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Change Management Practices for Frontline Supervisors: A Modified Delphi Study

Abstract

Frontline supervisors impact organizational change. Supervisors who anticipate and address the root causes behind change resistance can increase employee change adoption. This modified Delphi project asked 15 change management expert panelists to respond to a 4-round survey process. The project aimed to learn how frontline supervisors can best motivate and encourage their employees to embrace change. The experts analyzed 31 original change management practices from previous literature and distilled those into 10 new practices they agreed would assist their frontline employees in adapting to and accepting change. The practices included: Understanding the change before communicating it to employees, providing a simple reason for the change, using real stories and examples to present the change, describing the change in a favorable light, providing clear and simple tasks and goals for the change, listening to employee feedback about the change, allowing employees autonomy respecting the change, openly praising employees for adopting the change, communicating legitimate employee concerns to upper management about the change, and discussing change challenges with other frontline colleagues. The study culminated with a new framework for frontline change management.

Keywords: frontline change management, change resistance, frontline supervisor, organizational change, modified Delphi, frontline employees, change leadership

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged companies to make significant organizational changes. These changes required employees to adapt pre-existing processes using predefined performance goals into unprecedented pandemic-styled versions of work (Burton & O'Neill, 2020). As a result, leaders faced the challenge of leading employees during uncertainty, which exacerbated the change management challenge (Amis & Greenwood, 2021). The most common leadership approach for communicating and implementing change has been top-down, in which senior leaders are primarily responsible for making and driving change decisions (Eveleigh, 2019). Traditional change management strategies that support this top-down approach are often costly and ineffective due to a lack of top leadership engagement with frontline employees (Gleeson, 2017; Spencer & Watkins, 2019) and their supervisors (Townsend et al., 2022).

Diminishing employees' resistance to change, to create organizational change champions requires selecting critical stakeholders for early-stage communication with employees (Cooper, 2017). Frontline supervisors lead nonmanagerial work teams and directly influence team effectiveness (Zincume & Jooste, 2019). Support from the frontline management level contributes significantly to change management success based on the inherent close relationship and subsequent influence on employees (Prosci, 2019). Virtaharju and Liiri (2019) indicated that the

frontline leaders impacted the acceptance of organizational change through direct daily employee engagement. Supervisors influence corporate change adoption through regular and engaging employee interactions by role modeling, controlling, and directing (Netland et al., 2019). Leading the adoption of organizational change requires preparedness, as leaders may feel unequipped to manage dynamic change in times of uncertainty (Burton & O'Neill, 2020). Frontline supervisors can effectively promote subordinate acceptance of organizational changes but may lack forward-looking practices to decrease employee resistance (Johnson, 2017; Richmond, 2020). Senior leaders seeking to reduce employee change resistance should provide frontline supervisors with feasible and desirable practices that facilitate organizational change acceptance.

Business Problem and Gap in Practice

Traditional change management models may not prepare frontline supervisors to lead organizational change and gain employee acceptance (Tams, 2018). Traditional models focused on cascading messages and leadership from the top instead of directing change from the sides and bottom (Kaplan, 2018). Lack of leadership preparation from the frontlines resulted in leaders who were unprepared to influence, collaborate, remove barriers, and reduce employee resistance to the changes demanded within 21st-century organizations (Connell, 2019).

This study was designed to address employee change resistance during organizational change that results in workplace disruption. Employee resistance to change occurs when employees are unwilling to adapt or adjust to a change (Spence, 2020), which Stise (2021) found was the primary organizational change obstacle.

Gregersen and Lehman (2021) found that managers could avoid workplace disruption during change by providing leadership and support. However, when change initiatives lack effective leadership, the desired organizational objectives are less likely to be achieved, implementation is not timely, achieving established budgets is compromised, and employee productivity diminishes, reducing financial returns (Creasey, 2020). Folkman (2020) found that 32% of top managers found change leadership critical to their success, but only 15% of frontline supervisors understood this expectation.

Thus, a gap in practice exists. Few frontline supervisors understand that preparing for change requires employing methods that inspire acceptance of the change in their employees (American Productivity & Quality Center, 2019). Further, Townsend et al. (2022) noted that frontline managers have varying leadership styles that can impact the implementation of policy changes. While change leadership literature is plentiful, few resources have focused specifically on providing effective practices by frontline supervisors to reduce employee resistance to organizational changes.

Terms and Definitions

This study used the following terms and definitions:

Change Leadership. Leaders who support, communicate with, inform, and involve employees during an organizational change (Holten et al., 2019).

Change Management. Equipping individuals to implement changes according to managerial plans and competencies (Holten et al., 2019).

Change Resistance. Employee reluctance to accept, adopt and adjust to changes due to varying individualized reasons (Spence, 2020; Thakur & Srivastava, 2018).

Frontline Supervisor. A leader who works the closest to nonmanagement employees and most directly influences the effectiveness of the work team (Zincume & Jooste, 2019).

Organizational Change. A holistic transition addresses an organizational imbalance between outcomes and objectives and requires employees to transition from known to unknown processes and procedures (Thakur & Srivastava, 2018).

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Project Questions

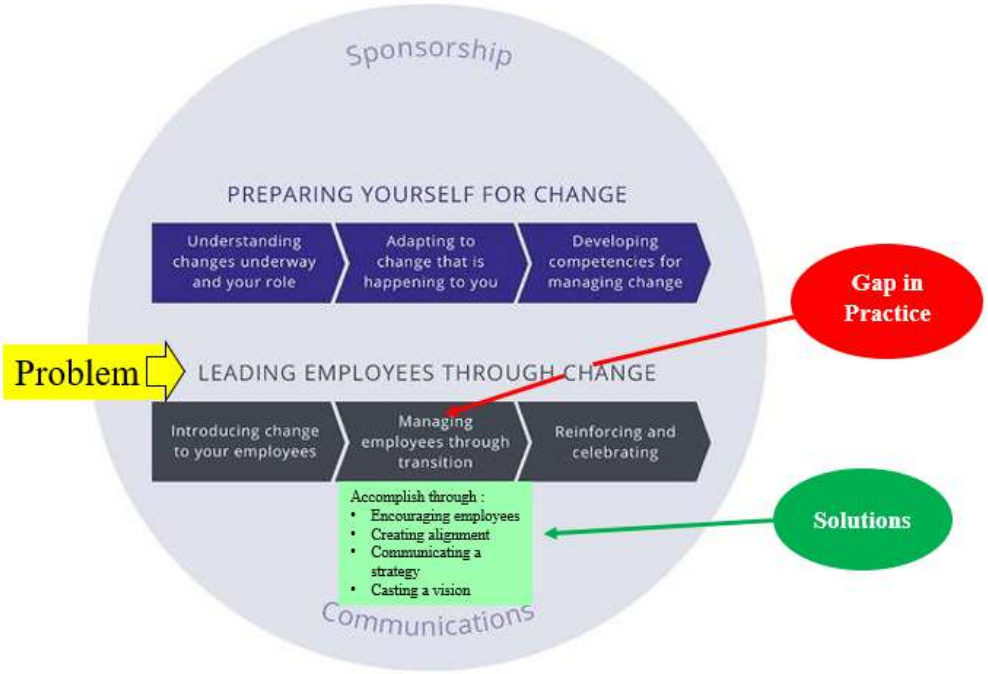
Modified Delphi studies use multiple project questions (PQs) to guide the study's rounds as the panelists focus on responding to the questions to become more precise and aligned and ultimately reach a consensus (Ab Latif et al., 2017). This study included two PQs:

> PQ1: What practices can facilitate frontline employee acceptance of organizational changes as viewed by a panel of frontline supervisor experts?
>
> PQ2: On which practices to facilitate employee acceptance of organizational change can a panel of frontline supervisor experts reach a consensus using a 70% desirability and feasibility level?

Applied Framework

Prosci's change management model (2019) uses a logical workflow for change. The process includes the lead sponsor of the change, specific communication steps by leaders and supervisors, and ensuring frontline supervisors have the proper training to support workers through the change (Kislik, 2018; Prosci, 2019). Change management practices handled by leaders that use transformational leadership principles of relationships, roles, responsibilities, and results (the 4-R model) assisted frontline leaders with managing change (McCloskey, 2009). McCloskey's findings included creating a vision for the change, while the Prosci process included encouraging employees, aligning with the change, and communicating the strategy (see Figure 1, *solutions*). These previously identified solutions became the categories that organized the literature search and review to find previously identified change management practices for the study. Those solutions, combined with the supervisor's preparations for change and the identified business problem with the gap in practice, contributed to creating an applied framework to guide the study (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Frontline Supervisor Change Management Applied Framework*



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Literature Review

The literature review identified practices that previous researchers had found influenced hourly workers' adoption of organizational changes. This study aimed to learn whether the practices remained cogent and viable postpandemic. The change management models before and during the 1990s are often criticized for being top-down, too direct, and time-consuming (Banerji, 2018). Many popular leadership models do not sufficiently deal with the complex, rapid, and constant state of change, making them difficult to understand or put into practice (Dumas & Beinecke, 2018). The change management problem of frontline supervisors' and managers' readiness to address change-related employee concerns and increase employee acceptance of the change had not been addressed.

While effective change management through the frontline leadership level literature was lacking, the relational topic of change leadership was plentiful. Moran and Brightman (2001) explored the vital role of all leadership levels in successful organizational change. Change leadership is top-down and bottom-up to provide vision, encourage participation, and generate support (Moran & Brightman, 2001). Farahnak et al. (2020) tested transformational leadership and leadership attitudes toward organizational change when implementing evidence-based practices. They determined that a leader's behavior was more impactful on change implementation than on the change because the leader's behaviors affected the attitudes of staff towards the change (Farahnak et al., 2020). Further, they empirically showed that behaviors were more impactful than leaders' attitudes towards change on the employees accepting the change.

Keith Townsend of Australia has led multiple projects with research teams to explore and examine how the role of frontline managers and supervisors differs from other management roles. In 2013, he found that when organizations experienced negative situations (i.e., grievances or policy changes), experienced and successful frontline managers could protect the organization from production decline. Townsend and Loudoun (2015) reminded senior leaders that hearing input from frontline workers requires those same senior leaders to communicate through their frontline supervisors. When frontline managers were perceived as "yes" people, frontline workers called them "the worst people to have in management because they appease, rather than make the right decision" (p. 37). When frontline supervisors do not transmit information well in union organizations, employees bypass them and go directly to their union leaders. However, frontline managers often disagree with or lack buy-in to changes in policy or process due to their lack of involvement with the policy or process formation (Townsend et al., 2022). Frontline managers' perceived lack of control caused them to adopt victim-like attitudes that led to their criticizing change when communicating it to front-line workers (p. 88).

Leaders can impact employee acceptance of changes. Oreg et al. (2018) studied the spectrum of change recipients' responses and the underlying reasons for the adverse reactions. The findings supported that a recipient experiences emotional episodes when a change occurs, including excitement, satisfaction, anxiety, or depression. Leaders can encourage positive emotional responses by understanding specific ground rules (Haudan, 2019), including assuming positive intent, achieving clarity, making fact-based decisions, supporting the whole over an individual, having open and candid conversations, publicly supporting decisions, sharing learning, and telling the truth.

Regardless of the selected change method, leadership intervention must occur for employees to accept the change. Organizational change leaders must know how best to implement changes through employees (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). Change leaders must be prepared to encourage employee participation in organizational change (Dumas & Beinecke, 2018). Frontline supervisors and managers must motivate employees to look beyond self-interest and commit to organizational success (Luu & Phan, 2020). Ultimately, leading change is a shared responsibility for the leader and employees, and if either is unprepared or closed to the change effort, the change will fail (Moran & Brightman, 2001).

Prosci (2019) and McCloskey (2009) identified four categories (*solutions*, Figure 1) that organized the 31 practices provided in Round 1 of the study's survey, with the practices pulled from change management literature. The categories included *vision-casting*, *alignment*, *encouragement*, and *strategy-making*. Table 1 provides literature information from which each practice was derived and examples of how literature guided the development of the Round 1 survey (see Appendix A).

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Table 1. *Literature Providing Suggestions for Practices Used by Front-Line Supervisors*

Citation	Delphi Round 1 Practices
Marzec, M. (2007). Telling the corporate story: vision into action. *Journal of Business Strategy*, *(28)*1, 26-36. https://doi.org/10.1108/02756660710723189	Frontline supervisors must provide a narrative that explains why change is necessary for the organization's long-term success and, specifically, your area of responsibility.
Townsend, K., & Russell, B. (2013). Investigating the nuances of change in front-line managers' work. *Labour and Industry, 23*(2), 168-181. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10301763.2013.820683	Frontline supervisors must communicate the impact of the change in creating a more favorable work experience for the team.
Martins, L-P. (2009). The nature of the changing role of first-tier managers: A long-cycle approach. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 22*(1), 92-123. http://doi.org/10.1108/09534810910933924	Frontline supervisors must identify the areas of change in simple terms and give realistic and clear targets to measure success.
Little, J. (2014). Learning Through "Huddles" for Health Care Leaders: Why Do Some Work Teams Learn as a Result of Huddles and Others Do Not? *The Health Care Manager*, *33*(4), 335-341. https://doi.org/ 10.1097	Frontline supervisors must utilize examples, analogies, metaphors, and stories to present a compelling picture of the future state expected of the change.
Gill, R. (2002). Change management--or change leadership? *Journal of Change Management*, *3*(4), 307-318. https://doi.org/10.1080/714023845	Frontline supervisors must communicate your message using simple language and avoid jargon or buzzwords as they may create doubt about the value of the change effort.
Gill, R. (2002). Change management--or change leadership? *Journal of Change Management*, *3*(4), 307-318. https://doi.org/10.1080/714023845	Frontline supervisors must engage team members by asking their opinions about the possible positive outcomes if the change is successful.
Di Fabio, A., & Gori, A. (2016). *Acceptance of change scale*. PsycTESTS Dataset. https://doi.org/10.1037/t60863-000	Frontline supervisors must solicit employees' concerns (i.e., fear, anger, doubt) about the change in a one-on-one setting and engage them in determining a strategy to overcome those concerns.
Levasseur, R. E. (2001). People skills: Change management tools—Lewin's change model. *Interfaces*, *31*(4), 71-73. https://doi.org/10.1287/inte.31.5.71.9674	Frontline supervisors must identify at least one advantageous opportunity for each team member that becomes possible due to the organizational change (i.e., future promotion opportunities).
Spencer, J., & Watkins, M. (2019, November 26). *Why organizational change fails*. TLNT. https://www.tlnt.com/why-organizational-change-fails/	Frontline supervisors must request the commitment of employees to work toward change adoption after each interaction and follow-up.
Haudan, J. (2019). Plan for successful change management: Keep in mind these 8 core behaviors. *Leadership Excellence*, *36*(2), 37-39.	Frontline supervisors must engage with employees about alternatives to organizational changes that achieve the organizational goal but may be more readily embraced by impacted employees.

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Citation	Delphi Round 1 Practices
Dumas, C., & Beinecke, R. H. (2018). Change leadership in the 21st century. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *31*(4), 867-876. https://doi.org/10.1108/jocm-02-2017-0042	Frontline supervisors must follow up with employees in the weeks or months following the change implementation to ensure no new concerns.

Modified Delphi Technique

In a traditional Delphi study, the Round 1 content comes from interviews or surveys of the initial team of experts (Drumm et al., 2022). The modified version of a Delphi study relies on creating a seeded Round 1 of practices derived from previous studies and research (Elnasr Sobaih et al., 2012), and then asking experts to comment upon those seeded practices, suggest additional ones, and then winnow and modify the practices through multiple survey rounds. This study followed the modified Delphi technique for data collection and analysis of results. Experts answered four survey rounds to attempt to distill expert knowledge, creatively explore ideas, and produce information that could inform decisions (Elnasr Sobaih et al., 2012). The survey tool, Survey Monkey, helped reduce or eliminate potential biases because panelists remained anonymous from each other, with only the researcher knowing the identity of the participants. Delphi techniques are used for forecasting, decision-making, consensus-building, and theory-making (Fink-Hafner et al., 2019).

Delphi Data Collection and Analysis Process

Data collection occurred through four rounds of surveys. In Round 1, panelists responded to a survey that included 31 change management and transformational leadership practices identified in the literature as potentially helping frontline supervisors to overcome barriers to organizational change adoption by hourly workers in the retail industry. The initial instrument received expert reviews by three doctoral-level management professors and was field tested. Four categories of practices were included in the survey: vision-casting, alignment, encouragement, and strategy-making.

- Vision casting categorizes those practices that communicate a credible future state while inspiring engagement (McCloskey, 2009). An example of a vision-casting practice was “Frontline supervisors must utilize realistic examples and stories to present a compelling picture of the future state expected of the change.”
- Alignment refers to the identified practices that help leaders gain employee commitment to the change vision (McCloskey, 2009). An example of an alignment practice was “Frontline supervisors must communicate and/or create opportunities for autonomy that further change adoption (i.e., delegate decision-making).”
- Encouragement identifies practices that motivate and inspire acceptance of the change (McCloskey, 2009). An example of an encouragement practice was “Frontline supervisors must assure employees that their feedback is essential and that you will ensure they have opportunities to share feedback and suggestions throughout the change.”
- Strategy-making refers to practices communicating the actions necessary to realize the change vision (McCloskey, 2009). An example of a strategy-making practice was “Frontline supervisors must create structured opportunities for organizational change collaboration (i.e., brainstorming sessions, task groups) for employees experiencing similar or opposing change feelings.”

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Participant Recruitment

UserInterviews (UI), a third-party panel vendor, handled the study's recruitment process. They found 17 expert frontline supervisors of hourly workers in the retail industry who had successfully overcome employee resistance to some organizational change. UI selected experts who

- had a minimum of 1 year of experience as a U.S.-based frontline supervisor or manager in the retail industry,
- had experience leading hourly employees through an organizational change,
- agreed to respond to four iterative surveys.

UI located 17 qualified participants, but only 15 participated in the survey (two participants did not respond to survey requests). Table 2 includes the complete characteristics of the panel who responded to the surveys.

Table 2. *Participant Demographics*

P #	Occupation	Age	State	Industry	Race	Gender
1	Department Supervisor	44	Florida	Retail	H/L	Female
2	Director of Retail Operations	54	North Carolina	Retail	W	Female
3	School Operations Manager	33	New York	Retail	B/AA	Male
4	Restaurant/Kitchen Manager	51	Michigan	Restaurant	B/AA	Female
5	Business Owner	43	West Virginia	Retail	H/L	Female
6	Operations Manager	47	Texas	Retail	H/L	Male
7	Store Manager	51	California	Retail	B/AA	Female
8	Aquatics Program Director	39	Florida	Education	W	Male
9	Retail Store Manager	39	Washington	Retail	A/ H	Female
10	Supervisor	37	South Carolina	Retail	W	Female
11	Retail Merchandiser	30	Texas	Retail	W	Female
12	Assistant Store Manager	32	New York	Retail	W	Female
13	Restaurant Manager	37	Georgia	Retail	W	Female
14	Store Manager	31	Colorado	Retail	W	Female
15	Manager	27	Pennsylvania	Retail	W	Female

Note. Abbreviations: A/H = Asian/Hispanic; B/AA = Black or African American; H/L = Hispanic or Latinx; W = White.

Participants were asked to review, edit, add to, and rate the 31 practices. They were advised to make no changes if they agreed with the practice, to edit practices using a text box, or to add additional practices they felt were necessary within the proper categories. Participant responses were analyzed for themes, patterns, and ideas.

A revised list of practices was provided for Round 2, with a Likert choice provided for each practice asking the participants how desirable or feasible they rated each practice, based on a 5-point scale of 1 = *strongly disagree the practice is desirable/feasible,* 2 = *disagree the practice is desirable/feasible,* 3 = *neither disagree nor agree the practice is desirable/feasible,* 4 = *agree the practice is desirable/feasible, or* 5 = *strongly agree the practice is desirable/feasible.* All practices receiving at least 70% desirable or feasible ratings (i.e., a 4 or 5 rating) were moved to Round 3.

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Round 3 used a weighted ranking process to determine the level of importance of each of the practices, and Round 4 asked the experts for their confidence level in the final ranked list.

Results

Round 1 – Initial Practices

From November 19, 2021, to November 24, 2021, the 15 experts responded through Survey Monkey to a survey with 31 initial practices culled from the literature about change management (Appendix A).

Expert comments were considered and thoughtfully consolidated into an updated list of practices. Panelists recommended changes to 86% of the practices categorized as vision-casting, 50% of the practices categorized as alignment, and 25% categorized as strategy-making. These practices were modified or changed for added clarity or emphasis based on comments by panelists. The panelists recommended that 100% of the practices categorized as encouragement remain unchanged. Sixteen practices remained unchanged, representing 59% of the practices presented in Round 1. From the original 31 practices, 15 remained unchanged, five were removed, and six were edited. The participants suggested no new practices. After the analysis, 22 frontline supervisor change-management practices moved to Round 2. The experts submitted 69 comments about the 31 initial practices. Examples of their comments appear in Table 3.

Table 3. *Round 1 Participant Comments Examples*

Practice	Comment	P or N
Frontline supervisors must engage team members by asking their opinions about the possible positive outcomes if the change is successful.	Disagree: I encourage them to pick it apart. Then I formulate a rebuttal to sell it. This shows a listen-first approach. Positive outcomes are pipe dreams. Opportunities and threats are real and present, and letting the employee voice their grievance is much more stress relieving to them. We cannot be afraid to hear sometimes seemingly hurtful feedback.	N
	I think it's also important for leaders to discuss concerns related to team members' opinions of the upcoming changes. This can be valuable in seeing things from a team member's standpoint in a way that leaders may not have considered.	N
	Unnecessary. The change is happening regardless of opinion and is already being presented as something that will be successful - hence it being implemented.	N
Frontline supervisors must communicate and/or create opportunities for autonomy that further change adoption (i.e., delegate decision-making).	Yes, but never losing sight of the goal and making sure that while delegating supervisors are checking performances step by step.	P
Frontline supervisors must solicit employees' concerns (i.e., fear, anger, doubt) about the change in a one-on-one setting and engage them in determining a strategy to overcome those concerns.	No, it would be best in a group setting to ease the nervousness.	N
	Anyone on one setting is concerning depending on your population. I would think small huddles or meetings would be more appropriate and add valuable insight given a variety or team member roles and tenure.	N
	Some employees may be hesitant to bring up concerns one on one, if they have not already observed feedback being encouraged and accepted.	N

Note. P = positive comment and N = negative comment.

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Round 2 – Ratings

On November 27, 2021, the panelists received instructions and the link to complete Round 2, and then on November 29, 2021, they received a reminder email. On December 1, 2021, the Round 2 survey closed when all panelists had responded. During Round 2, participants rated each of the 22 practices' desirability and feasibility. Desirability is the perceived rewards of a selected action, while feasibility is the perceived constraints and costs associated with a choice (Zhang et al., 2021). Each practice was presented twice with a 5-point Likert-type scale to rank the desirability and then the feasibility of the practice. Panelists were asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1= *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither disagree* n*or agree*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*.

Reaching consensus was defined when 70% or more of the panelists rated a practice as a 4 or 5 for desirability and feasibility. Panelists ranked 90% of the 22 practices as desirable and 45% as feasible. To move forward to Rounds 3 and 4, the practice must have achieved a consensus vote from the panelists. Ten of the 22 presented practices achieved consensus. Of the 10 practices, five (50%) were categorized as "vision-casting," two (20%) were from "alignment," two (20%) were from "strategy-making," and one (10%) was from "encouragement." While 100% of the practices categorized as encouragement were advanced from Round 1 to Round 2, only one encouragement-categorized practice survived the winnowing and advanced to Rounds 3 and 4. Ten feasible and desirable practices from Round 2 were advanced to Rounds 3 and 4. Table 4 provides the results of the Round 2 survey.

Table 4. *Practices Achieving Consensus for Being Desirable and Feasible in Round 2*

Practice	Desirable	Feasible	Category
Frontline supervisors must acquire social accounting from their senior leaders, voice their concerns and then commit to the organizational change before communicating the change to employees. (Social accounting occurs when leaders explain the reason(s) for the change to those affected by a change decision).	94%	81%	Vision-casting
Frontline supervisors must utilize realistic examples and stories to present a compelling picture of the future state expected of the change.	81%	81%	Vision-casting
Frontline supervisors must provide a simple narrative that explains why change is necessary for the organization's long-term success and, specifically, their area of responsibility.	94%	94%	Vision-casting
Frontline supervisors must communicate to all workers the impact of the change in creating a more favorable work experience for the team.	100%	88%	Vision-casting
Frontline supervisors must identify in simple terms the areas of change, assign individual tasks, give realistic and clear success targets, and regularly audit team progress.	88%	75%	Vision-casting
Frontline supervisors must communicate and/or create opportunities for autonomy that further change adoption (i.e., delegate decision-making).	81%	81%	Alignment
Frontline supervisors must publicly acknowledge the actions of employees that positively further the organizational change goal.	75%	81%	Alignment

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Practice	Desirable	Feasible	Category
Frontline supervisors must assure employees that their feedback is essential and that you will ensure they have opportunities to share feedback and suggestions throughout the change.	93%	73%	Encouragement
Frontline supervisors must consult with upper management regarding valid concerns and reasonable requests from employees.	81%	81%	Strategy-making
Frontline supervisors must consult with other supervisors within the company concerning what challenges they have encountered in leading the exact change in their department.	94%	81%	Strategy-making

Round 3 – Ranking

On December 1, 2021, panelists received instructions and the link to complete the Round 3 survey. Panelists who had not completed the round received email and SMS text reminders. Panelists received the first reminder on December 3, 2021, and the second on December 5, 2021. One of the panelists was unresponsive throughout Round 3 despite several efforts to establish contact. The Round 3 survey closed on December 5, 2021, after 15 candidates confirmed completion.

The 10 practices achieving consensus in Round 2 advanced as the practices for review in Round 3. Panelists were requested to prioritize the practices by ranking them based on their importance on a scale from 1-10. A ranking of 1 indicated a practice was most important, while 10 meant the practice was least important. The panelists were provided with an open-ended question and space to share comments about their rankings. The ranked practices were assigned a weighted score. The score for each practice was added and divided by the number of panelists completing the round to determine the weighted average.

Open-ended comments were encouraged in Round 3 related to panelists' prioritization of the 10 feasible and desirable practices. Panelists provided three comments; two related to the importance of vision-casting. P3 stressed the importance of leaders that are "aligned and embody the change so that they are seen as authentic and credible." P13 emphasized the importance of understanding "the new direction, implementing it yourself, and then setting clear expectations on how you will monitor the results." The top five ranked practices were those categorized as vision-casting with a weighted score of 6.2 or higher. The 10 practices ranked in Round 3 advanced to Round 4.

Table 5 provides the ranked practices, with 1 being the highest-rated practice, and includes the categories and final weights.

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Table 5. *Ranked Practices from Round 3*

Ranked Practices		Category	Weight
1	Frontline supervisors must acquire social accounting from your senior leaders, voice your concerns and then commit to the organizational change before communicating the change to employees. (Social accounting occurs when leaders explain the reason(s) for the change to those affected by a change decision).	Vision-casting	7.7
2	Frontline supervisors must provide a simple narrative that explains why change is necessary for the organization's long-term success and, specifically, their area of responsibility.	Vision-casting	7.6
3	Frontline supervisors must utilize realistic examples and stories to present a compelling picture of the future state expected of the change.	Vision-casting	6.7
4	Frontline supervisors must communicate to all workers the impact of the change in creating a more favorable work experience for the team.	Vision-casting	6.6
5	Frontline supervisors must identify in simple terms the areas of change, assign individual tasks, give realistic and clear success targets, and regularly audit team progress.	Vision-casting	6.2
6	Frontline supervisors must assure employees that their feedback is essential and that you will ensure they have opportunities to share feedback and suggestions throughout the change.	Encouragement	5.8
7	Frontline supervisors must communicate and/or create opportunities for autonomy that further change adoption (i.e., delegate decision-making).	Alignment	4.3
8	Frontline supervisors must publicly acknowledge the actions of employees that positively further the organizational change goal.	Alignment	4.1
9	Frontline supervisors must consult with upper management regarding valid concerns and reasonable requests from employees.	Strategy-making	3.9
10	Frontline supervisors must consult with other supervisors within the company concerning what challenges they have encountered in leading the exact change in their department.	Strategy-making	2.1

Round 4 – Confidence Scores

Panelists received instructions and the link to the Round 4 survey on December 5, 2021. Twelve panelists responded within 48 hours; after reminders on December 7 and 9, 2021, the Round 4 survey closed on December 10, 2021, when all panelists had completed the round.

The Round 4 survey required panelists to rank order the practices that achieved desirability and feasibility in Round 3 through a 5-point Likert-type confidence scale: *1 = Very unconfident, 2 = Unconfident, 3 = Neither, 4 = Confident, and 5 = Very confident*. The survey achieved 77% of confident (43%) or very confident (34%) results, as depicted in Figure 3.

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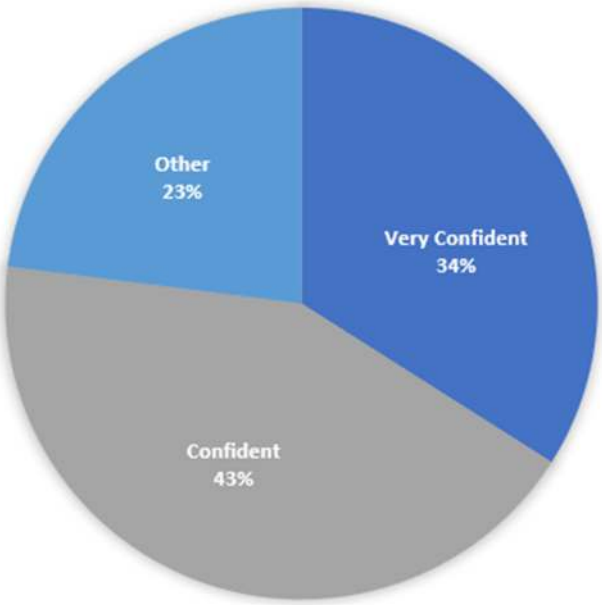
Figure 3. *Round 4 Panelist Confidence Rating*



Additionally, panelists provided four comments. The responses received were generally positive except for one: P5 adamantly opposed the concept of public praise without the express knowledge of employee preference for this type of acknowledgment. P5 suggested

> Asking a person upon hire how they like to be praised is a good way to know exactly how to get the most out of them. Do they like public praise? Do they like a written letter of thanks? Are they a silent emerging leader? For some the humbleness of work is most important.

Other comments included P4, who stated, "Feel that these steps in succession provide a methodical approach to disseminating information to frontline employees. It allows for understanding and feedback so that adjustments can be made as needed to ensure employee satisfaction and buy in." P8 said, "I think it's necessary for everyone on the team to be involved; everyone's input helps to ensure a successful outcome," and P9 said

> Rather modest updates with timelines, with a more overview to a specific picture of what the changes would mean for the workers with the outliers who either struggle with buying in, don't understand or don't agree with the changes being used as a way to hold the change strong. Convincing those specific members (publicly since those individuals stated their unalignment publicly too) would help other understand and buy into the change faster with a stronger commitment to see the changes through.

The final ratings of each of the practices, based on the panel members' confidence in that practice being valid, are provided in Table 6.

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Table 6. *Panelist Confidence of Practices*

	Practice	Confident	Very Confident	%
1	Frontline supervisors must acquire social accounting from your senior leaders, voice your concerns and then commit to the organizational change before communicating the change to employees. (Social accounting occurs when leaders explain the reason(s) for the change to those affected by a change decision.)	7	7	93%
2	Frontline supervisors must provide a simple narrative that explains why change is necessary for the organization's long-term success and, specifically, their area of responsibility.	10	5	100%
3	Frontline supervisors must utilize realistic examples and stories to present a compelling picture of the future state expected of the change.	6	6	80%
4	Frontline supervisors must communicate to all workers the impact of the change in creating a more favorable work experience for the team.	5	3	53%
5	Frontline supervisors must identify in simple terms the areas of change, assign individual tasks, give realistic and clear success targets, and regularly audit team progress.	5	5	67%
6	Frontline supervisors must assure employees that their feedback is essential and that you will ensure they have opportunities to share feedback and suggestions throughout the change.	8	5	87%
7	Frontline supervisors must communicate and/or create opportunities for autonomy that further change adoption (i.e., delegate decision-making).	6	3	60%
8	Frontline supervisors must publicly acknowledge the actions of employees that positively further the organizational change goal.	6	5	73%
9	Frontline supervisors must consult with upper management regarding valid concerns and reasonable requests from employees.	6	7	87%
10	Frontline supervisors must consult with other supervisors within the company concerning what challenges they have encountered in leading the exact change in their department.	6	5	73%

Note. The table lists the 10 practices from Round 4 and the number of panelists (out of 15) that selected a confidence rating of (5) *very confident* or (4) *confident*.

Findings

The findings of this modified Delphi project confirmed the framework categories. Figure 4 depicts the top 10 practices identified by the project panelists. The top five practices affirmed the importance of the vision-casting category, making up 50% of the list from Round 2 as the most desirable and feasible practices. Practice 4, *frontline supervisors must communicate to all workers the impact of the change in creating a more favorable work experience for the team*, received the lowest confidence rating, with an average score of 3.5, which leaned closer to neither confident or unconfident in the rating. Practice 7, *frontline supervisors must communicate and/or create opportunities for autonomy that further change adoption (i.e., delegate decision-making)*, was next lowest, with an average of 3.75. All other ratings earned average scores of 4 and higher, with Practice 9, *frontline supervisors must*

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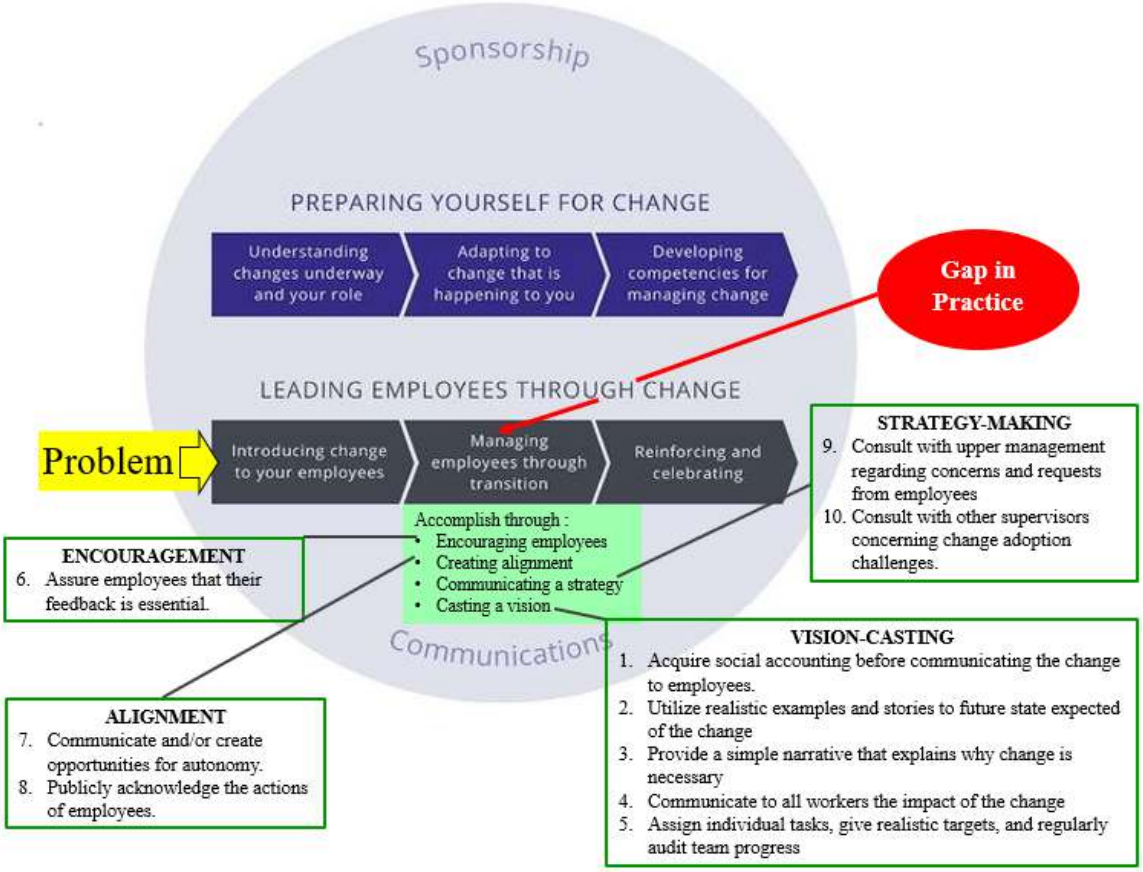
consult with upper management regarding valid concerns and reasonable requests from employees, earning the highest average (4.56). The total average of all 10 of the top practices was 4.1, which aligned with *confident* that the practices resembled desirable and feasible options.

Figure 4. *Miller's Frontline Supervisor's Transformational Change-Management Framework*



Note. Ten findings that address the gap in practice are aligned within the original applied framework's four categories to create a framework specifically geared toward frontline supervisors during change.

Contribution to Practitioner Knowledge Base

The findings from this project contribute to existing change leadership literature and enhance frontline supervisor leadership capabilities by offering actionable practices to increase employee adoption of organizational changes. As changes that impact hourly workers occur in organizations, the project findings provide frontline supervisors with actionable practices for casting a vision, making a strategy, gaining alignment, and encouraging employees toward change acceptance.

The project findings and comments gathered from panelists in Rounds 1, 3, and 4 confirmed that leaders must deliver compelling messages that tell employees that the future state is desirable to gain change cooperation, as noted by Tanner (2021). The group conceded that the most desirable, feasible, and important practices cast a vision

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by communicating a credible future state while inspiring engagement, reinforcing the soundness of McCloskey's 2009 research. The project also supports the American Productivity & Quality Center's (2019) position that the most critical role of supervisors in organizational change is explaining individual team member impacts, listening to employee feedback, escalating feedback to senior management, coaching employees, and monitoring change task completions. The panelist feedback revealed a consensus among experts on the importance of leadership communication and confidence in 10 practices for increased change adoption. This project's desirable and feasible practices may serve as a tool for organizations seeking to empower frontline supervisors to assume a more proactive role in increasing employee change adoption.

Practical Application

The findings from this modified Delphi project could guide frontline supervisors in communicating and gaining employee buy-in to change efforts during organizational change. Figure 4 provided the final Miller's Frontline Supervisor Transformational Leadership Framework and incorporated the 10 practices that reached consensus by expert panelists for increasing change adoption.

Various comments from Round 1 supported the need for such a project, including "senior leadership has to demonstrate action to affect other peoples' will and desire to change" and "Protect your people. That means from the higher-ups, too." The project results also revealed that while some practices were listed as desirable, they were viewed as unfeasible based on the perceived decision-making level. For example, a senior leader, P8, rated a practice as unfeasible because "frontline supervisors need approval from upper management before doing this."

The panelists' feedback also emphasized the importance of setting expectations and monitoring for accountability. P13 stated, "It is always important to understand the new direction, implement it yourself, and then set clear expectations and how you will monitor the results." Leaders and change practitioners may benefit from an in-depth study of the role of the frontline supervisor in promoting change accountability. According to Keller et al. (2021), leaders noted that their leaders held accountable for organizational change execution are 3.9 times likelier to lead a successful change transformation.

Area for Additional Studies

Future researchers may use the frontline supervisor transformational leadership framework to identify additional areas of change leadership development that may improve supervisors' success during a change. A recommendation for future projects includes evaluating the desirability and feasibility of leadership practices for senior leaders looking to inspire rapid change adoption by frontline supervisors. Specifically, practitioners and organizational leaders may benefit from exploring practices to reinforce and celebrate employees. The framework may also be extended to include other practices not explored in this project and other industries. Finally, turning the framework into a quantitative survey instrument to gain a larger sample's perspective on the utility of the practices would make for an interesting future study.

Conclusion

Iterative analysis of 31 initial frontline change management practices through four surveys led to a final list of 10 desirable and feasible practices as viewed by 15 expert panelists. These practices may reduce the gap in practice for frontline supervisors leading an organizational change. While they align with existing literature, they confirmed and reinforced that vision-casting, communicating the actions necessary to realize the change vision, and motivating and inspiring employees to accept the change are critical aspects of frontline change management. The results also provide retail leaders with change leadership practices to enhance their current leadership practices, which might help frontline supervisors reduce employee resistance to organizational change.

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Appendix A: Initial Round 1 Items

Vision Casting. The vision casting concept of the framework helps practitioners identify practices that communicate a credible future state while inspiring engagement (McCloskey, 2009).

- Frontline supervisors must acquire social accounting from your senior leaders, voice your concerns and then commit to the organizational change before communicating the change to employees. (Social accounting occurs when leaders explain the reason(s) for the change to those affected by a change decision.)
- Frontline supervisors must provide a narrative that explains why change is necessary for the organization's long-term success and specifically your area of responsibility.
- Frontline supervisors must communicate the impact of the change in creating a more favorable work experience for the team.
- Frontline supervisors must identify in simple terms the areas of change and give realistic and clear targets to measure success.
- Frontline supervisors must utilize examples, analogies, metaphors, and stories to present a compelling picture of the future state expected of the change.
- Frontline supervisors must communicate your message using simple language and avoid jargon or buzz words as they may create doubt about the value of the change effort.
- Frontline supervisors must engage team members by asking their opinions about the possible positive outcomes if the change is successful.
- Any additional practices related to this category

Alignment. The alignment concept of the framework helps practitioners identify practices that gain employee commitment to work toward the change vision (McCloskey, 2009).

- Frontline supervisors must solicit employees' concerns (i.e., fear, anger, doubt) about the change in a one-on-one setting and engage them in determining a strategy to overcome those concerns.
- Frontline supervisors must identify at least one advantageous opportunity for each team member that becomes possible due to the organizational change (i.e., future promotion opportunities).
- Frontline supervisors must communicate and/or create opportunities for autonomy that further change adoption (i.e., delegate decision-making).
- Frontline supervisors must request the commitment of employees to work toward change adoption after each interaction and follow-up.
- Frontline supervisors must personally take action and actively engage in group tasks that further implementation of the organizational change.
- Frontline supervisors must publicly acknowledge the actions of employees that positively further the organizational change goal.
- Any additional practices related to this category.

Encouragement. The encouragement concept of the framework helps practitioners identify practices that motivate and inspire employees toward change acceptance (McCloskey, 2009).

- Frontline supervisors must assure employees that their feedback is essential and that you will ensure they have opportunities to share feedback and suggestions throughout the change.
- Frontline supervisors must speak one-on-one with each team member to address individual questions or concerns they may not want to address in a group setting.
- Frontline supervisors must listen to employee concerns without bias and demonstrate understanding of those concerns through follow-up actions (i.e., commitment to seeking answers to questions, repeating back stated concerns).
- Frontline supervisors must demonstrate understanding of negative attitudes and questioning of leadership choices and do not perceive resistance behaviors as insubordination.

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- Frontline supervisors must commit to ongoing one-on-one follow-up sessions with team members to determine new or persistent barriers to change adoption.
- Frontline supervisors must request resources (monetary and/or nonmonetary) that you can use to incentivize change adoption and implementation.
- Any additional practices related to this category

Strategy-making. The framework's strategy-making concept helps practitioners identify practices that communicate the actions necessary to realize the change vision (McCloskey, 2009).

- Frontline supervisors must influence the communication logistics (timing, frequency, methods) of organizational change communication regarding employee workload.
- Frontline supervisors must create structured opportunities for organizational change collaboration (i.e., brainstorming sessions, task groups) for employees experiencing similar or opposing change feelings.
- Frontline supervisors must engage with employees about alternatives to organizational changes that achieve the organizational goal but may be more readily embraced by impacted employees.
- Frontline supervisors must consult with upper management regarding valid concerns and reasonable requests from employees.
- Frontline supervisors must consult with other supervisors within the company concerning what challenges they have encountered in leading the exact change in their department.
- Frontline supervisors must seek alignment with other supervisors within the company concerning any deviations or alternatives to be explored as part of the organizational change to prevent organizational discord.
- Frontline supervisors must follow-up with employees in the weeks or months following the change implementation to ensure no new concerns have arisen.
- Frontline supervisors must prepare a lesson learned document for use by other leaders in the company to ensure improved organizational change implementations in the future.
- Any additional practices related to this category.

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