

Helping your line managers be leaders of change

Introduction

The presentation covered the scale of the challenge facing organisations today — too much change, not enough time, and line managers who are being asked to lead change without the training, recognition or support to do so. It then set out four practical areas for action that HR professionals, L&D leaders and senior managers can take forward in their own organisations.

Our context

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Accenture – Pulse of Change 2025

- 84% of C-suite leaders expect the pace of change to increase further

Gartner – Organizational Change Management Insights 2025

- Typical firm has done 5 major changes in the past 3 years
- 75% expect to increase the number of major change initiatives in the next 3 years

Mckinsey – How change management can address radical transformation

- **10x Increase in Change Load** - The average employee now experiences **ten** planned change programs per year, a fivefold increase from a decade ago

IBM Institute for Business Value Business and Technology Trends for 2026

- **61% of employees** expect their job roles to change significantly in 2026 due to emerging AI agents and new technology.

We are not living through a temporary spike in change, this is a sustained, accelerating pattern. Senior leaders want to do more, and they want to do it faster. The disconnect between leadership ambition and the reality experienced by people on the ground is significant.

To put the resource challenge in perspective: the Global Change Capability Survey found that 84% of respondents said their change teams are staffed by fewer than 20 change professionals. In conversations with many of you at this conference, you have told me you are often a lone voice, those that are not are in teams of 3 or 4. When you set a handful of change professionals against the volume of change described in these statistics, it becomes clear that we are implicitly relying on line managers and team leaders to carry much of this work but without necessarily training or equipping them to do so.

New perspective

Help your organisation shift to its perspective

Cultural shift to become change-seeking organisations - it is not enough for organisations to be “change-ready” or receptive to change from above. What is really needed is an organisation where everyone is constantly alert to opportunities and up for the challenge of finding and embracing new ways of working.

2025 Harvard Global Leadership Development Study

The best change leadership approach is to "routinize change, so it becomes instinctive for employees to adopt change as part of the normal course of doing work". This means moving away from relying on inspiration and instead embedding change into the daily workflow, which can make employees three times more likely to adopt changes.

2025 Gartner CHRO Study

The ambition set out by both Harvard and Gartner is compelling. We want organisations where people are not just tolerating change but actively seeking it out. We want change to be so embedded in everyday work that it feels natural rather than threatening.

The Gartner concept of 'routinising' change is particularly interesting. This is about moving away from the idea that change requires a special burst of energy, inspiration or a dedicated programme, and instead making it part of how people think and work every day. Done well, this approach makes employees three times more likely to adopt new ways of working.

The word 'routinise' is admittedly an awkward one. But the underlying principle is sound: change should feel as normal as running the business, not like a separate, additional burden placed on top of it.

Importantly, the framing matters. The term 'change management' often triggers a threat response. Change creates one of two reactions: “not again, I am already busy with the last few changes” or “I don't need any help with that, I know how to make change happen” and management creates a sense that we are talking about something bureaucratic and imposed. In contrast, phrases like 'leading innovation' or 'continuous improvement' trigger curiosity and ambition.

Neuroscience tells us that the words we use activate real responses in the brain. Words associated with growth and opportunity generate engagement; words associated with compliance and control generate resistance. Clearly, how we engage line managers with their change responsibilities creates an important branding consideration. Harvard and Gartner along with others including McKinsey are highlighting the importance of framing change as strategically valuable, and being part of a “transforming organisation” is something we can encourage line managers and team leaders to be a part of.

The challenge

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Burnout of managers

- Middle managers resent the time spent on administration and chasing team members to do their role
- There is a need to shift the time spent tracking, scheduling or reporting to leading innovation

Volume of change [Change Capability Survey 2025](#)

- Our level of change is manageable = 12%
- Changes are assessed for inter-dependencies, duplications, and omissions = 31%
- People have time to adopt new ways of working = 29%

If you read online forums and communities for middle managers, the picture is stark. There is a persistent and deeply felt current of burnout, frustration, and disillusionment. Managers describe feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and resentful. Many say they wish they had never moved into management, because they simply want to go back to doing the work they are skilled at and enjoy.

McKinsey has highlighted this problem clearly: people often do not want to become people managers because the role means trading the subject expertise they value for administrative and organisational work they do not.

At the same time, the Global Change Capability Survey data paints a picture of organisations struggling to manage the sheer volume of change. The fact that only 12% of respondents feel their level of change is manageable is an extraordinary finding. And only a third are even looking at how their different change initiatives connect, overlap or conflict with one another. This matters enormously, because people will disengage from a change effort if they sense it is not joined up. If they put effort into something that turns out to conflict with what someone else is doing, or that gets changed or cancelled before it concludes.

Clearly, line managers and team leaders are a vital resource for making change happen. These managers are locally implementing and adopting new ways of working, and without them change remains an unfulfilled opportunity.

Access the [Change Capability report](#) via free membership to [ChangeabilityPro®](#) which is a bespoke online coaching and training platform to support you in building your change capability.

The rewards

The rewards

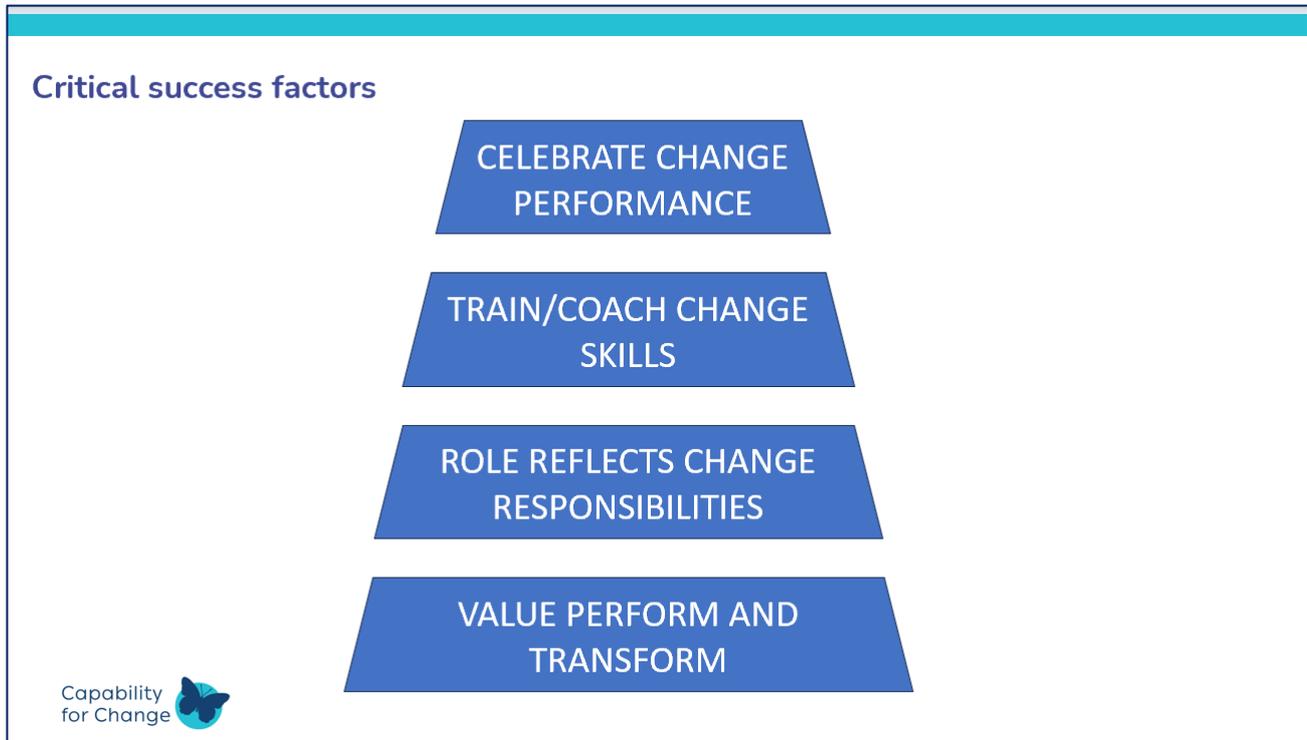
- **Frontline Involvement:** Engaging frontline employees in change initiatives can raise the success rate of transformations to 71%.
- **Effective Change Management (OCM):** Organizations with effective Organisational Change Management achieve an average ROI of 143%, compared to only 35% for those with little to no change management.
- **Everyone is an innovator** - companies that actively listen to and act on recommendations from frontline employees are 80% more likely to successfully implement better ways of working.

Despite the challenges, the rewards for getting this right are substantial. These statistics make a powerful business case that is worth having clearly in your pocket when making the argument internally for investing in the change capability of your line managers and teams.

The ROI figure from effective change management of 143% compared to 35% for those with little or no change management is particularly compelling. It is not just that good change management is nice to have; it dramatically outperforms organisations that do not invest in it.

The 71% success rate for transformations that actively involve frontline employees is equally striking. This is not simply about communication or keeping people informed, it is about genuine participation in shaping the change. And the 80% figure for companies that listen to and act on frontline recommendations reinforces this: when people feel that their experience and insight influence decisions, they become far more committed to making change work.

Critical success factors



I believe there are 4 essential elements required to develop the capability for change in line managers and team leaders:

1. Value the balance between achieving current performance targets and spending time developing new ways of working
2. Ensuring role descriptions correctly reflect that jobs involve current expectations for the role plus responsibilities for developing and improving how the job is carried out
3. Training and coaching change skills
4. Building motivation through celebration of involvement in making change happen

These four factors are not independent of one another, they work together. You cannot ask managers to lead change if their time is completely consumed by operational demands, if their job descriptions make no mention of change, if they have never been trained in how to do it, and if leading change is never recognised or rewarded. All four factors need to be addressed together.

Before describing these in more detail I invited the audience to contribute their own ideas. The suggestions offered included: better communication, creating dedicated time for managers to focus on change, preparation, reflection, listening, collaboration, and a proper communications plan. These themes map naturally onto the four areas that I describe below, and they validate the contents of this presentation.

Value perform and transform

Make the time for change

Value perform and transform – make the time for change

We need to create the time for change

TRANSFORM

PERFORM

One of the most fundamental barriers to line managers leading change is simply time. An informal survey I have been running for over 15 years consistently shows that people in knowledge work are operating at approximately 130% of their contracted hours. They are starting early, skipping lunch, working in the evenings, and preparing for the following week at weekends. This is their baseline, before any change initiative is added to their plate.

If we want managers to lead change on top of all of that, we need to look hard at what we can remove, reduce or simplify from their current workload. One manager put it very simply during a conversation: if we could find just 5% of their time, ring-fenced for change, it would be a genuine win.

Toyota offers a useful example here. Their CEO at the time created what was internally called the 'sniper, a deliberate, systematic effort to identify things that could be stopped. The questions they encouraged managers to ask were:

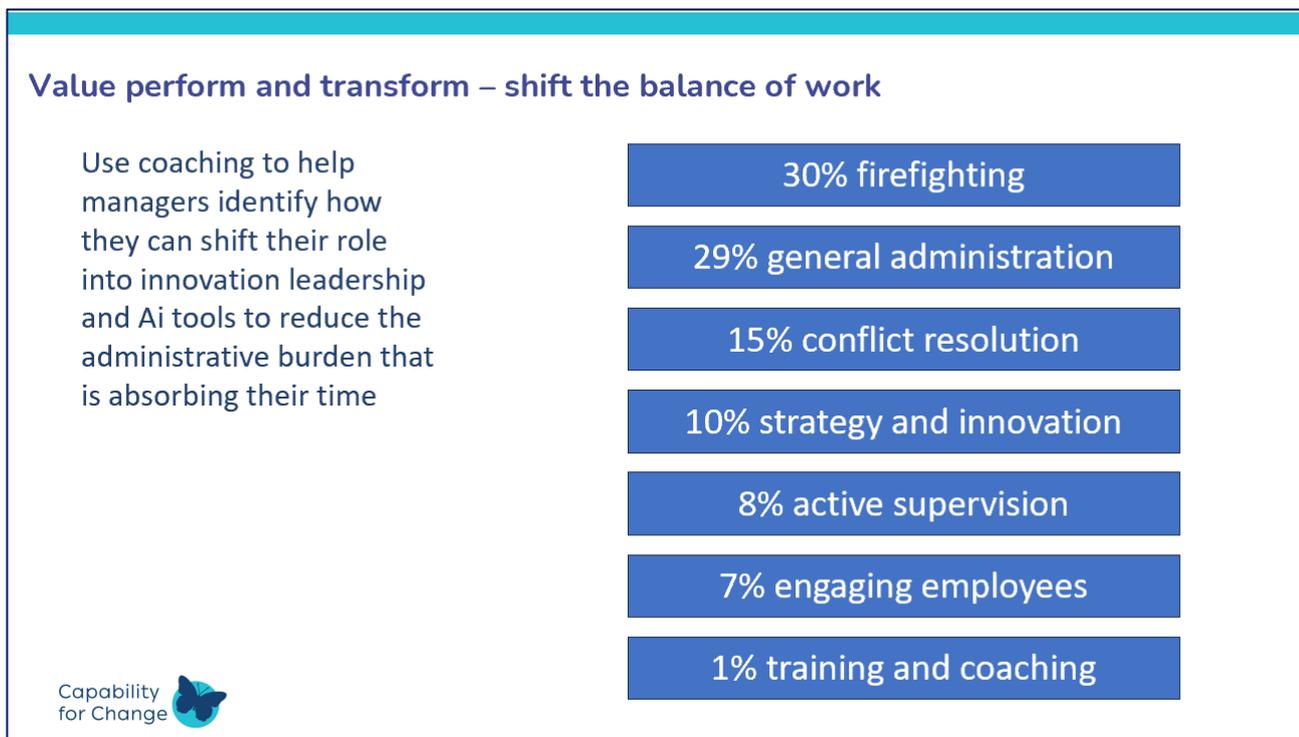
- Do we still need this report?
- Why are three people from the same team attending the same meeting?
- Are people attending meetings 'just in case', rather than because they are genuinely needed?
- Can we end this project early because it is no longer relevant, rather than carrying it through to completion out of habit?

This idea of deliberately stopping things is enormously valuable and consistently underused. A culture that values ending things well, tidying them off rather than letting them drag, is just as important as a culture that is good at starting things.

When I am encouraging senior leaders to adopt this approach, I use a powerful and memorable analogy: most managers would not move house and simply take everything from the attic, garage and shed without sorting it first. They would go through it, make decisions, and get rid of what is no

longer needed. Yet in organisations, we frequently launch new systems, new processes and new ways of working without clearing out the old ones. The legacy systems sit in the metaphorical garage alongside the new ones, consuming time, energy and resource. Decluttering, deliberately and thoughtfully, is a practical leadership act.

Shift the balance of work



The message on the slide was: use coaching to help managers identify how they can shift their role into innovation leadership, and use AI tools to reduce the administrative burden that is absorbing their time.

This slide shows typical percentages for how time is used by line managers and team leaders, sourced from multiple contributors on Reddit and research by consultancies including McKinsey. These figures are representative, not exact, but give a representative pattern of what I see in many organisations. More than half of a manager's time (combining firefighting and general administration) is spent on activities that are not strategic, innovative or developmental. Just 1% is spent on training and coaching their people.

This is the practical reality behind the aspiration to make managers leaders of change. Helping someone shift these proportions, even modestly requires coaching and honest self-reflection, not simply telling them to 'prioritise differently'. The aim is to help managers think deliberately about what they are spending their time on, which activities are genuinely adding value, and where tools, delegation or simplified processes could free up space for innovation and change leadership.

I have found they are more willing and able to do this following attendance at training that builds their understanding of what is involved in managing organisational change. Attending training in change management (often called "leading innovation master classes") inspires them to recognise that these are valuable activities that need their time and attention, and these rise up their priority list. I also believe that this coaching is going to become an essential if we are to help them exploit the value of AI tools.

Cultural shift

Value perform and transform – cultural shift

Establish new beliefs about change:

- We are a change seeking/transforming organisation
- Multiple, simultaneous change is normal
- Everyone has a role to play in change

Moody's - Make everyone an innovator. The goal is to empower employees to see themselves as able to influence the future of both their own individual work roles and the larger workings of the firm

Microsoft shifted its culture from a "know-it-all" to a "learn-it-all" organization, fostering a "growth mindset" because of their belief that it is difficult, if not impossible, to gain new skills if a company's culture says "we've learned all we can"

Creating the time for change is one part of the challenge. The other is building an environment or a culture in which change is seen as valuable, normal and understood. In conversations at the event, I know that fewer than half of you feel that change is genuinely understood across your organisations. Many of you have told me that you felt like a lone voice.

As I said earlier in this presentation, one of the most practical moves here is to think carefully about the language used. The term 'change management' often generates ambivalence or resistance. In contrast, phrases like 'leading innovation' carry a different emotional weight. They connect to ambition, development and growth rather than compliance and disruption. Neuroscience supports this: the words we choose activate threat or reward responses in the brain. Choosing language that positions change as an opportunity rather than something done to people makes a tangible difference to how people engage with it.

Moody's and Microsoft are both well-documented examples of organisations that have deliberately shifted the belief system of their workforce. The common thread is empowerment: both organisations moved towards a culture in which every individual sees themselves as capable of and responsible for contributing to change and innovation, rather than waiting for direction from above.

Role reflects change responsibilities

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Head of Finance is a senior leadership role responsible for ensuring robust financial management, planning, compliance, and the continued modernisation of finance operations, while acting as a trusted business partner to the Executive team.

Head of Operations is expected to bring clarity, structure and operational maturity across multiple businesses, without forcing them into a single rigid operating model.

Head of Secretarial Services

Key responsibilities: Lead initiatives related to new ways of working across the function, ensuring adoption and engagement firmwide.
Required experience: Ability to manage change and drive continuous improvement

One of the simplest but powerful actions we can take to empower our line managers and team leaders to participate in change is to reflect their responsibilities for leading change in their job descriptions. To prepare for this change real job descriptions to illustrate how rarely change leadership is formally recognised as part of a management role.

Of the job descriptions I reviewed before creating this presentation, roughly 95% made no mention of change management. This is a glaring omission given the volume of change that most managers are expected to navigate.

Here are two examples where the role expects significant leadership of change by the successful candidate:

"Head of Finance: A senior leadership role responsible for ensuring robust financial management, planning, compliance, and the continued modernisation of finance operations, while acting as a trusted business partner to the Executive team."

Despite 'modernisation of finance operations' appearing prominently in the brief, no mention was made of change management or the skills required to lead it.

"Head of Operations: Expected to bring clarity, structure and operational maturity across multiple businesses, without forcing them into a single rigid operating model."

Again, this is clearly a role requiring significant change leadership capability bringing acquired businesses together without imposing uniformity yet nothing in the description reflected this.

In contrast, I found this role advertised at the same time:

"Head of Secretarial Services (at a law firm): Key responsibilities include leading initiatives related to new ways of working across the function, ensuring adoption and engagement firmwide. Required experience: ability to manage change and drive continuous improvement."

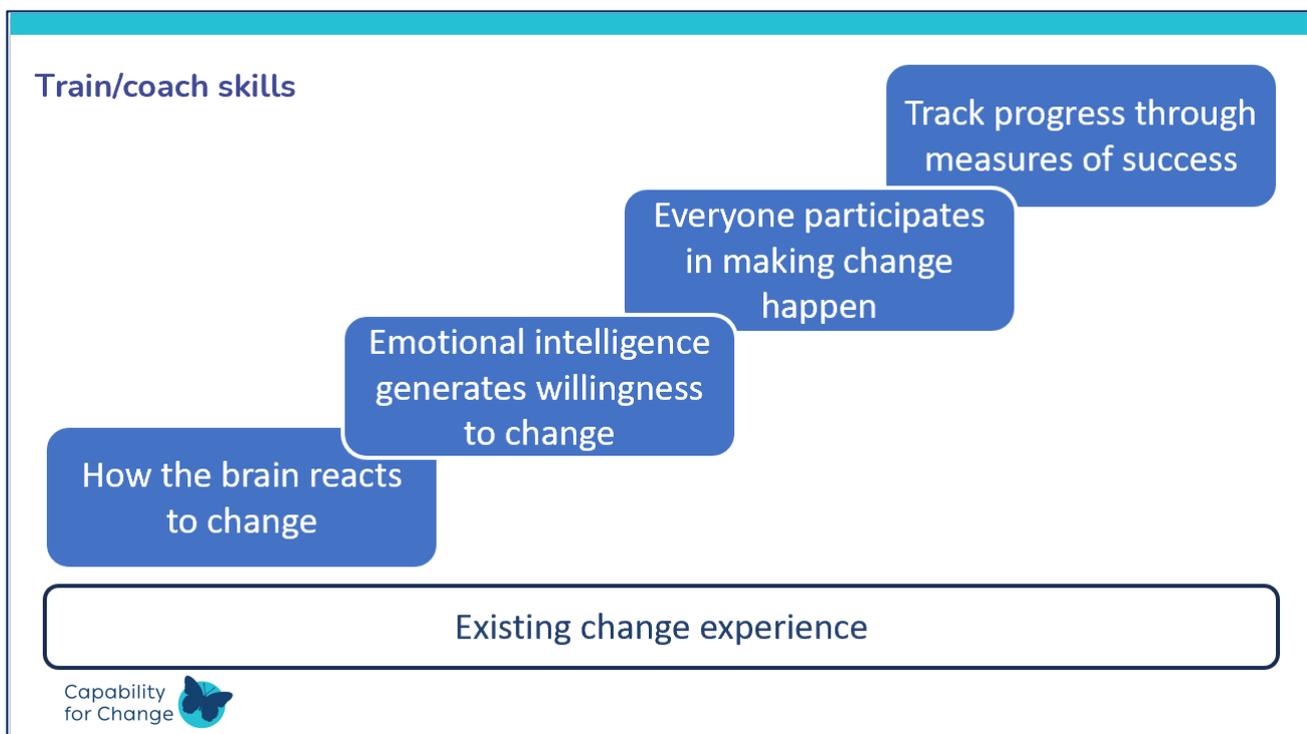
If change is not written into the role, it is not formally recognised as part of the job. It will not appear in performance appraisals, it will not be measured, and it will not be rewarded. The energy that managers put into leading their teams through change will remain invisible in formal processes.

This positive example from the law firm's head of secretarial services (and full disclosure, I have worked with the change team at this organisation!) shows that it is entirely possible to build this in and that it does not need to apply only to senior or specialist roles.

I had a powerful experience of the impact of including change responsibilities in role descriptions when I was supporting the European Medicines Agency through a significant culture shift. About 10 months into the change, we could see that the level of participation from the business was falling, and the need to repeatedly request managers to attend change meetings and workshops was increasing.

The HR director took the decision to ensure that change responsibilities were written into role descriptions across the organisation. The effect was valuable: when change became part of the formal role, people took it more seriously, it was respected, and they adhered to it. It moved from implicit expectation to genuine professional responsibility.

Train and coach to develop change management capability



An important starting point for any training or coaching in this area is recognising that nobody is starting from scratch. We all change, all the time. Our personal lives, our relationships, our habits



and our circumstances are constantly evolving. We would not be functioning adults if we were not, at some level, already capable of navigating change.

The job of training and coaching is not to imply that people are failing, it is to tune up skills that people already have and to make them more deliberately applicable to the workplace.

Neuroscience has transformed the way I approach change. At its heart, the challenge is to move people from a threat response where there are feelings of anxiety, dread and resistance triggered by change to a reward response, where change feels like an opportunity rather than a threat. This is not wishful thinking; it is achievable through specific, practical techniques.

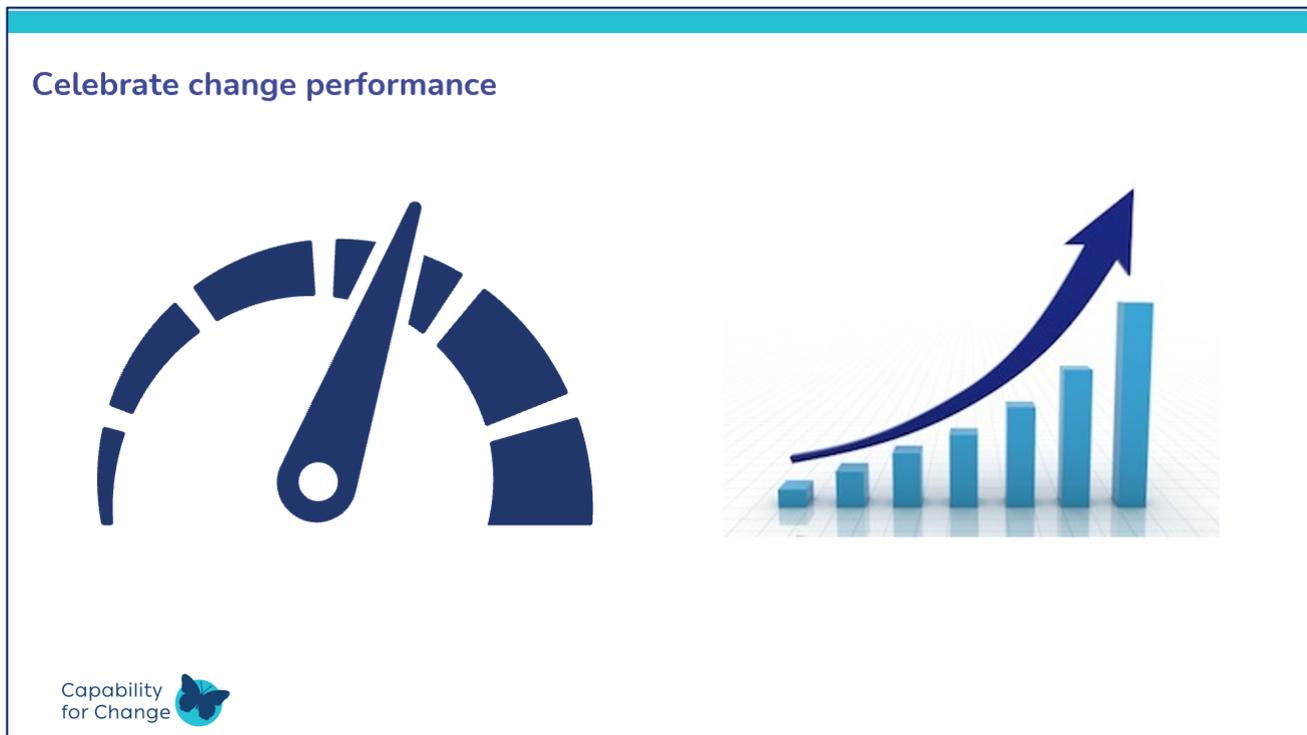
One of the most effective of these is emotional intelligence, and particularly the practice of labelling feelings. When we name what we are experiencing, for example: 'I am anxious', 'I feel out of control', 'I am confused', the brain receives the message that we have registered the signal. It no longer needs to keep repeating it. This allows us to move forward, to reframe, and to regain a sense of composure and capability.

Earlier this week, I was in a high-stress situation at a police station as I had to renew my residency documentation. I was so stressed, when they asked me my name, my legal representative had to answer for me! When we took our seats to wait for the interview to begin, I turned to my legal representative and deliberately outlined my professional qualifications, and my position as the Chief Executive of Capability for Change Limited. I was reclaiming my emotions by describing myself as a competent, organised and respected professional. This sent a powerful signal to my brain to cease the threat responses, and to adopt a calm and confident feeling instead. This is a vivid illustration that these techniques work in real life, not just in theory.

On the question of participation, there is clear evidence that change succeeds when people feel genuinely involved. Professor John Kotter from the Harvard Business School has spoken extensively about the need for a 'volunteer army' which is a critical mass of people who are actively engaged in making change happen, not just being managed through it. For managers, this means creating ways entries into the change that appeal to a range of preferences and working styles. There are dozens of psychological models for understanding preferences, for example, we are probably all familiar with the Myers Briggs Type Indicators, or the Insights Model or VARK approach. Whatever model you use to identify the different preferences of team members, the key principle is simply to ensure that the change does not only suit one type of person or one mode of engagement.

On measurement: it is worth helping managers understand that the progress of change does not have to be measured only through hard data. Often the most meaningful signals are observational. A subjective but relevant outcome from change initiatives is the feeling of confidence in working in the new way. What does more confident behaviour look like in your team? People getting started more quickly. Fewer questions. Less checking. Faster delivery. These are trackable, even when they are qualitative because we can turn them into more quantitative measures of time saved, shorter elapsed time for adoption of new ways of working, less time spent on rework etc.

Celebrate change performance



The final critical success factor is celebration which had been mentioned in panel discussions throughout the conference. We are often so focused on driving towards the next milestone that we forget to stop, acknowledge what has been achieved, and recognise the people who made it happen.

Celebration serves a real and practical purpose beyond morale. From a neuroscience perspective, recognising achievement triggers the release of positive brain chemicals, dopamine and endorphins that build motivation, energy and confidence. When people feel that their contribution to change is seen and valued, they are far more likely to engage with the next change initiative.

Celebration can be in the moment, with opportunities to build in events that recognise the achievement of key milestones in achieving change. More formally, ensure success in continuous reinvention is a core element of performance management. The skills and behaviours involved in leading change which include communicating clearly under uncertainty, coaching others through resistance, maintaining momentum when enthusiasm fades are genuine leadership capabilities that deserve to be recognised in appraisals and high-potential programmes.

For example, Petronas in Malaysia is an organisation that does this particularly well: they will not allow anyone onto their high-potential programme unless they have demonstrated change capability. The logic, as their leadership described it, is simple, the business is always changing, so why would you not make change a core leadership skill?

Conclusion

Audience contributions throughout the session had been valuable particularly during the polling exercise where I asked the audience about the level of focus in their organisations on equipping line managers to lead change. 58% of attendees did not currently train change management as a

leadership skill and had no formal commitment to building that capability. Only approximately 1 in 10 had a public commitment to upskilling change and a structured programme in place.

This pattern of responses reinforced the central argument of my presentation: that while the business case for building change capability in line managers is compelling, most organisations have not yet made the formal commitment or taken the practical steps to do so. The four critical success factors valuing perform and transform, reflecting change in role descriptions, training and coaching, and celebrating change performance are all within reach. What is needed is the organisational will to act on them.

The question isn't whether line managers will lead change, they already are. The question is whether we'll equip them to do it consciously, confidently, and well.

If you would like a one to one session to see how I can help you develop your approach to change capability building, please get in touch melanie@capabilityforchange.com