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Navigating Transformation: Review and Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Over the past twenty-five years, the *Journal of Change Management* has played a central role in rethinking how organisational change and transformation are understood. Early contributions moved beyond rational and planned change models by emphasising participation, learning and development. Later work increasingly framed change as continuous, relational and embedded in complex and dynamic systems. More recent studies extend this trajectory by focusing on emergence, collaboration and paradox, as well as on the broader societal, technological and ecological conditions shaping contemporary transformation. This article synthesises these developments through a longitudinal analysis of publications in the journal and identifies five periods in the evolving understanding of *navigating transformation*. It demonstrates how change theorising has shifted from organisation-centred and interventionist approaches toward more dialogical, context-sensitive and collaborative orientations. The article introduces the VOLCANIC perspective, which characterises contemporary environments as volatile, ongoing, liquid, complex, ambiguous, nested, interactive and chaotic, highlighting the limitations of linear and episodic change models. Building on this synthesis, navigating transformation is conceptualised as a distinct theoretical orientation and a future research agenda is proposed that outlines five interconnected pathways for advancing theory and practice.

MAD statement

This article makes a difference by clarifying *navigating transformation* as a distinct theoretical orientation rather than a variant of organisational change. Through a longitudinal review of twenty-five years of publications in the *Journal of Change Management*, it offers scholars a coherent synthesis of how thinking about change has evolved toward relational, emergent and collaborative perspectives. For practitioners, the article provides a language to recognise when managing change is insufficient and navigating transformation becomes necessary in volatile and ambiguous contexts. By situating transformation within broader societal and ecological dynamics, the article also highlights why navigating transformation matters for addressing complex challenges that extend beyond organisational boundaries.

KEYWORDS

Navigating transformation;
organisational change;
relational change;
sensemaking;
transformational leadership;
complexity

Introduction

Over the past 25 years, the *Journal of Change Management* (JCM) has consistently contributed to the evolving understanding of organisational change and leadership. Early work in the journal already moved beyond rational and planned change models by emphasising participation, development and learning. Over time, research increasingly framed organisations as complex, dynamic and relational systems, highlighting continuous change, sensemaking and co-creation. More recent contributions have further expanded this perspective by focusing on emergence, collaboration, paradoxical tensions and the societal and ecological entanglements shaping contemporary transformation.

Over the past decade, *navigating transformation* has come to be understood as a collaborative and multidimensional challenge rather than a discrete change process. It requires systemic awareness, shared purpose, an inquiring mindset and the ability to cope with uncertainty and paradox in volatile and ambiguous contexts. Special issues on crises, leadership and uncertainty have underscored that traditional, linear and interventionist approaches to organisational change offer limited guidance for navigating such conditions.

Although the terms *organisational change* and *navigating transformation* are sometimes used interchangeably, this article makes an explicit analytical distinction between them. Organisational change traditionally refers to changes within organisations and typically retains the organisation as its primary unit of analysis, even when relational, participative or emergent perspectives are adopted. Navigating transformation, as conceptualised here, refers to a broader and qualitatively different phenomenon. It denotes a conscious and collective engagement with fundamental shifts that transcend organisational boundaries and challenge existing assumptions about purpose, identity, power and responsibility.

Importantly, the meaning of organisational change and navigating transformation has evolved over time. Earlier contributions already questioned planned and managerial approaches to change, while later work increasingly foregrounded emergence, collaboration and learning. From a future-oriented perspective, this article conceptualises navigating transformation not as a new variant of organisational change, but as a distinct theoretical orientation that foregrounds collective sensemaking, relational leadership and responsible action amid ongoing disruption.

This article reviews how perspectives on navigating transformation have unfolded within JCM and identifies critical trends shaping contemporary thinking in the field. Building on this analysis, it outlines a research agenda comprising interconnected thematic areas and proposes five pathways for advancing theory and practice in navigating transformation in a dynamic global landscape.

Where Do We Come From: Past Research on Navigating Transformation

This section outlines how ideas about organisational change and navigating transformation evolved from 2000 to 2020. Four periods can be distinguished, each reflecting a shift in how change is understood – from participative processes to continuous adaptation, to emergent dynamics, and finally to collaborative change. Leadership –

particularly transformational leadership – plays a central role throughout this progression and has evolved alongside it (Figure 1).

Change as Participative Process

In its early years, the *Journal of Change Management* (JCM) emphasized participative change and organisational development. The organisation development approach sought broad involvement, shared decision-making and collective problem-solving to foster ownership (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). By engaging people at all levels change was actively shaped rather than passively accepted, enhancing its sustainability (Weisbord, 2004). The central concern was how to foster support and engagement through the development of mutual trust (Schein, 1999). Organisational change was viewed as a developmental process rooted in human interaction and informed by social psychological perspectives (Weick, 1979).

Leadership was conceptualized as a relational process between leaders and followers rather than a top-down mechanism, reflecting a shift away from leader-centric approaches toward more interactive forms of leadership in change processes (Higgs & Rowland, 2005). Commitment was built through a compelling purpose, shared values and inspiring images of the future, alongside recognition of emotions and uncertainties (Hattori & Lapidus, 2004). Although traditional hierarchies were avoided, leaders still initiated change processes, supported by professionals (By, 2005) (Table 1).

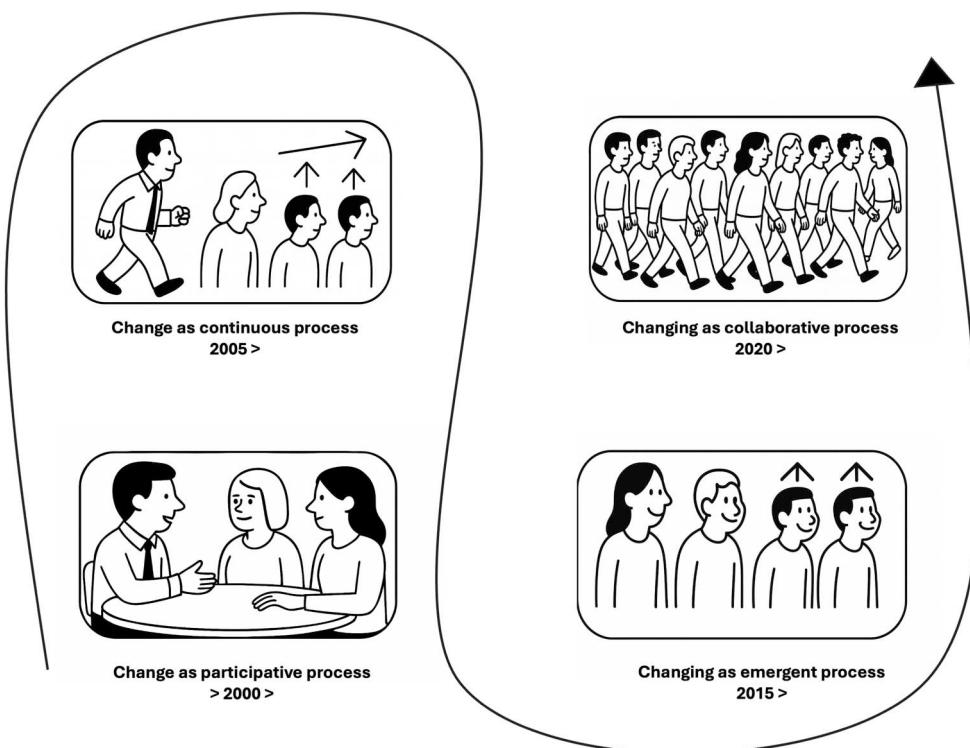


Figure 1. Evolution of change theories.

Table 1. Related articles and topics in JCM 2001–2005.

Author(s)	Year	Title
Haudan & MacLean	2001	'E' is for Engagement: Transforming your Business by Transforming your People
Gill	2002	Change Management – or Change Leadership?
Hattori & Lapidus	2004	Collaboration, Trust and Innovative Change
Karp	2005	An Action Theory of Transformative Processes
Higgs & Rowland	2005	Exploring Approaches to Change and its Leadership
By	2005	Organisational Change Management: A Critical Review

Change as Continuous Process

The second period brought increasing focus on environmental complexity (Ford, 2008). Organisations were seen as complex adaptive systems, where change was continuous and co-created through communication and sensemaking (Stacey, 2010). Rather than episodic interventions, change was framed as ongoing collaboration, learning and adaptation (Weick & Quinn, 2004). A social constructionist lens highlighted that organisations are socially constructed realities where change emerges through dialogue, relationships and collective sensemaking (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Organisational change was transitional in nature and evolved into a series of recurrent processes of collective sensemaking rather than a single process of planned implementation.

Leadership was reframed as relational and affective, emphasizing emotional resonance, trust-building, and authenticity, consistent with findings on how relational leadership styles influence change processes and outcomes (Hawkins, 2009). Leadership qualities gained attention, particularly self-awareness – insight into one's emotions and values, and social awareness – sensitivity to others' perspectives (Karp & Helgo, 2008) (Table 2).

Changing as Emergent Process

In the third period, the question shifted to coping with uncertainty and ambiguity (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). A communicative or discursive approach was promoted to create shared understanding and align visions of the future with present realities (Grant & Marshak, 2011). Change was increasingly regarded as emergent and co-created rather than merely participative or continuous (Chia, 2013; Cunha et al., 2012). This period also saw the rise of sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the discourse,

Table 2. Related articles and topics in JCM 2006–2010.

Author(s)	Year	Title
Ferdig	2007	Sustainability Leadership: Co-creating a Sustainable Future
Karp & Helgo	2008	From Change Management to Change Leadership
Russ	2008	Communicating Change: Review and Critical Analysis
Ford	2008	Complex Adaptive Systems and Improvisation Theory
Stebbins & Braganza	2009	Continuous Organisational Transformation
Benn & Baker	2009	Advancing Sustainability Through Change and Innovation
Burnes	2009	Ethics and Organisational Change – Return to Lewinian Values
Hawkins	2009	Relationships between leadership style and change
Graetz & Smith	2010	Managing Organisational Change
Werkman	2010	Reinventing Organisation Development
Van Nistelrooij & Sminia	2010	Organisation Development: What's Actually Happening?

sometimes framed as competitive advantage (Benn & Baker, 2009; De Matos & Clegg, 2013). Organisational identity became central as an anchor in turbulent contexts (Gioia et al., 2013). Identity provided direction and coherence yet evolved through reflection on narratives, values and aspirations.

Leaders were encouraged to articulate shared values and to cultivate trust, openness, and fairness as foundations for transformational engagement and for supporting the ongoing unfolding of change (Burnes & Jackson, 2011). A key task for leaders was identity creation – fostering a shared sense of ‘who we are’ that could evolve through reflection on history, current values, and future aspirations. Identity itself was not static but continuously shaped and reshaped in interaction and dialogue (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2011) (Table 3).

Changing as Collaborative Process

The fourth period expanded the perspective on change toward sensemaking in a complex global environment (Waddock, 2020). Revolutionary change as intentional community-level transition gained attention (Gersick, 2019). Sustainability was reframed as a social process: how organisations relate to their environments and contribute positively. CSR widened to themes of social and ecological sustainability (Loorbach et al., 2017). Change was understood as interplay, with emphasis on experimentation, reflection and learning to address ambiguity (Boonstra, 2019).

In this period leadership was marked by vision, inspiration and deep engagement, encouraging shared sensemaking, critical reflection and ownership (Sparr, 2018). Linking individual and collective purpose became vital, with practitioners enabling transformation not through control, but through trust, dialogue and co-creation of futures (Scharmer, 2018) (Table 4).

Recurring Themes across Two Decades

Rather than replacing earlier perspectives, each of the four periods builds on and extends previous understandings of organisational change and transformation. Participative and developmental assumptions remain embedded in contemporary approaches, while insights from complexity, sensemaking and emergence continue to inform transformational and societal change practices. Together, these layered perspectives have resulted

Table 3. Related articles and topics in JCM 2011–2015.

Author(s)	Year	Title
Nasim & Sushil	2011	Revisiting Organisational Change
Armenakis, Brown & Mehta	2011	Organisational Culture: Assessment and Transformation
Burnes	2011	Why does Change Fail?
Burnes & Jackson	2011	Success and Failure in Organisational Change
Caldwell	2012	Systems Thinking and Organisational Change
Cunha et al.	2012	The complexity of organisational improvisation
Doolin, Grant & Thomas	2013	Translating Translation and Change
De Matos & Clegg	2013	Sustainability and Organisational Change
Martinuzzi & Krumay	2013	CSR and Organisational Transformation
Chia	2013	Silent Transformation – ‘Letting Happen’
McClellan	2013	Announcing Change: Discourse and Uncertainty

Table 4. Related articles and topics in JCM 2016–2020.

Author(s)	Year	Title
Ala-Laurinaho, Kurki & Abildgaard	2017	Supporting Sensemaking for Systemic Change
Sparr	2018	Paradoxes in Organisational Change
Gersick	2019	Reflections on Revolutionary Change
Waddock	2020	Thinking Transformational System Change
Edwards, Prätorius & Nielsen	2020	A Model of Cascading Change

in an increasingly relational, systemic and ethically informed understanding of organisational change and navigating transformation, reflecting the growing complexity of the contexts in which organisations operate.

Across two decades of publications in the *Journal of Change Management*, several recurring themes can be discerned that together mark a gradual but profound reorientation of the field. A first and persistent shift concerns the understanding of change itself. Change is increasingly portrayed not as an episodic intervention or a linear process of implementation, but as an ongoing, relational and socially embedded phenomenon. Over time, this has led to a growing emphasis on sensemaking, dialogue and interaction as central mechanisms through which change unfolds in practice.

Closely related to this is a deepening engagement with complexity and uncertainty. Organisations are no longer primarily depicted as stable entities that occasionally change, but as dynamic systems continuously shaped by interdependencies within and beyond organisational boundaries. This perspective foregrounds emergence, non-linearity and the limits of prediction and control, inviting scholars and practitioners to reconsider traditional assumptions about planning, steering and leadership in change processes.

A third recurring theme concerns the role of purpose, identity and values in change processes. As environments became more turbulent and ambiguous, organisational identity increasingly functioned as an anchor that provides direction and coherence without fixing meaning once and for all. Purpose is portrayed not as a static statement, but as something that is continuously negotiated and reinterpreted through interaction with internal and external stakeholders.

Finally, these developments have been accompanied by a gradual redefinition of leadership and agency in transformation processes. Leadership is less frequently conceptualised as the actions of heroic individuals and more often as a relational and distributed practice that enables collective sensemaking, experimentation and learning. Together, these recurring themes illustrate how the field has moved toward understanding navigating transformation as a collaborative, context-sensitive and ethically grounded process rather than a matter of managing change initiatives.

Where Are We Now: Navigating through a Volcanic Landscape

Contemporary transformation increasingly unfolds in environments that are experienced as volatile, ongoing, liquid, complex, ambiguous, nested, interactive and chaotic, summarised here as VOLCANIC. This perspective builds on earlier attempts to characterise turbulence, such as VUCA and the more recent BANI concept, while also addressing their limitations. Although the VUCA and BANI acronyms have gained widespread popularity in both scholarship and practice, they emerged in highly specific contexts. VUCA was

originally developed within the United States military to describe strategic uncertainty during the late Cold War (Horny et al., 2010), while BANI was coined during the COVID-19 pandemic to capture acute experiences of fragility and anxiety (Salun & Zaslavská, 2024).

While both concepts offer accessible labels for disruption, they remain largely descriptive in nature and are weakly grounded in organisational theory and empirical research (Snowden & Boone, 2007; Taskan et al., 2022). The VOLCANIC perspective differs in this respect. Rather than proposing another typology of turbulent contexts, it provides a relational and systemic lens that is theoretically embedded in established work on organisational complexity, continuous change and emergence (Griffin et al., 1998; Weick & Quinn, 2004). Moreover, the VOLCANIC perspective is informed by empirical research on organisational transformation in complex and uncertain environments, offering a more robust foundation for understanding why linear, episodic and interventionist change models are increasingly inadequate (Boonstra, 2026).

In the VOLCANIC perspective *volatility* refers to rapid and often discontinuous shifts in markets, technologies, regulations and geopolitical conditions, which undermine predictability and long-term planning (Kotter et al., 2021). Under such conditions, transformation is inherently *ongoing* rather than episodic: organisations continuously adapt to evolving circumstances without clear end points or stable phases, requiring sustained attention to interdependencies and systemic dynamics (Ferry et al., 2024). At the same time, contemporary organising has become increasingly *liquid*. Boundaries between organisations, sectors and roles are more permeable, and traditional hierarchical structures are complemented or replaced by networks, alliances and cross-boundary collaborations in which relationships and interaction patterns outweigh formal positions and structural control (Bauman et al., 2015). These fluid arrangements intensify *complexity*, as transformation processes are shaped by multiple, interconnected elements. Actions taken in one part of a system often produce ripple effects elsewhere, frequently generating unintended consequences that challenge linear explanations and control-oriented interventions (Griffin et al., 1998).

Transformation in VOLCANIC environments is further characterised by *ambiguity*. Situations are often unclear, contested or open to multiple interpretations, making shared understanding fragile and provisional. In such contexts, sensemaking becomes a central practice through which actors negotiate meaning, remain open to different perspectives and learn to live with uncertainty (Denis et al., 1996). Moreover, many transformation challenges are *nested* within broader organisational, societal and ecological systems. Issues rarely exist in isolation but are embedded in wider patterns and contexts that shape both the possibilities for action and their consequences, calling for attention to deeper relational conditions rather than isolated symptoms (Trondal et al., 2022).

Transformation also unfolds through *interactive* social processes. Power relations, trust, cooperation and conflict continuously influence how meanings are constructed and how decisions emerge over time. From this perspective, dialogue, feedback and collaborative inquiry are not supplementary activities but constitutive elements of navigating transformation (Boros, 2009). Finally, VOLCANIC environments display *chaotic* dynamics. Small events may trigger disproportionate effects, established patterns can temporarily collapse, and new forms of order may emerge through self-organisation rather than intentional design. Insights from chaos theory highlight that navigating transformation under

such conditions requires the capacity to engage with unpredictability while cultivating conditions in which emergent coherence can develop (Tsoukas, 1998).

Navigating Transformation in a Volcanic Landscape

Integrating the VOLCANIC perspective into transformation research provides a richer understanding of contemporary organisational realities. Navigating transformation as a conscious and collaborative process is seen as crucial for fostering resilience and agility in turbulent environments (Boulton et al., 2015). Increasing attention has been given to technological disruptions as well as to the emotional and ethical dimensions of organisational life (Beghetto, 2023).

Leadership in a VOLCANIC world emphasizes the collective imagination of desirable futures and the supportive actions required to realize them (Grint & Jones, 2022). This perspective highlights the importance of engaging a wide spectrum of stakeholders – including employees, communities, society, and the environment – guided by humanistic and societal values (Bushe & Marshak, 2022).

These perspectives on navigating transformation and transformational leadership resonate with themes emerging across the *Journal of Change Management*. Between 2000 and 2025, the journal reflected the evolving complexities of organisational transformation. Perspectives shifted toward more dynamic, inclusive, context-sensitive approaches (Table 5).

What becomes visible across these contributions is that several streams of research stand out for their relevance to the VOLCANIC conditions organisations now face.

Navigating Transformation as a Collective Capacity

The special issues on *Changing Leadership in Changing Times* (Clegg et al., 2021; Crevani et al., 2021) similarly call for a reconceptualisation of leadership. Traditional leader-centric models offer limited guidance in contexts characterized by ambiguity and interdependence. Instead, leadership is understood as a distributed, relational process embedded in networks of people. It is concerned with enabling collective sensemaking, experimentation and adaptive action. Building on this, Bryson et al. (2021) emphasize leadership for the common good and propose a multi-level leadership spectrum that supports inclusive and collaborative approaches. Across these contributions, leadership is seen as a shared capacity essential for navigating societal as well as organisational transformation.

Table 5. Related articles in JCM 2020–2025.

Author(s)	Year	Title
Clegg, Crevani, Uhl-Bien & By	2021	Changing Leadership in Changing Times I
Crevani, Uhl-Bien, Clegg & By	2021	Changing Leadership in Changing Times II
Bryson et al.	2021	Leading Social Transformations
Imran, Shahzad, Butt & Kantola	2021	Digital Transformation of Industrial Organisations
Raelin	2022	Leadership practice contributing to development
Boonstra	2023	From Planned Change to Playful Transformations
Fiorito et al.	2023	Paradoxical Tensions in Cooperation
Alshwayat	2023	Paradox and Innovation in Formalized Organisations
Mastio et al.	2024	Leadership Ignoring Paradox
Kherrazi & Roquilly	2025	Managing Digital Transformation



Playfulness as a Transformational Stance

In a reflection article Boonstra (2023) argues that traditional, planned approaches remain dominant despite being ill-suited to volatile and complex contexts. He proposes a shift toward playful transformation: a collective process grounded in dialogue, improvisation and experimentation rather than linear planning. Playful transformation encourages curiosity, imagination and joint sensemaking, enabling diverse stakeholders to co-create emergent pathways. Leadership in this perspective shifts from directing to facilitating trust, interaction and plurality of perspectives (Raelin, 2022). Transformation becomes a continuous process of becoming, shaped in relation to others and the environment.

Technological and Digital Transformations

Digitalisation continues to reshape organisations in profound ways. Imran et al. (2021) highlight that digital transformation is not a technical upgrade but a sociotechnical reconfiguration that influences structures, processes, capabilities and cultures. Successful transformation requires challenging dominant mental models, cultivating learning and connecting technological innovation with human sensemaking. This resonates strongly with research by Kherrazi and Roquilly (2025), who question the suitability of established change frameworks for digital transformation and advocate rethinking organisational practices to address contemporary digital challenges. Together, these studies underline that technological transformation is iterative, relational and culturally embedded – requiring continuous navigation rather than mechanistic implementation.

Engaging Paradoxes as Drivers of Transformation

A growing body of research highlights paradoxical tensions as inherent to contemporary transformation processes. Recent studies in this journal show how organisations can use paradoxes as generative forces rather than viewing them as obstacles. Fiorito et al. (2023) demonstrate how balancing collaboration and competition strengthens resilience. Alshwayat (2023) shows that formalisation and flexibility can coexist when organisations adopt multi-level approaches to innovation. Mastio et al. (2023) warn that ignoring paradoxes in change practice risks inertia and undermines adaptability. Across these studies, the capacity to work constructively with paradox – rather than suppressing or resolving it – emerges as a hallmark of conscious and sustainable transformation.

Together, these contemporary perspectives reinforce a broader shift in the field: navigating transformation requires transformational leadership, openness to emergence, critical engagement with technology, and an ability to work with paradox in a VOLCANIC world.

Challenging Questions in the Contemporary Landscape

The contemporary landscape of navigating transformation gives rise to a set of persistent and interrelated questions that cannot be resolved through technical solutions or managerial recipes. These questions are not merely practical but also conceptual and ethical in nature, reflecting deeper tensions about how change is understood, enacted

and legitimised in conditions of ongoing disruption. Rather than seeking definitive answers, the field increasingly treats these questions as generative, inviting reflection and inquiry among scholars and practitioners alike.

A central question concerns how transformation is conceptualised. Is change understood as a linear movement from a current state toward a predefined future, or as an open-ended and exploratory process in which meanings, identities and directions emerge through interaction? This question challenges dominant assumptions about control and intentionality and calls for greater attentiveness to how problems are framed, who defines them and whose voices are included in shaping possible futures.

Closely related is the question of agency and responsibility in transformation processes. As transformation increasingly unfolds across organisational, societal and ecological systems, it becomes less clear who owns change and who is accountable for its consequences. This raises tensions between individual leadership and collective agency, as well as between local action and systemic impact. Navigating these tensions requires sensitivity to power relations, ethical considerations and the unintended effects of change initiatives.

A further question concerns how people make sense of transformation in volatile and ambiguous contexts. Sensemaking is not a neutral cognitive activity, but a relational process shaped by language, emotion, history and culture. Competing interpretations often coexist, and efforts to impose coherence too quickly may silence dissent or marginalise alternative perspectives. The challenge is therefore not to eliminate ambiguity, but to work productively with it through dialogue and ongoing inquiry.

Together, these questions underscore that navigating transformation in the contemporary landscape is less about solving discrete problems and more about cultivating reflective, relational and ethically grounded practices. They frame transformation as a continuous process of inquiry that invites scholars, leaders and practitioners to remain attentive to uncertainty, difference and responsibility in a VOLCANIC world.

Where Are We Going: Future Research Agenda

In a world marked by increasing volatility, interdependence and uncertainty, future research on navigating transformation needs to move beyond organisation-centric, interventionist change models. Contemporary transformation processes unfold across organisational, societal and ecological systems, raising questions about context, responsibility and the ethical implications of change (Loorbach et al., 2017; Van der Heijden et al., 2008). Research is therefore needed that situates navigating transformation within evolving political, technological and environmental landscapes and examines how organisations relate to broader societal transitions.

A central theme for future research concerns the relational and ethical dimensions of navigating transformation. Democratic interaction, truthfulness and practical wisdom are increasingly under pressure in polarized and digitally mediated contexts (Grint & Jones, 2022). This raises questions about how navigating transformation can support deliberative dialogue, inclusion and moral reflection, and how leaders and change agents act responsibly amid ambiguity and competing values (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Stengers, 2021).

Another important direction concerns collaboration across organisational boundaries. Many societal challenges require transformation in networks, partnerships and alliances rather than within single organisations (Keast et al., 2013; Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Future research could explore how shared societal issues can be placed at the centre of collaboration, how power and reciprocity are negotiated, and how alliances remain resilient and transformative over time (Boonstra & Eguiguren, 2023; Stacey, 2001).

Navigating transformation also demands renewed attention to sensemaking, observation and interaction. Research is needed on how scholars and practitioners cultivate open, multi-perspective and reflexive forms of observation in high-stakes transformation processes, and how dialogue enables collective learning across difference (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Hamann et al., 2025; Schön, 1983). Closely related is the growing recognition that paradoxes – such as stability and change, control and emergence – are inherent to transformation processes and can function as generative forces when engaged productively (Clegg et al., 2002; Fiorito et al., 2023; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Finally, future research should further explore emerging practices and interdisciplinary perspectives that challenge established assumptions about change. Viewing navigating transformation as collaborative play foregrounds experimentation, improvisation and learning in conditions of uncertainty (Boonstra, 2019, 2023; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Advances in digital technologies and artificial intelligence raise fundamental questions about autonomy, ethics and human–machine collaboration in transformation processes (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; Kherrazi & Roquilly, 2025). In addition, engagement with disciplines such as design, the arts and ecology can enrich both theory and practice by expanding how transformation is perceived, enacted and evaluated (Boland & Collopy, 2004; Horvath et al., 2025; Vervoort et al., 2024).

Together, these directions position navigating transformation as a relational, ethical and interdisciplinary field of inquiry, concerned not only with change outcomes but with how collective futures are imagined, negotiated and enacted in a VOLCANIC world.

The Future of Navigating Transformation: Five Pathways

This review, together with the wide range of perspectives presented in recent scholarship, opens the door to an important question: *What comes next?* How can the field of navigating transformation continue to evolve, deepen and contribute to organisational, community and societal renewal? In a volatile and turbulent environment, what practices resonate and remain meaningful? The next section identifies five developmental pathways that may shape the future of navigating transformation in the years ahead.

Engaging Deeply with Societal Challenges

The future of navigating transformation lies in its capacity to engage meaningfully with major societal and ecological challenges such as climate change, inequality and digital disruption. These issues cannot be addressed through linear planning or organisation-centred interventions alone. Research and practice need to position navigating transformation at the intersection of organisations, communities and societies, focusing on collective inquiry, relational dialogue and systemic experimentation. This pathway invites

scholars and practitioners to examine how transformation contributes to public value and sustainable futures rather than solely organisational performance (Boonstra & Dubbel-dam, 2026; Waddell et al., 2023; Waddock, 2020).

Investing in Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Navigating transformation increasingly requires collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. Complex transformation processes call for integrating insights from management studies, public administration, sociology, psychology, philosophy and sustainability sciences. Interdisciplinary research can deepen understanding of systemic dynamics and support the development of educational programmes that move beyond dominant planned-change paradigms toward relational and context-sensitive approaches (Camargo-Borges & McNamee, 2020; Loorbach et al., 2017; Nicolescu, 2014).

Engaging with Adjacent and Emerging Scientific Fields

Further development of the field depends on engagement with scientific domains that challenge conventional assumptions about causality, control and temporality. Complexity science, systems theory, design research, neuroscience, meteorology and ecological thinking offer alternative ways of understanding emergence, interdependence and adaptation. Microbiology and technical medicine open perspectives on life, growth and vulnerability on a microscopic scale. Such engagements encourage scholars to rethink dominant models of change and to explore new conceptual and methodological approaches to navigating transformation (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Senge, 2023; Stacey & Mowles, 2016).

Developing Technology and AI for Responsible Transformation

Digitalisation and artificial intelligence profoundly shape contemporary transformation processes. Rather than treating technology as a neutral tool or technical project, future research should explore how digital and AI-enabled systems interact with sensemaking, power relations and ethical responsibility. This pathway calls for research into how technology can support collective learning and responsible decision-making, while critically addressing risks related to inequality, surveillance and loss of human agency (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; Kherrazi & Roquilly, 2025; Zuboff, 2019).

Partnering with the Arts to Expand Ways of Knowing

Finally, engaging with artistic and creative practices offers powerful opportunities to expand perception, imagination and embodied forms of knowing in navigating transformation. Arts-based approaches can surface tacit knowledge, challenge dominant narratives and open spaces for experimentation beyond rational discourse. Partnering with the arts invites scholars and practitioners to explore transformation as an experiential and relational process, enriching both theory and practice (Boland & Collopy, 2004; Horvath et al., 2025; Vervoort et al., 2024).



Conclusion

This article set out to clarify and advance the concept of *navigating transformation* by reviewing twenty-five years of scholarship published in the *Journal of Change Management* and by articulating a future-oriented research agenda. Building on earlier traditions of participative and developmental change, the analysis shows how thinking in the field has progressively shifted from planned and interventionist models toward relational, emergent and collaborative perspectives. Over time, navigating transformation has evolved from an implicit concern within organisational change research into a distinct theoretical orientation that foregrounds sensemaking, interaction and collective responsibility in conditions of ongoing disruption.

As clarified in the introduction, navigating transformation is not conceptualised here as a new variant or subtype of organisational change. While organisational change research has increasingly embraced complexity, participation and emergence, it typically retains the organisation as its primary unit of analysis. Navigating transformation, in contrast, refers to a broader and qualitatively different phenomenon: a conscious and collective engagement with fundamental shifts that transcend organisational boundaries and challenge prevailing assumptions about purpose, identity, power and responsibility. This distinction is not merely semantic but reflects a substantive reorientation of how change is understood, studied and enacted.

The VOLCANIC perspective introduced in this article further illuminates why such a reorientation is needed. In environments characterised by volatility, ongoing change, liquidity, complexity, ambiguity, nestedness, interactivity and chaos, attempts to manage change through linear planning and control are inherently limited. Navigating transformation in a VOLCANIC landscape calls for collective capacities to observe, interpret and act amid uncertainty, rather than for the optimisation of predefined change trajectories. Transformation, from this perspective, is less about achieving stability and more about sustaining movement, learning and responsible action over time.

The future research agenda and the five pathways outlined in this article position navigating transformation as a relational, ethical and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. They invite scholars and practitioners to engage more deeply with societal challenges, to collaborate across organisational and disciplinary boundaries, to explore the implications of digitalisation and artificial intelligence, and to experiment with alternative ways of knowing, including arts-based and design-oriented approaches. Together, these directions underscore that navigating transformation is not only concerned with change outcomes, but also with how collective futures are imagined, negotiated and enacted.

Since its inception, the *Journal of Change Management* has played a leading role in shaping and advancing scholarly debates on organisational change, leadership and transformation. Over more than two decades, the journal has consistently provided a platform for critical reflection, theoretical innovation and dialogue between scholars and practitioners. By publishing work that challenged dominant planned-change paradigms, embraced relational and emergent perspectives, and increasingly engaged with societal and ecological concerns, the journal has both reflected and influenced the evolving field of navigating transformation. Building on this rich legacy, the *Journal of Change Management* is well positioned to continue fostering rigorous, pluralistic and practice-relevant scholarship that supports organisations, communities and societies in navigating transformation in an increasingly VOLCANIC world.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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