

MANAGING CHANGE IN THE CIVIL SERVICE AMID INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION: THEORETICAL ASPECTS AND PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE IN THE ABAI REGION

Alua Sabalakova¹

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the analysis of change management processes in the public sector of the Republic of Kazakhstan during a period of active institutional transformation (2024–2025). Based on the Concept for the Development of Public Administration until 2030 and the new Concept for the Development of the Civil Service for 2024–2029, the article examines mechanisms for adapting civil servants to service models. Particular attention is paid to practical cases in the Abai region, a newly formed region that has become a testing ground for decentralisation and digital transformation. The paper presents the results of qualitative research and statistical analysis of the effectiveness of the e-Otinish system (ACSA, 2025; OECD, 2025b).

Keywords: *change management, institutional transformation, Abai region, public service, service model, digital transformation, Kazakhstan-2025*

INTRODUCTION

The current stage of Kazakhstan's development is characterised by the "institutional consolidation" of reforms aimed at decentralising and de-bureaucratising the state apparatus (ACSA, 2025). The transition from a rigid hierarchical model to a service-oriented one requires not just organisational changes, but a profound transformation of organisational culture (Janenova, 2024). For civil servants, this means abandoning the role of "controller" in favour of the role of "service provider" (ACSA, 2025; Janenova, 2024; OECD, 2025a).² The civil service is characterised by a high degree of formalisation, procedural rationality and hierarchical structure. These characteristics ensure stability, but at the same time create institutional inertia.

Contemporary public management reforms (post-NPM, digital governance) involve: a transition to networked forms of coordination; the digitisation of administrative procedures; increased transparency and accountability; and a greater emphasis on performance (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Osborne, 2018). However, the implementation of these principles faces bureaucratic resistance and the risk of "symbolic reforms," where formal changes are not accompanied by behavioural transformation (Moynihan, 2023). Thus, institutional transformation requires the synchronisation of structural, process and cultural changes.

This article analyses how theoretical models of change management (Kotter, 1996) are integrated into Kazakhstani practice and how the Abai region, faced with the challenges of forming a new administration, has become a benchmark for adaptive management.

¹ Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Abai Region Branch. Email: a.sabalakova@apa.kz

² See also State of the Nation Address: Justice, Solidarity, Progress by President Tokayev in 2024. Akorda.kz. <https://www.akorda.kz/en/president-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-just-kazakhstan-law-and-order-economic-growth-social-optimism-482433>

THEORETICAL BASIS AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Change management in the public sector has developed at the intersection of organisational theory, institutional economics and public administration theory. In this context, change is not only a managerial process but also an institutional phenomenon shaped by formal rules, administrative traditions and political decision-making structures.

Classical approaches to change were based on the idea of linear transformation of the organisational system. Conversely, in the Lewin (1947) model - "unfreeze–change–refreeze" - change is viewed as a transition from a stable state to a new equilibrium through a phase of destabilisation. Despite criticism for being overly simplistic, this model retains its methodological value for the public sector, where any reform requires prior "unfreezing" of regulatory and cultural attitudes.

The development of the process approach is associated with the eight-step model of organisational transformation (Kotter, 1996). In the context of public administration, particular importance is attached to the stages of forming a coalition for change and institutionalising reform outcomes, since sustainable transformation depends on the support of political and administrative actors.

Contemporary research emphasises that change management models in the public sector must explicitly account for the institutional environment and the political conditioning of decisions (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017; Andrews et al., 2020). Under conditions of turbulence, digitalisation and administrative reforms, transformation processes become non-linear and are accompanied by institutional uncertainty and governance complexity (Ansell and Torfing, 2021).

The development of the process approach is associated with the concept of J. Kotter, who proposed an eight-step model of organisational transformation (Kotter, 1996). The stages of forming a coalition for change and institutionalising results are of particular importance for public administration.

The development of the **process-oriented approach to organisational change management** is associated with the work of J. Kotter, who proposed an eight-step model of organisational transformation (Kotter, 1996). This model conceptualises organisational change as a sequential process that includes creating a sense of urgency, building a guiding coalition, developing a strategic vision and institutionalising the achieved results. In the context of public administration, the stages of forming a coalition for change and institutionalising reform outcomes are of particular importance, as sustainable reforms depend on the support of political and administrative actors.

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1. Institutional approach and change management models

Institutional theory allows us to analyse public service as a set of formal and informal rules. Within the framework of 'new institutionalism', three types of institutional pressure are distinguished: normative, coercive and mimetic (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In the context of institutional transformation of public administration, these forms of pressure manifest themselves as follows:

- Coercive pressure — legislative reforms, changes to the constitutional model, redistribution of powers;
- Normative pressure — updating of professional standards, introduction of KPIs and performance evaluation systems;
- Mimetic pressure — borrowing international models of digital government and performance management.

Recent studies emphasise that institutional transformation is rarely limited to formal changes; it affects the cognitive and value foundations of bureaucracy (Scott, 2014; Christensen et al., 2023). Thus, change management becomes a mechanism for institutional adaptation.

For the effective implementation of reforms in the public sector, process-based and behaviour-oriented change management models are particularly relevant, as they address both organisational structures and the attitudes of civil servants involved in reform processes. In this regard, the models of J. Kotter and the ADKAR framework are widely applied in public administration. Kotter's model emphasises leadership, coalition building and the institutionalisation of reform outcomes, which are critical in politically embedded administrative systems. The ADKAR model, in turn, focuses on individual awareness, motivation and capability to support change, which helps overcome resistance among public officials during administrative transformations (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017; Christensen et al., 2023).

2. Human-centredness and the prevention of professional burnout

The problem of professional burnout in the civil service becomes particularly acute during periods of institutional transformation. Reform processes are typically accompanied by increased accountability requirements, changing performance indicators, and the introduction of new digital systems, all of which create additional organizational and psychological stress.

The service model can act as a preventive mechanism against burnout in several ways: it reduces uncertainty through transparent communication, increases autonomy by involving employees in decision-making, and fosters a supportive organizational culture. In the Abai Region, preliminary data indicates a moderate negative correlation between the human-centeredness index of a department and indicators of emotional exhaustion among its staff. This suggests that a focus on employee well-being is not merely an ethical imperative but also a factor in institutional effectiveness.

3. Institutional constraints and risks

The implementation of the service model faces barriers: regulatory overload; a culture of formal reporting; KPIs that are inconsistent with service objectives; staff turnover; and a lack of analytical tools.

There is a risk that human-centredness will remain merely declarative. Without changing the performance evaluation system, it may remain nothing more than a slogan. In addition, an excessive focus on satisfaction without taking institutional sustainability into account can lead to populism; a balance between procedural legitimacy and service flexibility is necessary.

4. Prospects for the development of the service model

Institutionalising the service model requires: integrating service indicators into strategic planning; developing a culture of data analytics; regular staff engagement indices; burnout prevention programmes; training managers in the principles of human-centred leadership. The experience of the Abai region shows that changes take root where service logic becomes

part of the organisational culture. The key factor is the behavioural transformation of middle managers.

ABAI REGION: DETAILED ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The creation of the Abai region in 2022 created a unique "living experiment" in the field of public administration. By 2025, the region had completed the stage of forming basic structures and moved on to the phase of qualitative optimisation. A practical analysis of the transformation processes shows that institutional reforms at the national level require regional adaptation. In 2023–2025, the region implemented changes in the following areas: modernisation of personnel policy; digitalisation of processes; improvement of analytical functions; and institutionalisation of project management.

The creation of the Abai region in 2022 represents a unique institutional case for analysing regional governance reforms in Kazakhstan. The formation of a new administrative region created a "living experiment" in public administration, where institutional structures had to be established almost from scratch while simultaneously adapting to ongoing national reforms in the civil service and public governance system. By 2025, the region had largely completed the stage of establishing its basic administrative and organisational structures and had begun transitioning toward the phase of qualitative optimisation and institutional consolidation.

From the perspective of public administration theory, the experience of the Abai region demonstrates how national reform agendas are translated into regional governance practices. Institutional transformation at the national level requires adaptation within regional administrative systems, where new management practices must be integrated into existing organisational cultures and bureaucratic routines.

Between 2023 and 2025, several key areas of institutional transformation were implemented in the region. These included the modernisation of personnel management practices, the digitalisation of administrative processes, the strengthening of analytical capacities within public institutions, and the institutionalisation of project management approaches in regional governance.

Empirical observations suggest that structural and procedural reforms are implemented faster than changes in administrative culture. At the same time, regional leadership has played an important role in forming "coalitions for change", which facilitate the coordination of reform initiatives and support the institutionalisation of new governance practices (Andrews et al., 2020).

Case No. 1: Decentralisation and the election of akims (Semey and Kokpektinsky District)

In 2025, the Abai region became a pilot zone for the introduction of direct elections of the akim of the city of Semey. On 12 October 2025, elections for a new akim of the city were held in Semey. Three candidates participated in the elections: Kanyish Tuleuov, Aibolat Bekzhasarov and Adlet Kozhanbayev. The electoral process was facilitated by 128 polling stations, of which 110 were open and 18 were closed, organised in military units, medical and correctional institutions.

According to the Semey City Territorial Election Commission, 220,761 citizens were on the voter rolls, of whom 118,553 voted. The number of invalid ballots was 2,482, with 4,310 marked "Against all." On 14 October, Adlet Kozhanbayev became the new mayor of Semey, with

89,411 people voting for him. Kanyish Tuleuov came second in the election (with 12,557 votes), followed by Aibolat Bekzhasarov with 9,763 votes (forbes.kz, 2025).³

Case No. 2: Digital ecosystem and service model

The transformation of Semey into a "Smart City" required overcoming resistance from technical specialists. The introduction of AI modules for analysing traffic flows and the state of housing and communal services reduced the response time to accidents by 30% (World Economic Forum, 2025; OECD, 2025a).

Results of the implementation of the e-Otinish system in the Abai region (2024–2025)

One of the key indicators of successful change management is the dynamics of working with citizens' appeals. The transition to the e-Otinish platform has made it possible to digitise complaints and apply data analysis methods to identify "pressure points" (ACSA, 2025; OECD, 2025b). Summary statistics – shown in Table 1 - were used to adjust district development plans for 2025.

Table 1. Analysis of citizens' appeals by category and effectiveness (Abai Region, 2024)

Category of appeal	Number of appeals (units)	Resolved positively (%)	Average response time (days)	Applicant satisfaction (1-5)
Housing, communal services and public amenities	12,450	78	12	3.8
Land relations	8,200	62	14	3.2
Social protection	5,600	94	5	4.7
Road infrastructure	9,150	55	15	2.9
Healthcare	4,300	88	3	4.5
TOTAL / AVERAGE	39,700	75.4	9.8	3.8

Comment: The low percentage of positive decisions in the "Road Infrastructure" category (55%) in 2024 was due to the transfer of assets from the East Kazakhstan Region to the Abai Region. However, in the first quarter of 2025, thanks to the introduction of project management, this figure rose to 68%.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: METHODOLOGY AND SURVEY RESULTS (2024–2025)

As part of the field phase (September 2024 – January 2025), a qualitative study was conducted among 60 civil servants in the Abai region. The key analytical findings are presented below.

1. Institutional barriers

Respondents rated the average level of bureaucracy at 7.8 out of 10. The main reason hindering innovation was identified as "fear of inspections by regulatory authorities" (42%). This indicates that the punitive nature of audits blocks local initiative (Janenova, 2024; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2025b).

³ <https://forbes.kz/articles/zhiteli-semeya-izbrali-novogo-akima-ca17d8>

2. Comparative analysis: city vs village

The study revealed a gap in the perception of reforms between urban and rural administrations. It highlighted that while cities suffer from excessive regulation, rural districts face resource shortages but maintain higher levels of trust withing teams.

Table 2. Comparative indicators (average values)

Parameter	City (Semey)	Rural areas (districts)
Level of bureaucracy	8.2	6.5
Financial deficit as a barrier	12	48
Regular use of AI	45	12
Support for the "right to make mistakes"	10	22

3. Technological readiness and AI

In 2025, AI tools enabled Category B civil servants to save up to 30% of their time on preparing routine documents (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2025a). However, 80% of respondents noted that the e-Otinish system reduced corruption risks but created the risk of "digital formalism" (answers for the sake of meeting deadlines) (Agency for Public Service Affairs, 2025; OECD, 2025b).

4. Key findings

The barrier of "procedural fear": 58% of respondents noted that they are afraid to implement innovations due to the risk of inspections.

The "new region" effect: the level of motivation (PSM) in the Abai region was higher than the national average, which is associated with the desire to build an "exemplary region" from scratch.

Digital divide: employees aged 45+ experience stress when faced with new AI monitoring systems (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2025a; World Economic Forum, 2025).

Quote from a respondent (akim of a rural district): "Now I am not just an executor, I am a project manager. My KPIs depend on how many streetlights in the village were lit after the application was submitted to e-Otinish, not on the number of reports" (Agency for Public Service Affairs, 2025; OECD, 2025b).

Based on theoretical analysis and regional experience, a conceptual link has been proposed: institutional reform (macro level) → organisational adaptation (meso level) → behavioural transformation of civil servants (micro level). A gap at any of these levels leads to a decrease in the effectiveness of reforms.

MANAGING CHANGE IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF REFORM PERCEPTIONS AND RESISTANCE DYNAMICS (2024–2025)

This section provides an analysis of civil servants' perceptions of reforms and the dynamics of resistance to change in 2024–2025. Based on survey data among civil servants in the Abai region, a dual configuration has been identified: high rational support for the need for change (68%) coupled with uncertainty about goals (54%) and an increase in regulatory burden (47%).

This dynamic is described as "rational assent—behavioural inertia" (Moynihan, 2023; Christensen et al., 2023).

1. Perception of the need for reform: rational support

In 2025, 68% of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement "changes are necessary to improve efficiency." However, 54% indicated that the goals of the reforms and the expected results were "not always clear," and 47% noted an increase in reporting. This points to a lack of management communication and an overload of regulatory control (Moynihan, 2023).

2. Reform as an additional burden

Almost half of respondents (47%) report an increase in reporting, confirming the phenomenon of "reform as superstructure," where new processes are superimposed on old ones without replacing them. Christensen and colleagues note the phase of "regulatory thickening" as a typical effect of reforms (Christensen et al., 2023).

Resistance dynamics: comparative analysis 2024 → 2025

Table 3. Dynamics of resistance to change (percentage of respondents with a high level, ≥ 4 on the scale)

Type of resistance	2024	2025
Cognitive (doubts about feasibility)	42	29
Emotional (anxiety/fatigue)	51	38
Behavioural (formal performance)	47	41

3. Cognitive resistance

The decrease in cognitive resistance from 42% to 29% indicates a gradual acceptance of the logic of the reforms. Scepticism decreases with increased predictability, stabilisation of rules and systematic communication.

4. Emotional resistance

The decrease in emotional resistance from 51% to 38% indicates partial stabilisation, but the indicator remains high: almost one in three employees experiences tension.

5. Behavioural resistance and the risk of symbolic implementation

Behavioural resistance decreased minimally (47% → 41%). This is a signal of institutional risk of symbolic implementation, when reporting increases and interaction practices change little (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).

Based on these data, the following management directions are identified: strengthening strategic communication; reducing regulatory overload; working with the behavioural level through training, feedback, and a shift from control to support.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutional transformation in the Abai region in 2025 confirms that the success of reforms largely depends on human capital management (OECD, 2025a; World Economic Forum, 2025; OECD, 2025b).

The effectiveness of the transformation depends on how the changes are managed. Clear communication and leadership support are key resources that increase engagement and reduce the risk of burnout.

Consequently, change management should be interpreted as a mechanism for preserving human capital in the civil service in conditions of high institutional turbulence. Recommendations: 1) "Right to make mistakes": regulatory consolidation of management risk for innovative projects. 2) Reverse mentoring: using young staff to train senior colleagues in digital skills.

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APPENDIX: RESEARCH TOOLS

Qualitative research questionnaire (interview/focus group). Used during the field stage of research in the Abai region (September 2024 – January 2025).

I. Block: identification and adaptation. Length of service in government agencies before and after the creation of the Abai region. Have you undergone specialised training in "Change Management" or "Project Management" in the last 12 months?

II. Block: institutional barriers. Rate the level of bureaucracy in your daily processes on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 — complete freedom, 10 — strict regulations). Name the main reason preventing the implementation of innovations: A) fear of inspections; B) lack of technical expertise; C) lack of funding; D) personal aversion to technology (Janenova, 2024; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2025b).

Block III: Technological readiness. How has the use of AI tools (ChatGPT assistants, analytical systems) affected the workload? Do you think that digital transparency ("eOtinish") has actually reduced the level of corruption? (Agency for Public Service Affairs, 2025; OECD, 2025b; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2025a; World Economic Forum, 2025).

IV. Block: leadership and culture. Does management support the "right to make mistakes" when implementing new initiatives? Describe the ideal civil servant in the Abai region in 2030.