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Change Management During Leadership Transition in the Public Sector in Sierra Leone: Problems and Resistance Factors

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ABSTRACT

Leadership transitions in public institutions are periods of organizational uncertainty that often trigger major structural and cultural changes. This paper draws on the first two objectives of Kanu's (2023) MPhil thesis to examine (a) the problems associated with introducing change during leadership transition, and (b) the factors responsible for resistance to change in public institutions in Sierra Leone. Anchored in Lewin's (1951) force-field analysis model and supported by insights from organizational change literature, the paper synthesizes empirical evidence from Statistics Sierra Leone to show how employee behavior, organizational culture, and leadership styles interact to shape change outcomes. The findings reveal that lack of consultation, inadequate communication, threats to existing power structures, and fears of the unknown are the most pervasive challenges during transition. The study concludes with recommendations for participatory, transparent, and context-specific change management strategies in Sierra Leone's public sector.

KEYWORDS: Change Management, Economy, Leadership transition, Public Public Sector.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Organizational change is a necessary and continuous process through which institutions adapt to shifting internal and external environments. In the public sector, leadership transitions represent critical moments of institutional realignment, where new leaders introduce reforms intended to redirect organizational vision, improve service delivery, and enhance administrative efficiency (UNDP, 2006). Such transitions frequently entail adjustments to organizational culture, work routines, and power relations, making them highly sensitive periods marked by uncertainty and disruption. Effective management of change therefore requires a deliberate and context-specific strategy that takes into account institutional history, employee behavior, and broader socio-political dynamics.

In many developing contexts, including Sierra Leone, the complexity of leadership transition is often amplified by long-standing structural weaknesses. Public institutions tend to operate within rigid bureaucratic frameworks that prioritize hierarchy, stability, and compliance over innovation and adaptability (Weber, 1968). This bureaucratic orientation, while useful for administrative control, often slows down reform processes and limits employees' willingness to accommodate new approaches. Leadership changes in such environments are not merely managerial shifts; they represent shifts in power, identity, and relationships within the institution. As Kanu (2023) observes, Sierra Leone's public sector struggles with entrenched practices, limited institutional memory, and inadequate documentation of transitional experiences, making it difficult for new leaders to build on previous reforms or avoid repeating past mistakes.

Statistics Sierra Leone (Stat SL) provides a central example of the challenges surrounding leadership transition and change management. Between 2002 and 2010, the institution underwent multiple leadership changes driven by both administrative restructuring and national development priorities. Each transition attempted to modernize operations through new management approaches, technological upgrades, or organizational reforms. However, these efforts often triggered employee resistance, administrative conflict, and declines in performance, revealing deep tensions between intended reforms and the capacity or willingness of the institution to absorb them. These experiences highlight the need to understand change from a sociological perspective—one that examines not only systems and procedures but also employee attitudes, group dynamics, institutional norms, and the cultural meaning of change.

Understanding the problems that accompany leadership transitions and the factors that generate resistance is therefore crucial for improving governance in Sierra Leone's public sector. Without such understanding, change initiatives risk becoming episodic, fragmented, or counterproductive. A comprehensive analysis of change management at Stat SL provides valuable insights into how transitional leaders can navigate organizational politics, build trust, inspire cooperation, and sustain long-term reforms. It also contributes to the broader academic literature by documenting locally grounded evidence—a gap that previous studies have left largely unaddressed due to their heavy reliance on models developed in advanced economies. By examining the Sierra Leonean context, this study enriches global knowledge on public-sector change management and provides actionable lessons for leaders, policymakers, and practitioners.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although change management has been widely studied in advanced economies, there is a lack of empirical documentation on how public institutions in Sierra Leone experience change, particularly during leadership transition (Kanu, 2023) . Many institutional reform reviews focus heavily on technical and administrative issues, overlooking the sociological dynamics and behavioral responses of employees who are central to the success or failure of change.

Additionally, transitional periods are not well documented and often involve informal or confidential processes that make systematic study difficult. Employees grapple with uncertainty, disrupted work routines, shifting power structures, and potential loss of status, all of which can lead to resistance. As a result, many reforms fail to achieve their intended outcomes, leaving institutions ill-equipped to respond to national development challenges.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper focuses on the following objectives:

To assess the problems associated with introducing change during leadership transition in public institutions.

To identify the factors associated with resistance to change during leadership transition.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Change Management and Leadership Transition

Change management refers to the systematic and deliberate process through which organizations adopt new structures, strategies, or behaviors in order to improve their effectiveness and respond to evolving demands (Moran & Brightman, 2001). It involves a coordinated set of activities aimed at preparing individuals, teams, and systems for transformation. In this regard, change is not an isolated event but an ongoing organizational condition that requires clear direction, strategic alignment, and human-centered approaches to ensure that new practices are successfully institutionalized.

Leadership transitions create unique conditions for change because they introduce new visions, management styles, and priorities. Such transitions are critical moments that disrupt established norms, routines, and power relations, compelling employees to adjust quickly to unfamiliar expectations (Kotter, 1996). When a new leader assumes office, their efforts to initiate reforms may challenge the status quo, leading staff to renegotiate their roles, identities, and relationships within the institution. This makes leadership transitions inherently sensitive periods that demand careful navigation and thoughtful engagement with organizational actors.

The theoretical foundation for understanding change within institutions is strongly supported by Lewin's (1951) three-step model: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. According to Lewin, successful change begins with unfreezing—loosening existing attitudes, behaviors, and cultural patterns that may resist transformation. This is followed by the moving stage, where new values and practices are introduced, negotiated, and tested. Finally, refreezing involves stabilizing these new patterns so they become part of everyday organizational life. Each stage requires psychological readiness, institutional support, and effective communication to minimize resistance and ensure long-term sustainability.

In public institutions, the process of change is further complicated by political and administrative pressures that shape decision-making and organizational behavior. Stewart and Kringas (2003) argue that public-sector change often occurs in politically charged environments where institutional autonomy is limited and reforms may be driven by external demands rather than internal consensus. As a result, leadership transitions may not only reflect managerial intentions but also broader political agendas that influence employees' perceptions of legitimacy, fairness, and continuity.

Moreover, public-sector organizations are traditionally grounded in bureaucratic cultures that emphasize stability, formal rules, and predictability (Weber, 1968). While such structures offer order and accountability, they can also impede innovation and adaptability, making change processes slow and difficult to implement. Bureaucratic norms often encourage risk aversion, lengthy decision-making procedures, and rigid hierarchies, all of which hinder the speed and effectiveness of reforms introduced during leadership transitions. Consequently, leaders must navigate both structural constraints and human factors to ensure that change efforts are accepted and embedded across the institution.

4.2 Problems of Introducing Change During Transitions

Introducing change during leadership transitions presents a complex set of challenges that can significantly disrupt organizational functioning. Scholars note that transitions often destabilize existing communication systems, creating gaps, inconsistencies, and distortions in the flow of information (McHugh et al., 1999). When employees are unsure about the rationale, goals, or expected outcomes of new reforms, confusion increases and informal speculation replaces official communication channels. This communication breakdown weakens organizational cohesion and diminishes employees' sense of direction, thereby undermining their readiness to engage with change initiatives.

Another major challenge during transition periods is the heightened uncertainty surrounding roles, responsibilities, and job security. Leadership changes frequently come with restructuring, reassignments, or shifts in reporting lines, leaving staff unsure of their future within the organization. Such uncertainty breeds anxiety and low morale, which in turn reduce employees' willingness to cooperate with new directives. Kotter (1996) argues that change efforts often fail at this stage because organizations underestimate the importance of creating a compelling sense of urgency that motivates employees to embrace rather than resist change.

Kotter (1996) also highlights the absence of strong guiding coalitions as a common pitfall. During transitions, new leaders often lack established networks of trusted allies or supportive managerial teams who can champion reforms. Without a cohesive coalition, change initiatives lose momentum and face internal opposition. This is particularly problematic in public institutions where existing leadership structures are deeply rooted, and new leaders may be viewed as outsiders attempting to disrupt entrenched norms and practices.

In addition, poor communication remains a recurrent problem that undermines credibility and acceptance of change. When change is introduced abruptly or without adequate consultation, employees often perceive the process as imposed rather than participatory. This perception fuels resistance, misunderstanding, and distrust toward the leadership. Effective communication is therefore essential not only for informing employees about upcoming reforms but also for building engagement and ownership of the change process.

Public-sector contexts introduce additional layers of complexity. Leadership turnover in government institutions often results in ambiguous priorities and short-termism driven by political interests rather than long-term organizational vision (Thomas, 1996). Incoming leaders may abandon or reverse the programs of their predecessors, creating discontinuity and frustration among employees who have to adapt repeatedly to shifting mandates. This politicization of change erodes institutional memory and makes it difficult to establish consistent reform trajectories.

Furthermore, transitional leaders may face resistance from longstanding staff who view new reforms as threats to their influence or status within the organization. In institutions where seniority and tenure are culturally valued, change initiatives that alter established hierarchies can generate subtle or overt opposition. As noted by Fernandez and Rainey (2006), such resistance is compounded when employees are excluded from decision-making, lack clarity about the direction of change, or feel inadequately prepared for new expectations.

Collectively, these challenges illustrate that change introduced during leadership transitions is inherently fragile. Without deliberate strategies that acknowledge communication needs, emotional reactions, and political realities, change initiatives risk triggering conflict, slowing performance, or failing altogether. Effective change management therefore requires a careful balance of planning, communication, collaboration, and contextual understanding.

4.3 Factors Associated with Resistance to Change

Resistance to change is widely recognized as a natural psychological and social reaction that emerges when individuals perceive proposed reforms as threatening or destabilizing. Maurer (1996) notes that resistance can take informational, emotional, and political forms, each shaped by different concerns, perceptions, and power relations. At the individual level, employees often resist change due to fear of the unknown, uncertainty about future expectations, and discomfort associated with altering long-established habits or routines (Judson, 1991). These fears are intensified when change disrupts personal identity, professional autonomy, or familiar work processes.

Several scholars emphasize that threats to job security and loss of privileges are central drivers of resistance. Booysen and Beaty (1997) argue that employees frequently interpret organizational change as a risk to their position, influence, or long-term career prospects, prompting defensive behaviors. When change initiatives come with restructuring, redeployment, or shifts in authority lines, individuals—especially those in mid-level and supervisory roles—may fear losing status or control. Such concerns are particularly intense in hierarchical institutions, where seniority often determines influence and where change may be perceived as undermining deeply institutionalized norms (Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

Poor communication is another major factor repeatedly identified in organizational change literature. When reforms are introduced without adequate explanation, justification, or clarity, employees tend to form their own interpretations—often negative or speculative (Elving, 2005). Kotter (1996) stresses that the absence of open and continuous communication creates skepticism and mistrust, weakening employee commitment. Similarly, Bovey and Hede (2001) argue that inadequate information fuels emotional resistance, as individuals feel excluded, undervalued, or blindsided by change.

The lack of involvement in decision-making significantly exacerbates resistance. Research by Lines (2004) demonstrates that employee participation increases perceptions of fairness, ownership, and legitimacy, while exclusion intensifies opposition. When staff have no opportunity to contribute to shaping reforms, they are more likely to protect existing interests or adhere to old routines. This is consistent with findings by Armenakis and Harris (2002), who note that participatory approaches reduce uncertainty and strengthen readiness for change.

Another structural factor associated with resistance is insufficient training and capacity-building. Soltani et al. (2007) show that when employees feel unprepared to meet new demands—such as adopting new technological systems or complying with revised procedures—they experience anxiety and fear of failure, which naturally leads to resistance. Training deficits disproportionately affect older or long-serving employees who may already feel vulnerable during transitions, especially when change requires new competencies or rapid adaptation.

In many African public-sector institutions, socio-cultural orientations and bureaucratic traditions further shape how employees respond to change. Research by Ayee (2008) and Olowu (1999) shows that public servants often operate within hierarchical administrative cultures that value order, predictability, and adherence to established procedures. These cultural orientations make staff less receptive to innovations that disrupt routine or challenge authority structures. Historical experiences of poorly implemented or politically motivated reforms also contribute to collective skepticism and "reform fatigue," a phenomenon observed in several post-conflict and emerging democracies (Caulfield, 2004; Hope, 2001).

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that resistance to change is not merely an expression of unwillingness but is shaped by psychological fears, structural constraints, communication failures, cultural expectations, and prior institutional experiences. Effective change management therefore requires leaders to acknowledge and address these multifaceted drivers through transparent communication, inclusive decision-making, continuous training, and sensitivity to organizational culture.

5. FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

Using a mixed-methods approach—including questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation—the study produced comprehensive evidence on how leadership transitions shaped organizational culture, staff behavior, and the success or failure of change initiatives at Statistics Sierra Leone (Stats SL). The findings highlight deep-seated challenges rooted in communication breakdowns, lack of strategic planning, cultural tensions, and emotional responses to uncertainty. The expanded results below synthesize narrative interview data, staff perceptions, and documented organizational patterns from the thesis.

5.1 Problems Identified During Leadership Transition

5.1.1 Lack of Initial Organizational Assessment

The study found that new leaders frequently introduced change without conducting a proper assessment of existing systems, institutional culture, or staff competencies. Participants explained that leaders “came in with their own agenda,” immediately introducing structural and procedural reforms without first understanding how the institution functioned or how prepared staff were for such changes. This top-down approach created confusion and resentment because employees felt the reforms were not grounded in a real appreciation of institutional strengths and constraints. As several staff reported, leadership failed to consider ongoing projects, existing work flows, or staff workloads before imposing new directives, leading to overlapping responsibilities and operational inefficiencies

5.1.2 Poor Communication and Limited Consultation

Communication challenges were among the most significant problems identified. Employees consistently reported that they were informed late about major decisions, sometimes hearing about new policies and restructuring indirectly rather than from formal communication channels. Decisions affecting job roles, departmental arrangements, or reporting lines were often shared verbally or through rumors rather than official memos or staff meetings. This resulted in speculation, mistrust, and heightened anxiety among staff. Many employees perceived the lack of consultation as deliberate exclusion, reinforcing the belief that leadership was not transparent or interested in participatory governance. The findings indicate that these communication gaps severely undermined confidence in the transition process

5.1.3 Disruption of Work Routines and Power Structures

Another major challenge involved disruptions to routine operations. Leadership transitions often resulted in reassignment of roles, creation of new departments, or changes in supervision structures. Long-serving staff felt displaced or marginalized when their responsibilities were shifted or when junior officers were given roles traditionally held by senior personnel. Employees reported confusion about whom to report to, what new procedures entailed, and how to prioritize tasks within the new structure. These disruptions created friction, reduced morale, and slowed productivity. Several respondents described the changes as “destabilizing,” with some interpreting them as attempts to weaken existing teams or dismantle established networks of authority within the institution

5.1.4 Fear and Uncertainty

Fear and uncertainty were pervasive emotional responses during leadership transitions. Staff worried about the possibility of demotion, redeployment, or loss of influence, especially because changes were introduced abruptly and opaquely. Employees expressed concern that new leaders might bring in their own allies, thereby displacing existing personnel. This anxiety reduced cooperation, as individuals became more concerned with protecting their positions than engaging with the new reforms. Several participants explicitly stated that they avoided taking initiative or committing to new processes until they were certain of the leadership’s long-term intentions. This “wait-and-see” attitude contributed to delays in implementation and weakened organizational cohesion

5.2 Factors Associated with Employee Resistance

5.2.1 Psychological Resistance

The thesis found that employees exhibited strong emotional responses linked to fear of losing familiar routines, established identities, and accustomed work patterns. Change was perceived as destabilizing because it disrupted deeply rooted ways of working. Psychological resistance manifested in withdrawal, decreased enthusiasm, and in some cases passive non-compliance with new directives. Staff reported feeling overwhelmed when new expectations were introduced suddenly, creating a sense of insecurity and internal conflict about their future within the institution

5.2.2 Lack of Involvement in Planning Change

A consistent theme across staff interviews was the belief that reforms were imposed rather than collaboratively developed. Employees described decision-making as “closed,” with major restructuring plans formulated at the leadership level without input from those responsible for front-line implementation. This exclusion contradicted principles of participatory change and reinforced employees’ belief that their expertise and institutional knowledge were undervalued. When staff are not meaningfully involved in shaping change, they are more likely to view new initiatives as illegitimate, unnecessary, or disruptive, which was clearly reflected in the reactions documented in the study

5.2.3 Mistrust in Leadership

Historical experiences with previous poorly managed reforms contributed to widespread skepticism toward new leadership. Many employees felt that earlier changes had produced little positive outcome or were politically motivated, leading them to doubt the sincerity and effectiveness of subsequent reforms. This mistrust was further reinforced when new leaders failed to communicate decisions clearly or appeared to favor certain groups. Staff interviews revealed concerns about nepotism, favoritism, and personal agendas, all of which intensified resistance and negatively affected organizational morale

5.2.4 Cultural and Structural Barriers

Deep-seated bureaucratic traditions and hierarchical norms were major structural barriers. The institution's culture strongly valued seniority, rigid reporting lines, and predictable routines. Leadership reforms that attempted to introduce more flexible or modernized approaches often clashed with these long-standing expectations. Older workers in particular were reluctant to change established practices or adopt new technologies. Furthermore, highly centralized decision-making and rigid chains of command created structural inertia, making organizational transformation slow and difficult. These cultural factors significantly shaped how staff interpreted new leadership behaviors and contributed to persistent resistance

5.2.5 Inadequate Training and Preparation

The study found that insufficient training and preparation were major contributors to employee resistance. Staff were often unprepared for the technical or procedural demands of new systems introduced during leadership transition. Many respondents explained that they were expected to implement new processes without receiving orientation, guidance, or capacity-building support. This left them feeling overwhelmed and unqualified to perform new tasks. Where training was offered, it was often inconsistent or limited to certain departments, creating disparities in readiness for change. As a result, employees who felt inadequately prepared responded with avoidance, reluctance, or complaints—further slowing the momentum of the reforms

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate a strong alignment with established international theories of change management, notably Lewin's (1951) three-step model and Kotter's (1996) eight-step framework. Both theorists emphasize that successful organizational change depends not only on structural adjustments but also on psychological readiness and collective engagement. The Sierra Leonean experience reflects this principle: the resistance observed at Statistics Sierra Leone (Stats SL) was rooted less in explicit opposition to organizational development and more in employees' perceived threats to identity, status, stability, and professional legitimacy. This observation reinforces Maurer's (1996) contention that resistance to change is inseparable from its social and political dimensions, where power dynamics, emotional security, and existing relationships shape responses to new leadership agendas.

The context of a fragile-state bureaucracy further complicates change processes. As Stewart and Kringas (2003) argue, public-sector organizations in developing or post-conflict environments operate within institutional histories characterized by administrative discontinuities, politicized appointments, and weak institutional memory. The evidence from Stats SL reflects these realities. Each leadership transition occurred against a backdrop of competing loyalties, fragmented communication structures, and unresolved tensions from prior reforms. These conditions create an environment where employees interpret change not in technical terms, but through the lens of past experiences, interpersonal relationships, and perceived risks. Consequently, reform initiatives that fail to acknowledge this historical layering struggle to gain legitimacy or traction.

The recurring problems of poor communication, inadequate planning, and minimal consultation point to significant weaknesses in strategic leadership during periods of transition. The tendency of incoming leaders to prioritize rapid administrative restructuring over inclusive engagement demonstrates a technocratic view of change management—one that assumes that structural reforms will automatically lead to behavioral compliance. However, the research shows that technical solutions alone are insufficient in contexts where organizational culture, emotional climate, and power configurations are deeply entrenched. This echoes Kotter's (1996) argument that successful change requires a combination of vision, communication, empowerment, and coalition-building. Where these elements are absent—as the findings indicate—resistance becomes not only likely but rational from the employees' perspective.

Applying a sociological lens illuminates the central role of human agency, collective memory, and workplace identities in shaping reform outcomes. Organizational behavior scholars such as Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) highlight that institutions are sustained not merely by structures and policies but by shared meanings, social norms, and everyday interactions among employees. The study's findings confirm that staff perceptions, interpersonal trust, and informal networks significantly influence whether change is embraced or resisted. Employees drew on past negative experiences with abrupt leadership changes to interpret new reforms, demonstrating how institutional memory acts as a powerful filter in shaping present behavior.

Moreover, the study underscores the significance of workplace relationships in reinforcing or hindering change. When employees believed that new leaders did not respect established professional norms or undervalued long-serving staff, this eroded trust and reduced willingness to participate in reform efforts. Trust-building, therefore, emerges as a critical prerequisite for successful change management, echoing insights from Armenakis and Harris (2002), who argue that readiness for change is rooted in both psychological safety and credible leadership communication.

Taken together, the findings highlight that effective public-sector change in Sierra Leone must move beyond mechanistic models of restructuring and embrace a more holistic, human-centered approach. This approach should prioritize transparent communication, participatory planning, and continuous engagement with staff at all levels. By integrating sociological insights into change management practice—particularly those related to identity, culture, power, and memory—leaders can foster an environment where reform is not perceived as a threat but as a shared institutional journey. Such strategies are essential for building adaptive, resilient, and responsive public-sector institutions capable of sustaining change over time.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

7.1 Conduct Organizational Diagnosis Before Change
Transitional leaders should undertake a baseline assessment of organizational culture, staff capacities, and existing challenges before introducing reforms.

7.2 Enhance Participation and Consultation
Employees at all levels should be meaningfully involved in planning and implementing change to improve ownership and reduce resistance.

7.3 Institutionalize Transparent Communication Systems
Regular briefings, written updates, and feedback channels should be established to minimize rumors and build trust.

7.4 Provide Capacity Building and Training
Training programs should accompany any structural or technological changes to ensure employees are equipped to adapt.

7.5 Manage Power Dynamics Ethically
Leaders should acknowledge and manage shifts in power structures with sensitivity, avoiding favoritism, marginalization, or abrupt role changes.

7.6 Build Trust Through Consistency and Accountability
Leaders should demonstrate commitment, fairness, and reliability, as trust is the cornerstone of successful change management.

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