

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.

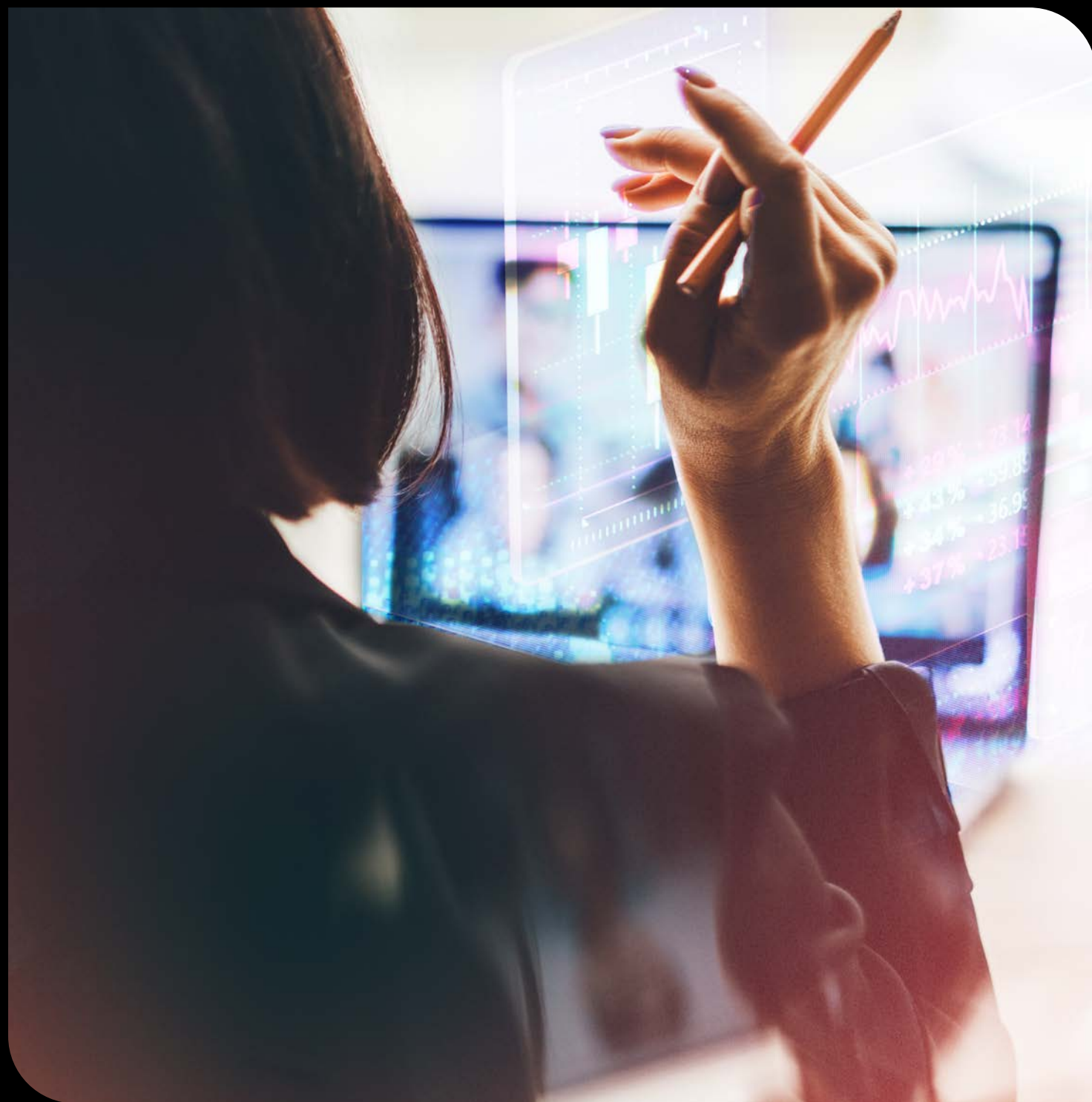
Chief Technical Officers (CTOs) need to stop measuring productivity by lines of code. AI is changing how dev teams work—and what they're even for.

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 CEO: Hands-on future-proofer

For perhaps the first time in corporate history, CEOs find themselves in the uncomfortable position of leading a revolution they didn't initiate and may barely understand. This peculiar reality demands a fundamental recalibration of executive function—you must not only learn the tools better than any other emerging technology, but also learn from your employees to create an overarching strategy.

Change management imperative 1:

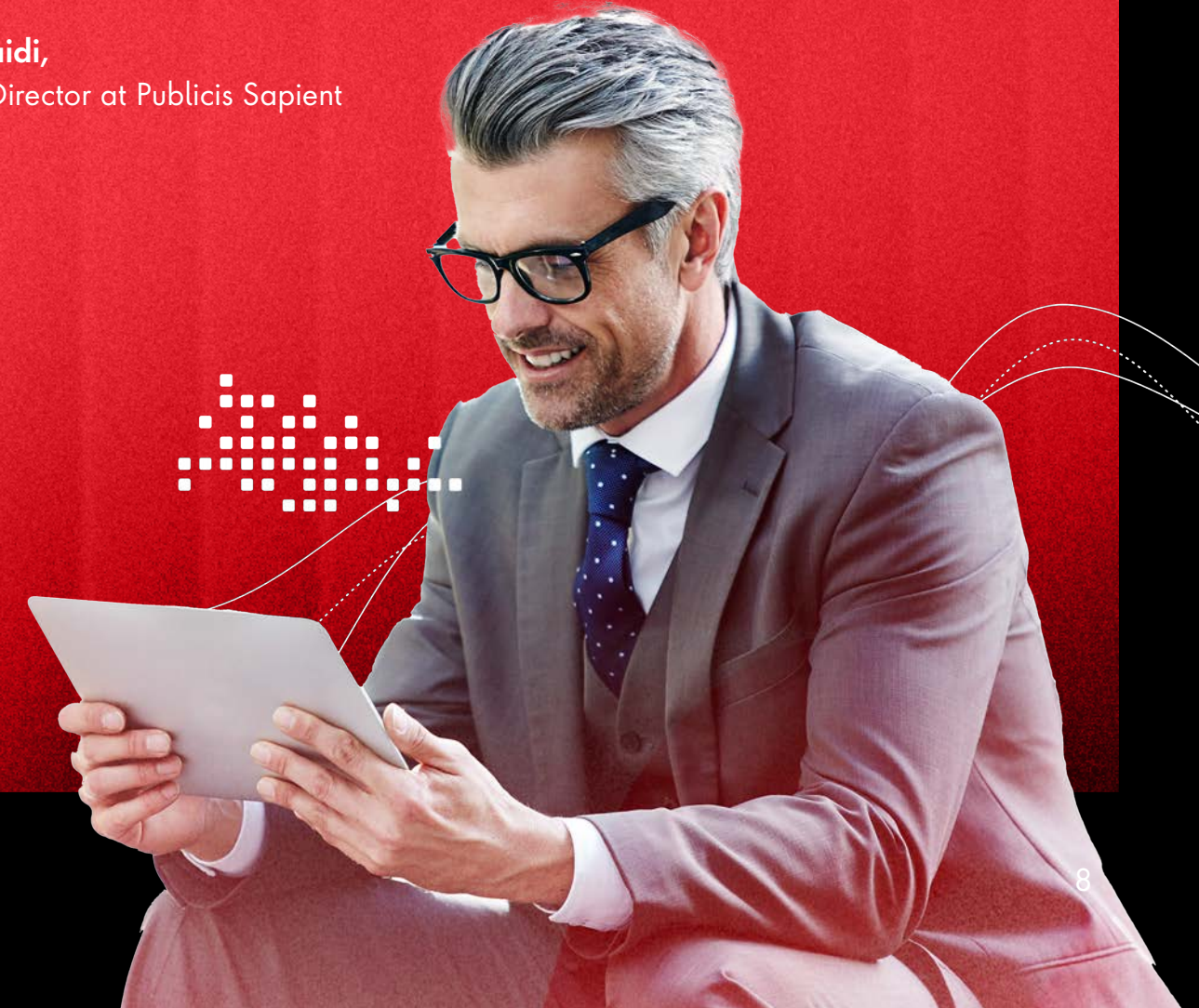
Become the student before the master

The fantasy of AI delegation—that comfortable myth where you outsource understanding to the technically inclined—is as outdated as corner offices with landlines. This revolution demands first-person immersion from those at the top.

Executives who treat AI like previous technologies—something to be understood through quarterly briefings and filtered summaries—will find themselves presiding over well-articulated strategies that fundamentally misunderstand the very thing they're strategizing about.

"This is a seismic shift. If you don't take the time to really understand what the implications of something are, you are not really in a position to guide an organization in adopting it."

Bilal Zaidi,
Senior Director at Publicis Sapient



Change management imperative 2:

Transform experimentation into intentional architecture

Random AI dabbling breeds nothing but digital confetti—colorful, briefly entertaining, ultimately meaningless. The challenge isn't authorizing innovation but architecting it toward transformational outcomes: customer interactions measured in seconds rather than hours, product cycles collapsing from quarters to weeks.

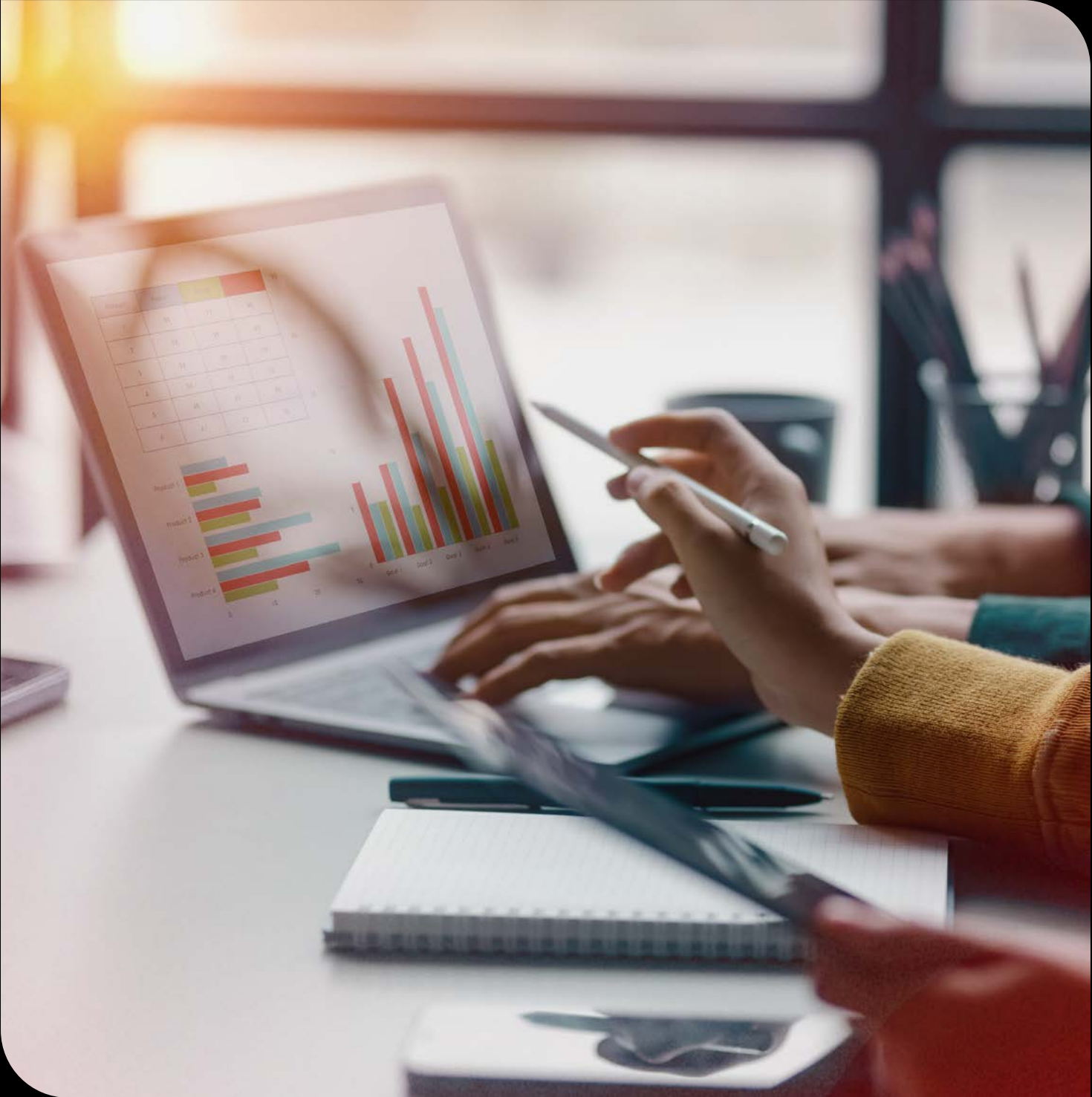
When experimentation lacks strategic anchoring, you create the organizational equivalent of a thousand independent science experiments without a unified theory—interesting perhaps, but ultimately incoherent.

Change management imperative 3:

Design for perpetual evolution, not static transformation

That dizzy sensation you're feeling? It's unprecedented acceleration. Whatever five-year plans you've crafted are already out of date. The path forward isn't perfect prediction—it's architectural adaptability.

The annual review cycle belongs in a museum alongside other corporate artifacts. Quarterly pivots, cross-functional teams with actual authority to change course and malleable success metrics that anticipate their own extinction—these are the governance structures that acknowledge AI's fundamental unpredictability.



Change management imperative 4:

Embrace the math of resource allocation

The most excruciating calculus awaits in talent distribution, where dedicating your brightest minds to future-focused initiatives means, at times, accepting degradation in current operations. This tension—between maintaining quarterly performance and investing in capabilities that render those very metrics obsolete—defines the contemporary CEO's dilemma.

The wisest approach isn't always accumulating AI talent but, instead, AI leadership acumen: potentially recruiting executives who've already navigated the AI waters rather than hoping your entire existing leadership will spontaneously develop entirely new mental frameworks.

Change management imperative 5:

Recognize the existential stakes

The magnitude demands decisive action without sentimental attachments to how things were done yesterday.

The AI literacy gap isn't shrinking—it's expanding daily, creating an ever-widening chasm between the organizations methodically building fluency and those hoping disruption will politely await their readiness. The competitive advantage doesn't belong to those with the most advanced AI, but to those who've most thoroughly reconstructed their organizational DNA to aid continuous technological evolution.


Bottom line: The modern CEO must master the paradox of learning from those they lead while refusing to delegate understanding of complex technology in order to guide their company in a unified, strategic direction.



"Take it, embrace it and really aggressively transform your company, because if you don't, you are not going to be around."

Vicki Zoll
Senior director at Publicis Sapient

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 silhouetted against the bright light coming from the opening.

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.