Randel Consulting Associates
Leading Organizations through Change and Growth

Mapping the Context of Change Toolkit

Learning To See What Surrounds You

Revealing the Context of Change:
Learning To See What Surrounds You

When the environment around you keeps shifting, it's tempting to stay heads-down and react to whatever comes next. But that approach has a cost. You end up making decisions based on partial information and assumptions you haven't examined. Your team may be operating from different pictures of reality without realizing it.

The Paradox of Change
Preparing for change begins not by focusing on where you want to go, but by getting clear on where you actually are.

This is where a **Context of Change Map** becomes useful. This map is a simple visual tool that helps you and your team step back and see the landscape surrounding a change you're considering. It makes implicit assumptions explicit. It surfaces what different people are noticing—and what's being missed.

The real power of a Context of Change Map comes when you build it together. Each person brings a different vantage point. One colleague sees internal dynamics you've missed. Another notices an external trend that changes the picture. By assembling your observations in a shared display, you move from scattered impressions to collective understanding.

And then you can explore the questions that matter most: "What pathways are available to us in this context?" That question—asked with curiosity—opens the door to creative exploration of what's needed and what's possible.

Michael

M i c h a e l   R a n d e l

F o u n d e r   a n d   D i r e c t o r
R a n d e l   C o n s u l t i n g   A s s o c i a t e s
W a s h i n g t o n ,   D . C .

H e l p i n g   L e a d e r s   a n d   t h e i r   T e a m s
M o v e   T h r o u g h   C h a n g e   a n d   G r o w t h
W i t h   C a l m   a n d   C o n f i d e n c e

Template: Context of Change Map

Use the template on the following page to visualize your change landscape. The map places your organization and the change you're considering at the center, surrounded by the forces and factors that shape your context.

The Four Parts of the Context of Change Map

1**. The Change Being Considered:** Is this about positioning for growth, maintaining your current course through continuous improvement, or responding to challenges and threats?

2. The Environment: What's happening inside and outside your organization that shapes the need for this change?

3. The Emerging and the Unknown: What trends are developing, and what uncertainties remain unclear?

4. Energy Flow: What forces might propel this change forward, and what forces might create resistance?
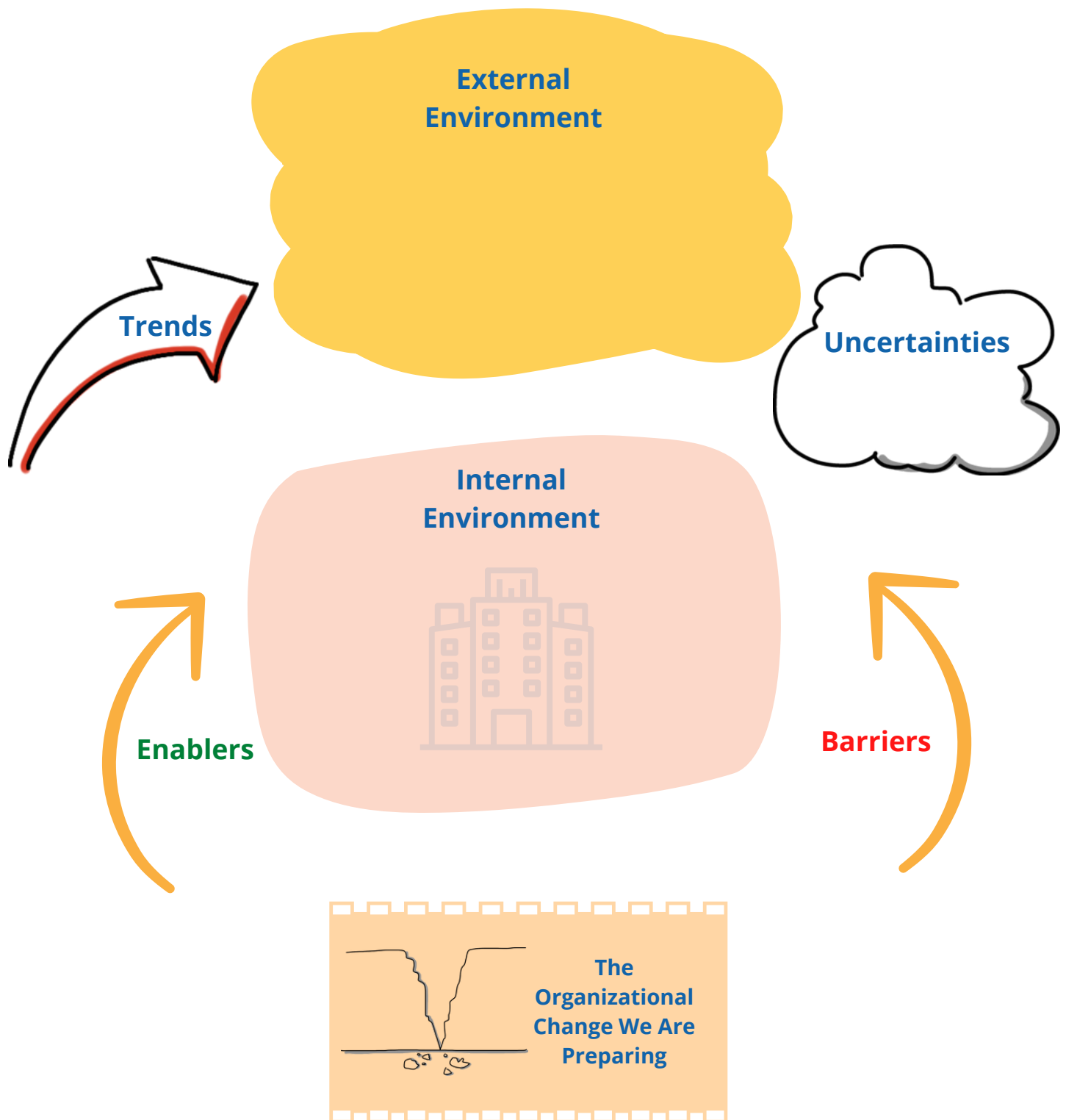
We recommend that you develop this map in sequence, starting with a consideration of your current status and the change you are considering.

The remaining elements can be approached iteratively, with additional information being included as you learn more about your context.

TIP

Print this template large (poster size) for in-person sessions, or recreate it in a digital whiteboard tool like Miro or Mural for virtual collaboration.

The Context of Change Map

External Environment

Trends

Uncertainties

Internal Environment

Enablers

Barriers

The Organizational Change We Are Preparing

1. The Change Being Considered

Before diving into creating the map of your change context, it's important to step back and be clear on the WHY of the change you're exploring.

Organizational changes typically arise from one of three catalysts:

Catalyst 1: Position for Opportunity and Growth
You see possibilities ahead and want to move toward them. This might include expanding into new markets, launching new programs, or building new capabilities.

Catalyst 2: Maintain the Present Course (Continuous Improvement)
Things are working, but you want to strengthen and refine what you're doing. This involves optimizing processes, improving quality, or deepening existing relationships.

Catalyst 3: Respond to Challenges and Threats
External pressures or internal problems require adaptation. This might mean addressing funding disruptions, staff changes, competitive pressures, or regulatory shifts.

Each of these catalysts shape the approach to the context. Are you seeking to quantify the growth opportunities? If so, you will benefit from deepening your understanding of your external environment and trends that may shape future demand for your services.

If you are navigating an uncertain and changing environment, however, you will benefit more from focusing on trends and uncertainties, allowing you to name factors that may unexpectedly disrupt your current approach.

Ways to Gather Information

- **Leadership team discussion:** What is driving the need for change? Which catalyst best describes our situation?
- **Review of strategic planning documents and board discussions**
- **Analysis of recent decisions:** What patterns emerge about why changes are being considered?
- **Stakeholder interviews:** What do key stakeholders see as the primary driver for change?
- **Environmental scan summary:** What external signals suggest a particular type of change is needed?

Reflection Questions

→ What is the change we are considering?
→ Which catalyst best describes what's driving this change?
→ How would we describe the direction we're hoping to move?
→ What would success look like if this change went well?

1 Position for
Opportunity and Growth

2 Maintain the
Present Course
(Continuous Improvement)

3 Respond to
Challenges and Threats

Catalyst:
We know that the organization needs to change because...

Direction:
We will know the organization is moving in the right direction when we observe:

2. The Environment

The environment includes both external factors (outside your organization) and internal factors (within your organization) that shape the need for change and influence how change might unfold.

External Environment

Events, developments, and factors outside your organization that impact the need for change. These might include market conditions, regulatory changes, technological shifts, economic factors, demographic changes, or actions by competitors and partners.

Internal Environment

Events, developments, and factors within your organization that impact the need for change. These might include organizational culture, staff capacity and morale, financial position, leadership transitions, operational challenges, or strategic priorities.

Ways to Gather Information

- **Industry reports and publications:** What external trends are analysts highlighting?
- **Competitor and peer analysis:** What are similar organizations doing or experiencing?
- **Regulatory and policy monitoring**: What changes are on the horizon?
- **Customer/client feedback**: What are they telling you about their changing needs?
- **Employee surveys and focus groups**: What do staff see as the internal realities?
- **Financial and operational data review**: What do the numbers reveal about internal conditions?
- **Board and leadership perspectives**: What external and internal factors keep them up at night?
- **Informal conversations**: What's being discussed in hallways and over coffee?

Reflection Questions

→ What external forces are creating pressure or opportunity for change?
→ What internal conditions are shaping our readiness for change?
→ Where do external and internal factors intersect or amplify each other?
→ What environmental factors are we most confident about? Least confident?

3. The Emerging and The Unknown

This section captures what's developing on the horizon (trends) and what remains unclear (uncertainties). Both influence the change landscape—one points to where things may be heading, the other acknowledges what we don't yet know.

Trends

Developing patterns that may have an influence on the change landscape, whether positive or negative. Trends are directional—they suggest movement toward something, even if the pace and impact are unclear.

Uncertainties

Unknowns about the present and future. These may be internal or external to the team. Uncertainties aren't necessarily negative—they simply represent areas where we lack clarity and may need to gather more information or prepare for multiple scenarios.

Ways to Gather Information

- **Horizon scanning:** What emerging developments might affect your work in 1-3 years?
- **Scenario planning exercises:** What different futures might unfold?
- **Expert interviews:** What do people with specialized knowledge see coming?
- **Cross-industry learning:** What trends in other sectors might eventually affect yours?
- **"What keeps you up at night?" conversations:** What uncertainties worry your team most?
- **Assumption testing:** What are we assuming to be true that might not be?
- **Early warning indicators:** What signals might tell us if a trend is accelerating or an uncertainty is resolving?
- **Diverse perspectives:** Who sees things differently, and what do they notice that we might miss?

Reflection Questions

→ What trends are developing that could affect our change effort?
→ Which trends feel most significant? Most uncertain in their impact?
→ What don't we know that could materially affect our success?
→ What assumptions are we making that we should test or monitor?

4. Energy Flow

Energy flow captures the forces and dynamics that will either support or constrain your change effort. Understanding these forces helps you work with the natural momentum in your system rather than against it.

Enablers

Existing forces and dynamics that may support, reinforce, and champion efforts to introduce and implement change. Enablers are assets you can leverage—they create energy and momentum toward your goals.

Barriers

Existing forces and dynamics that may constrain efforts to introduce and implement change. Barriers aren't necessarily problems to eliminate—sometimes they need to be worked around, addressed, or simply acknowledged as limiting factors.

Ways to Gather Information

- **Stakeholder mapping:** Who supports this change? Who might resist? Who's undecided?
- **Resource inventory:** What assets, relationships, and capabilities can we draw on?
- **Past change analysis:** What helped previous changes succeed? What got in the way?
- **Force field analysis:** What's pushing for change vs. pushing for status quo?
- **Culture assessment:** What aspects of your culture support or hinder change?
- **Political mapping:** Where does power sit, and how might it affect this change?
- **Constraint identification:** What's non-negotiable? What can't be changed?
- **Quick wins inventory:** What small successes could build momentum early?

Reflection Questions

→ What existing forces will support this change?
→ Who are our natural allies and champions?
→ What barriers are we likely to encounter?
→ Which barriers can be addressed, and which must be worked around?
→ How might we strengthen enablers and reduce the impact of barriers?

What's Next? From Insight to Action

The Context Map helps you see your landscape more clearly. But clarity alone doesn't create change—action does. This section offers a brief guide for moving from what you've learned to what you'll do.

Scanning for Options

Once your map is complete, step back and ask: *Given what we now see, what options are available to us?*

This is a generative moment. Don't rush to decide. Instead, brainstorm possible responses to what you've learned. These might include:

- Actions that leverage enablers you've identified
- Ways to address or work around barriers
- Responses to emerging trends before they fully arrive
- Steps to reduce key uncertainties
- Shifts in direction based on environmental realities

Capture these options without judgment first. Aim for quantity before quality.

Filtering Questions

Not every option deserves the same attention. Use these questions to assess which possibilities warrant further exploration:

- **Does this option align with the change we're actually trying to make?** (It's easy to get pulled toward interesting ideas that don't serve your core purpose.)
- **Does it address something significant we learned from the map?** (The best actions respond directly to what the context reveals.)
- **Do we have—or can we build—the capacity to pursue this?** (Consider resources, relationships, and readiness.)
- **What enablers can we leverage? What barriers must we navigate?** (Use the Energy Flow section of your map to pressure-test feasibility.)
- **What's the risk of acting? What's the risk of not acting?** (Inaction is also a choice with consequences.)
- **Who needs to be involved in or informed about this action?** (This question begins to surface stakeholder considerations.)

After filtering, you should have a shorter list of options that feel both meaningful and achievable.

The Four Power Moves

The Context of Change Map is the first of four "Power Moves" that help leaders prepare for change:

1. **MAP** – Create a Context Map to better understand what is contributing to the current situation. (You've just done this.)

2. **MOBILIZE** – Develop a Stakeholder Assessment to learn about areas of support and resistance. (Who will be affected by the options you're considering? Where will you find allies and resistance?)

3. **MOVE** – Prepare a Plan for the change process—but don't make it too detailed! (What sequence of actions will move you forward? What early steps can you take?)

4. **MESSAGE** – Communicate the Change to prepare your stakeholders for what's coming. (How will you bring people along? What do they need to understand?)

These moves form a natural sequence: understand your context, assess your stakeholders, prepare your approach, and communicate your intentions. Each builds on the one before.

[Callout Box]

Where to Go from Here

The Context of Change Map gives you a foundation. The options you've identified and filtered point toward possible paths.

The next step is to consider who will be affected and how they might respond—which is exactly what a Stakeholder Assessment helps you do.

Visit my blog to access **The Leader's Guide to Understanding Stakeholder Influence**.

Facilitation Tips

The Context Map is most powerful when developed collaboratively. Here are approaches for facilitating this work with your team.

In-Person Facilitation

Setup

- Print the Context Map template at poster size (at least 24" x 36")
- Provide sticky notes in different colors for each section of the map
- Have markers available for writing directly on the map
- Arrange the room so everyone can see and access the map

Process

- Begin by orienting the group to the map and its four parts (15 minutes)
- Start with "The Change Being Considered"—get alignment on what you're exploring (15-20 minutes)
- Work through each section, inviting individuals to write observations on sticky notes before sharing (10-15 minutes per section)
- After each section, invite additions: "What else? What are we missing?"
- Once all sections are populated, step back and look at the whole picture together
- Close by asking: "What pathways are available to us in this context?"

Tips for Success

- Invite diverse perspectives—different roles and tenure levels see different things
- Encourage candor—the map is only useful if it reflects reality
- Capture dissenting views—disagreement often reveals important information
- Take photos of the completed map to document the conversation

Facilitation Tips

Virtual Facilitation

Setup

- Recreate the Context Map template in a digital whiteboard tool (*Miro* or *Mural* work well)
- Create sticky note areas or zones for each section of the map
- Test the technology with participants before the session
- Consider assigning a co-facilitator to manage the technology
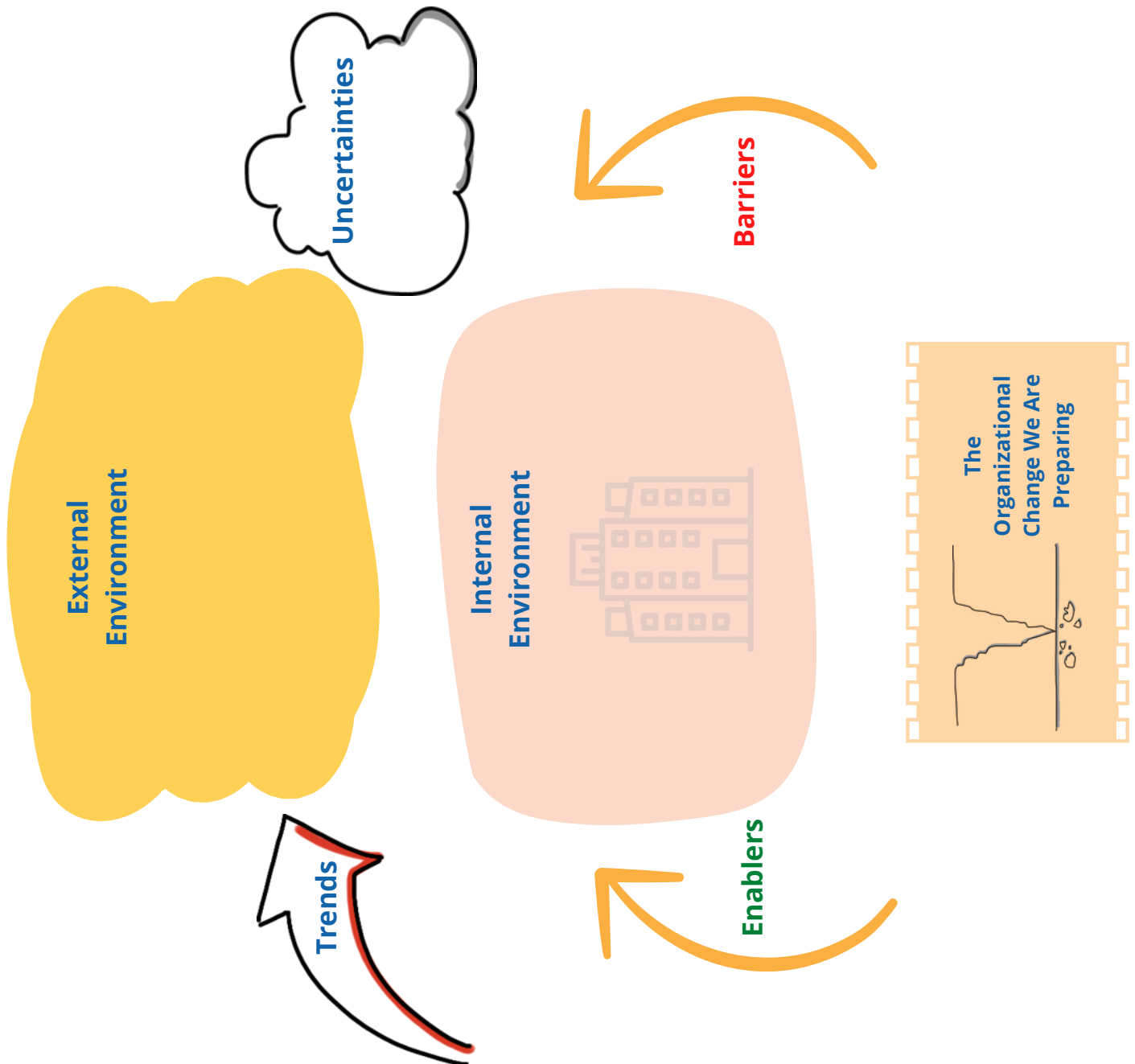
Process

- Share a link to the digital whiteboard in advance so participants can familiarize themselves
- Follow the same sequence of steps for moving through the map as in the In-person setting.
- Use breakout rooms for small group work if the team is large (4-6 people per room)
- Have participants add inputs on sticky notes simultaneously, then discuss—this increases engagement
- Use voting or dot-voting features to prioritize items within each section
- Record the session (with permission) to capture the discussion

Tips for Success

- Keep virtual sessions shorter—90 minutes maximum with breaks
- Consider spreading the work across two sessions if needed
- Use the chat for additional observations that arise during discussion
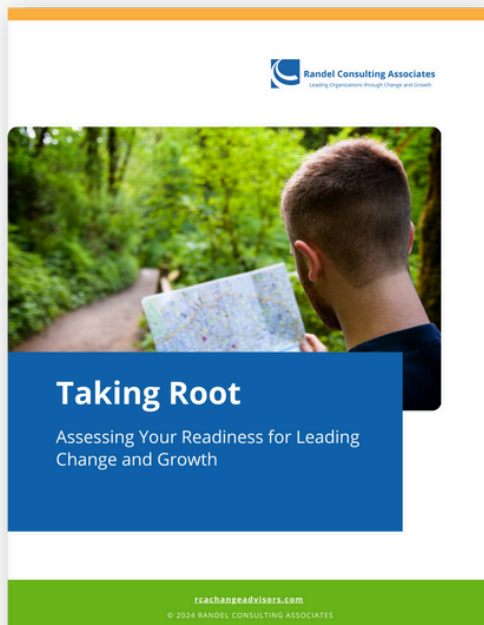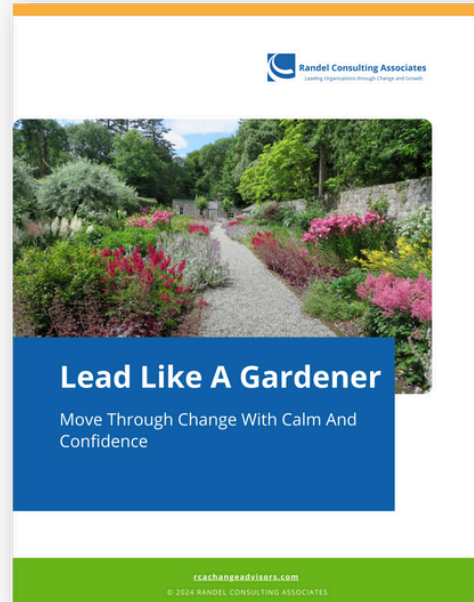- Export the completed board as a PDF for documentation and sharing

The Context of Change Map

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5 CRITICAL MISTAKES THAT CAN THREATEN YOUR CHANGE INITIATIVE

Implementing organizational change doesn't have to be challenging. Get our insider tips to overcome these 5 common problems.

Lead Like A Gardener

Move Through Change With Calm And Confidence

Taking Root

Assessing Your Readiness for Leading Change and Growth

Making the Most of a Windfall

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Visit our website to access these and other practical resources for leaders and teams moving through change

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