

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 COO: evolution orchestrator

The COO's arena is where AI can bring some of its most clear benefits—but also where people may resist change the most.

“There’s often resistance to AI-driven change. It’s very natural because AI drives fear, essentially fear of job loss or redundancies because there’s so much automation happening.”

-Bilal Zaidi, Senior Director at Publicis Sapient

Change management imperative 1:

Build change into your operations from the start

The old idea that change management comes at the end of transformation is wrong. We often think people just need good instructions to accept change. The truth is that change management must be part of transformation from the beginning, like the tempo set for the entire orchestra.

This means including the human side of change when redesigning processes:

- Map out how employees will experience the change alongside the technical workflows
- Address fears about job loss with the same seriousness as technical details

When teams redesign work processes without considering how people will adapt, they make a serious mistake.

Change management imperative 2:

Plan for slow, step-by-step change

Companies often dream of quick transformation—replacing old systems with new AI solutions overnight. But this ignores how people actually handle change. Real change requires careful planning: 90-day cycles of gradual improvement rather than sudden overhauls, test teams with different perspectives and attitudes and ways to gather feedback about how people feel, not just about technical results.

Success stories serve as proof that others have safely tried new ways of working. Each story helps reduce the fear of those considering similar changes, making new approaches seem less strange over time.

Change management imperative 3:

Track new types of progress

Operational leaders often have a strong attachment to traditional measurements—the familiar numbers presented in quarterly meetings. These old measurements can actually block real transformation. Traditional productivity measures show how well old processes work, not how new capabilities are developing.

The real return on investment isn't just about lower costs or higher revenue. It's about whether your organization can respond to market changes in weeks instead of months, creating advantages that grow stronger over time.

A better approach measures:

- How quickly resistance changes to acceptance
- How teams feel as they learn new systems
- How much faster value is created as AI capabilities grow



Change management imperative 4:


Create better human-machine partnerships

The biggest challenge for operational leaders is creating service delivery that is neither all-human nor all-machine, but a partnership where each does what they do best. This means more than just reassigning tasks—it means rethinking work itself. Identify what machines do efficiently and what humans do with unique judgment, then design systems where these abilities strengthen each other.

This partnership requires operational and technology leaders to work closely together. The COO and CIO become architects of evolution, making sure that data systems and operational processes develop together rather than separately.

Bottom line: When implementing AI in operations, focusing only on the technology while ignoring how people feel about the changes will create perfect systems that your teams will quietly refuse to use.

The corporate revolution from below: final thoughts

A person stands at the end of a long, dark tunnel with curved walls. A bright blue sky with white clouds is visible at the end of the tunnel, creating a strong contrast with the dark interior.

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.