

Change Acceleration Process and the Problem of Direction

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April 2026

General Electric's Change Acceleration Process (CAP) is one of the more practical and durable corporate change frameworks to emerge from large-scale industrial practice. It is notable for treating change not only as a technical programme of implementation but as a human process requiring leadership, shared need, commitment, reinforcement and structural alignment. This paper examines CAP alongside related approaches, including GE's earlier Work-Out tradition, General Motors' GoFast! approach, and more general frameworks such as Kotter's eight-step model and ADKAR.

The central argument is that these frameworks are strongest when they are understood as mobilisation and implementation disciplines rather than as diagnostic disciplines. They are highly effective at building urgency, aligning stakeholders, accelerating decisions and embedding new behaviours. What they do not, by themselves, guarantee is that the underlying diagnosis is correct. If an organisation is moving in the wrong direction, acceleration increases the speed at which error propagates.

On this reading, CAP is best positioned not as a complete philosophy of change, but as a powerful second-stage method. It becomes most effective when preceded by serious diagnosis: analysis of causes, constraints, incentives, contradictions and value flows. In that context, a Hegelian perspective is also useful. It reframes organisational resistance and inconsistency not simply as obstacles to overcome, but as signals of unresolved contradiction inside the system itself. The paper therefore proposes a simple but consequential distinction: change effectiveness depends on both direction and speed. CAP and related models are strongest on speed. Their enduring value depends on being joined to a prior discipline of direction.

1. Introduction

Change management frameworks are often judged by their clarity, portability and practical utility. In that respect, General Electric's Change Acceleration Process has considerable appeal. It offers a simple sequence: lead the change, create a shared need, shape a vision, mobilise commitment, make change last, monitor progress, and change systems and structures. Unlike more abstract strategy models, CAP is explicit about the need to work on the human side of change as well as the

technical side.

That practical orientation helps explain its persistence. CAP has been cited in later professional and academic literature as a widely used model, and it has also influenced applied change practice beyond GE itself. Yet the framework is often treated as though it were self-sufficient. This paper takes a different view. CAP is powerful, but its power lies in disciplined mobilisation rather than in deep diagnosis.

This distinction matters. Many organisational change efforts fail not because leaders cannot mobilise action, but because the problem has been framed too narrowly, too early, or at the wrong level of the system. In such cases the organisation may execute change competently while still pursuing the wrong intervention.

2. What CAP Is

The standard CAP model is usually described through seven linked elements:

1. leading change
2. creating a shared need
3. shaping a vision
4. mobilising commitment
5. making change last
6. monitoring progress
7. changing systems and structures

This architecture is revealing. CAP is not merely a communication model, nor merely a programme-management overlay. It seeks to bridge business purpose, leadership behaviour, stakeholder alignment and institutional reinforcement. It is therefore best understood as an implementation discipline that attempts to connect intention, adoption and sustainability.

Its practical genius lies in its refusal to separate technical change from human adoption. This has often been the failure of purely process-driven transformation programmes. A process can be redesigned on paper while the organisation continues to behave as before. CAP addresses that gap directly.

3. GE Before CAP: Work-Out and the Practical Turn

CAP did not emerge from nowhere. Harvard Business School's account of organisational learning at GE describes CAP as the successor to Work-Out, a programme associated with Jack Welch's attempt to reduce bureaucracy, surface candour and accelerate action. Work-Out was more interventionist and event-driven than CAP, but the lineage matters. Both approaches arose from the recognition

that large organisations are slowed not only by process complexity, but by deference, delay, silence and procedural overburden.

Seen in that light, CAP represented a maturation of GE's earlier practical turn. It retained the bias towards action, but gave that action a more explicit architecture. Work-Out attacked bureaucracy and encouraged boundaryless candour. CAP added a more structured account of leadership, commitment, reinforcement and organisational design.

This genealogy helps explain why CAP feels corporate rather than purely academic. It was not built as a universal theory of change. It was built as a usable discipline within a large and operationally demanding organisation.

4. Similar Frameworks: GoFast!, Kotter and ADKAR

If CAP is read as a member of a wider family of change approaches, its distinctive contribution becomes easier to see.

General Motors' GoFast! programme, described in Conference Board and Workforce accounts, was designed to counter slowness, hierarchy, internal rivalry and excessive bureaucracy. It used one-day workshops to bring the relevant people together, solve defined business problems, and secure decisions quickly. In spirit, GoFast! resembles the more action-oriented side of GE's tradition. It privileged urgency, visible decisions, cross-boundary problem-solving and public tracking of implementation.

Kotter's eight-step model also shares important ground with CAP. It emphasises urgency, coalition-building, vision, communication, obstacle removal, short-term wins and anchoring change in culture. Its strength is narrative clarity. It gives leaders a memorable sequence and a language for mobilisation. ADKAR, by contrast, compresses change into five individual-level elements: awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement. It is narrower in scope than CAP, but particularly useful where the adoption problem sits at the level of the person rather than the enterprise.

These frameworks differ in granularity, language and emphasis, but they share an orientation. They are largely concerned with mobilisation, adoption and sustainability. They are strongest once a change agenda has already been defined.

5. What This Family of Frameworks Does Well

CAP and related approaches offer at least four enduring strengths.

First, they convert abstraction into action. Organisations often know that change is needed, but not how to turn diffuse dissatisfaction into structured movement. CAP gives leaders a practical sequence for doing so.

Second, they force attention onto the social reality of change. Shared need, commitment and reinforcement are not optional extras. They are conditions of adoption. This is one reason these

frameworks have survived. They are grounded in an elementary truth: people do not simply comply because a plan exists.

Third, they create rhythm. Vision, mobilisation, implementation and reinforcement form a disciplined cadence. This matters in large organisations where the default alternative is fragmented, uneven activity.

Fourth, they help convert change from a one-off announcement into a managed transition. Monitoring progress and changing systems and structures recognise that the new state must be supported institutionally if it is to persist.

These are real strengths. They should not be understated.

6. The Limitation: Mobilisation Is Not Diagnosis

The limitation is equally important. CAP and similar frameworks are excellent at helping an organisation move. They do not, by themselves, ensure that the organisation is moving in the right direction.

This limitation is often hidden because the framework begins only after some prior act of framing has already occurred. The need has been identified. The vision has been shaped. The problem appears to be known. But this is precisely where many change efforts become vulnerable.

The visible symptom may not be the real problem. A slow decision cycle may reflect unclear decision rights, contradictory incentives or overloaded governance. Apparent resistance may reflect rational concern about quality, risk or legitimacy. A demand for greater accountability may actually mask ambiguity in role architecture or a breakdown in value flow.

If such conditions are misread, the organisation can create urgency around the wrong issue, mobilise commitment to the wrong remedy and reinforce the wrong behaviours. Execution then becomes a vehicle for error.

7. A Simple Proposition: Change Effectiveness = Direction × Speed

A useful way to frame the issue is through a simple proposition:

$$\textit{Change Effectiveness} = \textit{Direction} \times \textit{Speed}$$

This is deliberately elementary, but it captures something important.

Frameworks such as CAP, GoFast!, Kotter and ADKAR help increase speed. They improve alignment, reduce drift, strengthen adoption and make implementation more coherent.

What they do not settle is direction. They do not determine whether the organisation has correctly diagnosed the problem, chosen the right level of intervention, understood the relevant constraints, or distinguished symptoms from causes.

Where direction is wrong, increased speed increases the rate of misalignment. In that sense, change acceleration is not neutral. It amplifies whatever direction has been chosen.

8. The Missing Precursor: Diagnostic Discipline

If this is correct, then CAP should be located downstream of diagnosis rather than at the beginning of the entire change enterprise.

What is needed upstream is a diagnostic discipline capable of asking questions such as:

- ❖ What problem is actually being solved?
- ❖ At what level of the system does it arise?
- ❖ Which symptoms are being mistaken for causes?
- ❖ What constraints, incentives and contradictions shape present behaviour?
- ❖ Where does value degrade, stall or become distorted?
- ❖ What would remain broken even if the target individual or team behaved perfectly?

Such questions do not replace CAP. They prepare the ground for it. They ensure that shared need is built around a sound diagnosis rather than around a hasty narrative.

This distinction also clarifies why some change programmes feel energetically managed yet conceptually thin. They have acceleration, but not enough diagnosis. They are rich in sponsorship, workshops, communications and milestones, but weak on causal understanding.

9. Hegel and Organisational Contradiction

Hegel may seem an unlikely companion to corporate change frameworks, yet he offers a useful corrective. Much change management language assumes that resistance is an obstacle to be overcome, that ambiguity is an implementation problem, and that inconsistency signals weak commitment. A dialectical perspective suggests something subtler.

Organisations frequently impose contradictory demands. They ask managers to move faster and exercise more judgement, to reduce cost and improve quality, to decentralise initiative while preserving central control, to innovate while maintaining tight compliance. Such tensions are not incidental. They are often structural.

From a Hegelian perspective, behaviour that appears inconsistent may reflect an unresolved contradiction rather than a simple failure of will. What presents itself as resistance may be the system registering incompatibility within its own demands.

This matters for CAP and similar approaches. Mobilisation without attention to contradiction can become coercive simplification. A dialectical reading encourages leaders to ask not only how to secure commitment, but what opposing claims employees are being asked to hold together. In

some cases the answer is not more persuasion, but synthesis: a redesign of priorities, sequencing, decision rights or operating logic that reduces the contradiction itself.

Hegel therefore does not replace practical change frameworks. He deepens them by forcing attention onto contradiction as a source of organisational truth.

10. Repositioning CAP

On this reading, CAP is best understood as a second-stage framework with first-rate practical value.

It is not a substitute for diagnosis. It is not a theory of causation. It is not a complete account of why organisations become stuck.

What it does offer is a disciplined way of moving once the organisation has reason to believe it is facing in the right direction. It translates diagnosis into mobilisation, and mobilisation into sustained institutional change.

This repositioning strengthens rather than weakens CAP. It places the framework where it is most effective. Instead of expecting it to solve every problem in the change enterprise, it allows it to do the work it is genuinely good at doing.

11. Implications for Practice

Several practical implications follow.

First, organisations should resist the temptation to treat urgency as a substitute for understanding. A shared need built on weak diagnosis merely socialises error.

Second, leaders should separate diagnostic work from mobilisation work, even if they later integrate them. Different cognitive disciplines are involved. Diagnosis requires inquiry, contradiction, challenge and causal humility. Mobilisation requires clarity, rhythm, commitment and reinforcement.

Third, frameworks should be combined deliberately. A diagnostic method can sit upstream of CAP. CAP can then sit upstream of programme management. This creates a more coherent sequence: understand, align, mobilise, reinforce.

Fourth, resistance should be interpreted carefully. It may still reflect fear, politics or inertia. But it may also indicate that the system is imposing contradictory requirements or has misframed the problem.

12. Conclusion

GE's Change Acceleration Process remains one of the most usable corporate change frameworks of its kind. Its continued relevance lies in its practical understanding that change must be led, shared, reinforced and structurally embedded. In that respect it belongs to a wider family of approaches,

including Work-Out, GoFast!, Kotter and ADKAR, all of which seek to convert intention into action and adoption.

Their common strength is not deep diagnosis but disciplined mobilisation. That is both their value and their boundary.

The consequence is straightforward. Change frameworks that accelerate movement should be judged not only by how well they build commitment and sustain momentum, but by whether they are being applied to a soundly understood problem. Direction and speed are different things. Organisational change requires both.

References

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