Capability for Change

From the Front Line of Change

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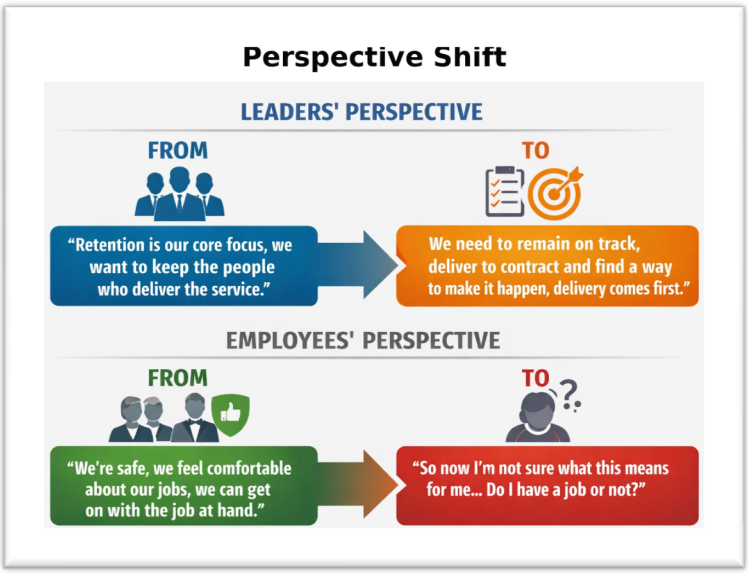
What I've Learned About Leading Change When Organisations Are Already Stretched

1. A moment that changed my perspective

Every person I've met has been through changes yet there is usually a moment in those experiences that still "sticks in the throat." Those moments when you find yourself thinking: if only that hadn't happened to me, if only they hadn't said that, if only they hadn't treated me that way. Notice the word underneath that reaction: me. In many ways, that is the essence of why organisational change succeeds or fails because however carefully a programme is designed, change ultimately lands with the individual living through it.

One experience reinforced this for me. During a major organisational change, the direction of the programme shifted and messaging that had previously been shared in good faith had to change. What stayed with me was not the decision itself, but the stark difference between how it was discussed in leadership forums and how it was experienced by the teams who would feel the most impact.

In leadership conversation, the perspective shifted significantly away from "employee first to delivery first." The focus turned to timelines, delivery, and implementation and the conversations were about how we get consultation done, whilst pushing the transition timeline, absorbing the fall-out from the change of messaging. On the front line, the questions were quite different. People were thinking about their roles, their teams, their customers, and their future, being open to the improvements that they'd been promised. Earlier messaging had created a sense of stability. Once that certainty shifted, the perspective shifted too. The change was no longer about delivering a better service; it became about them and what that change would cost them



Moments like this create a far more fragile change landscape. There was no consideration for the change of message, just a factual consideration of the new "instructions," unwilling to recognise the shift in perspective, and to persuade and reassure employees of the desire to retain them. What it led to was what

became an irreversible consequence by failing to acknowledge the shift and say, “we’re sorry we misled you.” Ambiguity rose quickly, confidence eroded, and building trust became significantly harder than maintaining it in the first place.

That experience revealed something I have seen repeatedly over the years: change looks quite different depending on where you are standing.

2. The hardest part of change is not the framework

Change is often described as a process, and many organisations understandably focus their attention on finding the right framework or methodology to deliver it. Yet in my experience, the real difficulty of change rarely lies in the method itself. It lies in the gap between how change is understood in leadership conversations and how it is experienced on the front line.

A recent Harvard Business Review article described the growing challenge of what it called “ungovernable change,” HBR where organisations are dealing with overlapping waves of transformation rather than a single programme with a clear beginning. Many practitioners will recognise that reality. Change is no longer an occasional event designed to move an organisation from one stable state to another. It has become a constant. One initiative follows another, often before the previous one has fully settled.

In this environment, organisations often continue to treat improvement as a series of change programmes, each positioned as the initiative that will finally deliver the breakthrough. Yet on the front line, people are often looking for something much simpler. They want work to improve, systems to function better, processes to make sense and clarity about how their role contributes to the organisation’s direction. In other words, they are seeking continuous improvement rather than repeated disruption through large-scale change programmes.

When that gap emerges, it creates friction. Boards and leadership teams see change as a programme to deliver. Those closest to the work are often looking for stability alongside steady improvement. The result is that organisations can inadvertently make change feel heavier and more disruptive than it needs to be.

At the same time, many organisations underestimate the resources required to lead change well. Successful change requires time, preparation, and capability, particularly for the front-line managers responsible for guiding teams through uncertainty. Evidence born out of work from McKinsey & Company, Gartner, Deloitte, and Prosci’s reflects this clearly, with many transformation leaders calling for greater investment in preparation, training, communication, and leadership capability.

Without that investment, the pressure falls on front-line managers. Many find themselves running day-to-day operations while simultaneously delivering transformation. They are expected to answer questions they may not yet have answers for, maintain engagement within their teams, and continue delivering operational performance against ambitious timelines.

The challenge, then, is not that organisations struggle to design change programmes. The challenge lies in creating an environment where change becomes part of everyday organisational life, where adjustments and improvements are expected and where front-line managers are equipped, enabled, and empowered to guide their teams through those adjustments.

In other words, the real task is not to run more change programmes. It is to build a capability for continuous improvement across the organisation so that changes can become part of organisational life.

3. We don't have time for change

It is common to hear people say, "we don't have time for change." In my experience, that statement rarely means what it first appears to mean. More often, what people are really saying is this: I do not yet understand what this means for me. for my role, my team, my future, or my customer. In other words, the barrier is rarely time, it is uncertainty.

When uncertainty increases, ambiguity follows, and with that comes a sense of risk. From a neuroscience perspective, this reaction is entirely natural. As Tibisay Vera and Melanie Franklin Capability for Change explain in Neuroscience for Change at Work, the brain's limbic system interprets the unknown as a potential threat to survival. People instinctively move into protective responses. Some challenge the change; others withdraw from it and many simply wait to see what happens next.

Understanding this changes the leadership task. If uncertainty is the real barrier, then creating time for change is less about asking people to prioritise differently and more about reducing the threat the brain perceives.

Leaders therefore need the capability to balance the threat and reward signals that people experience during change. When people understand why adjustments are being made, how they may be affected and where they have agency in shaping the outcome, the sense of risk begins to soften.

This is another reason why building a culture of continuous improvement matters. When change becomes part of everyday organisational life rather than a sudden disruptive event, the psychological impact is reduced. Adjustments feel smaller, more manageable, and easier to navigate.

When that happens, space opens for something far more constructive. People can become involved in shaping improvements. They can contribute ideas, test solutions, and help refine how work is done. Instead of change being something done to people, it becomes something people help to create.

This brings us to an important leadership implication. Boards and senior leaders must resist the temptation to assume they already understand what their people need. This is why research from organisations such as McKinsey & Company, Gartner and Deloitte consistently highlights that successful change depends not only on strategy, but on clarity, capability, and the capacity of those expected to deliver it. It is surprisingly common to see leaders explain with confidence how a proposed change will improve employees' jobs, only to discover that the real challenges employees experience every day are quite different.

The most effective leaders approach change differently. They involve people earlier. They ask questions before presenting solutions. They create communities where ideas can be tested and refined. They allow space to pilot improvements and learn from what works and what does not. In short, they recognise that the role of leadership in change is not simply to announce decisions, it is to bring people with them while the organisation moves forward.

4. Stability creates the conditions for change

In organisations that navigate change well, there is often a noticeable sense of stability even while the organisation itself is shifting and evolving. People feel grounded. They understand the direction of travel and where they sit within it. That sense of internal stability reduces resistance and makes acceptance and adoption far more likely. Unfortunately, what I see more often is the opposite.

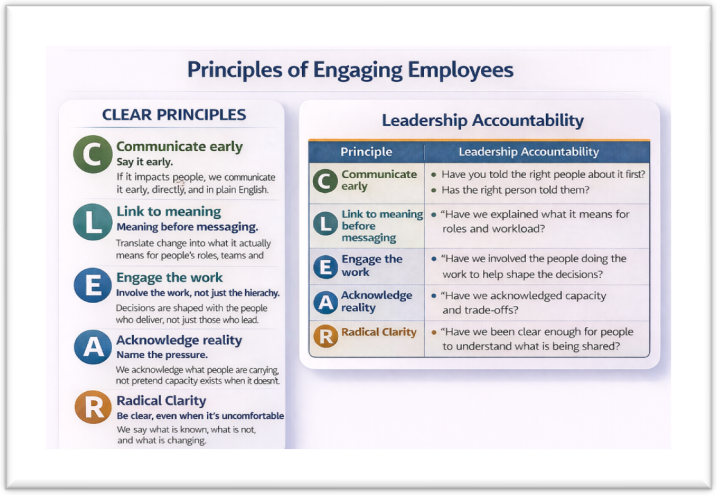
Many organisations interpret resistance as change fatigue. While that can sometimes be true, on the front line the experience often plays out differently. The front line may be the place where change ultimately happens, but it is often the last place where decisions about change are made. Teams can find themselves waiting for others to determine what will change, how it will change and what the implications will be for their work. During that time, people are effectively treading water.

When sequencing is unclear and multiple initiatives overlap, the result is noise. Conversations circulate without resolution, information arrives at different times, and teams spend energy trying to interpret what is happening rather than focusing on the work itself. That noise is not harmless, it is expensive. It distracts from day-to-day responsibilities and creates a ripple effect as people attempt to fill the gaps left by uncertainty. Time that could be spent improving the work is instead spent trying to make sense of the environment around it.

The work of Andy Gilbert at Go MAD Go Mad Thinking is helpful here. His work on the cost of organisational noise demonstrates how expensive disengagement and uncertainty can become when employees are not meaningfully involved in improvement. It also shows the difference that occurs when people feel genuinely included in shaping how work evolves.

As a practitioner, this has influenced how I approach change engagement. I now begin by asking a simple question: where are people in the change process right now? Not everyone starts from the same place. Some people are ready to engage early. Others need more time to understand the implications before participating. The role of leadership is to recognise those differences and create opportunities for people to become involved in ways that make sense for them.

In practice, this often means working less from rigid frameworks and more from a shared set of principles. Principles that guide how we involve, include, and inform people throughout the process, and which teams can hold leadership accountable to.



To create focus on these principles this often means I'm facilitating discussions focused on questions such as:

- "what problem are we trying to solve, and is this the simplest way to solve it"
- "how will this land for the people expected to deliver it, not just those designing it?"
- "where are we asking for change without creating the conditions for it to succeed?"
- "if this does not work as intended, what is our plan to respond?"

There is also a biological dimension to this. When environments feel unstable, our brains interpret that instability as a potential threat. Cortisol and adrenaline levels increase, making it harder for people to focus, absorb new information and engage constructively. That is why the feeling of constantly treading water is so common in poorly sequenced change environments.

Creating stability does not mean avoiding change, it means creating the conditions where change becomes normal rather than exceptional. This is where cultures of continuous improvement become so important. When organisations treat change as a rare event, every programme feels disruptive and threatening, yet when improvement becomes part of everyday organisational life through small adjustments, experimentation, learning and refinement, the brain begins to interpret those shifts differently. The threat response reduces and change becomes less about disruption and more about progress.

In environments where continuous improvement is embedded, people are not waiting for the next transformation programme to arrive. They are already engaged in shaping how the organisation evolves. And when that happens, change becomes significantly easier to navigate.

5. Building the capability to change

As I reflect on these challenges, one question stands out above the others: if organisations now operate in a state of continuous change, how do we ensure there are enough people capable of leading through it? Put differently, how do we make change leadership a normal leadership skill rather than a specialist role?

In my experience, the answer begins with preparedness and the ability to prioritise adaptability over rigidity. Change rarely unfolds exactly as planned. Leaders, managers, HR professionals and change specialists need to be equipped to operate in environments where circumstances evolve and adjustments are required in real time.

The organisations that do this well focus on developing leadership capability as part of their commitment to continuous improvement rather than relying solely on programme structures.

This begins with preparing front-line managers to lead people through uncertainty; emotional intelligence, communication skills, curiosity, rapport building, empathy, and the ability to listen well become essential capabilities. Leaders must be able to explain change clearly, respond to resistance respectfully and create environments where people feel safe to share, experiment and learn.

Capability is not built in the classroom. It is built in practice, reinforced through supervision, feedback, and coaching. When leaders are given the opportunity to apply these skills in real situations, their confidence and resilience grows and their teams begin to experience change very differently.

Behavioural principles can also help leaders navigate this process. Models such as David Rock's SCARF framework provide a useful lens for understanding how people interpret change. By paying attention to status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness, leaders can design engagement approaches that reduce perceived threat and increase willingness to participate.

Alongside leadership capability, communities play an important role in scaling change across the organisation, they are not solely communication tools. Change champions, influencers and employee networks can act as valuable bridges between leadership and the front line. These communities provide opportunities to gather insight, test ideas, and listen to employee perspectives in a more structured and constructive way.

What enables front-line managers to lead change effectively is building a community of self-aware individuals who reassure, energise, and help colleagues move through change, while also lifting some of the engagement burden from managers themselves. These are Change Champions.

In my experience of creating and leading these networks, they are often the most powerful lever for supporting employees through change. They don't need a specialist skillset. They need to be credible humans; kind, compassionate, able to listen, communicate clearly, engage others, challenge constructively and help people get unstuck.

When done well, they become a powerful extension of the change effort and free up front-line managers to focus on delivery. They also create powerful feedback loops that keeps managers informed. When done badly, and I have seen this, they can quickly become negative disruptors, undermining the narrative, amplifying resistance, and at times aligning more with union or personal positions than the broader employee experience.

Using these types of groups, Leaders gain better insight into the real experience of change, while employees see their voices shaping the way improvements are implemented. In my experience, these communities are often the difference between change being announced and change being understood, accepted, and embedded.

They provide the organisation with something invaluable: the ability to say, “we did this together.”

6. What I now refuse to do in change programmes

As change has continued and accelerated, I have become much clearer about some common practices that look good on paper yet rarely work in reality.

I no longer believe in **reducing change leadership to a checklist**, often disguised as a plan or schedule of activity. Plans matter, preparation matters, yet neither should be used as a substitute for responding to what is happening in front of you and taking action that reinforces the messages people are hearing through the change.

Leading people requires more than a checklist. Leading people day to day, through change and through continuous improvement requires presence, compassionate and constructive listening, thoughtful judgement, and the ability to adapt in real time. Templates can support leaders, yet they cannot replace leadership behaviour.

I also no longer **confuse activity with support**. Many organisations try to demonstrate their commitment to change by increasing activity without any real understanding of what people need, how they need it or how often.

More activity is not a substitute for meaningful conversations that help people feel listened to, respected and valued. Less done well builds trust. More done badly erodes it quickly.

Sometimes the most powerful thing leaders can do during change is focus on a small number of meaningful actions and do them consistently well.

And finally, I no longer **dilute feedback that is critical to helping leaders make better decisions**, nor do I default to creating a sense of reassurance where there is genuine uncertainty. Experience has shown me that clarity, even when it is uncomfortable, leads to better outcomes than false confidence. This approach has led some executives to describe me as a positive disruptor. The intent is not to challenge for the sake of it, but to improve the quality of decisions and reduce the risk of unintended consequences that create additional pressure, noise and rework across the organisation.

At its core is a simple belief: the most effective change happens *with* people, not *to* them, and that position is grounded in evidence from what actually works in practice. This makes me accountable for raising it, standing by it, and ensuring that the implications of those decisions are clearly understood.

After years of doing this work, these are some of the things I have learned to stop doing so I can focus on what genuinely adds value to both the individual and the organisation.

7. Measuring the impact of change

One of the questions I am most often asked is how we measure the success of change management activity.

At one level, the answer is simple: the benefits of the change are realised. But what leaders are often really asking is something more commercial. How do we know the investment in change management has been worth it? What is the return? And, if the return is not clear, do we truly need to build change capability into the business at all?

That question was explored directly at Melanie Franklin's Change Capability Forum in March 2026 Capability for Change, where senior change leaders discussed how to translate the value of change capability, particularly for front-line managers and team leaders, into financial terms.

The discussion highlighted something important. Effective change capability delivers measurable value through reduced attrition, lower absenteeism, less rework, faster programme delivery and earlier realisation of benefits, alongside improved customer outcomes, and stronger commercial performance.

Crucially, organisations that equip front-line managers to lead change, reduce operational noise, increase adoption, and free up management time for more strategic activity. This is where change capability demonstrates its value most clearly, not as a supporting activity, but as an enabler of organisational performance. The discussion also reinforced the cost of inaction, including programme under-delivery, reputational risk, and competitive disadvantage. The implication was clear: the cost of not investing in change capability is already being paid, and that cost will only grow as the pace of change accelerates.

That said, many organisations still default to measuring activity rather than impact. They count communications, workshops, training sessions, and engagement events. Those measures may tell us that something happened, but they do not tell us whether change is actually working.

Real impact shows up elsewhere. It shows up in behaviour, in the confidence of front-line managers and in the stability of operations and the level of trust people have in the organisation's direction. It shows up in how quickly teams begin to work differently and how effectively benefits are realised and sustained.

Strong change capability enables an organisation to adapt faster with less disruption, so that change no longer feels like an interruption but a normal part of how work improves and evolves.

Change is not complete when the programme ends. It is complete when the organisation begins behaving differently.

8. Closing reflection

Many organisations still approach transformation as though the next programme will be the one that fixes everything. In reality, sustainable change happens differently.

It happens when organisations build the capacity to keep adapting. When leadership is honest. When pace is realistic. When front-line managers are capable and supported.

If I can leave you with one thing, I know you know to be true. When employees are trusted, involved, and treated like adults, and when continuous improvement becomes part of how the organisation works, not an occasional initiative imposed upon it, then, and only then will leadership and the front-line find common ground and be able to improve the organisation in a positive way.