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Building Trust and Emotional Safety in Public Sector Change Initiatives

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Abstract: Purpose: Public sector reforms frequently fail not due to technical design flaws, but because they neglect the emotional experiences of civil servants during change. This article examines emotion-centred change management within Georgia's public administration reform and proposes an integrated framework that synthesises behavioral and strategic perspectives to enhance reform implementation in transitional governance systems.

Design/methodology/approach: This article utilises secondary analysis of a mixed-methods doctoral study conducted in 2022, focusing on the human factor in Georgia's public administration reform. The original research employed a sequential explanatory design, combining a structured survey of 581 civil servants from central and local government with 26 semi-structured interviews involving senior officials, reform managers, international partners, and civil society experts. The survey was based on the ADKAR model and expanded to include measures of emotional barriers, motivational drivers, and organisational support. For the purposes of this article, the dataset is reinterpreted through an emotion-centred lens and mapped onto the Kübler-Ross Change Curve, ADKAR, and Kotter's Eight-Step Model.

Findings: Emotional readiness functions as a phase-gating condition for reform. Uncertainty-related anxiety and perceived loss of autonomy are the most significant negative predictors of engagement, whereas intrinsic public service motivation and recognition serve as key positive drivers. In low-trust, politically volatile contexts such as Georgia, the conventional ADKAR sequence is disrupted; trust-building and emotional reassurance frequently need to precede broad awareness campaigns. Symbolic recognition, visible leadership care, and participatory dialogue facilitate the transition of civil servants from frustration to exploration and acceptance. Structural and legal changes have advanced more rapidly than behavioural and cultural adaptation, resulting in a gap between formal EU alignment and everyday practice. Academic contribution to the field: This article integrates behavioural and strategic approaches into an emotion-centred hybrid model for public sector reform, demonstrating how emotional dynamics, organisational culture, and leadership behaviours interact with established change frameworks. It challenges linear assumptions about reform sequencing in transitional contexts.

Research limitations/implications: The analysis is limited to a single country and one doctoral dataset. Future comparative and longitudinal studies are necessary to assess the model's transferability and examine how emotional readiness evolves across reform phases.

Practical implications: This article provides a context-sensitive roadmap for reform leaders, emphasising that emotional climate assessment, trust-building, psychological safety, and recognition mechanisms should be integrated into reform design alongside technical measures and aligned with communication, leadership behaviour, organisational culture, and HR practices.

Originality/significance/value: This is one of the first studies to operationalise emotion-centred change management for public-sector reform in a post-Soviet transitional setting. It presents an empirically grounded framework that treats emotional readiness as a strategic variable and shows how synchronising emotional, behavioural and structural dimensions can stabilise reform outcomes.

Keywords: emotion-centred change management; public sector reform; emotional readiness; change leadership; Georgia; transitional governance.

Introduction

Public sector reforms are often designed as technical solutions to administrative problems. Reform documents frequently focus on structures, processes, and efficiency gains, while assuming that civil servants will adapt once new rules and systems are in place. However, a growing body of research shows that implementation success depends far more on how people experience reform emotionally than on the formal design of the change itself (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). When trust is low and emotional safety is weak, even well-designed reforms struggle to move beyond the paper stage.

Scholars have increasingly moved away from viewing reform as a neutral and purely administrative task. They argue that public administration reform is shaped by political interests, value conflicts, and deep-seated organisational cultures. Successful reform, therefore, requires shifts not only in legislation and organisational charts, but also in workplace norms, shared values, and everyday behaviour (Bouckaert, Nemec, & Hajnal, 2008). Within this perspective, resistance is not simply a lack of cooperation. It is often an emotional and identity-based response to perceived threat, loss of control, or uncertainty about the future.

Emotional resistance is one of the most persistent obstacles to reform. Civil servants frequently report anxiety, doubt, and reluctance to engage with changes imposed from above or under political pressure (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). These reactions often do not reflect disagreement with the goals of reform. Instead, they arise from fear of losing status, professional identity, or job security, as well as from mistrust in the intentions and consistency of political and administrative leaders (By & Ford, 2016). Such dynamics are particularly pronounced in transitional governance settings, where reforms are rapid, highly visible, and strongly influenced by external actors.

Georgia provides a salient example of these conditions. As a post-Soviet country pursuing European Union integration and the modernisation of its public administration, Georgia has adopted ambitious reform agendas to align its institutions with European standards, improve service delivery, and strengthen democratic accountability (European Union, 2014). At the same time, the reform environment is marked by frequent political turnover, strong centralisation of decision-making, and bureaucratic traditions that prioritise stability and continuity over experimentation (Hofstede, 2010; Giorbelidze & Odisharia, 2025). (Kipiani & Kartlos, 2010) Civil servants often face rapid cycles of reform, shifting priorities after elections, and limited involvement in the design of changes that fundamentally affect their work.

The empirical evidence used in this article comes from a 2022 mixed-methods doctoral study on the human factor in Georgia's public administration reform. The original research included a survey of 581 civil servants in central and local government and 26 in-depth interviews with senior officials, reform managers, international partners, and civil society experts. The analysis showed that anxiety related to uncertainty, perceived loss of autonomy, and mistrust in leaders were strong predictors of resistance to reform. By contrast, intrinsic public service motivation and symbolic recognition of contributions supported engagement and willingness to participate in change processes.

These findings point to a central challenge for reform leaders. Technical and strategic frameworks, such as process mapping or legal alignment, are necessary but not sufficient in themselves. Reformers must connect the behavioural and emotional side of change with the formal planning and execution of reform. This requires treating emotional readiness as a strategic variable that can accelerate or block progress through the stages of change.

Building on this insight, the article proposes an Emotion Centred Hybrid Change Management Model. The model integrates behavioural frameworks, such as the Kübler-Ross Change Curve, with strategic approaches, including ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006) and Kotter's Eight-Step Model (Kotter, 1996). It introduces a diagnostic adaptive logic in which the sequencing of reform activities is adjusted to the emotional readiness of civil servants. In this perspective, trust building, reassurance, and psychological safety are not soft add-ons. They are preconditions for effective communication, capacity development, and performance management.

The article makes three main contributions. First, it advances change management theory in public administration by demonstrating how emotional dynamics, organisational culture, and leadership behaviour interact with established

strategic change models in transitional governance contexts. Second, it offers empirical insights from Georgia that illustrate how emotional thresholds can function as phase-gating conditions for reform, shaping when and how civil servants can move from awareness to acceptance and implementation. Third, it provides a practical, context-sensitive roadmap for reform leaders and practitioners who seek to reduce resistance, build emotional safety, and embed reforms more sustainably in public administration systems.

Overall, the argument is that public sector reforms often fail not because civil servants reject the substance of change, but because the emotional and relational dimensions of reform are neglected. By placing trust and emotional safety at the centre of reform strategy, public institutions can create conditions in which civil servants feel secure enough to engage with change, contribute their expertise, and carry reforms through to practice.

Public-sector reform presents unique challenges distinct from private-sector organisational change, characterised by bureaucratic rigidity, resistance to innovation, and entrenched institutional cultures (Yuana et al., 2025). (Reforming Public Sector: A Comprehensive Guide, 2025) The integration of emotion-centred approaches represents a paradigmatic shift from purely technical or structural change management strategies toward recognising the behavioural and affective dimensions that drive successful transformation. Rather than treating organisational change as a linear, rational process focused solely on structural adjustments and policy implementation, emotion-centred frameworks explicitly acknowledge that individuals' emotional experiences, psychological states, and interpersonal relationships significantly influence reform outcomes (Tumaini et al., 2020). (Giorbelidze et al., 2025, pp. 442-454) This fundamental reorientation requires change leaders and public administrators to address not only the "what" and "how" of reforms but also the emotional and psychological dimensions that shape how employees interpret, accept, and implement organisational changes.

Emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to understand, manage, and regulate one's own emotions and those of others, has emerged as a critical competency for change leaders navigating organisational reform (Mahbub & Barhate, 2025). (Ćwiąkała & al., 2025) The five dimensions of emotional intelligence—self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skill- provide a structured framework through which leaders can diagnose organisational readiness for change, identify emotional barriers to reform acceptance, and build supportive relationships with employees experiencing transition stress. This approach acknowledges that organisational change is fundamentally a human experience involving cognitive appraisals, emotional responses, and behavioural intentions (Onyeneke & Abe, 2021). When change leaders demonstrate high emotional intelligence, they are better positioned to understand how employees cognitively interpret reform initiatives and to influence the emotional responses that ultimately determine whether staff members will support or resist implementation efforts. Change leadership behaviours that emphasise visioning, communication, participation, and genuine concern for employees' well-being create psychological safety, allowing individuals to process organisational transitions with reduced anxiety and increased commitment to change objectives.

The tension between reform requirements and resistance to change remains a persistent challenge in post-socialist and developing economies, where historical legacies, politicization, and institutional inertia impede successful human resource management (HRM) transformation (Poljaevi et al., 2025). These contexts frequently feature deeply embedded bureaucratic norms, employment status disparities, and generational value conflicts that create psychological distance between reform mandates and frontline implementation. Emotion-centered frameworks address these barriers by recognizing that employee readiness for change depends on individual stress levels, organizational climate, and the emotional support provided by change agents (Kalbermatten, 2024). Public administrators implementing reforms must account for reform-related strains experienced by civil servants, including identity threats, competency concerns, and status anxieties, while simultaneously cultivating organizational climates that facilitate rather than inhibit adaptive responses. When organizational leadership demonstrates empathy for these individual challenges and provides substantive emotional support alongside reform communication, employees develop greater psychological readiness to embrace institutional changes, even when such transformations challenge established professional identities and operational practices.

Emotional Intelligence as a Driver of Change Management Success in Public Organisations

Emotional intelligence operates as a foundational mechanism through which change leaders translate organisational imperatives into behavioural commitment among public sector staff. The five core dimensions of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, each contribute distinctly to effective change management by addressing different aspects of human experience during organisational transition (Tumaini et al., 2020). Research conducted across Kenya's devolved governance units, involving 406 employees, demonstrated that staff who perceive their managers as emotionally intelligent exhibit substantially higher confidence

in the organisation's commitment to change. Notably, empathy and self-awareness emerged as the most significant predictors of positive employee perceptions of change management capacity, with both dimensions demonstrating nonlinear effects on staff beliefs about leadership commitment (Tumaini et al., 2020). This finding suggests that there is an optimal threshold beyond which additional emotional expression becomes counterproductive, requiring leaders to calibrate their emotional displays to organisational context and employee readiness states.

Five Core Dimensions of Emotional Intelligence and Their Manifestations in Change Leadership

Self-Awareness: Leaders recognise their own emotional triggers, biases, and limitations, enabling them to respond deliberately rather than reactively to resistance and uncertainty. In changing contexts, self-aware leaders acknowledge the legitimate concerns embedded in staff resistance and model vulnerability by admitting uncertainty about reform trajectories.

Self-Regulation: The capacity to manage emotional impulses and maintain composure in ambiguous situations allows leaders to avoid escalating conflict or projecting anxiety onto subordinates. This dimension is particularly critical when implementing unpopular reforms or navigating political pressure, as regulated leaders sustain consistent messaging and emotional stability that reassures anxious staff.

Motivation: Intrinsic drive aligned with organisational purpose enables leaders to maintain enthusiasm for change even when institutional inertia leads to setbacks. Motivated leaders inspire comparable commitment in others by demonstrating that reform objectives serve collective interests beyond personal advancement.

Empathy: The ability to understand and validate others' emotional experiences during change processes creates psychological safety, enabling authentic participation. Empathetic leaders recognise that change inevitably generates identity threats, competency concerns, and status anxieties, and respond with supportive engagement rather than dismissing legitimate anxieties.

Social Skills: Effective relationship management facilitates coalition-building, conflict resolution, and collaborative problem-solving, all of which are essential for implementing complex public-sector reforms. Leaders leveraging strong social skills navigate competing stakeholder interests, build cross-functional teams, and maintain institutional relationships despite organisational disruption.

The mediation pathway from emotional intelligence to organisational performance operates through multiple complementary mechanisms. Research examining manufacturing organisations found that emotional intelligence enhances organisational citizenship behaviour, discretionary actions that extend beyond formal job requirements, which substantially improve operational effectiveness and employee performance (Santa et al., 2023). In public sector contexts characterised by resource constraints and formal role rigidity, such discretionary contribution becomes particularly vital for reform success. Leaders demonstrating high emotional intelligence create psychological safety that enables staff to voice concerns authentically, participate genuinely in change design processes, and reduce the defensive behaviours that typically characterise resistance (Khan et al., 2024). (Iqbal et al., 2024) Rather than suppressing dissent through hierarchical authority, emotionally intelligent leaders leverage dissent as diagnostic feedback regarding implementation barriers, thereby transforming potential obstacles into design improvements.

Humanising leadership, characterised by vulnerability, emotional expression, authentic communication, and inclusive decision-making, significantly moderates the relationship between organisational culture and change effectiveness. (Ćwiakala et al., 2025) This approach represents a substantive departure from traditional hierarchical public sector norms, emphasising emotional neutrality and formal distance between leadership and staff. Yet empirical evidence from Ghana's public sector demonstrates that emotional intelligence, when mediated by leadership effectiveness, drives organisational performance even in resource-constrained environments where technical change management tools prove insufficient (AppiahKubi et al., 2025). This finding suggests that the emotional dimension of leadership transcends organisational context, functioning as a universal mechanism through which humans interpret institutional change and determine their levels of participation. The integration of humanising leadership principles with strategic change management objectives creates a hybrid approach that simultaneously addresses the affective barriers to reform acceptance and the structural requirements for successful implementation. Public administrators who combine empathetic relationship-building with clear reform communication, transparent decision-making processes, and genuine concern for employee welfare lay the emotional foundation for sustainable organisational transformation.

Strategic Integration: Behavioral Mechanisms and Organizational Climate in Public Sector Reform

Multi-level factors operating simultaneously at the individual and organisational levels fundamentally determine employee readiness for change in public sector reform contexts (Kalbermatten, 2024). Organisational culture fundamentally shapes the relationship between emotion-centred leadership and reform outcomes by establishing the emotional substrate through which leaders and employees navigate institutional transformation (Alsharari & Daniels, 2023). In institutional contexts characterised by successful reform implementation, culture change catalyses the transformation of accounting and operational practices by establishing trust between technical staff and management, thereby creating psychological conditions that enable authentic collaboration and information sharing. However, rigid bureaucratic cultures embedded in hierarchical norms and generational value gaps create structural resistance even when formal policies explicitly support innovation, because such cultures embody competing value systems that make reform directives emotionally incoherent to embedded employee populations. Research across Indonesian public sector agencies illustrated this dynamic, revealing that non-civil servant employees frequently experience exclusion and limited recognition within hierarchical structures, while younger generations face structural resistance to their innovation proposals despite formal espousal of modernisation values (Yuana et al., 2025). (Ramli et al., 2025) The gap between espoused organisational values that support adaptive change and actual practices that reinforce bureaucratic tradition creates cognitive dissonance, undermining emotionally intelligent leadership efforts. Change leaders operating within such cultures must therefore prioritise culture transformation as a prerequisite to emotion-centred management effectiveness, recognising that building individual trust and psychological safety proves insufficient when organisational systems systematically contradict leadership messaging through inequitable treatment and hierarchical norm reinforcement.

The chain mediation mechanism through motivational pathways provides a sophisticated explanation for the formation of proactive behaviour in public sector reforms, revealing how motivational states sequentially interact to sustain employee support for institutional change (Sun & Huang, 2025). (Aarons et al., 2011) In Chinese institutional reform contexts characterised by high-intensity organisational disruption, research examining 194 public sector employees identified that intensive reform initiatives dynamically deplete public service motivation, the intrinsic drive to serve collective interests, triggering compensatory mechanisms wherein 'can do' motivation (capacity-focused determination) and 'reason do' motivation (purpose-clarification processes) sequentially restore proactive support for change. (Liu et al., 2023) This chained mediation pathway differs substantially from Western corporate findings, emphasising individual-level motivation maintenance and, instead, cross-cultural adaptation requirements, whereby non-Western public sectors develop distinctive psychological compensation mechanisms when traditional motivation sources become psychologically exhausted. The practical implication extends beyond Western change management frameworks: public administrators implementing reforms in institutional contexts characterised by traditional public service values must anticipate motivation depletion during high-intensity change phases and proactively cultivate alternative motivation pathways by clarifying how specific reform objectives connect to employees' core values and by creating structured opportunities for employees to demonstrate and experience agency in change implementation. This approach transforms potential motivational collapse into adaptive psychological resilience, in which exhausted public service motivation activates secondary motivation systems that sustain behavioural commitment to reform objectives even when the idealistic orientation temporarily diminishes.

Practical Implementation: Communication, Leadership Commitment, and Stakeholder Engagement in Change Initiatives

Effective communication, strong leadership commitment, and teamwork emerge as critical success factors in managing public sector change across diverse national contexts (Obudo, 2015). In Kenya, research involving 18 mainstream government ministries confirmed that these factors significantly influence change management effectiveness, with communication quality and leadership team cohesion demonstrating direct effects on organisational transformation outcomes. (Mulegwa et al., 2023) In Pakistan, top management support, organisational culture adaptation, and HRM practices demonstrating genuine emotional investment correlate strongly with employee willingness to accept change (Nawaz et al., 2025), suggesting that emotional authenticity in leadership commitment—rather than superficial endorsement—determines reform acceptance. (Nawaz et al., 2025) The foundational principle underlying these cross-national findings is that communicating the rationale for change with genuine empathy and transparency reduces both cognitive resistance (employees questioning the logical necessity of reforms) and emotional resistance (anxiety, identity threat, and status concerns) (Vlassi et al., 2023). When organisational leadership transparently explains reform imperatives, acknowledges legitimate employee concerns, and demonstrates authentic investment in managing transition impacts, staff members develop cognitive clarity about the necessity of change

while simultaneously experiencing reduced psychological threat, thereby enabling behavioural support grounded in understanding rather than coercion.

Change leadership behaviours encompassing visioning, communication, participation, support, and concern for participant interests generate distinct emotional and cognitive responses that operate sequentially to mediate behavioural intentions (Onyeneke & Abe, 2021). The relationship between change leadership and employee support operates indirectly through employee cognitive appraisal (rational assessment of reform necessity and feasibility) and emotional response (affective reactions including anxiety reduction, hope activation, or trust development); this serial mediation process reveals that change agents must address both rational understanding and emotional processing to secure genuine commitment. Leadership demonstrating authentic concern for employee welfare while simultaneously articulating a clear reform vision enables employees to reframe organisational change from threatening disruption into purposeful transformation, thereby activating psychological resilience and discretionary contribution aligned with reform objectives.

Organisational change in public sector contexts frequently encounters resistance rooted in emotional exhaustion, occupational stress, and workplace incivility—phenomena that intensify substantially during poorly managed transitions. Conservation of resource theory provides critical insight into these dynamics, demonstrating that organisational change systematically depletes psychological resources, triggering stress responses that manifest as interpersonal hostility and behavioural withdrawal (Raza et al., 2023). Notably, emotional exhaustion functions as a moderating mechanism in this pathway, suggesting that emotion regulation support and psychological resource replenishment critically influence whether employees manifest constructive adaptation or counterproductive incivility during institutional transformation (Raza et al., 2023). Organisations that fail to implement comprehensive stress management protocols during change initiatives inadvertently accelerate resource-depleting cycles, in which stressed employees exhibit reduced capacity for collaborative problem-solving and heightened defensive behaviours that compound change management difficulties. This dynamic reveals a paradox: organisations that implement rapid, technically focused reforms without systematically attending to emotional dimensions systematically generate the very resistance patterns that undermine implementation success.

Cultural compatibility between reform ideals and existing organisational values fundamentally determines whether institutional change results in integration or merely superficial compliance. Public sector organisations require the deliberate cultivation of local cultural characteristics—specifically proactive responsiveness and goal-oriented cooperation—that align with reform objectives (Yee & Thiel, 2020). However, when new administrative reforms directly contradict established bureaucratic norms emphasising stability, procedural adherence, and hierarchical deference, affective resistance emerges particularly intensely among employees whose professional identities have been historically aligned with traditional hierarchical structures. These employees experience reform initiatives not merely as operational changes but as threats to established identity frameworks and professional status, intensifying emotional resistance even when rational organisational arguments support the necessity of reform. The gap between espoused reform values and embedded organisational culture creates cognitive dissonance that emotionally invested public administrators cannot readily overcome through technical change management alone. Successful emotion-centred approaches therefore prioritise culture transformation as foundational, recognising that building individual trust requires organisational systems that substantively embody reform principles rather than merely verbally espouse them.

Digital transformation and technological innovation compound these emotional and structural challenges in contemporary public administration contexts. In Morocco, an examination of civil servant readiness for artificial intelligence adoption revealed that over 40% of respondents identified insufficient digital skills as a major implementation barrier (Barodi & Lalaoui, 2025). However, this technical skills deficit intersects dynamically with emotional anxiety regarding technological competence, creating a compounded barrier wherein anxious employees simultaneously doubt their capacity to learn new systems and fear that technological automation threatens job security and career continuity. Effective change management in digitally transforming public sectors requires integrated approaches that address both technical training infrastructure and emotional reassurance regarding role clarity, career pathways, and organisational commitment to workforce preservation (Barodi & Lalaoui, 2025). Public administrators must recognise that technological anxiety reflects not merely knowledge deficits but legitimate concerns about professional futures and organisational valuation of employee expertise in increasingly automated environments.

The interconnection among these barriers creates multiplicative rather than merely additive complexity: organisations facing cultural misalignment while simultaneously managing technological transition with resource constraints experience compounded employee stress that single-intervention approaches cannot adequately address. Emotion-

centred change management frameworks must therefore operate concurrently across multiple organisational levels, combining individual stress management support with cultural transformation initiatives while maintaining transparent communication and ensuring participatory decision-making throughout the implementation phases. This multi-level integration acknowledges that resistance rooted in emotional exhaustion, cultural incongruence, and skill anxiety cannot be overcome through leadership assertion alone but rather requires systemic organisational responses that substantively reduce psychological threat, honour organisational history and employee expertise, and demonstrate genuine institutional commitment to employee welfare during institutional transition.

Organisational Learning, Resilience, and Sustainable Change in Public Sector Transformation

Organisational learning capabilities constitute foundational infrastructure for sustainable change; however, public sector institutions face substantial structural, cultural, and procedural barriers that inhibit experiential learning implementation and organisational adaptability (Krukowski & Oliski, 2025). (Nikiforova et al., 2024) Peter Senge's learning organisation model emphasises five interrelated dimensions—systems thinking, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and personal mastery—that, when integrated, enable organisations to process information, generate collective insights, and adapt responsively to environmental change. (Senge & M., 1990) Yet in public sector contexts, achieving effective organisational learning requires fundamental cultural transformation rather than reliance on structural reforms alone (Krukowski & Oliski, 2025). (Giorbelidze et al., 2025, pp. 442-454) Bureaucratic inertia, silo-oriented management structures, and organisational rigidity systematically prevent the dissemination of learning practices across hierarchical levels and functional departments, creating fragmented rather than integrated knowledge systems. This institutional fragmentation reflects deeper emotional and cognitive dimensions: entrenched organisational cultures reinforce defensive routines in which employees protect established roles and resist the vulnerability inherent in collective meaning-making, thereby preventing the psychological safety necessary for authentic organisational learning. Emotion-centred approaches address this barrier by recognising that learning organisation principles require affective investment—leaders and employees must develop emotional capacity to acknowledge uncertainty, embrace experiential mistakes as learning opportunities, and engage authentically with colleagues across hierarchical boundaries. When public administrators cultivate psychological safety through consistent vulnerability modelling, genuine inquiry into employee perspectives, and organisational practices that reward learning from failure, experiential learning practices become institutionally viable, transforming rigid bureaucracies into adaptive systems capable of interpreting complex reform imperatives and generating contextually appropriate implementation solutions.

Organisational resilience, defined as adaptive capacity to absorb systemic shocks, maintain core functionality, and recover from disruption, operates fundamentally through emotional intelligence mediation, a mechanism particularly evident during crisis contexts that demand rapid organisational adaptation (Dhoopar et al., 2021). In higher education institutions navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, research examining 390 teaching and non-teaching professionals confirmed that emotional intelligence functioned as a critical mediating variable in the resilience-performance relationship, wherein employees exhibiting higher emotional intelligence substantially contributed to organisational resilience levels, which subsequently enhanced overall performance outcomes (Dhoopar et al., 2021). This mediation pathway reveals that organisational resilience depends not merely on structural redundancy or resource reserves but rather on individuals' emotional regulation capabilities—their capacity to manage anxiety during uncertainty, sustain collective efficacy under disruption, and maintain collaborative problem-solving despite crisis pressures. Emotionally intelligent employees process ambiguous crisis information without panic escalation, demonstrate interpersonal competence during high-stress situations, and model adaptive behaviour that influences colleagues' coping strategies, thereby strengthening the organisation's capacity to absorb shocks without fundamental dysfunction. This finding extends significantly beyond crisis contexts: organisations building emotional intelligence capabilities during stable periods develop resilience infrastructure applicable to anticipated and unanticipated organisational disruptions. For public sector institutions operating with resource constraints and facing mounting service delivery demands amid fiscal pressure, developing emotional intelligence systematically enhances organisational resilience by creating human infrastructure capable of sustaining performance even when technical systems or funding availability become compromised.

Methods

This study builds upon the co-author's 2022 doctoral research, which examined the role of the human factor in Georgia's public administration reform. The original research adopted a mixed methods sequential explanatory design (Caldwell, 2013), combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both the prevalence of readiness for change and the mechanisms underlying civil servants' responses to reform. For the purposes of this article, the dataset

has been re-analysed through an emotion-centred change management lens. This reinterpretation focuses specifically on the interaction between emotional barriers, motivational drivers, and strategic change processes, with the aim of developing an integrated behavioural and strategic framework suitable for transitional governance contexts. While the doctoral study addressed readiness, engagement, leadership, and institutional dynamics broadly, the present article narrows the analytical scope to emotional readiness and resistance as determinants of reform participation.

The quantitative component of the original research involved a structured survey administered to 581 civil servants from central ministries, local self-government institutions, and autonomous public agencies. The survey instrument was based on the ADKAR model (Hiatt, 2006), which examines awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement. The instrument was expanded to include items measuring emotional barriers such as uncertainty-related anxiety, fear of change, and perceptions of diminished autonomy. Additional items captured motivational factors, including intrinsic commitment to public service values and perceptions of recognition and career opportunities, as well as organisational support indicators such as communication clarity and leadership responsiveness. A purposive sampling strategy ensured representation from reform-intensive sectors, including education, healthcare, and finance. Data collection was conducted electronically via the Civil Service Bureau between March and May 2022. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the most common emotional and motivational patterns, and Pearson correlations and multiple regression models were employed to assess the predictive significance of these variables for reform engagement.

Formal approval from a university Research Ethics Board was not required for the original data collection, as the study was conducted in accordance with the ethical and legal requirements of the country in which the research took place, where such approval is not mandated for this type of public administration research. The original doctoral study adhered to applicable national legislation and institutional regulations governing research involving public officials. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of the data for research purposes, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality and minimise potential risk, all responses were anonymised at the point of analysis, and no personally identifiable information was retained or reported. The secondary analysis presented in this article relies exclusively on anonymised data and does not involve any new data collection or interaction with participants.

The empirical analysis draws on a mixed-methods dataset comprising both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative component consists of a structured survey administered to 581 civil servants employed in central government ministries, local self-government bodies, and autonomous public agencies in Georgia. The qualitative component includes 26 semi-structured interviews conducted with senior civil servants involved in reform design and implementation, representatives of international and donor organisations, and civil society experts engaged in monitoring public administration reform. Together, these samples provide both breadth and depth, enabling the examination of prevalence patterns as well as the contextual mechanisms shaping emotional readiness and engagement with reform. The sample size was determined by both methodological and contextual considerations relevant to public administration research in a transitional governance setting. For the quantitative component, a survey sample of 581 civil servants was considered sufficient to capture meaningful variation in emotional readiness, motivation, and engagement across institutional levels and policy sectors, while allowing for robust statistical analysis, including correlation and regression modelling. The sample size exceeds commonly accepted thresholds for detecting medium effect sizes in organisational research and supports stable estimation of relationships among key variables derived from the ADKAR framework and emotion-related constructs. Importantly, the sample includes respondents from central ministries, local self-government institutions, and autonomous public agencies, enhancing internal diversity and reducing the risk of sector-specific bias. For the qualitative component, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted to achieve analytical depth rather than statistical representation. This number was guided by principles of thematic saturation, whereby additional interviews yielded diminishing returns in terms of new insights into emotional resistance, trust, and leadership behaviour. The combination of a large survey sample with a purposively selected qualitative sample reflects a deliberate mixed-methods design, enabling triangulation between prevalence patterns and explanatory mechanisms. Together, the sample sizes were adequate to support the study's analytical objectives while remaining feasible within institutional and access constraints.

The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with senior civil servants involved in reform design and implementation, representatives of international and donor organisations supporting governance reform, and civil society experts monitoring reform progress. The interview guide was informed by Kotter's Eight Step Model (Kotter, 1996) to explore urgency creation, coalition formation, and cultural anchoring, and included targeted prompts on emotional resistance, trust in leadership, and sources of motivation. Interviews were conducted with informed consent,

recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed in NVivo 12. Coding followed a hybrid strategy that combined deductive codes derived from the Kübler-Ross Change Curve, ADKAR, and Kotter frameworks with inductive codes emerging from participant narratives.

Data integration followed a triangulation protocol (Fetters, 2013). Quantitative findings established prevalence patterns and predictive relationships, while qualitative insights explained the contextual and behavioural mechanisms underlying those results. Integration involved theoretical mapping to examine points of convergence and divergence between empirical evidence and established change management models. The analysis revealed that emotional reassurance and trust-building often needed to occur before awareness-raising in Georgia's reform context, which represents a departure from the standard ADKAR sequencing. Qualitative findings further highlighted the importance of symbolic recognition in helping civil servants progress from frustration to exploration within the Kübler-Ross framework.

The original doctoral research followed the ethical guidelines of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was protected through anonymisation. The present article draws exclusively on anonymised secondary data.

By revisiting the dataset through an emotion-centred analytical approach, this study positions emotional readiness as a critical gating phase in reform progression. It demonstrates the need for sequencing adjustments when applying established change management models in transitional governance systems and generates an empirically grounded hybrid framework that integrates behavioural insights with strategic reform processes.

Several measures were taken to mitigate potential internal biases associated with the use of secondary mixed-methods data and self-reported perceptions. First, the original survey instrument was based on established change management frameworks (ADKAR) and complemented with validated constructs from the organisational change and public administration literature, reducing construct ambiguity and common-method bias. Survey items were neutrally worded and administered anonymously through the Civil Service Bureau, which helped minimise social desirability bias and fear of reprisal in a politically sensitive reform environment. Second, triangulation was used systematically to address single-source bias. Quantitative patterns were cross-checked against qualitative interview data drawn from diverse stakeholder groups, including senior officials, reform implementers, international partners, and civil society experts, enabling convergence and contrast across perspectives. Third, the re-analysis applied a theoretically guided coding framework (Kübler-Ross, ADKAR, and Kotter) combined with inductive coding, which reduced confirmation bias by allowing unexpected themes to emerge beyond the predefined models. Fourth, analytic transparency was ensured through systematic documentation of coding decisions and iterative comparison between datasets. Finally, interpretation focused on patterns and mechanisms rather than individual attributions, reducing the risk of over-interpretation of context-specific responses. Together, these measures strengthen the internal validity of the findings and enhance confidence that the identified emotional dynamics reflect robust reform-related patterns rather than artefacts of measurement or researcher interpretation.

Research design rationale and guiding principles

The research design is grounded in the principle that public sector reform is a multi-dimensional phenomenon in which observable behavioural outcomes are inseparable from underlying emotional and relational processes. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was therefore selected to ensure analytical coherence between measurable reform engagement patterns and the subjective experiences that give rise to them. The design is conceptually anchored in pragmatism and critical realism, recognising that while quantitative indicators can identify regularities in attitudes and behaviours, they cannot on their own explain why such patterns emerge in politically volatile and low-trust governance contexts. The initial quantitative phase establishes empirical regularities in emotional readiness, motivation, and engagement, providing a structured diagnostic baseline. The subsequent qualitative phase is intentionally explanatory rather than exploratory, designed to interpret, contextualise, and refine these findings through the lived experiences of reform actors. This sequencing reflects the principle that emotional dynamics in organisational change are often latent, relational, and context-dependent, requiring interpretive depth to complement statistical association. Importantly, the design avoids privileging one methodological tradition over another; instead, it treats quantitative and qualitative components as analytically interdependent. Quantitative results delimit the scope of inquiry, while qualitative insights interrogate causal mechanisms, sense-making processes, and contextual constraints that shape reform behaviour. This alignment ensures that explanations are neither purely inferential nor anecdotal but grounded in systematic evidence across methods. The design is particularly suited to transitional governance settings, where reform trajectories are non-linear and where emotional responses may disrupt the assumptions embedded in conventional change

management models. By structuring the research process around explanation rather than confirmation, the design supports theory refinement and context-sensitive interpretation rather than simple model testing.

Design integration, inference logic, and analytical contribution

A central principle of the research design is methodological integration through inference rather than aggregation. Rather than merging datasets mechanically, the study employs a sequential inferential logic in which findings from the quantitative phase actively shape the focus, framing, and interpretive priorities of the qualitative phase. This approach ensures that qualitative inquiry is analytically purposeful, directed toward explaining specific empirical tensions, such as gaps between reform awareness and engagement or the disproportionate influence of emotional variables relative to technical capacity factors. The qualitative phase thus functions as an explanatory mechanism, unpacking how civil servants interpret reform signals, leadership behaviour, and institutional credibility within their organisational and political environment. Integration occurs at the level of interpretation, where quantitative trends and qualitative narratives are mapped onto established behavioural and strategic change frameworks. This process enables the identification of sequencing mismatches, emotional thresholds, and contextual moderators that are not visible through single-method designs. The design also reflects a principle of analytical restraint: conclusions are derived from convergent patterns rather than isolated findings, and emphasis is placed on conditional explanations rather than universal claims. By privileging explanation over prediction, the design contributes to theory-building in public administration and change management, particularly in contexts where reform outcomes are shaped by trust, emotional safety, and institutional memory. The explanatory sequential design thus serves not only as a methodological choice but as an epistemological stance, recognising that understanding “how” and “why” reforms unfold requires moving iteratively between measurement and meaning. This design logic strengthens the study’s contribution by demonstrating how emotion-centred mechanisms interact with strategic reform processes, offering insights that are both empirically grounded and theoretically generative.

Results

The mixed-methods analysis reveals that reform engagement in Georgia’s public administration is shaped not only by awareness of reform measures and procedural expectations, but also by a complex interplay of emotional, motivational, and contextual factors. The quantitative survey of 581 civil servants highlights a substantial gap between awareness and willingness to engage: although 64 per cent reported awareness of ongoing reforms, only 38 per cent expressed readiness to actively participate in their implementation. Regression results show that uncertainty-related anxiety ($\beta = -0.35, p < .001$) and perceived loss of autonomy ($\beta = -0.29, p < .01$) were the strongest negative predictors of engagement. These findings indicate that emotional resistance is not peripheral but a central determinant of reform participation.

Qualitative interviews reinforced this conclusion. Interviewees frequently described experiencing an information vacuum, particularly at middle management and frontline levels, because reform communication often reached them late or in limited form. Without timely explanations of reform rationale, timelines, or expected impacts, civil servants tended to interpret reforms with suspicion, which is consistent with Oreg et al.’s (2011) argument that affective sense-making precedes cognitive acceptance.

Despite these barriers, the data also reveal strong motivational levers. Seventy-one per cent of respondents expressed high intrinsic motivation grounded in public service values, while 65 per cent identified extrinsic incentives such as recognition or career advancement as important. Correlation analysis confirmed that intrinsic motivation ($r = .46, p < .001$) predicted engagement more strongly than extrinsic motivation ($r = .38, p < .001$). Interviews showed that symbolic recognition and visible leadership appreciation acted as emotional accelerators, helping civil servants transition from frustration to exploration, consistent with the Kübler-Ross Change Curve.

Leadership emerged as a decisive factor, although the findings challenge the linear sequencing assumed in ADKAR and Kotter’s models. In Georgia’s low-trust environment, trust-building frequently had to precede awareness-raising. Three patterns were consistent across datasets:

- (1) the sequence “trust-building → awareness → desire” was more effective than beginning with awareness;
- (2) symbolic recognition had a stronger influence on acceptance than technical training; and
- (3) Anchoring cultural change required ongoing emotional reinforcement to prevent regression.

Organisational culture and political context also shaped responses. Interviewees noted that political influence on senior appointments weakened reform credibility, created discontinuity, and undermined institutional memory. Many civil

servants described reforms as “done to us” rather than “done with us,” especially in technocratic early phases that largely excluded those responsible for day-to-day implementation.

Emotional barriers were widespread: 62 per cent reported uncertainty-related anxiety, 54 per cent feared loss of autonomy, and 48 per cent anticipated increased workload or scrutiny. When unaddressed, these concerns led to passive resistance—formal compliance accompanied by informal preservation of existing practices—or disengagement from reform activities. Such reactions were often influenced by prior experience of reforms that promised transformation but delivered only symbolic change.

Qualitative narratives underscored that emotional resistance became entrenched when communication, trust-building, and participatory problem-solving were insufficient. As one senior official explained, “I only started taking the reform seriously when I felt the leadership genuinely cared about how the changes would affect us, not just about ticking boxes.”

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that emotional readiness functions as a gating condition for reform progress. When emotional alignment is absent, technically robust strategies are perceived as externally imposed and fail to secure sustained buy-in.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the emotional experience of reform is a central determinant of implementation outcomes in public administration, rather than a secondary concern. In Georgia’s case, awareness of reforms was relatively high, yet willingness to engage remained markedly lower. This gap illustrates that knowing about reform is not the same as feeling ready or safe enough to participate in it. Emotional readiness, shaped by uncertainty, perceived loss of autonomy, and previous experiences of incomplete or politicised reforms, acted as a phase gate that either enabled or blocked engagement.

These results align with broader evidence that reforms fail less because of technical flaws and more because they do not adequately account for how people interpret and feel about change (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). In this study, anxiety related to uncertainty and perceived loss of autonomy emerged as the strongest negative predictors of engagement. This pattern echoes arguments that emotional sense-making often precedes cognitive openness to change: when civil servants feel threatened, overburdened, or excluded, they are unlikely to perceive reform messages as credible or relevant, regardless of how well-designed the reform package is.

At the same time, the study shows that emotional resistance is not simply an expression of cynicism or lack of professionalism. The prevalence of uncertainty, fear of losing control, and anxiety about increased scrutiny reflects rational responses to a context of frequent political turnover, shifting priorities, and limited consultation with those responsible for implementation. In this sense, what appears as “resistance” can also be read as a signal of misalignment between reform strategy and the lived realities of civil servants in a transitional governance system.

The findings on motivation provide an important counterpoint. High levels of intrinsic public service motivation suggest that many civil servants are willing, in principle, to support reforms that they see as contributing to the public good. The fact that intrinsic motivation predicted engagement more strongly than extrinsic incentives indicates that reform leaders can build on existing professional values rather than assuming apathy or self-interest as the default. Symbolic recognition and visible appreciation from leaders functioned as emotional accelerators, helping civil servants move from frustration toward exploration and acceptance. This reinforces the view that recognition does more than reward performance; it signals respect, validates identity, and strengthens trust.

Leadership behaviour and sequencing emerged as critical elements. The empirical pattern “trust-building → awareness → desire” complicates the standard ADKAR sequence that begins with awareness. In Georgia’s low-trust environment, reform messages resonated only after leaders had demonstrated credibility, transparency, and care. Participants’ accounts showed that when they experienced leadership as distant, politicised, or primarily concerned with formal compliance, they tended to disengage or adopt defensive postures. When leaders acknowledged uncertainty, invited questions, and demonstrated concern for how reforms would affect staff, emotional resistance softened and space for genuine dialogue opened.

This has direct implications for how established change models are used in transitional governance settings. ADKAR and Kotter’s Eight Step Model provide valuable structure, but their linear application assumes relatively stable institutional conditions and a baseline level of trust. The Georgian experience suggests that in contexts shaped by political volatility and legacies of hierarchical administration, these models need to be applied adaptively. Emotional

diagnostics should guide the timing and nature of interventions, with particular attention to when it is realistic to move from awareness raising to building desire and capability.

The findings also highlight the importance of organisational culture and political context. Perceptions that senior appointments are politically driven and that reforms shift with electoral cycles undermined reform credibility and eroded institutional memory. Civil servants described reforms as being “done to” them rather than “done with” them, especially during technocratic phases focused on legal and structural changes. This disconnect between reform design and frontline experience reinforces arguments that culture and context mediate whether global reform templates can be translated into meaningful local practice. In Georgia, as in other post-socialist and developing systems, bureaucratic traditions that value predictability and hierarchy amplify the emotional impact of rapid and externally visible reforms.

Anchoring reform sustainably requires more than embedding new procedures in legislation or organisational charts. The results indicate that without sustained effort to shift norms, recognition practices, and everyday interactions, reforms remain vulnerable to political turnover and may regress once initial momentum fades. Emotional safety and trust are essential to this anchoring process. When civil servants feel that their expertise is respected, their concerns heard, and their contributions recognised, they are more willing to internalise new ways of working and less likely to treat reforms as temporary or purely symbolic.

From a theoretical perspective, the study supports an integrated view that combines behavioural and strategic change models. Emotional readiness, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, leadership behaviour, organisational culture, and political context interact to shape how reforms unfold. Treating emotional readiness as a strategic variable helps explain why technically similar reforms can produce very different outcomes across settings, and why sequencing flexibility is essential. The emotion-centred hybrid model proposed in this article builds on this insight by positioning trust-building, psychological safety, and recognition as core components of reform strategy rather than optional additions.

There are, however, important limitations. The analysis is based on a single-country case and the secondary use of one doctoral dataset. While this allows for depth, it limits generalisability. Further comparative research is needed to test whether the identified sequencing pattern and emotional dynamics hold in other transitional or developing governance systems, and whether different policy sectors exhibit distinct emotional profiles. Longitudinal designs would also help clarify how emotional readiness and trust evolve across reform cycles and how early investments in emotional safety influence long-term outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the study offers clear implications for policy and practice. Reform leaders need to treat emotional climate assessment, trust-building, and psychological safety as integral parts of reform design and monitoring, and to assess them with the same seriousness as technical capacity or financial resources. Communication strategies should prioritise listening as much as informing, allowing civil servants to process change collectively and to see themselves as partners rather than passive recipients. Recognition should be built into reform processes, not only as a performance management tool but as a consistent signal of organisational values.

Ultimately, the Georgian case underscores a simple yet often-neglected point: public sector reforms succeed when they are experienced as fair, respectful, and meaningful by the people who implement them. Building trust and emotional safety is, therefore, not a soft concern but a hard condition for institutional transformation in transitional governance environments.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that trust and emotional safety are not peripheral elements of public sector reform but core determinants of whether change initiatives take root. The analysis of Georgia’s public administration reform shows that emotional readiness, shaped by anxiety, uncertainty, perceived threats to autonomy, and past experiences of incomplete reforms, functions as a gating condition for engagement. When emotional concerns are unaddressed, civil servants may comply formally while resisting behaviourally, resulting in stalled or superficial implementation even when reform goals are widely supported.

In interpreting the findings and drawing conclusions, particular care was taken to account for potential internal biases inherent in self-reported and context-specific data. Rather than treating individual perceptions as objective facts, the analysis focused on consistent patterns, relational mechanisms, and converging signals across data sources. Conclusions were derived through triangulation between quantitative trends and qualitative narratives, allowing emotionally driven responses to be interpreted as meaningful indicators of reform dynamics rather than as distortions. Importantly, emotional reactions such as anxiety, mistrust, or perceived loss of autonomy were not treated as noise

but as analytically relevant phenomena that shape reform behaviour in low-trust governance contexts. To reduce interpretive bias, findings were anchored in established change management and behavioural frameworks, ensuring that conclusions reflected theoretically grounded mechanisms rather than post hoc explanations. Claims were deliberately framed at the level of tendencies and conditional relationships, avoiding causal overreach or generalisation beyond the Georgian context. Where alternative explanations were plausible, emphasis was placed on explanatory coherence rather than attribution. This reflexive approach strengthens the credibility of the conclusions by demonstrating that emotional dynamics identified in the study are not artefacts of measurement or researcher interpretation, but robust features of reform experience that persist across methods, actors, and institutional levels. As such, the conclusions reflect analytically cautious yet substantively meaningful insights into how emotional readiness conditions public sector reform outcomes.

The findings challenge the linear logic of many established change management models, which assume that awareness naturally precedes desire. In low-trust and politically volatile environments, reform messages gained traction only after leaders demonstrated credibility, transparency, and genuine concern for employees' well-being. Emotional reassurance, therefore, became a necessary precursor to awareness-building, indicating that sequencing must be adapted to the context rather than imposed uniformly. This insight underscores the importance of leadership behaviours that create psychological safety, encourage open dialogue, and validate employees' experiences throughout the reform process.

Motivation emerged as a critical counterweight to emotional resistance, but its effectiveness depended heavily on relational conditions. Intrinsic motivation rooted in public service values supported long-term engagement, while symbolic recognition and visible appreciation served as catalysts that helped civil servants move from frustration to exploration. These mechanisms illustrate how trust and emotional safety amplify the impact of motivational drivers, enabling civil servants to internalise reform objectives rather than merely comply with them.

The study also highlights that structural and legal changes cannot produce sustainable transformation without parallel investment in cultural and behavioural change. Political turnover, shifting priorities, and inconsistent leadership signals weakened reform momentum and eroded institutional memory. In such contexts, anchoring reform in organisational culture through shared norms, recognition practices, transparent communication, and participatory decision-making proved essential for resilience and continuity.

Overall, the evidence confirms that successful reform requires a deliberate and sustained focus on the human experience of change. Building trust, reducing uncertainty, and fostering emotional safety are strategic imperatives, not optional supplements to technical design. When civil servants feel respected, informed, and psychologically secure, they are more likely to engage constructively with reform, contribute ideas, and sustain new practices over time. When these conditions are absent, even well-designed reforms struggle to advance beyond symbolic compliance.

In transitional governance contexts such as Georgia's, where reforms are rapid, politically visible, and often externally driven, an emotion-centred approach offers a more realistic and effective pathway to institutional transformation. By integrating emotional alignment with strategic planning, reform leaders can cultivate environments in which change is not experienced as a threat but as a shared and meaningful opportunity for public value creation. Trust and emotional safety, therefore, become the foundation upon which durable, credible, and people-centred reforms are built.

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