

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 CXO: north star navigator

As Chief Experience Officer, you occupy a unique position—standing at the crossroads where all paths of the organization eventually meet. Your role isn't defined by a single function but by a commitment to see connections others miss.

The digital face you present to customers through AI systems isn't just another technology implementation; it's the new front door to your entire organization. That chatbot isn't merely answering questions; it's forming first impressions, setting expectations and shaping how people feel about your company.

A clumsy, frustrating bot damages customer trust more effectively than any human agent ever could, while a thoughtful, efficient one creates the sense that your entire organization runs with the same smoothness.

“The role of this CXO is to connect the dots. You have to have a versatile skill set and mindset to understand different requirements, from business strategy to data strategy to marketing strategy and sales... but always keeping the customer in mind.”



Soulaf Khalifeh

Manager of Customer Experience and Innovation Consulting at Publicis Sapient



Change management Imperative 1:

Build a shared customer vision

The greatest customer experiences don't emerge from a single brilliant mind but from collective commitment to a shared vision.

"The CXO should own the customer's north star vision—but that only works if every team and stakeholder feels a sense of co-ownership." -Bilal Zaidi, Senior Director at Publicis Sapient

This isn't about imposing your vision but orchestrating its collective creation. When marketing, product, technology and service teams each see their fingerprints on the experiential vision, it transforms from a departmental mandate into an organizational commitment. This means workshops where diverse teams define the ideal customer experience together, clear principles that guide decisions across departments and visual tools—like AI-enhanced journey maps—that make abstract concepts tangible for everyone involved.

Change management imperative 2:

Focus on people, not just technology

In the rush toward AI-enhanced experiences, the most essential truth is easily forgotten: Technology is implemented by humans and for humans, and its success depends entirely on human adoption. A CXO's job is to connect teams, grasp their incentives and earn their buy-in. That takes time.

The human-centered approach begins with genuine curiosity about how teams operate—their goals, their constraints, their hopes, their fears. It requires aligning incentives so that AI initiatives create value for everyone involved, not just customers. And it demands regular check-ins across teams to maintain unity as projects evolve from concept to reality.

Change management imperative 3:

Create new success measures

The metrics that guided organizations in the pre-AI era are necessary but insufficient for measuring success in this new landscape. KPIs like time to market, employee productivity and ROI on creative work have always existed, but now they take on a new significance. AI isn't just a cool feature; it must connect customer satisfaction with operational efficiency.

Meaningful measurement requires balanced scorecards that capture both traditional business metrics and new AI-specific outcomes, dashboards that show the relationship between customer experience improvements and operational gains and flexible KPIs that evolve alongside AI capabilities. When metrics remain static while technology transforms, you measure yesterday's success, not tomorrow's.

“If AI handles 40% of your tasks, how do you use that time? The answer isn’t just efficiency—it’s rechanneling that energy into high-value, creative work.”

Bilal Zaidi,
Senior Director at Publicis Sapient



Change management imperative 4:


Redirect human energy

The most profound opportunity isn’t efficiency but liberation—freeing human creativity from routine tasks to focus on what machines cannot replicate.

This redirection means systematically identifying tasks that can be automated, training teams to work alongside AI as a creative partner and redefining roles to emphasize what remains uniquely human: strategic thinking, emotional intelligence and creative leadership. The question isn’t what jobs AI will replace but how it will transform the jobs that remain.

Bottom line: Your job is to ensure AI-powered experiences don’t fragment across teams. Align everyone to a shared customer vision, build cross-functional journey maps and measure success by how well AI improves both satisfaction and efficiency.

The corporate revolution from below: final thoughts

A person stands at the end of a long, dark tunnel, looking out at a bright blue circular opening. The tunnel's walls are lined with curved, ribbed structures. The light from the opening illuminates the person and the tunnel floor.

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.