

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 CMO: data harmonizer

The marketing executive looking backward for inspiration might as well be studying ancient hieroglyphics. The Don Draper archetype—intuitive, charismatic, spinning narratives from creative instinct—has given way to something less cinematically appealing but infinitely more powerful.

This fundamental shift isn't merely technological but strategic: from broad demographics to data-driven personalization. AI is now informing and assisting entire cross-channel customer journey orchestrations—browsing patterns, purchase histories, content development, support interactions, social engagement—creating the unprecedented ability to tailor experiences to individual preferences. The marketer who once knew audience segments now has insights at the individual level.

“CMOs are becoming CDOs (chief digital officers). The CMO of the past? You might think of “Mad Men” and Don Draper. But the CMO of today is living in data insights and dashboards.”



John Ayers

Global Lead of Strategic Partnerships at Publicis Sapient



“The challenge with performance marketing today lies in the division of labor. Media teams focused on top-of-funnel brand awareness often speak a different language than their colleagues managing engagement across owned channels. To unlock the full potential of attribution, we need tighter collaboration across paid, earned, shared and owned experiences. That alignment is the true north star.”

John Ayers

Global Lead of Strategic Partnerships at Publicis Sapient

Change management imperative 1:

Break down the tower of babel

The modern marketing department often resembles a linguistic nightmare where specialized teams speak entirely different languages while theoretically pursuing the same goal.

This fragmentation—where media, creative, physical (in real life) and digital teams operate in silos—leads to campaigns that make sense individually but fall apart collectively. It creates marketing that’s internally coherent but collectively disjointed. The solution isn’t another dashboard but a fundamental restructuring: unified customer data platforms that capture interactions across all channels, teams organized around audience segments rather than channels and metrics that measure complete customer journeys instead of isolated campaign metrics.

Change management imperative 2:

Find the human-AI balance

The creative process becomes neither fully automated nor stubbornly manual. Instead, it becomes something altogether new.

“There’s a whole lot of hype about the power of AI in creating marketing materials and creative content, and it can do a fantastic job in that regard. But without it being complemented by good old school human creativity, it could go off-brand or create legal risk.” -Bilal Zaidi, Senior Director at Publicis Sapient

Successful organizations develop hybrid approaches: AI handles data analysis, content optimization and performance forecasting while humans make strategic decisions. This requires clear boundaries between AI and human responsibilities, oversight systems for AI-generated content and quick feedback loops that allow human intervention when necessary.

Change management imperative 3:

Liberate creative energy

When marketing teams spend less time on repetitive tasks—manually scheduling posts, formatting reports, testing email variations—they gain something precious: creative capacity. AI automation isn’t about reducing headcount but redirecting human energy toward innovation and strategy.

The transformation requires mapping current workflows to find automation opportunities, creating dedicated “innovation time” when teams can work on strategic initiatives, and measuring both efficiency improvements and innovation outcomes to demonstrate the value of this shifted focus.

Change management imperative 4:

Protect trust when reality blurs

As AI makes fake and real content increasingly indistinguishable, authenticity becomes marketing's most valuable currency. When algorithms can generate endless variations of messages, the human touch becomes not just nice but necessary.

"Data is no longer the currency. Trust is. And with AI, brand authenticity will be the differentiator."

-John Ayers, Global Lead of Strategic Partnerships at Publicis Sapient

Maintaining trust requires clear policies about AI-generated content, quality control processes that ensure brand consistency and customer experiences that balance AI efficiency with human connection at key moments that matter.

Change management imperative 5:


Start small, think big

Transformation happens step by step, not overnight. As Zaidi notes: "Some kind of marketing content automated content generation, content review capabilities [are essential investments]... For marketing offices, especially in content creation and things like that, these should be like no-brainers to get as a first step."

The most successful AI adoptions begin with specific pain points that frustrate teams daily, such as juggling four different dashboards to analyze campaign performance. By addressing concrete problems with targeted solutions, showing measurable value and building momentum through early wins, marketing leaders create the foundation for broader transformation.

Bottom line: As AI makes perfect marketing execution available to everyone, the true competitive advantage shifts from tactical excellence to something machines cannot replicate: the courage to develop a distinctive brand voice that sometimes intentionally speaks to fewer people more deeply.

The corporate revolution from below: final thoughts

A person stands at the end of a long, dark tunnel, looking out at a bright blue sky with white clouds. The tunnel's walls are lined with curved, metallic-looking panels that reflect the light from the opening. The person is a small silhouette in the distance, emphasizing the vastness of the light ahead.

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.