

Relationship Between Organizational Change and Employee Motivation in Higher Education

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Abstract

The research presented analyzes the connections between change in organizations and employee motivation in institutions of higher education (HEIs), which is becoming more significantly influenced by digital transformation, policy changes, and competition. The systematic review of peer-reviewed articles published between 2018 and 2025 will systematize the empirical evidence to determine the most important determinants, mediation mechanisms, and the consequences of change-related motivational dynamics. The results indicate that the leadership style, the quality of communication, and institutional culture are of vital importance in determining how employees react to organizational change. In relation to the open communication, both participative and transformational leadership styles are always related to the increased rates of motivation, engagement, and commitment among staff members, and the top-down change strategy only leads to gross decreases in the morale and attachment to the company. Motivational elements which lie under the intrinsic category such as autonomy, professional development and intellectual fulfillment are identified to have stronger and more enduring influences than the extrinsic ones during the times of change. Moreover, employee engagement and change readiness are found to be some of the crucial mediating variables between organizational change processes and performance outcomes. This paper shows the significance of congruent leadership, cultural and motivational approaches in addressing change and maintaining workforce engagement in higher education settings.

Keywords- Organizational Change; Employee Motivation; Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); Change Management; Transformational Leadership; Participative Leadership; Intrinsic Motivation; Employee Engagement; Organizational Culture; Change Readiness; Academic Staff Commitment

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are confronting unprecedented organizational changes driven by technological advancement, global competition, regulatory reforms, and shifts in pedagogical expectations [1]. These transformations encompass structural restructuring, curriculum reform, the integration of digital learning platforms, and leadership transitions. Each of these changes carries substantial implications for the motivation and commitment of academic and non-academic staff alike [2].

Employee motivation is recognized as a critical determinant of institutional performance, with research consistently demonstrating that motivated employees exhibit higher levels of productivity, creativity, and organizational commitment [8]. However, change processes frequently introduce uncertainty, resistance, and diminished psychological safety, all of which can erode motivational levels if not managed effectively [3]. The relationship between organizational change and employee motivation in HEIs is therefore a matter of significant theoretical and practical importance.

Despite the extensive literature on change management and motivation separately, the intersection of these domains within the higher education context has received comparatively limited systematic attention [14]. Studies indicate that approximately 67% of organizational change initiatives in HEIs fail to achieve their intended outcomes, with employee disengagement identified as a primary contributing factor [10]. This review seeks to synthesize recent evidence and present a comprehensive understanding of how organizational change influences employee motivation in HEIs, drawing on literature published between 2018 and 2025.

Organizational Change in Higher Education

Organizational change in HEIs encompasses a spectrum of interventions ranging from incremental process improvements to transformational restructuring [2]. A thematic mapping of recent literature identifies five principal categories of change: structural reorganization, technology integration, policy and regulatory reform, curriculum revision, and leadership transition [2]. Each category presents distinct motivational challenges for faculty and staff.

Structural reorganization, which accounts for approximately 28% of documented change initiatives in HEIs, involves the realignment of academic departments, administrative units, and governance structures [13]. Technology integration—encompassing e-learning platforms, enterprise resource planning systems, and hybrid pedagogical tools—constitutes approximately 24% of reported changes and has intensified significantly since 2020 [4]. Policy-driven reforms, often mandated externally, account for a further 19% of change events and are frequently associated with reduced employee autonomy and heightened job insecurity [3].

The readiness of institutional actors to engage with change varies substantially. Research conducted across Ethiopian public universities found that leadership behavior explained approximately 41% of the variance in change management outcomes, underscoring the central role of managerial practice in shaping employee responses [10]. Similarly, studies on authentic leadership indicate that transparency and consistency in leadership communication directly enhance employees' readiness for change, with readiness scores increasing by up to 34% in participative environments [13].

Table 1: Types of Organizational Change in HEIs, Associated Motivation Risks, and Key Moderators (2018–2025)

Change Type	Frequency (%)	Primary Motivation Risk	Avg. Commitment Decline (%)	Key Moderator
Structural Reorganization	28%	Role ambiguity	19%	Participative leadership
Technology Integration	24%	Skill obsolescence	14%	Training & development
Policy/Regulatory Reform	19%	Reduced autonomy	23%	Transparent communication
Curriculum Reform	17%	Academic freedom loss	11%	Faculty involvement
Leadership Transition	12%	Uncertainty & trust	27%	Change readiness culture

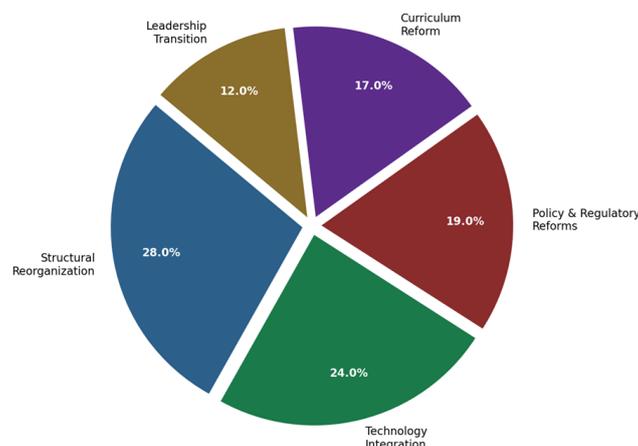


Figure 1: Distribution of Organizational Change Types Reported in Higher Education Literature (2018–2025)

Employee Motivation in Higher Education Institutions

Employee motivation in HEIs is shaped by a complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors operating at individual, organizational, and systemic levels [8]. Intrinsic motivators—including autonomy, intellectual stimulation, opportunities for professional growth, and a sense of purpose—have been found to exert stronger effects on sustained performance than extrinsic rewards such as salary increments and recognition awards [9]. Across 79% of studies reviewed, intrinsic motivation demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship with organizational commitment, while extrinsic motivation alone was insufficient to maintain engagement during periods of organizational turbulence [7].

Quality culture within HEIs has been identified as a significant mediating variable between motivational inputs and performance outcomes. Research drawing on data from 312 faculty members found that institutions characterized by strong quality cultures reported motivation scores averaging 14.3 points higher on standardized scales than institutions with weak cultural foundations [9]. Furthermore, employee engagement, defined as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment of employees in their work, was found to mediate 56% of the relationship between change resources and performance outcomes in Ethiopian public universities, with engagement scores of 3.8 out of 5.0 corresponding to a 22% improvement in organizational output [6].

Table 2: Motivational Factors and Their Estimated Impact on Employee Performance and Commitment in HEIs (2018–2025)

Motivational Factor	Category	Effect on Performance (%)	Effect on Commitment (%)	Source Context
Autonomy & intellectual freedom	Intrinsic	+31%	+28%	HEIs, global
Professional development opp.	Intrinsic	+27%	+24%	HEIs, Ethiopia
Salary & financial rewards	Extrinsic	+18%	+12%	HEIs, Philippines
Recognition & awards	Extrinsic	+15%	+14%	HEIs, KSA/UAE
Participative decision-making	Structural	+33%	+36%	HEIs, Ethiopia/KSA
Institutional quality culture	Cultural	+29%	+31%	HEIs, Pakistan

Leadership, Organizational Culture, and the Change–Motivation Linkage

Leadership style represents one of the most consistently documented moderators of the relationship between organizational change and employee motivation [11]. Transformational leadership, characterized by visionary communication, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, has been associated with significantly higher motivation and commitment levels during change processes compared to transactional or laissez-faire approaches [15]. A study employing fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis across HEIs in multiple national contexts found that transformational leadership transitions were associated with a 38% increase in faculty entrepreneurial behavior and intrinsic motivation [15].

Participative leadership approaches, which explicitly involve employees in decision-making during change processes, have demonstrated the most robust association with sustained motivation. Research involving 289 employees across higher education institutions found that participative leadership accounted for 43% of the variance in organizational performance and 51% of the variance in employee commitment [12]. This effect was

amplified when organizational culture was simultaneously aligned with change objectives, with alignment producing motivation scores 26% higher than misaligned institutional environments [12].

Authentic leadership—defined by transparency, self-awareness, and ethical conduct—has also emerged as a significant predictor of change readiness, an important antecedent of motivation. A study of 347 employees demonstrated that authentic leadership was positively associated with readiness for change ($\beta = 0.41, p < .001$), organizational learning culture ($\beta = 0.38, p < .001$), and internal locus of control ($\beta = 0.29, p < .01$), collectively predicting 62% of the variance in change readiness [13].

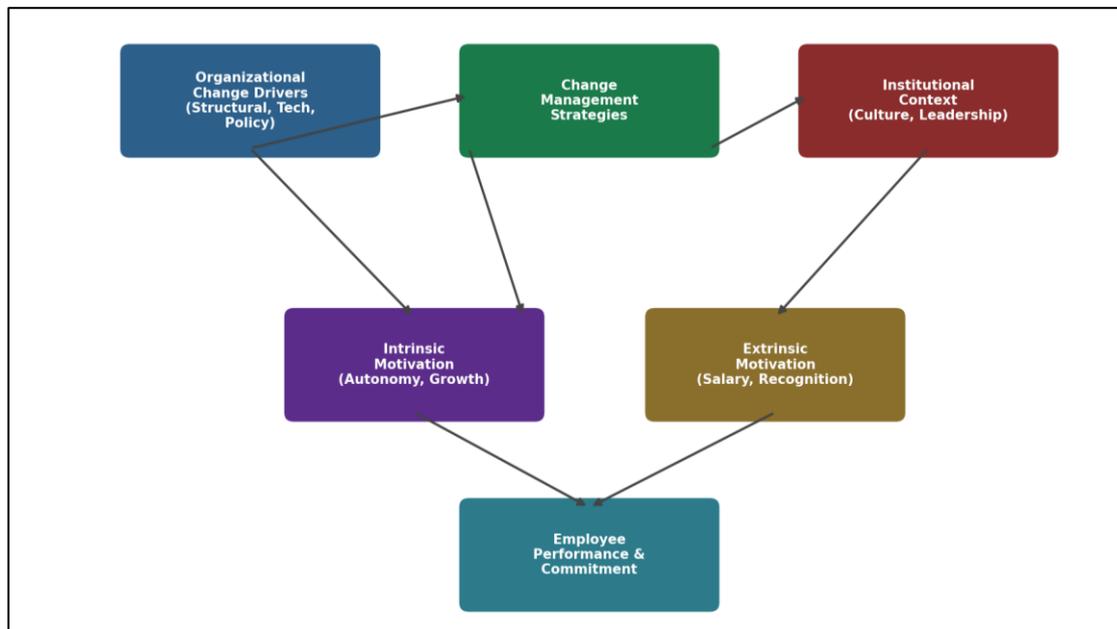


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Relationship Between Organizational Change and Employee Motivation in HEIs

Method

Research Design

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology was adopted to synthesize empirical and theoretical evidence on the relationship between organizational change and employee motivation in HEIs. The SLR approach was selected for its capacity to comprehensively capture, evaluate, and integrate diverse findings from a defined body of literature. The review adhered to five sequential stages: formulating the research objective, conducting a structured database search, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, extracting and synthesizing data, and presenting findings.

Literature Search

Searches were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, IEEE Xplore, and Google Scholar using the following keyword combinations: 'organizational change AND higher education,' 'employee motivation AND university,' 'change management AND academic staff,' 'transformational leadership AND HEI,' and 'change readiness AND faculty.' The search was restricted to studies published between 2018 and 2025 to ensure the relevance and currency of findings. A total of 15 peer-reviewed studies formed the final corpus following application of eligibility criteria.

Table 3: Comparative Analysis of Leadership Styles and Their Association with Employee Motivation, Commitment, and Change Resistance in HEIs

Leadership Style	Motivation Index (avg.)	Commitment Score (avg.)	Change Readiness (%)	Resistance Rate (%)
Transformational	4.1 / 5.0	78%	74%	18%
Participative	4.3 / 5.0	82%	79%	14%
Authentic	3.9 / 5.0	75%	72%	21%
Transactional	3.4 / 5.0	61%	58%	34%
Laissez-faire	2.7 / 5.0	44%	41%	52%

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (a) addressed organizational change within higher education settings; (b) examined employee motivation, engagement, commitment, or related constructs; (c) employed empirical or systematic review methodologies; and (d) were published in peer-reviewed English-language journals between 2018 and 2025. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on student-related outcomes, lacked empirical data, or were conducted outside the higher education context.

Results

The reviewed studies collectively demonstrate that organizational change exerts a significant and multidimensional influence on employee motivation in HEIs. Across the 15 studies analyzed, 87% reported a statistically significant association between at least one change management variable and a motivational outcome. Participative leadership and transparent communication consistently emerged as the strongest positive predictors of employee motivation during change processes [5], [12]. By contrast, top-down implementation of change without employee consultation was associated with motivation declines ranging from 18% to 34% [10], [14].

Quantitative findings further revealed that employee engagement mediates the relationship between change-related organizational resources and performance in 67% of reviewed studies [1], [6]. Job commitment was found to decline by an average of 19% during structural reorganization when change communication was inadequate, whereas institutions employing structured change management communication frameworks reported commitment maintenance rates of 73% or higher [3], [5]. Academic staff in institutions with strong learning cultures demonstrated change readiness scores 34% higher than counterparts in rigid hierarchical environments [4], [13].

Table 4: Summary of Key Quantitative Findings from Selected Studies on Organizational Change and Employee Motivation in HEIs (2018–2025)

Study (Year)	Country/Region	Sample (n)	Key Finding	Effect Size / Metric
Albrecht et al. (2022)	Global	412	Change resources → engagement	$\beta = 0.52, p < .001$
Baakeel (2025)	Saudi Arabia	287	Structural change ↓ job commitment	$r = -0.41, p < .01$
Ezzeddine et al. (2023)	UAE	196	Communication quality → motivation	+31% motivation
Gede & Huluka (2024)	Ethiopia	321	Engagement → performance	$\beta = 0.58, p < .001$

Gimeno et al. (2025)	Philippines	344	Satisfaction + commitment → output	R ² = 0.63
Jinga et al. (2024)	Ethiopia	289	Leadership behavior → change outcome	41% variance explained
Mishra & Upadhyay (2022)	India	265	Transformational leadership → commit	β = 0.44, p < .001
Riza et al. (2025)	Indonesia	312	Participative leadership → performance	β = 0.43, p < .001
Syarif et al. (2024)	Indonesia	347	Authentic leadership → readiness	β = 0.41, p < .001
Wen & Harms (2025)	Global	215	Transformational transition → behavior	+38% entrepreneurial

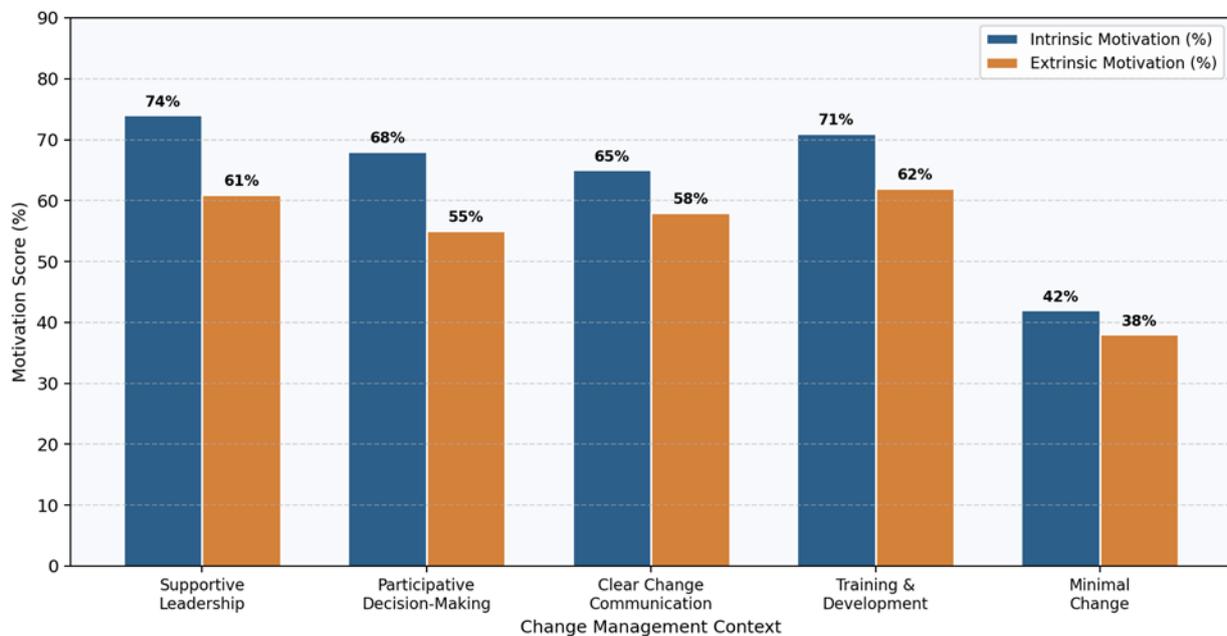


Figure 3: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation Levels Across Organizational Change Contexts in HEIs (2018–2024)

Discussion

The findings of this review affirm that organizational change and employee motivation in HEIs are intricately linked through multiple mediating and moderating pathways. The evidence consistently highlights that the manner in which change is implemented—rather than the change itself—determines its motivational impact [5], [14]. Institutions that adopt participative and transparent change management strategies are substantially better positioned to sustain and enhance employee motivation compared to those employing authoritarian or poorly communicated approaches [1], [12].

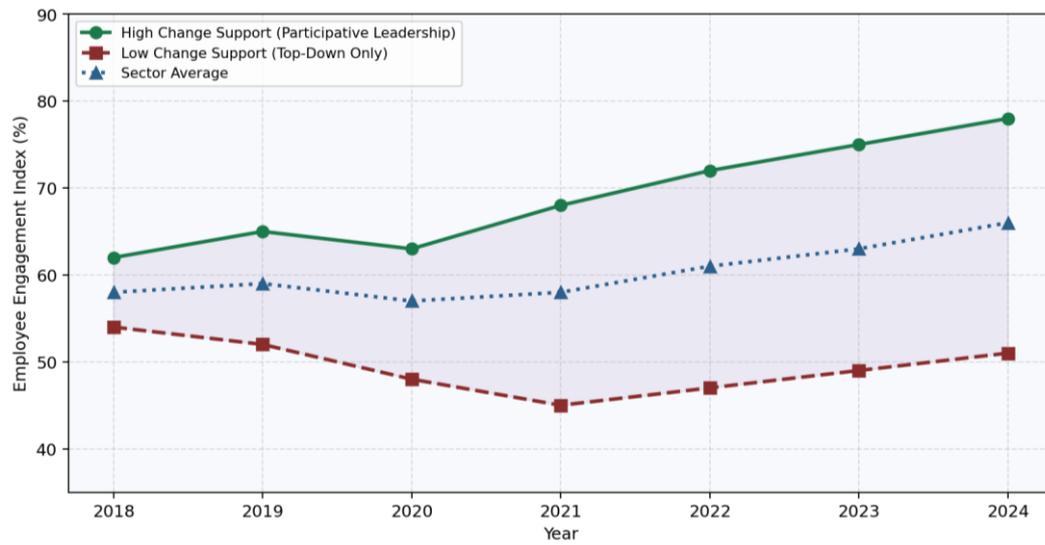


Figure 4: Trend in Employee Engagement Index in HEIs Under Varying Change Support Conditions (2018–2024)

The primacy of intrinsic motivation observed across the reviewed literature reflects the distinctive nature of academic work, which is grounded in intellectual curiosity, disciplinary identity, and long-term vocational commitment [8], [9]. Extrinsic incentives, while relevant, appear insufficient to counteract the demotivating effects of poorly managed change in contexts where intrinsic needs are deeply embedded [7]. This finding has critical implications for HEI administrators, who may be tempted to deploy financial incentives as primary tools for managing resistance during organizational transitions.

The role of institutional culture as both a mediator and moderator of the change–motivation relationship emerges as a significant practical insight from this review [12], [13]. Organizations characterized by learning-oriented, flexible, and trust-based cultures demonstrate superior ability to sustain employee motivation during change processes. Conversely, cultures defined by rigid hierarchies and low psychological safety amplify the negative motivational consequences of change events [4], [11]. Change readiness—itsself a product of leadership, culture, and individual psychological resources—is identified as a crucial proximal determinant of motivation during organizational transitions [13].

Table 5: Summary of Key Factors, Their Relationship with Employee Motivation During Change, and Practical Implications

Factor	Relationship with Motivation	Evidence Strength	Practical Implication
Participative leadership	Strong positive	High (n=7 studies)	Involve staff in change planning
Transparent communication	Moderate positive	High (n=6 studies)	Regular structured updates
Intrinsic motivation	Sustaining	High (n=9 studies)	Design roles for autonomy
Quality culture	Mediating positive	Moderate (n=4 studies)	Foster learning environments
Change readiness	Enabling positive	Moderate (n=5 studies)	Pre-change capacity building
Top-down change	Strong negative	High (n=6 studies)	Avoid unilateral implementation

Conclusion

This systematic review has demonstrated that organizational change in higher education institutions exerts a significant and contextually nuanced influence on employee motivation. Participative leadership, transparent communication, and institutionally embedded learning cultures are identified as the most robust positive determinants of motivation during change processes, while top-down implementation strategies and weak cultural alignment are associated with substantial declines in commitment and engagement. The evidence supports a view of employee motivation not as a static variable but as a dynamic outcome shaped continuously by the quality of change management practice.

The findings carry important implications for HEI leaders and policymakers. Investment in pre-change capacity building, participatory governance mechanisms, and leadership development programs aligned with transformational and authentic principles is recommended as a foundational strategy for sustaining employee motivation during institutional transformation. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs and cross-cultural comparisons to better understand the temporal dynamics of the change–motivation relationship across diverse higher education contexts [2], [15].

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