

# THE ADKAR MODEL AS A COMMON LANGUAGE FOR CHANGE

Applications of ADKAR Research Study

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# INTRODUCTION

Any time people communicate, the language they use is critically important. When people use different words to describe the same concept, or use the same words to refer to different concepts, confusion ensues. A common language leads to more effective communication. For example, two people speaking French will likely communicate more effectively than if one were speaking French and the other Mandarin.

Communicating about change is no different. Change is often seen as ambiguous and difficult to understand. When the language an organization uses to discuss change is varied and inconsistent, this language only exacerbates the issue of ambiguity. However, if a common language for change — an inclusive set of words and phrases that are used to describe and understand change — is established, change can be viewed as a concrete process with relatable stages that can be managed.

Establishing a common language for change gives organizations an opportunity to clarify and articulate what change is. Establishing a common language also ensures people can use a shared vernacular and removes the risk of unique, but potentially incorrect, interpretations. Finally, establishing a common language streamlines the conversations around change; rather than spending time clarifying what is meant by the language being used, the common language allows for change to be discussed efficiently and effectively across the entire organization.

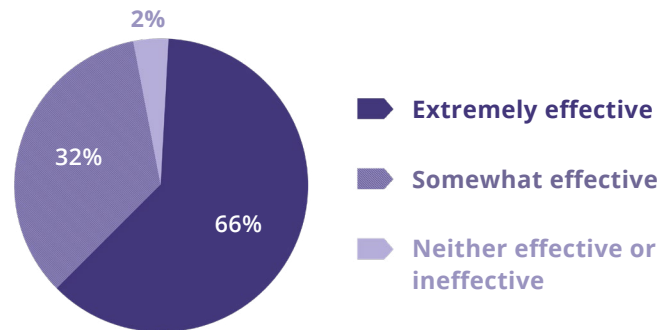
In a research effort to understand how organizations use the **Prosci ADKAR® Model** (ADKAR), Prosci asked questions about using ADKAR as a common language for change. Here, we examine why organizations used ADKAR as a common language for change, how they established this language effectively, and the results they saw from this effort.

ESTABLISHING A COMMON  
LANGUAGE FOR CHANGE  
GIVES ORGANIZATIONS AN  
OPPORTUNITY TO CLARIFY AND  
ARTICULATE WHAT CHANGE IS.

“  
ADKAR has allowed us to more  
openly discuss change and  
manage change at all levels.  
It has prompted thought  
and caused more questions  
to be asked (a good thing)  
throughout the organization.  
Just for these reasons, we have  
increased our ability to deal  
with and adapt to change.

# USING THE ADKAR MODEL AS A COMMON LANGUAGE FOR CHANGE

Nearly one-third of study participants reported they had adopted ADKAR as a common language for change, and nearly all of these participants said that ADKAR was either slightly or very effective for this particular use.



## Percent of Study Respondents Who Used ADKAR as a Common Language for Change

USE CASE	PREVALENCE	FREQUENCY
Leverage a structured approach and methodology	80%	95%
Facilitate individual change	45%	95%
Measure change outcomes	44%	91%
Create a common language for change	34%	98%
Integrate with project management	34%	90%
Empower managers	32%	87%
Equip senior leaders	25%	97%

# WHY USE THE ADKAR MODEL AS A COMMON LANGUAGE

Prosci asked study participants whose organizations were using ADKAR as a common language why it had been selected for this purpose. While some participants had not been a part of the selection of ADKAR as the common language, the participants who had revealed two primary reasons for its selection:

## 1 Is easy to explain and understand

Participants reported that ADKAR was easy to explain and understand. Participants noted that anyone in the organization, including those who were not change managers, could quickly understand the concepts of ADKAR.

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*ADKAR is simple and practical for our members at all levels of the organization. Most importantly, it is easy to remember and discuss in terms of change.*

## 2 Aligns with natural experience and makes sense

ADKAR was viewed as a common sense way of talking about change. ADKAR was reflective of people's experience with change and easily made sense to the people who learned it. Because the language in ADKAR was not vastly different from how people were already discussing change, the impacted groups were able to quickly start using the common terminology in a meaningful way.

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*ADKAR is so intuitive that anyone can understand its purpose and start using it very quickly. Besides, putting business and technical people together to understand each other using this common, not rocket science, language was key to support collaboration between impacted teams.*

In addition to asking participants why they selected ADKAR as their common language, this study also explored how ADKAR has been useful as a common language for change. Here is how participants found ADKAR useful as a common language:

PARTICIPANTS REPORTED  
THAT THE ADKAR MODEL  
WAS EASY TO EXPLAIN AND  
UNDERSTAND.

### 3 Provides common understanding and dialogue

Because ADKAR could be easily understood by people across the organization, participants noted it was a useful way to ensure a common definition for change. This common language allowed for more meaningful and specific dialogue about change and the impact of changes to employees.

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*The language used in the definitions is easy for all team members to understand. The concepts are easy to give examples for. We can take a recent change and apply ADKAR to the process to assist in showing staff how the process works.*

### 4 Articulates the change process

Participants felt that ADKAR was useful within their organization because it reflects the individual change process. Rather than referencing change generally, ADKAR allowed people within the organization to discuss change more specifically and reference the specific part of the change process that was either experiencing difficulty or being influenced by a specific activity.

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*ADKAR has allowed us to have conversations about where people are, where the sticking points are, and give an opportunity to discuss what might be done.*

# HOW TO EMBED THE ADKAR MODEL AS A COMMON LANGUAGE

The process of embedding ADKAR as a common language in participants' organizations took many forms. While each organization is unique, there were several frequently-referenced ways for creating a common language using ADKAR and sustaining the common language.

## CREATING THE COMMON LANGUAGE

### Conduct organization-wide training

Participants reported that training key parts of the organization in ADKAR was the primary way they established ADKAR as a common language for change. This training was a formalized way to introduce people to ADKAR and allow them to begin learning the ADKAR lexicon. Participants varied in the groups and the number of people that they trained within the organization. While most participants' organizations had focused on training leadership, project management and change management offices, some participants' organizations were making a concerted effort to train every member of their organization.

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*We are training practitioners in various groups who are using the language. Our leaders have recognized the value of having a common language amongst themselves about change, especially as it pertains to our strategy. We have provided books and materials across the organization. It has almost become a part of our everyday business language.*

## Create buy-in and competency with leaders

Many participants reported that they first embedded ADKAR in their leadership teams by training leaders and managers. This training led to both buy-in for the model itself and also spread the use of the model as leaders started using ADKAR to talk about change.

## Deploy through project application

Participants reported that establishing ADKAR as a common language for change was a primary directive for the change management group or office. The change management group specifically worked to embed ADKAR as a common language for change through project application and various engagements and awareness-building activities. Many participants reported using ADKAR surveys to check the current level of understanding, which they felt was the best indicator of a successful implementation of ADKAR as a common language for change.

## SUSTAINING THE COMMON LANGUAGE

### Demonstrate leadership support

Having leadership actively and vocally supporting the use of ADKAR as a common language helped sustain it throughout the organization. Leaders both vocally supported the use of ADKAR throughout the organization and actively used ADKAR language when speaking about change. These two approaches worked together to ensure that other members in the organization continued to use ADKAR language.

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*Established a Change Management Office complete with Change Management and Organization Adoption professionals who are matrixed into the business. Saturated the business with messages about ADKAR and the benefits of a common change language. Campaigned to business using senior leaders as evangelist. Continuous feedback from business to simplify message and more sharing of messages. Document and share examples of success.*



## Use consistently and broadly

Participants consistently used ADKAR language to talk about change in any context. ADKAR was not only used to discuss change management activities, but also when discussing general change and individual transitions. This aided participants in instilling ADKAR as the way of talking about change as a concept throughout the organization.

## Integrate with project management approach

Change management and ADKAR were embedded into the organization's project management approach. This meant that every project acted as a reinforcement of ADKAR as a language for change.

..... “ .....

*We publish the ADKAR Corner in our monthly employee newsletter and constantly use the terminology in our project plans and discussions with project and operational leaders.*

# OUTCOMES OF USING THE ADKAR MODEL AS A COMMON LANGUAGE

Participants who successfully established ADKAR as a common language for change found that it provided several positive outcomes across projects, impacted groups and the organization as a whole.



## Improved project results

Participants noted that by embedding ADKAR as a common language for change, change initiatives were more easily embraced and the desired outcomes of those projects were more fully realized. By creating a language for change, change was more readily adopted.

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*Increased the ability to identify resistance and secure the resources to mitigate it.*



## Increased visibility for change management

Participants reported that using ADKAR as a common language for change naturally increased the understanding and visibility of change management in projects and initiatives in the organization. Participants reported that having ADKAR as a common language required project teams and leaders to focus on change management activities that led to successful adoption and usage, thereby raising the overall awareness for change management in the organization.

**BY CREATING A LANGUAGE FOR CHANGE, CHANGE WAS MORE READILY ADOPTED.**



## Change treated as process

Participants reported that, once ADKAR was established as a common language for change, their organization started to understand and treat change as a process. Rather than providing only training, participants' organizations focused on creating *awareness* and *desire* for changes before building *knowledge* and *ability*. This understanding also allowed for change management activities to have more focus on the individual outcomes that ADKAR describes.

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*Impacted people have become more acceptable of change taking place. Sponsors have more confidence in communications and engagements and have more faith that adoption and utilisation will take place within a shorter period of time than previous projects which did not include the ADKAR process.*

# CONCLUSION

Selecting a common language for change that utilizes words that everyone in the organization can relate to allows for change to become something that everyone can not only understand, but also positively influence. Common language is not only for change management professionals; it is for everyone. ADKAR provides simple, common terms in a framework that is both easy to understand and implement in day-to-day situations. Using ADKAR as a common language provides not only clarity and ease of communication, but can also positively impact the outcomes of change initiatives and produce better change results.



# SUCCESS STORY: OKLAHOMA GAS AND ELECTRIC COMPANY

What if there was an organization where, from executives to frontline employees, change management was spoken about in nearly every meeting? Where change management influenced project decisions from resource allocation to go-live? Where people sought out a change manager because they knew their project would need change management? What would you have to do to create this kind of culture around change management in your organization?

Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company, founded in 1902, serves more than 830,000 customers in 276 towns and cities in a 30,000 square mile area of Oklahoma and western Arkansas. With heating, cooling and electrical power for hundreds of thousands of people on the line, OG&E needed to be more successful with many must-win projects. Vickie Troxel, an Organizational Development Consultant with OG&E, was considering various change management models in preparation for a large-scale change that would affect two-thirds of the organization's construction services. Vickie learned about ADKAR during her Prosci Change Management Certification training. A day into the program, she was sold.

Vickie came back from certification passionate about the potential success that OG&E could have by adopting ADKAR. Vickie proposed that they apply ADKAR on a single project in order to demonstrate its potential, and she set to work applying the model with frontline Construction Services employees.

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*You don't need a psych degree to understand ADKAR.*

Vickie found that the model provided a simple but meaningful way to talk about change. Foremen and supervisors started to use ADKAR language when talking about a change amongst themselves and their employees. This allowed, and in some case forced, them to evaluate the impact that a change would have on employees. Vickie found that this employee-impact focus even took place midway through some projects. By using ADKAR to talk about change, some foremen and supervisors were able to identify if they should have accounted for ADKAR earlier in the process. “People naturally realized when they had made a mistake. Several meetings stopped as managers and supervisors concluded that ‘We really need to ADKAR this.’ They would come get me, and I would jump on the project and start helping them out.”

Vickie saw employees at all levels of her organization begin to use ADKAR language when talking about change. People became more empathetic about changes in the organization. They identified the impact a change would have on others at the beginning of a project. They were also able to perform post-mortem reviews on unsuccessful changes and identify why they failed. As the common language for change grew, people wanted to know more about ADKAR and have more access to change management materials to continue learning.

“The biggest change I saw this applied on was when we were eliminating a core, long-standing position within the company. This was the definition of an impactful change. Employees in these roles could either try to find a position somewhere in the company, retire, or move on to different pastures. We ‘ADKARed’ the heck out of this. We had *awareness* and *desire* communications going out, we had sponsors giving face-to-face communication—we did everything we could. Because employees were so used to how we would be talking about this change and were able to fluently communicate back to us, we were able to adapt our approach to match their needs. I had people after this change—people whose job was disappearing—thank us for how we had handled this change.”

“

*People recognize change management gaps on their own and start looking for ways to address them themselves or seeking change management help...I did not even know that we needed a common language for change, but now it has made all the difference.*

Vickie has seen many positive benefits in her organization from instilling ADKAR as a common language for change, such as more successful and reliable changes. But that is not the only place she sees its value: “There are more successful changes, sure. But the common language for talking about change is way more valuable. People recognize change management gaps on their own and start looking for ways to address them themselves or seeking change management help...I did not even know that we needed a common language for change, but now it has made all the difference.”

When asked what advice she would give to someone looking to instill ADKAR as the common language for change in their organization, Vickie said:

“ADKAR is about doing change management. If you want a road map that is directly applicable and allows you to work with people who have never seen change management before, go with ADKAR...ADKAR is so perfectly simple that people can pass it by. That is why it is important for you, as a practitioner, to internalize it before you try to externalize it...Let the process happen naturally. Use it, and if you see results, then there is no need to force it.”

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