

AI Change Management:

The Inverted Transformation Imperative for the C-Suite

How to lead AI change when you can't keep up with it yourself



For the first time in business history,

we are seeing something completely new: regular employees are using new AI technology faster than the companies they work for. This is not just another technology that needs a quick fix. Instead, it completely changes how companies adopt new technology. In the past, new technology moved from top leaders down to workers. Now, it moves from everyday workers up to leadership. The center of change has shifted from the boardroom to employee chat channels and personal accounts.

“Individuals—human beings both in and outside of business—are adopting AI quicker than can be embraced at the enterprise level. As leaders, we’ve realized we’ve got a vulnerability here.”

Toby Boudreaux
Global Vice President of Data
Engineering at Publicis Sapient

The “Shadow AI” phenomenon

The evidence of this “Shadow AI” phenomenon is both overwhelming and vaguely terrifying. A staggering 73.8 percent of workplace ChatGPT accounts belong not to the corporate domain but to personal email addresses circulating beneath official channels. Between March 2023 and March 2024, the corporate data being fed into these unsanctioned AI tools exploded by 485 percent, a figure that would trigger a heart event in any self-respecting CISO.

AI technology is ahead of AI culture

Meanwhile, the C-suite finds itself in the unfamiliar position of playing catch-up, like parents discovering their teenagers have been throwing parties while they were away at management retreats. Leadership is dutifully developing strategies, allocating budgets and commissioning consultants to develop upskilling roadmaps, yet Cisco’s AI Readiness Index reveals an organizational culture unprepared for the revolution already occurring.

Only 9 percent of companies report being fully prepared culturally for AI integration—a figure that inspires approximately the same confidence as a paper umbrella in a hurricane.



AI change management is... on the decline?

The statistics on AI change management are bleak: while 76 percent of organizations claim to have some form of AI change management plan (down from 79 percent last year), a mere 28 percent would describe their plan as comprehensive. The remainder exist in various states of doneness—62 percent “in progress” and 10 percent in “draft form,” which one suspects might translate to “someone mentioned it in a meeting once.”

A ProSci Survey helpfully reminds us that only 1 in 8 projects with “poor change management programs” met or exceeded goals, a correlation that should surprise exactly no one.

So how does the C-suite lead change management when adoption speeds have already left organizational readiness in the dust?

In this strange new world, change cannot simply flow from the top like holy wisdom. Instead, we need bi-directional movement: leadership providing the guardrails, north star priorities and compliance frameworks, while simultaneously embracing (or at least acknowledging) the employee-driven knowledge and innovation already transforming workflows at the bottom.

What follows are insights from seven Publicis Sapient consulting veterans, who’s collective 150+ years of experience grants them the wisdom to navigate this particular corporate paradox.

They explain how **each member of the C-suite is uniquely positioned to drive AI change management—or at minimum, prevent it from driving them into existential crisis.**

Key takeaways



A Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who's still relying on secondhand decks to grasp AI strategy is already behind—the only way to lead is to actually use the tools.

For Chief Operations Officers (COOs), the priority isn't crafting the perfect rollout plan—it's setting a focused direction so teams can experiment and learn quickly.

Chief Information Officers (CIOs) are driving change in the most fragile part of the org, where legacy systems, data silos, and compliance worries collide—and they still have to deliver early wins before anyone else can move.

Chief Technical Officers (CTOs) need to stop measuring productivity by lines of code. AI is changing how dev teams work—and what they're even for.

A Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) may have unified customer data, but until they align the teams behind it, AI will only reinforce the same old fragmentation.

For Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) the math is changing fast—when AI can deliver outcomes in seconds, traditional billing models stop making sense.

For Chief Experience Officers (CXOs), AI is already shaping every customer touchpoint, but unless you actively connect the dots across teams and channels, the experience will still feel completely disconnected.

And the Chief Digital Officer (CDO)? Your job isn't to evangelize AI—it's to make it usable, safe and scalable for teams who don't have time to wait.



The CDO: Fierce AI lobbyist

While other C-suite roles evolved gradually over decades, the Chief Digital Officer emerged like a sudden evolutionary adaptation—a corporate mutation perfectly suited for an environment where technology isn’t just a business function but the medium through which business itself happens. This role exists in the fertile chaos of perpetual reinvention.

The CDO faces a unique paradox: tasked with enterprise-wide transformation while lacking direct authority over the specialized teams who must execute it. Rather than being a design flaw, this is a necessary tension that forces innovation through influence rather than mandate.

“Arguably one of the most important C-suite roles in an organization in terms of harnessing the power of AI and directing AI strategy is the Chief Digital Officer.”



Bilal Zaidi

Senior Director at Publicis Sapient

Change management imperative 1:

Democratize access while maintaining coherence

Unlike the specialized domains of other C-suite roles, the CDO's challenge lies in making AI accessible to everyone while preventing digital anarchy. This means creating self-service innovation platforms where non-technical teams can safely experiment with AI, developing tiered access models that match capabilities to expertise levels and establishing common standards that allow diverse solutions to connect rather than conflict.

The organizations that succeed don't reserve AI for data scientists or digital specialists. They're the ones that make it an organizational utility, as accessible as spreadsheets were in the 1990s but infinitely more powerful. This democratization isn't an afterthought, and instead the central mechanism through which digital transformation actually happens.

Change management imperative 2:

Build digital courage

The greatest barrier to transformation is less technological and more psychological—the natural organizational resistance to abandoning familiar practices for uncertain new capabilities. While every C-suite member manages some aspect of change, the CDO uniquely focuses on cultivating digital courage: the collective willingness to experiment despite discomfort.

This courage-building requires creating safe spaces for experimentation where failure carries minimal career risk; developing showcase opportunities where early successes receive organizational visibility; and establishing storytelling mechanisms that transform individual learning into collective wisdom.. When digital experiments happen in isolation, their lessons remain trapped; when they become organizational stories, they create cultural momentum.

Change management imperative 3:

Foster technological imagination

While other leaders focus on what AI can do today, the CDO cultivates organizational capacity to imagine what it might do tomorrow. This forward-looking orientation means systematically exposing teams to emerging technologies before they're fully mature, creating forums where potential applications can be explored without immediate implementation pressure and developing future-state visions that inspire innovation beyond current constraints.

The most successful digital leaders recognize that imagination precedes implementation—that the ability to envision new possibilities often matters more than the technical skill to realize them. This isn't idle speculation but practical preparation for a landscape that transforms faster than traditional planning cycles can accommodate.

Change management imperative 4:

Create digital learning loops

The CDO's most essential function may be establishing systems that accelerate organizational learning about digital capabilities. Unlike traditional knowledge management focused on capturing established wisdom, digital learning systems must capture emerging insights about rapidly evolving technologies.

This means creating mechanisms that document experiments across different business units, developing shared taxonomies that make disparate learning comparable and establishing regular forums where insights move across organizational boundaries. The company that learns about AI capabilities faster than competitors doesn't just implement better—it develops entirely different strategic options.



Change management imperative 5:


Blend digital and physical realities

While other C-suite roles focus on either digital or physical domains, the CDO uniquely orchestrates their convergence—the increasing integration of computational intelligence into physical spaces, products and experiences. This blended reality requires developing frameworks that guide the embedding of AI into physical environments, establishing experience principles that maintain coherence across digital and physical touchpoints and creating governance models that address the unique ethical questions that arise when algorithms shape physical reality.

This integration isn't merely a technical challenge but a philosophical one, requiring organizations to reimagine fundamental relationships between information, objects, spaces and human experience in ways that previous technological revolutions never demanded.

Bottom line: The CDO must operationalize AI access across the org—fast. That means launching self-serve platforms, creating governance guardrails and institutionalizing learning loops that turn individual pilots into enterprise-wide momentum.

The corporate revolution from below: final thoughts

A person is standing in the center of a dark, curved tunnel. At the end of the tunnel, there is a bright, circular opening that reveals a clear blue sky with some white clouds. The person is looking out towards this opening. The tunnel's walls are dark and have a ribbed texture.

The executive suite now faces a profound choice: attempt to control a revolution already in progress or become its most thoughtful enablers, creating frameworks that channel its energy rather than contain it.

The C-suite's value lies both in a decent understanding of AI capabilities (which will continuously evolve beyond any static comprehension) as well as in creating the organizational conditions where both humans and machines can continuously learn together.

What connects all successful AI transformations is humility—the recognition that no leader, regardless of title, fully comprehends the end state toward which we're collectively evolving. The organizations that thrive won't be those with the most advanced AI strategies on paper, but those that have reconstructed themselves, in difficult ways, to adapt continuously as AI capabilities expand in directions we cannot yet imagine.

The question isn't whether your organization will transform—it's whether that transformation will happen coherently, with intentional guidance from the c-suite, or haphazardly through a thousand unconnected adaptations.

The AI revolution won't wait for your carefully orchestrated change management plan. It's already happening, with or without your permission.