

State of Change Management in the UN System 2025

Executive summary

This report presents the findings of the 2025 survey of the State of Change Management in the United Nations (UN), drawing on data gathered from 123 experienced change sponsors, change managers, and change practitioners from across the UN system. It is the second change management study conducted by the United Nations Lab for Organizational Change and Knowledge (UNLOCK), part of the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC); the first was published in [2023](#).

Change management in the UN context is a strategic, structured, and inclusive process that helps prepare, equip, and support individuals, teams, and organizations to successfully adapt to and sustain reforms or new ways of working. According to change management experts [Prosci](#), organizations implementing a best-practice approach to change management are more likely to deliver successful change outcomes. Given this, understanding the state of change management in the UN system – what is working well, and what may need to evolve to increase the chances of successful change in the future – is more important than ever.

This executive summary presents headlines from the survey findings, and provides an overview of actions that change sponsors, change managers and change practitioners can take to maximize opportunities for successful change in the future.

Headlines from the findings

- 1** In 2025, change management in the UN system is being significantly affected by the complex and uncertain funding and geopolitical contexts in which it is operating. There is a broad spectrum of major change initiatives underway, with organizations and individuals juggling multiple change projects at the same time. On average, organizations are implementing six organizational change initiatives simultaneously, of which the three most frequently mentioned by respondents are digital transformation, culture change and initiatives to increase efficiency. 90 percent of respondents have a somewhat clear or very clear definition of success in terms of the changes they are working on.

90 percent of respondents say they have a somewhat clear or very clear definition of success in terms of the changes they are working on

2 Change saturation, also known as change fatigue, is a reality for both individuals and organizations. More consistent and standardized use of change management practices and tools could help build organizational change management maturity and agility.

68 percent of respondents believe their organizations to be past, at, or nearing change saturation

87 percent of respondents rate the level of change agility in their organization as moderate or low

3 Across an organization, the priorities and experiences of change can appear different depending on respondents' role and location within the system. For instance, respondents see leaders as paying most attention to staff engagement and communications, whereas respondents themselves are most focused on culture change. Such differences in perspective can make alignment a challenge and highlight the importance of communication between stakeholders in order to build a shared understanding of change management priorities.

86 percent of change managers believe their organization has no further capacity for change, compared with 39 percent of change sponsors

4 Senior leaders are more likely than any other stakeholder to be seen as primarily responsible for leading organization-wide change in the UN system. Others seen as responsible include change management units, project teams, human resources divisions, and external consultants – each bringing their own background, expertise, and approach, and often balancing the work of change management alongside their main role.

33 percent of respondents describe the role of senior leadership in driving change as one of strong leadership and active involvement

5 The range of people contributing to change management brings with it a variety of experiences, perspectives, and solutions regarding what works and what doesn't. This is one reason why peer-to-peer learning holds such value for respondents – helping peers share what's working, learn from each other, and find connection in their roles.

74 percent of respondents said that they find peer conversations or communities of practice to be the most helpful learning tool for managing change

6 Looking to the future, respondents see considerable potential for the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in change management – for example, in assessing organizational change readiness, or helping tailor communications. Practical experience of AI in change management is still limited, and concerns are real: about data privacy, ethical use, and above all, losing the human relationships that sit at the heart of meaningful change.

31 percent of respondents say they use AI tools regularly in change management

62 percent of respondents have ethical concerns about the use of AI in their work, or concerns about AI bias

Looking to the future

The survey findings point to a number of actions in relation to change management that change sponsors, change managers, and change practitioners in the UN system can take to maximize successful change outcomes in the future.

For change sponsors

Change sponsors lead and champion both organization-wide and project-specific change. They play a vital role in creating the conditions for successful change in the UN system. From the perspective of change management, this means:

1. Positioning change management as a strategic enabler of success, actively

championing change management as a discipline, setting clear expectations, and investing in change management capability.

2. Aligning and coordinating change management priorities, adopting a change portfolio management approach that ensures clear prioritization and focus, and reduces the risks of siloed working, duplication and inefficiencies.
3. Strengthening the change ecosystem, including acknowledging the important contributions to successful change management made by stakeholders in functions such as human resources, information technology, and internal communications, alongside change management functions, and encouraging peer-to-peer learning at all levels.
4. Staying informed about the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders in the change ecosystem through regular engagement, active listening, and feedback dialogues on the enablers of and barriers to change.
5. Encouraging those managing and implementing change to explore opportunities for the responsible use of AI in change management, with the objective of accelerating the delivery of successful change outcomes.

For change managers and practitioners

Change managers and practitioners help translate the strategic intent of change sponsors into reality, leading on implementation and helping people understand, engage with, and adapt to change. In terms of change management, this means:

1. Providing strategic support for change sponsors regarding the value of change management – for instance by helping build the case for investment in change management capabilities, and providing data on the benefits of effective change management in terms of engagement, efficiency and risk reduction.

2. Maintaining awareness of the organization's strategic priorities and plans, and contributing ideas on how effective change management can help translate strategy into practical change initiatives.
3. Building a close working relationship with change sponsors, sharing insights on implementation challenges and risks such as change saturation, and on possible solutions.
4. Contributing to organizational change maturity and agility by using change management tools, a change portfolio management approach, and frameworks and metrics to measure progress.
5. Participating in peer-to-peer learning to support collective capacity and a consistent approach to change management.
6. Exploring the responsible and ethical use of AI to gather and interpret data – for instance, on change readiness, and staff engagement and communications – and translate the findings into actions for successful change.

Glossary

Change ecosystem. The network of people, teams, and functions that contribute to organizational change. It mostly includes change sponsors, change managers, and business process leads from operations, including information technology, human resources, and communications and learning.

Change management. In the UN context, a strategic, structured, and inclusive process that helps to prepare, equip, and support individuals, teams, and organizations to successfully adapt to and sustain reforms or new ways of working. It ensures that technical, cultural, and behavioural shifts are achieved collaboratively and in alignment with the United Nations' mission and values, and the diverse needs of its stakeholders. By focusing on both the human and systemic dimensions of change – including people, structures, processes, and procedures – change management increases the likelihood of successful and lasting transformation.

Change manager. Someone responsible for the implementation of change, either full-time or as part of another role.

Change portfolio management. Defined by change management experts Prosci as “a structured approach and set of tools for managing the cumulative and collective impact of a portfolio of change”.

Change practitioner. Someone contributing to the implementation of change projects as part of a change team or as part of a functional role.

Change saturation/change fatigue. The capacity of an organization to handle change. Change saturation/ change fatigue occurs when the number of changes an organization is implementing exceeds the capacity of people in the organization to effectively adopt and use those changes.

Change sponsor. Someone initiating and/or leading change. For organization-wide change efforts, the sponsor is someone in a senior leadership role. For technical change projects, the sponsor is the person to whom the project team is accountable and is not necessarily in a senior leadership role in the organization.

Digital transformation. Defined by change management experts Prosci as “a deliberate business model shift that integrates technology across operations, reshapes business processes, and empowers people to work in new ways”, reinventing the way the organization does business and ensuring that reinvention permeates everything the organization does.

Executive leaders. The most senior level of leadership in an organization, with ultimate responsibility for strategic direction, resourcing, decision-making and organizational performance

Organization. The organization within the UN system for which change sponsors, change practitioners and change managers work. It does not mean the United Nations in general, sometimes referred to as the Organization.

Organizational change agility. The ability of an organization to rapidly anticipate and respond to change in a flexible and effective way. Three levels

of organizational change agility are referenced in this report:

- **Low organizational change agility:** When an organization follows a rigid, top-down change management process, lacks stakeholder engagement, effective communication, and agile practices, and does not measure outcomes or adapt to feedback.
- **Moderate organizational change agility:** When an organization has a structured change management process with some stakeholder involvement and adequate communication, uses agile practices inconsistently, and measures some outcomes but does not adapt.
- **High organizational change agility:** When an organization has a flexible change management process driven by a compelling vision, engages stakeholders, communicates effectively, uses agile practices iteratively, and regularly measures outcomes to learn and adapt.

Organizational change management maturity.

An organization's ability to implement, manage, and sustain change effectively, and the integration of change management into the organization's culture, processes, and systems. See change management experts Prosci's 5 Levels of Change Management Maturity for more detail.

Senior leadership. The most senior level of leadership in an organization, including Executive leadership.

UN system. Defined as the United Nations itself, plus "funds, programmes and specialized agencies, each of which has its own area of work, leadership and budget". For more information on the UN system visit <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-system>.

