

# Achieving sustained improvement: A literature review for the years 2010–2021

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Change and improvement are complex matters, and there are many aspects that can impact if the results are sustainable over time. But are there any universal factors that always lead to sustainable results, independent of context? A literature review by Buchanan et al. (2005) could not find any clear answers to this question. All the same, new findings may have emerged since. With this in mind, it is certainly relevant to more closely study what is required for implemented change initiatives leading to improvement to become sustainable over time.

## Purpose, research question, and key concepts

The purpose of this study was to investigate what is required for an improvement, as a result of a major organisational change, to become sustainable over time in a real-world setting. The research question of the study was: *Which themes to create sustained improvement are described in current research regarding organisational change?*

Definitions of key concepts:

- **Change** – an episodic process with the goal to reach improvement.
- **Major organisational change** – key elements:
  - There are either several elements of structural change or radical shifts in a single element of structure (Barnett & Carroll, 1995)
  - The change is strategic and implemented through step-by-step changes (Price & Chahal, 2006)
  - The change is intentional (Smith, 2002)
  - The change aims to change the way the organisation does business by affecting the strategic position of the organisation in relation to its competition (Smith, 2002)
- **Sustainability** – “as the process through which new working methods, performance goals and improvement trajectories are maintained for a period appropriate to a given context” (Buchanan et al., 2005, p. 189)

## Methods

The choice of method was a systematic literature review, as a literature-based method is typically used: to summarize current knowledge within a field (Forsberg & Wengström, 2016), to find gaps and/or contradictions in the knowledge base (Jesson et al., 2012), or to describe how the results of different studies relate to one another (Booth et al., 2016). This method thus fit both the aim of this study and the research question. Additionally, literature studies are uncommon within quality management. Thus, this study may contribute to the methodological knowledge development within the field.

This study employed the type of review that Booth et al. (2016) label as a *literature review*, which could be viewed as a midpoint between the “gold standard” systematic review and the traditional or general review. A *literature review* relates to each of the key steps in the framework **SALSA** as follows:

- **Search.** Involved carrying out a scoping review, defining inclusion and exclusion criteria, finalising search strategy, and carrying out database searches in Business Source Complete, SCOPUS and Academic Search Premier.

- **AppraisalL.** Quality assessment of those studies that would be considered for inclusion, through an assessment protocol contained 18 “yes/no”-questions. 39 articles were finally included in the study.
- **Synthesis.** Narrative synthesis of data, meaning the results of the included studies were presented using descriptive text, tables and other graphical illustrations.
- **Analysis.** Thematic analysis through an affinity diagram that was developed iteratively.

The three main considerations to be systematic can be summarised as: *clarity*, *validity*, and *auditability*. This study meets these considerations by, firstly, having a straightforward disposition that presents methodological considerations transparently (clarity). Secondly, the authors have not allowed any preconceived notions on the topic to impact the selection or assessment of included articles (validity). Lastly, the study provides visual and textual descriptions of the collected and analysed data, so that readers may review the strength of the study independently of the authors’ findings (auditability).

This study meets ethical issues by providing proof of a transparent selection of articles and an unbiased presentation of results; the latter is accomplished through textual, tabular and graphical descriptions. By using a literature review, the findings are inherently validated by being an aggregate of multiple and independently published articles. Data from these articles, as well as other sources used in this study, are presented by the authors with proper attribution, in order to avoid plagiarism. Lastly, all articles included in this study will be archived digitally by both authors for ten years after its publication, i.e., until June 2031.

### **Findings, conclusions, and contributions to the field**

Through the affinity diagram eight distinct themes for sustainable improvement emerged. These eight themes are: *Collective visions and goals*, *Communication*, *Leadership*, *Personal growth*, *Positive organisational culture*, *Reduce variability*, *Resources*, and *System thinking*. Each theme has related sub-themes and specific elements for sustained improvements.

Change sustainability is a complex field and there are many aspects to consider. The eight emerging themes display the importance of working to sustain change in several parallel and disparate areas, and that these areas do not necessarily touch upon each other. Though the articles in this review are not evenly distributed across the themes the findings do not support the importance of one theme over another, i.e., there is no hierarchy among them. This can depend on the contextual needs of the improvement at hand.

For a deeper understanding of what the emerging themes in this study entail, in order to practically apply them in a real-world context, it is more beneficial to consider their respective sub-themes and the guidance they provide. Through these sub-themes, it is clear that a key step to achieve change sustainability is to plan ahead and have a clear change strategy, and to then realise this strategy through continuous efforts in different areas, such as communication, measurement, standardisation, and resources. In the course of the planning and realisation of the strategy, it is important to consider how to strengthen the organisation multi-dimensionally. These dimensions include both organisational structure (i.e., employees, teams, and leaders), and areas of operation (i.e., communication, organisational culture, and resources). Lastly, it is vital to acknowledge the context of the change, and thus to be flexible and adaptable, which is seen through system thinking, processes and coaching leadership.

A fundamental aspect in understanding and interpreting the findings of this study is that while there are themes, sub-themes, and elements, the individual factors that form the data set are very scattered, i.e., most of them are unique. This is seen through the affinity diagrams for each theme, as they have far more factors that occur only once, compared to two or more times. Even in those cases where there were duplicate factors, these did not use the same wording to express them. By extension, this means that it is not obvious if there are general factors that always contribute to sustained change; perhaps the contextual aspects are more impactful than any given factors.

This study contributes to the field of quality management with a suggested quality assessment protocol of articles that is less excluding, by only weeding out those articles that do not fully present their method. This broad inclusion of articles ensure that one does not exclude important data by being too narrow in the process of selecting studies. Furthermore, this study contributes with a knowledge compilation of current research on how to create sustained major organisational change. Also, this study's affinity diagram can be used as a foundation to evaluate the contextual needs of an organisation regarding the implementation of a sustainable change.

For further research we would suggest studying the contextual implication on sustainable change, as this seems to have a great impact. For any future literature reviews on this topic, we believe it is imperative to keep an open mind and have a broad and all-encompassing search strategy to ensure relevant data are not missed.