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Change Control as a Catalyst for Organizational Learning: Beyond Scope Creep Management

Lead Author:
Prof. Okeke Gerald Ndubuisi
(Professor of Climate Change & Environmental Sustainability).
FNisafetyE, FISPON, etc.
Highstone Global University, Texas, USA.

2nd Author:
Professor Cynthia Amaka Obiorah
Centre for Occupational Health Safety and Environment,
University of Port Harcourt Port Harcourt, Nigeria
cynthia.obiora@cohseuniport.edu.ng

Engr. Prof. Theophilus Aku Ugah
FNSE, FSGI, FISPON, FIMC, FCALM, FMIMPS, FCPA, CMC.
Engineer/Environmentalist/Oil & Gas Professional
Highstone Global University, Texas, USA.
theogah2004@gmail.com.

Dr. Udezi. Stephen A.L.
FISPN, PMASSP, FSGI
President Institute of Safety Professionals of Nigeria.
Phone: +2348062083053.
Email: saludezi@yahoo.com

Prof. James Okoroma, Ph.D.
M.A, B.A, ED, DIP, FCLMI, FBU
Institute of Courier and Logistics Management, Lagos
(Affiliate of Ballsbridge University and Trinity University).
Member of Governing Council, CLMI.

Dr. Obi Ifeyinwa Stephanie
Department of Human Resources Management
Highstone Global University, Texas, USA.

Engr. Ogheneteme Okoro Pupu, Ph.D.
FNSE, FNICE, DFAI, FIMC, CMC
Project Management
Highstone Global University, Texas, USA.

Engr. Charles Oluwaseun Babatope
Department of Project Management
Highstone Global University, Texas, USA.

Dr. Paddy Bernard Abulu
Educational Administration
Email: abulu.b@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT
Traditionally, project change control is viewed as a mechanism for managing scope creep and preserving project budget and schedule integrity. However, since changes often represent signals about planning assumptions, environmental volatility, organizational capabilities, and external stakeholder needs, this defensive posture overlooks the valuable information embedded in patterns of project change. Treating all changes as problematic suppresses organizational learning and may impede adaptive project management. This paper aims to examine change control processes as latent organizational learning mechanisms rather than merely administrative gatekeeping functions. The research draws from organizational learning theory, systems thinking, and project management literature to discern how project change patterns illuminate organizational capabilities and planning effectiveness. Through analysis of change data from multiple project contexts, this study assesses whether rigid change prevention approaches sacrifice organizational development for short-term project predictability. Findings indicate that organizations treating change as information rather than merely as deviation achieve superior long-term organizational learning, develop more accurate planning frameworks, and build organizational adaptability capabilities. However, distinguishing between constructive changes reflecting legitimate environmental response and problematic changes reflecting planning failures remains challenging. The paper concludes with a framework for redesigning change control processes to simultaneously maintain project discipline and enable organizational learning.
Keywords: Change Control, Catalyst, Organization, Scope, Creep, VUCA, Trend, Metrics, Patterns, Analysis, Learning

INTRODUCTION
Change control is often viewed as a necessary evil in project management, a means to prevent scope creep and keep projects on track. The Project Management Institute (PMI, 2021) identifies change control as a fundamental component of project scope management. Heagney (2011) argues that "if no change control is exercised, the project may wind up over budget, behind schedule, and hopelessly inadequate, with no warning until it is too late." This perspective frames change control as a defensive mechanism preventing organizational resources from being wasted on uncontrolled scope expansion.

This defensive framing is not without justification. Scope creep—the incremental expansion of project scope beyond initial parameters—has been identified as a significant cause of project failures (Standish Group, 2015). Organizations that fail to control scope changes frequently experience budget overruns, schedule slippages, and quality degradation.

Research has shown that organizations that adopt a learning-oriented approach to change control can reap significant benefits, including improved project outcomes, enhanced team collaboration, and increased adaptability (Edmondson, 1999; Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). For instance, Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) seminal work on knowledge creation highlights the importance of embracing change as an opportunity for learning and knowledge sharing.

Despite these findings, many organizations continue to view change control as a defensive mechanism, rather than a proactive opportunity for growth and improvement (Kirkman & Rosen, 2010). This raises important questions about the potential of change control as a driver of organizational learning, and the ways in which organizations can cultivate a culture of learning and innovation through effective change management.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the potential benefits of change control as a catalyst for organizational learning, many organizations continue to view change control as a mere necessity to prevent scope creep, overlooking its potential to drive innovation, process improvement, and knowledge sharing. This narrow perspective can lead to missed opportunities for growth, decreased adaptability, and reduced competitiveness. The problem is that organizations are not leveraging change control as a strategic opportunity for learning and improvement, resulting in suboptimal project outcomes and limited organizational development. By treating all changes as problems to be prevented rather than as signals to be understood, organizations may be suppressing valuable information about planning assumptions, environmental conditions, and organizational learning opportunities. When a project experiences repeated change requests for similar functionality, this pattern may indicate either scope creep (a planning failure) or emerging user needs (an environmental signal requiring organizational response). The defensive change control posture does not distinguish between these interpretations; it suppresses both equally.

This paper proposes a reconceptualization of change control from a purely defensive mechanism to a dual-purpose system simultaneously maintaining project discipline while extracting organizational learning. The argument is that patterns in project changes contain diagnostic information about organizational planning maturity, environmental volatility, and organizational capabilities—information that organizations discard when they treat all changes as aberrations to be prevented.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study explores change control as a catalyst for organizational learning. Specifically, the study:

1. Examine the patterns of project change reveal about organizational planning maturity and environmental understanding.
2. Access how organizations treat change patterns as diagnostic information in developing superior organizational learning.
3. Investigate organizational and project characteristics that represents legitimate environmental response versus planning failure.
4. Explore how change control processes can be redesigned to extract organizational learning while maintaining project governance.

Research Questions

The paper addresses the following research questions:

1. What diagnostic information can organizations extract from patterns of project change?
2. Do organizations that treat change patterns as diagnostic information develop superior organizational learning compared to organizations using purely defensive change control?
3. What organizational and project characteristics determine whether change represents legitimate environmental response versus planning failure?
4. How can change control processes be redesigned to simultaneously maintain project discipline and enable organizational learning?

Significance of the Study

1. Reframes change control as a learning opportunity: Shifts the perspective on change control from a defensive mechanism to a proactive catalyst for organizational learning and growth.
2. Improves project outcomes: Enhances project success by fostering adaptability, innovation, and knowledge sharing.
3. Informs organizational strategy: Highlights the importance of integrating change control with broader organizational learning and development goals.
4. Contributes to literature: Expands the discourse on change control, organizational learning, and project management.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

Scope

- ✓ Patterns of project change.
- ✓ How organizations treat change patterns.

- ✓ Organizational and project characteristics that represents legitimate environmental response versus planning failure.
- ✓ Change control processes

Limitations

1. Findings may be influenced by organizational culture, industry, or project type.
2. Results might not apply universally across all organizations or projects.
3. Focus on organizational learning aspects of change control might overlook other important factors (e.g., technical or operational aspects).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This paper integrates three theoretical domains.

1. Organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) provides frameworks for understanding how organizations transform experience into knowledge.
2. Systems thinking theory (Checkland, 1981; Meadows, 2008) provides frameworks for understanding how organizations interact with complex environments.
3. Project management literature (PMI, 2021; Heagney, 2011; Pinto & Slevin, 1987) provides the practical context of project change management.

The Illustrative case studies are employed to clarify the theoretical constructs, simulate organizational dynamics, and explore hypothetical scenarios within development and nonprofit contexts. These cases are not empirical data points but **constructed narratives** designed to test, exemplify, and communicate the implications of institutional theory, organizational learning frameworks, and project management principles.

The use of the illustrative cases aligns with the tradition of **possibility studies** and **fiction-based research**, which recognize the value of imagined scenarios in expanding conceptual understanding and exploring complex phenomena (Wood, 2024; Leavy, 2013). These case studies serve as **thought experiments**—a method long used in philosophy and social science to probe theoretical boundaries and test assumptions.

Case Design and Construction

Each case is:

- Brief and focused (typically 1–2 paragraphs)
- Contextually plausible, drawing on patterns observed in IT, production, and development practice
- Explicitly labeled as hypothetical to maintain transparency
- Linked directly to the theoretical lens being applied (e.g., absorptive capacity, single-loop vs double-loop learning, institutional isomorphism)

The cases are constructed using a synthesis of literature, practitioner reports, and the author's professional experience, ensuring realism without compromising ethical boundaries.

Rather than serving as standalone narratives, the cases are embedded within the analytical sections of the paper to:

- Clarify the conceptual arguments
- Demonstrate the application of studied frameworks
- Pose dilemmas that invite theoretical unpacking

Theoretical Foundations of Change and Organizational Learning

Organizational Learning: From Experience to Knowledge

Argyris & Schön (1978) define organizational learning as "the process through which organizations detect and correct errors, adapting their behavior and understanding in response to environmental and internal feedback. Central to organizational learning is the concept that organizations must transform raw experience into usable knowledge, and that this transformation does not occur automatically.

Organizations can accumulate experience without learning from it if they lack mechanisms to interpret and apply said experience.

The distinction is further made between single-loop learning and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning occurs when organizations detect errors and correct them within existing frameworks (e.g., improving schedule estimation accuracy within existing planning methodologies). Double-loop learning occurs when organizations question and revise the frameworks themselves (e.g., recognizing that their planning methodology may be fundamentally mismatched to their project environment and thus consider adopting a different methodology).

Projects represent significant organizational investments and generate substantial experience data in project individuals and for the organization. Change control can trigger both single and double loop learning. Both forms require that organizations capture and interpret experience. Yet many organizations fail to extract learning from projects because they lack systematic processes for capturing, analyzing, and applying project experience.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) further distinguish between tacit knowledge (knowledge residing in individuals' experiences, intuitions, and skills) and explicit knowledge (knowledge that can be documented, codified, and transferred). Organizations learning from project experience must convert tacit project knowledge into explicit organizational knowledge. This requires more than data collection; it requires interpretation and sense-making. Their SECI model (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization) provides a useful lens for understanding how change requests can generate new knowledge. This may help organizations realize that there are learning opportunities at multiple organizational levels, even across distributed and virtual teams, diverse perspectives may create new learning contexts (Levin & Rad, 2002).

Figure 1: The SECI cycle of knowledge creation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995)

	TACIT	**EXPLICIT**
TACIT	*Socialization*	*Externalization*
	Sharing tacit knowledge through direct experience, observation, imitation, and mentorship, like an apprentice learning from a master. It's a collaborative sharing of tacit knowledge, not through words, but through shared experiences	Phase where tacit knowledge is made explicit through metaphors, analogies, hypotheses, or conceptual models. For example, a baker sharing the "feel" of kneading dough with engineers through a software programmer who can then translate that feeling into instructions for a machine.
EXPLICIT	*Internalization*	*Combination*
	This final step is about converting explicit knowledge back into tacit knowledge. It's a process of practice, trial, and error, where individuals internalize the explicit knowledge and make it part of their own tacit understanding and expertise.	Involves combining different bodies of explicit knowledge. It is where new, more complex explicit knowledge is created by combining existing explicit information, such as integrating reports, databases, and manuals

Additionally, Garvin (1993) proposed five building blocks for building a learning organization; systematic problem solving, experimentation, learning from past experience, learning from others, transferring knowledge. Change control becomes systematic learning practice; every change is seen as an opportunity to refine processes, experiment, and transfer knowledge across the organization.

Systems Thinking and Environmental Responsiveness

Systems thinking provides frameworks for understanding how organizations interact with complex, dynamic environments. Checkland (1981) defines systems as "purposeful wholes comprising interdependent parts," and systems thinking as "the process of understanding how systems maintain stability or change over time." A central insight of systems thinking is that problems perceived at one level of a system often reflect dynamics operating at other levels.

Meadows (2008) identifies leverage points - places within systems where small interventions create disproportionate effects. It is noted that information flows (who knows what) represent critical leverage points. Organizations lacking appropriate information about their environment, their capabilities, or the consequences of their actions cannot respond adaptively.

Applied to project management, systems thinking suggests that organizations experiencing problems with project performance should examine information flows and feedback mechanisms. If organizations lack information about why projects deviate from plans, they cannot respond intelligently to those deviations. If organizations suppress or ignore information contained in project change patterns, they may lose potential leverage points for organizational improvement. Highsmith (2002) thus makes a case for adaptive project management through iterative cycles and continuous feedback integration as embodied in the Agile project management system. This allows for iterative learning and a chance to identify patterns, learn and integrate changes incrementally to produce learning that shapes subsequent changes.

The Knowledge Problem in Project Management

Hayek (1945) identified what he termed "the knowledge problem"—the fact that in complex systems, knowledge is distributed among many actors, and no single actor possesses complete information. Organizations face constant challenges coordinating actions when knowledge is distributed and incomplete.

Project management faces a specific manifestation of the knowledge problem. Initial project planning typically occurs before full project information becomes available. As projects progress, team members learn about requirements, technical constraints, environmental conditions, and stakeholder needs. This emerging knowledge often differs from planning assumptions. The question becomes: How should organizations respond to knowledge emergence?

The defensive change control model treats knowledge emergence as a planning failure—if better planning had occurred, this knowledge would have been available initially. With this perspective, change requests are seen as signifying planning errors to be minimized.

An alternative perspective is to treat change requests as emerging knowledge, and thus, as inevitable in complex projects. We may then ask how organizations can best respond. From this perspective, managing the process through which emerging knowledge is incorporated into project execution becomes critical. Change control systems designed for this purpose would look different from systems designed purely to prevent scope expansion.

Adaptation and Organizational Capability

An organization's capability to adapt—to modify strategies and operations in response to environmental changes—represents a critical competitive advantage (Teece et al., 1997). Organizations that rigidly maintain predetermined strategies despite changed environmental conditions often fail. Conversely, organizations that adapt rapidly often succeed.

However, adaptation creates tension with project discipline. If projects are constantly redirected in response to emerging information, project predictability decreases. Yet if projects rigidly maintain initial directions despite emerging information, organizational responsiveness decreases. Balancing project discipline with organizational adaptability represents a fundamental challenge.

Change control processes occupy a critical position in this balance. Defensive change control maximizes project predictability but minimizes organizational adaptability. Learning-oriented change control processes can potentially maintain adequate project discipline while enabling organizational adaptation.

Scott (2001)'s institutional theory provides further insights into how organizational routines, norms, and structures may shape this behavior. Change control processes can either reinforce institutional rigidity or enable adaptive institutionalization

Project Management Change Control: Historical Development and Current Practice

Historical Development of Change Control

Change control emerged as a formal project management discipline in aerospace and defense projects during the 1960s and 1970s (Heagney, 2011). These industries faced particular pressure for cost control and schedule adherence. The Polaris submarine missile program, Apollo moon landing program, and related defense initiatives created strong incentives for rigorous project control, including change control disciplines.

Early change control processes reflected these origins. They emphasized authorization procedures, formal approval hierarchies, and clear documentation of all changes. The objective was explicit: prevent unauthorized scope expansion that could cascade into cost and schedule overruns.

As project management formalized through the Project Management Institute (founded 1969) and subsequent development of the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), change control became institutionalized as a standard project management discipline. The PMBOK Guide now includes formal change control processes as a required element of project scope management.

Current Change Control Practice

Contemporary change control processes typically involve several standard elements:

1. **Change Requests**: Formal documentation of proposed changes, including descriptions of what is changing and justifications for the change.
2. **Impact Analysis**: Assessment of how proposed changes affect project schedule, budget, scope, quality, and risks.
3. **Authorization and Approval**: Formal approval procedures, typically requiring sign-off from project managers, sponsors, or change control boards.
4. **Implementation**: If approved, changes are incorporated into project plans, with updated schedules, budgets, and documentation.
5. **Tracking and Documentation**: Complete records of all changes (requested, approved, rejected, and implemented) are maintained.

These elements serve primarily defensive functions—preventing unauthorized change, quantifying change impacts, documenting decisions, and maintaining project baselines.

The Defensive Model and its Limitations

Problems with Defensive-Only Change Control

Despite its widespread adoption, purely defensive change control creates several problems:

1. **Information Suppression**: By framing changes as problems to be prevented, defensive change control discourages organizational actors from surfacing information about changing requirements, environmental conditions, or capability limitations. Functional managers may suppress change requests to avoid appearing to have planned inadequately. Stakeholders may hide emerging requirements rather than requesting formal changes. This suppresses organizational learning.
2. **Slow Organizational Response**: When organizations rigidly prevent changes, they slow their responsiveness to legitimate environmental changes. Markets shift, regulatory changes, technology evolution, and emerging stakeholder needs. Organizations that cannot incorporate these realities into projects may deliver solutions mismatched to actual needs.
3. **Planning Misconception**: Defensive change control can create organizational misconceptions about planning accuracy. If organizations successfully suppress changes, they may believe their

planning is superior to actual reality. This blocks recognition of planning process problems that should be addressed.

4. **Missed Capability Development Opportunities**: When projects experience repeated changes in similar areas, this pattern signals capability gaps. For example, if successive projects require changes to user interface design, this suggests that user interface design capabilities need development. Yet defensive change control suppresses visibility into these patterns.
5. **Adversarial Dynamics**: Defensive change control can create adversarial relationships between project management and other organizational functions. Functional managers may view change control as blocking resource allocation, while project managers may view functional managers as attempting to expand scope through change requests. This adversarial dynamic impedes organizational coordination.

Assumptions Underlying Defensive Change Control

Defensive change control rests on several implicit assumptions:

1. **Scope Definition Accuracy**: The model assumes that project scope can be defined with sufficient precision and accuracy, such that changes represent unauthorized expansions rather than clarifications of initially ambiguous definitions.
2. **Planning Completeness is Achievable**: Defensive change control assumes that with adequate effort, organizations can plan all aspects of projects completely before start of execution. From this perspective, changes represent planning failures rather than inevitable consequences of working with incomplete information.
3. **Environmental Stability**: The model assumes that project environments are sufficiently stable that plans made before execution remain relevant throughout the execution phase. Changes are interpreted as deviations from planned environments rather than as reflections of the usual volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environmental conditions.
4. **Change Prevention is Beneficial**: The model assumes that preventing changes (reducing their number and magnitude) benefits organizations by improving project predictability and reducing waste.

Challenging the Defensive Model Assumptions

Empirical evidence challenges each of these assumptions:

Scope Definition Accuracy Challenge

Research on requirements engineering (the process of identifying, analyzing, documenting, and managing the needs and expectations of stakeholders for a system, especially in software development) demonstrates that scope definition is inherently imprecise, particularly for projects involving novel functionality or stakeholder interaction (Sommerville, 2011). Initial scope definitions often reflect misunderstandings between stakeholders and developers. Changes emerge as these misunderstandings are clarified.

Planning Completeness Challenge

Research on project estimation and planning demonstrates that complete planning before execution is not achievable, particularly for complex or novel projects (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003). Projects characterized by high technical uncertainty, novel requirements, or emerging technologies cannot be completely planned *ex-ante*. Attempts to force complete planning either consume excessive time and resources or produce plans that are subsequently invalidated by learning.

Environmental Stability Challenge

For many contemporary projects, environmental stability cannot be assumed. Market conditions shift, regulatory requirements emerge, technology evolves, and stakeholder needs change during project execution. Organizations operating in such environments that rigidly prevent changes effectively disconnect projects from environmental realities.

Change Prevention Benefits Challenge

The assumption that preventing changes benefits organizations has not been empirically validated. Some research suggests that moderate levels of change may be beneficial by improving project alignment with

actual requirements (Standish Group, 2015). Excessive rigidity preventing legitimate changes may cause more organizational damage than benefits gained from schedule and budget predictability.

The Defensive Model's Unexamined Costs

While defensive change control prevents certain costs (scope expansion, budget overruns, schedule slippages), it imposes other costs that are less visible:

1. **Learning Suppression Costs**: By discouraging change requests, defensive change control suppresses information that organizations could learn from. Organizations fail to recognize patterns in repeated changes, fail to address capability gaps reflected in change patterns, and fail to adjust planning processes based on change experience.
2. **Responsiveness Costs**: Organizations that prevent changes become less responsive to legitimate environmental and stakeholder requirement changes. Products delivered may be mismatched to actual market needs, customer dissatisfaction may increase, or competitive advantage may erode.
3. **Capability Development Costs**: When capability gaps are revealed through change patterns but suppressed by defensive change control, organizations fail to invest in capability development. This perpetuates capability gaps.
4. **Organizational Health Costs**: Defensive change control can create organizational cultures where people hide problems, suppress information, and avoid accountability. These cultural effects extend beyond project management and affect broader organizational effectiveness. But there is an opportunity to position change control as a strategic tool, such that projects become vehicles for organizational learning; change outcomes (and patterns) may then be measured against strategic objectives (Turner, 2009).

Change as Information: What Project Changes Reveal

Change Patterns and Their Possible Insights

Beck et al. (2001) proposed a paradigm shift, that organizations should reframe change as an organizational asset as opposed to a constraint; change becomes a continuous learning mechanism rather than a deviation to be controlled, an opportunity for learning and adaptation. If changes are interpreted as information rather than merely as problems to prevent, what diagnostic value do they provide? This section proposes a framework for identifying and interpreting change patterns.

Pattern 1: Requirement Volatility Changes

- *Presentation*: This pattern presents as repeated changes to functional requirements, user interface specifications, or business rules throughout project execution.
- *Probable Insight*: This pattern suggests either (a) incomplete requirements gathering before project initiation, (b) genuine requirement volatility in the external environment, or (c) inadequate stakeholder engagement during initial planning.
- *Organizational Response*: The organization should investigate whether the volatility is inherent to the project environment (in which case planning processes should accommodate it) or reflects process inadequacy (in which case requirements processes should be improved).

Pattern 2: Technical Constraint Changes

- *Presentation*: Changes emerging from technical constraints becoming apparent during design or implementation phases (e.g., "This approach is not technically feasible" or "We need different technology than initially planned").
- *Probable Insight*: This pattern suggests that technical planning was superficial or that technical risks were not adequately assessed during project planning.
- *Organizational Response* : The organization should examine whether technical expertise was sufficiently involved, or present in the organization during initial planning, whether technical risks were assessed, and whether technical due diligence processes are adequate.

Pattern 3: Capability Gap Changes

- *Presentation*: Changes reflecting capability limitations (e.g., "We don't have the expertise to implement this as planned" or "We need different skill sets than we currently have").

- *Probable Insight*: This pattern reveals organizational capability gaps.
- *Organizational Response*: The organization should assess whether capability gaps should be addressed through training, hiring, contracting, or whether project scopes should be adjusted to match available capabilities.

Pattern 4: Environmental Change Changes

- *Presentation*: Changes emerging from external environmental changes (market changes, regulatory changes, technology evolution) occurring during project execution.
- *Probable Insight*: This pattern reflects environmental conditions more volatile than was assumed at initial planning.
- *Organizational Response* : The organization should assess whether planning processes adequately account for environmental volatility, whether scanning processes exist in the organisation and can identify emerging changes early, and whether projects should be designed for adaptability rather than rigid adherence to initial plans.

Pattern 5: Stakeholder Misalignment Changes

- *Presentation*: Changes emerging from stakeholders disagreeing about requirements, priorities, or project objectives during execution.
- *Probable Insight*: This pattern suggests inadequate stakeholder engagement or misalignment before project initiation.
- *Organizational Response* : The organization should examine stakeholder engagement processes and whether projects have clear, documented and agreed objectives before initiation.

Distinguishing Legitimate Changes from Planning Failures

A critical question emerges: How should organizations distinguish between changes reflecting legitimate environmental response (which should be incorporated) and changes reflecting planning failures (which should be prevented)? This distinction is not always clear.

- **Change Timing and Predictability**: Changes requested early in projects, before significant work has been performed, may represent legitimate emerging requirements. Changes requested late in projects, after substantial work is complete, are more costly and may reflect planning failures.
- **Change Frequency Relative to Baselines**: Organizations with mature planning processes should experience lower change frequencies than organizations with immature planning. If an organization experiences low change rates despite volatile environments, this suggests either effective planning or suppressed change surfacing. Conversely, high change rates in stable environments suggest planning process problems.
- **Change Magnitude and Cumulative Impact**: Defensive change control focuses on preventing large changes that significantly impact schedules and budgets. However, this may conflate two different phenomena: large changes that represent legitimate strategic pivots versus large changes that represent planning failures. The organizational response should differ.
- **Environmental Baseline Accuracy**: Some environmental changes (market shifts, regulatory changes) are unpredictable and should not be interpreted as planning failures. Other environmental changes (technology evolution) may be predictable and should have been anticipated in planning.
- **Stakeholder Input to Change Decisions**: Changes requested by project sponsors or key stakeholders may reflect legitimate priority shifts and should be considered differently from changes emerging from individual contributor suggestions.

These distinctions require judgment and contextual understanding. A purely defensive change control model eliminates this judgment by treating all changes as problems. A learning-oriented model preserves judgment by distinguishing between change types.

The Organizational Learning Cycle

Organizations can develop systematic approaches to extracting learning from change patterns. The organizational learning cycle includes several steps:

Step 1: Comprehensive Change Capture: Organizations must capture all change requests, not just approved ones. Rejected changes contain information; analyzing why changes were rejected reveals organizational constraints and priorities.

Step 2: Change Pattern Analysis: Organizations should systematically categorize changes (by type, by project phase, by change magnitude, by requestor, by approval status). Pattern analysis reveals what types of changes are most frequent, which phases generate most changes, and whether certain organizational groups drive most changes.

Step 3: Change Pattern Diagnostic Interpretation: Organizations should investigate what patterns reveal about planning processes, capability maturity, environmental characteristics, and stakeholder engagement.

Step 4: Organizational Response: Based on diagnostic interpretation, organizations should implement process improvements, capability development, or planning methodology adjustments.

Step 5: Feedback and Refinement: Organizations should assess whether implemented changes improved subsequent project performance, and refine approaches accordingly.

Redesigning Change Control for Organizational Learning

Hybrid Change Control Approaches

Rather than choosing between purely defensive change control or abandoning change control entirely, organizations can adopt hybrid approaches that simultaneously maintain project discipline and enable organizational learning.

Hybrid Approach 1: Tiered Change Management

Different change control rigor levels apply based on change magnitude and timing

- **Tier 1 (Minimal): Minor changes identified and incorporated early** - Lower administrative burden, faster approval
- **Tier 2 (Moderate): Moderate changes requiring impact analysis** - Balanced administrative burden and learning capture
- **Tier 3 (Intensive): Major changes requiring formal approval** - Higher administrative burden, significant learning capture

This approach focuses defensive gatekeeping on high-impact changes while enabling easier incorporation of minor changes. The reduced barrier to minor changes encourages their surfacing for learning analysis. Based on Turner (2009)'s Hierarchical Governance Structure and Kerzner & PMI Integration's Comprehensive Tiered Model, the tiered change management model below is proposed.

Figure 2: Tiered Change Management Model

TIER	TIER 1: MINOR CHANGES	TIER 2: MODERATE CHANGES	TIER 3: MAJOR CHANGES
Impact	<5% of project schedule or budget	5-15% of project schedule or budget	>15% of project schedule or budget
Examples	Minor requirement clarifications, small scope additions	Design modifications, moderate scope changes	Major requirement changes, scope expansion
Approval	Project Manager sign-off	Change Control Board with impact analysis	Executive steering committee with full analysis
Timeline	1-2 days	3-5 days	5-10 days
Documentation	Simple change log entry	Detailed change form with impact analysis	Comprehensive change documentation with alternatives
Learning Track	Captured for pattern analysis	Pattern analysis and diagnostic interpretation	Strategic analysis and organizational implications

Hybrid Approach 2: Dual-Track Change Control

Parallel change control processes serve different purposes

- **Operational Track**: Focused on project-specific change management and control
- **Organizational Learning Track**: Focused on capturing and analyzing change patterns for organizational improvement

The operational track maintains project discipline. The organizational learning track extracts diagnostic information without slowing project-level decisions.

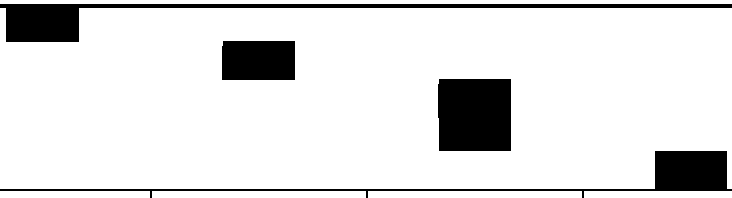
Hybrid Approach 3: Phase-Dependent Change Thresholds

Vary the change thresholds by project phase

- **Planning Phase**: Flexible change tolerance; emerging understanding is expected; changes are natural
- **Design Phase (/Front End Engineering):** Moderate change tolerance; design iterations expected; major requirement changes require approval
- **Implementation Phase**: Minimal change tolerance; changes require high-level approval and impact analysis
- **Testing/Closure Phase**: Very minimal change tolerance; changes usually deferred to post-project improvements

This approach accommodates the reality that different project phases have different change readiness. Building on the life cycle model by Pinto & Slevin (1987) and backlog seeding during maintenance mode by Highsmith (2002), the following phase dependent change threshold model is proposed.

Figure 3: Phase-Dependent Change Threshold Model

CHANGE TOLERANCE	High/Flexible				
	Moderate				
	Low/Restrictive				
	Very Low				
		Planning	**Design/ Front End Engineering**	**Implementation**	**Testing/Closure**
	APPROVAL AUTHORITY	*Project Manager*	*Change Control Board*	*Executive Steering Committee*	*Post-Release Backlog*
		PROJECT PHASE			

RATIONALE:

- Planning phase: Emerging understanding expected; changes are natural
- Design phase: Design iterations normal; major requirement changes require board approval
- Implementation phase: Minimizes rework; major changes require executive decision
- Testing/closure: Ensures quality; changes deferred to post-release with new stories for potential future development.

Hybrid Approach 4: Stakeholder-Weighted Change Decisions

Change prioritization considers the source of the change

- Changes requested by project sponsors or strategic stakeholders receive rapid, favorable consideration
- Changes requested by technical team members receive different evaluation criteria
- Changes from external stakeholders require stakeholder engagement validation

This approach recognizes that stakeholder alignment represents legitimate change drivers.

Metrics and Monitoring for Learning-Oriented Change Control

Organizations adopting learning-oriented change control should develop metrics that capture both defensive goals (to prevent unnecessary change) and learning goals (to extract information):

Sample Defensive Metrics:

- Number of approved changes versus rejected changes
- Total change magnitude relative to baseline (as % of budget, schedule, scope)
- Change distribution across project phases
- Rework costs attributed to inadequate initial planning

Sample Learning Metrics:

- Change pattern distribution by type (requirement, technical, capability, environmental, stakeholder misalignment)
- Change request source distribution (sponsor, team member, external stakeholder)
- Relationship between change patterns and project characteristics (project type, organizational maturity, environmental volatility)
- Planning accuracy improvements over time (comparing estimated to actual requirements/costs/schedule in successive projects)
- Capability gap identification and resolution rates

Organizations should track both sets of metrics to assess whether change control processes are balancing defensive and learning objectives.

Organizational Culture and Change Surfacing

A critical enabler of learning-oriented change control is organizational culture that encourages rather than suppresses change surfacing. This requires explicit cultural change in many organizations.

Cultural Element 1: Psychological Safety: Team members must feel safe surfacing change requests without fear of appearing incompetent or causing problems. Leaders must explicitly communicate that change requests provide valuable information.

Cultural Element 2: Learning Orientation: Organizations should frame change requests as learning opportunities rather than failures. "What does this change reveal about our planning process?" rather than "Why wasn't this planned correctly?"

Cultural Element 3: Blameless Analysis: When analyzing changes, organizations should focus on understanding system factors contributing to changes rather than assigning individual blame. Blame-oriented analysis suppresses information surfacing.

Cultural Element 4: Experimentation Permission: Organizations should explicitly permit and encourage reasonable experimentation in project approaches, recognizing that some changes will emerge from learning experiments.

Integration with Project Portfolio Management

Learning-oriented change control operates most effectively when integrated with project portfolio management. Portfolio-level perspectives on change patterns reveal information that individual project perspectives miss.

For example, if one project experiences requirement changes, this is interesting but limited data. If five projects in the same product portfolio all experience requirement changes in user interface design, this suggests a systematic capability gap or process problem worthy of organizational level response.

Portfolio-level change analysis enables organizations to:

- Identify systemic process problems affecting multiple projects
- Recognize emerging organizational capabilities or gaps
- Adjust organizational strategies based on aggregate learning
- Address similar issues in newer projects still in planning to avoid same change issues
- Allocate resources to capability development based on change pattern evidence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative synthesis of academic literature, project management standards (e.g., PMBOK), and illustrative case studies from IT, production, and development sectors. The goal is not empirical generalization but identifying patterns and design principles that support learning-oriented change control, thus achieving theoretical integration.

RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Illustrative Case Studies

Case Study 1: Software Development Organization

Context: A mid-sized software development organization (approximately 50 employees) developing custom enterprise software solutions. Projects ranged from 3 to 18 months duration.

Initial Change Control Approach: The organization had implemented a defensive change control model focused on preventing scope expansion. All changes required formal approval from a change control board. Change approval required full impact analysis and executive sign-off.

Problem Observed: Despite strong change control discipline, project success rates were low (approximately 35% of projects met original schedule and budget targets). Customers reported dissatisfaction with delivered solutions, often stating that delivered functionality did not match their present needs. Post-project analyses revealed that requirements had shifted during projects, but changes had been rejected or substantially delayed.

Organizational Intervention: The organization implemented a hybrid approach with tiered change management:

- Tier 1 (minor changes, <5% impact): Approved by project managers with documentation
- Tier 2 (moderate changes, 5-15% impact): Approved by change control board with impact analysis
- Tier 3 (major changes, >15% impact): Approved by executives with full analysis

Additionally, the organization established an organizational learning track separate from operational change control, analyzing all change requests (approved and rejected) to identify patterns.

Results after Two Years:

- Project success rate increased to 60% (defined as meeting all original objectives, even if timeline or budget was adjusted)
- Customer satisfaction with delivered solutions increased significantly
- Change request frequency increased from average 2.5 per project to 5 per project
- Analysis of change patterns revealed that 65% of changes fell into "requirement clarification" category, indicating that initial requirements gathering was incomplete
- The organization implemented improved requirements gathering processes
- In year three, requirement-related change frequency decreased to 2.1 per project, while capability and environmental change categories remained stable

Interpretation: The organization's experience suggests that loosening defensive change control while adding learning-oriented analysis enabled better organizational outcomes. Higher change request frequency was not inherently problematic; it revealed information that drove organizational improvement.

Case Study 2: Product Development Organization

Context: A product development organization (approximately 200 employees) developing consumer electronics. Projects ranged from 12 to 36 months duration.

Initial Change Control Approach: The organization had implemented a strong change control model with all changes requiring formal approval from senior product management and engineering leadership. Emphasis was on maintaining project stability and predictability.

Problem Observed: The organization was experiencing competitive pressure from faster-moving competitors. Products took longer to develop than competitive products, and market positions shifted during development. When market changes occurred (new competitor offerings, emerging technologies,

shifting customer preferences), the organization's defensive change control prevented rapid response. Products reached markets after competitive advantages had shifted.

Organizational Intervention: The organization implemented a phase-dependent change threshold model:

- Planning phase: Flexible requirement acceptance through project initiation
- Design phase: Design changes accepted; major requirement changes require sponsor approval
- Implementation phase: Only mission-critical changes approved
- Testing/closure phase: Changes deferred to post-release improvements

Additionally, the organization established a strategic change category, distinct from routine changes, enabling rapid incorporation of strategically important environmental or market changes.

Results after Two Years:

- Time-to-market decreased by approximately 18%
- Product success rate increased (measured by market acceptance, revenue achievement)
- Number of routine changes remained stable; strategic changes increased
- Analysis of strategic changes revealed patterns reflecting market evolution; these insights informed strategic planning

Interpretation: This organization's experience suggests that rigid change prevention in dynamic environments impedes organizational responsiveness. Phase-dependent thresholds better matched the organization's business environment, enabling appropriate responsiveness while maintaining project discipline.

Case Study 3: Government Infrastructure Project

Context: A government agency managing a large infrastructure modernization project (approximately $500 million, five-year duration, involving multiple contractors and internal stakeholders).

Initial Change Control Approach: The organization maintained strict change control based on government contracting requirements. All changes required formal approval from multiple stakeholder organizations. Change approval timelines extended to 2-3 months in some cases.

Problem Observed: The project experienced slow decision-making around emerging issues. When contractors identified technical constraints or capability gaps, the formal change control process delayed addressing them. The project slipped as a result. Additionally, major project changes (scope adjustments, technology shifts) sometimes were deferred so long that they emerged as crises rather than planned adaptations.

Organizational Intervention: The organization implemented a hybrid approach with tiered change management and explicit stakeholder-weighted decision criteria:

- Strategic steering committee (government representatives + key contractors representatives) biweekly meetings enabled rapid decisions on strategic changes
- Change control board: Weekly meetings and made decisions on operational changes
- Project management teams: Daily operations; Project manager empowered to approve and address minor changes immediately with proper documentation

Clear escalation criteria determined which decision level addressed each change type.

Results after Twelve Months:

- Project schedule milestone adherence improved; the project remained within 2% of revised baseline (vs. 12-15% slippage in previous years)
- Stakeholder satisfaction increased as they felt more involved; formal status reviews reported fewer surprises
- Decision-making velocity increased dramatically; routine changes were addressed and signed off in days rather than weeks
- Strategic changes received executive attention and explicit trade-off analysis rather than being deferred indefinitely

Interpretation: This organization's experience suggests that defensive change control can become so rigid that it impedes rather than enables project management. Tiered approaches matching decision authority to change magnitude improved outcomes.

Empirical Research on Change Control Effectiveness

While case studies provide illustrative evidence, quantitative research on change control effectiveness is limited. However, several relevant research findings support the thesis:

Standish Group Research: Standish Group's (2015) analysis of project performance data found that moderate levels of change (15-25% of scope) did not significantly harm project success, while very rigid change prevention (essentially zero changes) was associated with lower user satisfaction and perceived project success. Very high change levels (>50% scope expansion) were associated with project failure.

Verner et al. (2014) Meta-analysis: A meta-analysis of software project success factors found that change management maturity (the ability to manage changes effectively) predicted project success more strongly than change prevention (preventing changes). The most successful organizations had mature change management rather than rigid change prevention.

Flyvbjerg et al. (2003) Planning Accuracy Research: Research on major project planning found that complete planning accuracy is not achievable for complex projects; planning errors consistently exceed 25% even for well-planned projects. This suggests that some change is inevitable, and organizations should design systems to manage rather than prevent it.

Schwalbe (2015) Information Systems Project Research: Analysis of IT project data found that projects receiving high change volumes were more likely to meet stakeholder satisfaction measures (particularly when changes reflected stakeholder needs) despite potentially missing initial budget or schedule targets. This suggests that change preventing organizations may achieve schedule adherence at the cost of stakeholder satisfaction.

Discussion

The research and analysis presented above suggests that the conventional defensive change control model, while appropriate for specific organizational contexts, is overgeneralized in project management practice. Treating all changes as problems to be prevented suppresses valuable organizational learning and may impede organizational responsiveness to legitimate environmental changes.

However, the research also demonstrates that abandoning change control entirely creates its own problems. Uncontrolled scope expansion, budget overruns, and schedule slippages are real risks that disciplined change control addresses.

The resolution appears to be hybrid approaches that simultaneously maintain project discipline through focused defensive gatekeeping and enable organizational learning through systematic analysis of change patterns. The specific balance between defensive and learning orientations should vary based on organizational context, project characteristics, and environmental volatility.

For organizations in stable environments with routine projects, more defensive change control is appropriate. These organizations face lower environmental volatility; changes are more likely to represent planning failures than environmental response. Rigid change prevention does not significantly impede organizational responsiveness because little responsive change is needed.

For organizations in dynamic environments with novel projects, more learning-oriented change control is appropriate. These organizations face higher environmental volatility; changes are more likely to represent appropriate environmental response. Overly rigid change prevention will impede organizational responsiveness and competitive adaptation.

For most contemporary organizations, operating somewhere between these extremes, hybrid approaches balancing defensive and learning objectives appear most effective. Tiered change management, phase-dependent thresholds, and stakeholder-weighted decision criteria enable organizations to maintain project discipline while extracting learning.

The cultural dimensions are critical, organisational leadership teams should not just pay lip service to the concept. Organizations that psychologically punish change requests suppress information and impede learning. Organizations that frame change requests as learning opportunities while maintaining project

discipline achieve better outcomes. Edmondson (1999) identified psychological safety as a foundational issue to facilitate great learning behavior. Without psychological safety, change initiatives fail at implementation level. Psychological safety is an enabler for candid feedback on changes and acceleration of organizational adaptation.

Summary of the Findings

The key findings are:

1. **Change Patterns Contain Diagnostic Information** Different change pattern signatures reveal different organizational and environmental conditions. Requirement volatility changes suggest incomplete requirements gathering or genuine environmental volatility. Technical constraint changes suggest inadequate technical planning. Capability gap changes reveal organizations' developmental needs. Environmental changes reflect external volatility. Stakeholder misalignment changes suggest process problems. Organizations treating change data as information can diagnose and address these underlying conditions.
2. **Purely Defensive Change Control Creates Hidden Costs** While defensive change control prevents certain visible costs (scope expansion, budget overruns), it imposes less visible costs: learning suppression, reduced organizational responsiveness, perpetuated capability gaps, and organizational cultures that hide problems. For organizations in dynamic environments, these hidden costs often exceed the benefits of defensive gatekeeping.
3. **Organizational Context Determines Appropriate Change Control Philosophy** Organizations in stable environments with routine work appropriately employ more defensive change control. Organizations in dynamic environments with novel work benefit from more learning-oriented approaches. Most contemporary organizations operate in intermediate contexts and benefit from hybrid approaches balancing defensive and learning objectives.
4. **Hybrid Approaches Are Effective** Tiered change management (varying administrative burden based on change magnitude), phase-dependent thresholds (varying change tolerance across project phases), stakeholder-weighted decision criteria, and dual-track change processes (operational and learning tracks) enable organizations to maintain project discipline while extracting learning.
5. **Cultural Elements Are Critical** Organizations with psychological safety, learning orientation, blameless analysis practices, and experimentation permission surface more change information and extract more learning. Organizations with blame-oriented cultures suppress information and impede learning.

Implications for Project Management Practice

1. **For Project Managers:** Project managers should recognize that change control serves dual purposes: maintaining project discipline and extracting organizational learning. Rather than viewing all change requests as problems to suppress, project managers should analyze what changes reveal about requirements clarity, technical constraints, organizational capabilities, and environmental conditions. Change patterns provide diagnostic information valuable for organizational improvement.
2. **For Change Control Boards:** Change control boards should be learning forums. They should develop tiered approval processes that focus intensive gatekeeping on high-impact changes while enabling easier incorporation of minor changes. Boards should also establish organizational learning processes that analyze all change requests (whether approved or rejected) to identify patterns. The learning analysis should be separated from operational decisions to enable non-judgmental pattern analysis.
3. **For Organizational Leadership:** Leadership should recognize that some level of change is inevitable in complex projects and dynamic environments. Rather than setting organizational targets to minimize changes, leaders should recognize appropriate change levels and design processes to manage them effectively. Leaders should also establish organizational cultures that encourage change surfacing for learning purposes rather than punishing it.

4. **For Organizations in Dynamic Environments:** Organizations operating in rapidly changing environments (technology, markets, regulations) should adopt learning-oriented change control philosophies. Rigid change prevention in such environments may impede competitive responsiveness. Phase-dependent thresholds and strategic change categories enable appropriate responsiveness while maintaining project discipline.

Implications for Project Management Theory

This study suggests that project management theory should expand beyond purely defensive change control perspectives. Organizational learning theory, systems thinking, and adaptive management theory provide valuable frameworks for understanding change in projects. Project management should integrate these perspectives rather than treating change control as a purely administrative gatekeeping function.

Additionally, project management should recognize that appropriate change control philosophy varies with organizational context. Universal prescriptions for minimizing change may be inappropriate for organizations operating in dynamic environments. Context-sensitive approaches enable better outcomes.

Conclusion

Change control in project management need not be solely a defensive mechanism preventing scope expansion. By reconceptualizing change requests as information signals about planning assumptions, environmental conditions, organizational capabilities, and stakeholder needs, organizations can extract valuable organizational information that rigid defensive approaches suppress.

Recommendations

1. **Conduct Change Philosophy Assessment** Organizations should assess whether their current change control approach matches their organizational context. Assessment questions include:

- What is the environmental volatility level our organization operates within?
- How routine versus novel are typical organizational projects?
- What are the organizational consequences of missed market opportunities or delayed responsiveness versus schedule/budget overruns?
- What is our organizational culture regarding problem surfacing and learning?

Organizations should consciously choose their change control philosophy rather than adopting approaches through historical inertia.

2. **Implement Tiered Change Management** Organizations should establish multiple change approval pathways with different administrative burdens based on change magnitude. This focuses defensive gatekeeping on high-impact changes while enabling easier incorporation of minor changes.
3. **Establish Organizational Learning Processes** Organizations should create processes separate from operational change management that analyze change patterns to identify:
    - Systemic planning process problems
    - Recurring capability gaps
    - Environmental conditions causing repeated changes
    - Stakeholder engagement process improvements
4. **Develop Change Metrics and Monitoring** Organizations should track both defensive metrics (change frequency, magnitude, impact on schedule/budget) and learning metrics (change pattern distribution, relationship between changes and organizational characteristics). This enables organizations to assess whether change control processes balance defensive and learning objectives.
5. **Establish Cultural Foundations** Organizations should explicitly cultivate:
    - Psychological safety enabling change requests without fear of repercussion
    - Learning orientation framing changes as information rather than failures
    - Blameless analysis focusing on system factors rather than individual responsibility
    - Experimentation permission enabling reasonable project approach variation
6. **Integrate with Portfolio Management** Organizations should conduct change analysis at portfolio level, identifying systemic patterns affecting multiple projects. Portfolio-level analysis

enables recognition of organizational capability gaps and process problems that individual project analysis might miss.

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