



# HOW TO CHANGE ANYTHING

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A playbook for change leaders

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Lead and transform your organisation,  
without the friction, fatigue and failures.

HUW THOMAS



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## ABOUT HUW

Huw is an expert in influencing behaviour change, individually and at-scale. He is a sought-after thought leader in organisational change, strategy implementation and executive leadership. He helps organisations improve their change success rate, capture greater returns on their change investment (ROCI) and transform their organisations without the friction, fatigue and failure.

Combined with extensive evidence-based research and formal education, Huw has led award-winning projects and advised and trained thousands of leaders across more than 200 diverse organisations including multi-billion-dollar listed enterprises, government agencies, multi-nationals and for-purpose community organisations. He lives and breathes change.

Huw also has real business growth experience. While delivering his expertise to clients, Huw led the 5x revenue growth of a consulting startup in under five years, founded another successful professional service firm, and oversaw significant growth and transformation at another company as a non-executive director and chair of the board.

While it has never been more important for organisations to rapidly adapt, experience shows many leaders misunderstand the deeply human forces at play during change and routinely fail to drive success.

Huw wants to give you the ability to transform yourself, your team and your organisation so you can thrive in the modern world. This playbook is a good start.

[www.huwthomas.com.au](http://www.huwthomas.com.au)





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# TURN MANAGERS INTO ADEPT CHANGE LEADERS

## Ditch the change friction, fatigue and failures

Huw has helped hundreds of executives and managers become adept change leaders by teaching the concepts in this playbook. When your most influential people understand the psychology of change and possess a simple framework and principles to get thousands of employees moving in a new direction at once, transformational change becomes more than possible. It is assured.

## Teach your managers How to Change Anything

A common mistake executives make is delegating change to a project team and assuming they will make it happen. This overlooks the most critical driver of change success and failure: managers in the business. Whether or not employees prioritise and support change is determined by how effective their manager is at navigating them through it.

Most organisations struggle to get managers to take ownership for leading change. And it's hard for managers because they tend to be experts in the functional area they manage but they aren't behaviour change experts. **No one ever taught them how to tackle employee resistance to change or what success looks like as a change leader.** How can they be expected to own the change leadership effort without being given the capability?

The How to Change Anything program not only transfers the expertise in this playbook to your managers, it creates space for them to apply the model to any real change they are experiencing or leading.



Enquire about the How to Change Anything change leadership program for managers and executive leaders.

[ENQUIRE TO REGISTER INTEREST](#)

Or read on to learn more!



# INTRODUCTION

**Change is uncomfortable by default of our nature.** When we encounter this discomfort, we're inclined to follow our instinct and reject the source of it. However, when we raise awareness of what is occurring in our mind during change, we're better equipped to be okay with it and to consciously navigate ourselves and others through it.

This playbook demonstrates why understanding the very human sources of change resistance are essential to overcoming them. It also identifies the five things humans need to have a decent chance of changing successfully. Finally, it highlights the critical importance of ensuring managers across your organisation understand change on this deeper, human level so they can lead their people through any change and ensure your organisation captures lasting value from any change program.





## WHY WE NEED THE 'HOW' NOT JUST THE 'WHY'

When I ask people what most enables change, the most common answer is "a powerful why." That is, essentially a good reason to change. While it's somewhat useful, evidence suggests the 'why' alone is far from enough to actually change behaviour or even motivate progress. We humans need to understand how we change.

In Kegan and Lahey's book *Immunity to Change*, they quote a study of patients who'd had bypass heart surgery. In each case, doctors advised patients post-surgery, if they didn't change their health and lifestyle habits they would die an early death.

Now you would think avoiding an untimely end is a 'powerful why' wouldn't you? After all humans' most basic need and priority is staying alive. Yet in that study, six out of seven patients did not change anything, post-surgery. Even when our lives are at stake, we struggle to change.

Our inability to change extends well beyond physical health though. As Kegan and Lahey surmise, humans have an innate 'immunity to change' that treats a call to action for any kind of change as a pseudo virus to reject.

The resistance is real. I've seen it. In employees I've managed, in executive workshops I facilitate and in coaching clients I support. I've also experienced it in myself; we all have, when we have dreams, aspirations and resolutions that never come to pass. But even though we feel it and fall short of our ultimate desires time and again, we don't fully understand what is holding us back. We make convenient excuses like "I don't have time". We point the finger and pass the buck - "*I thought it was a good idea but now I don't*" after getting mentally stuck. Other times, we put the idea of changing out of our mind altogether to avoid accepting the struggle to traverse it.

**People simply don't know how to conquer that resistance. They're confused by it and don't recognise it. They lack a framework to tackle it. They don't know how to change.**

I'm on a mission to change that, for you.



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# ABOUT THE HOW-TO- CHANGE-ANYTHING MODEL

After extensive formal management education, research and 20 years of hands-on experience working with more than 200 organisations, mentoring thousands of leaders and advising dozens of transformation projects, I developed a model that highlights the five critical elements people need, to change anything. And I mean anything. The model can be applied to your individual aspiration, to developing the maturity and effectiveness of your leadership team or to gaining employee support and adoption for an organisational transformation project. Those engaged in politics can even apply the principles to gain support for policy and cultural changes in society and communities.

This is not a change management model. Despite having roots in organisational psychology and leadership, modern change management has largely become about supporting project management and solution implementation. Change management models tend to focus on deliverables, methodologies, tools and templates. This is all useful to a point but often causes us to forget about human needs well beyond the change project itself that influence the success of these projects.

*“When change initiatives fail (and they do so more often than not) they rarely fail on technical skills (hard skills), they fail on the people skills.”*

**– David A. Shore, Harvard.**

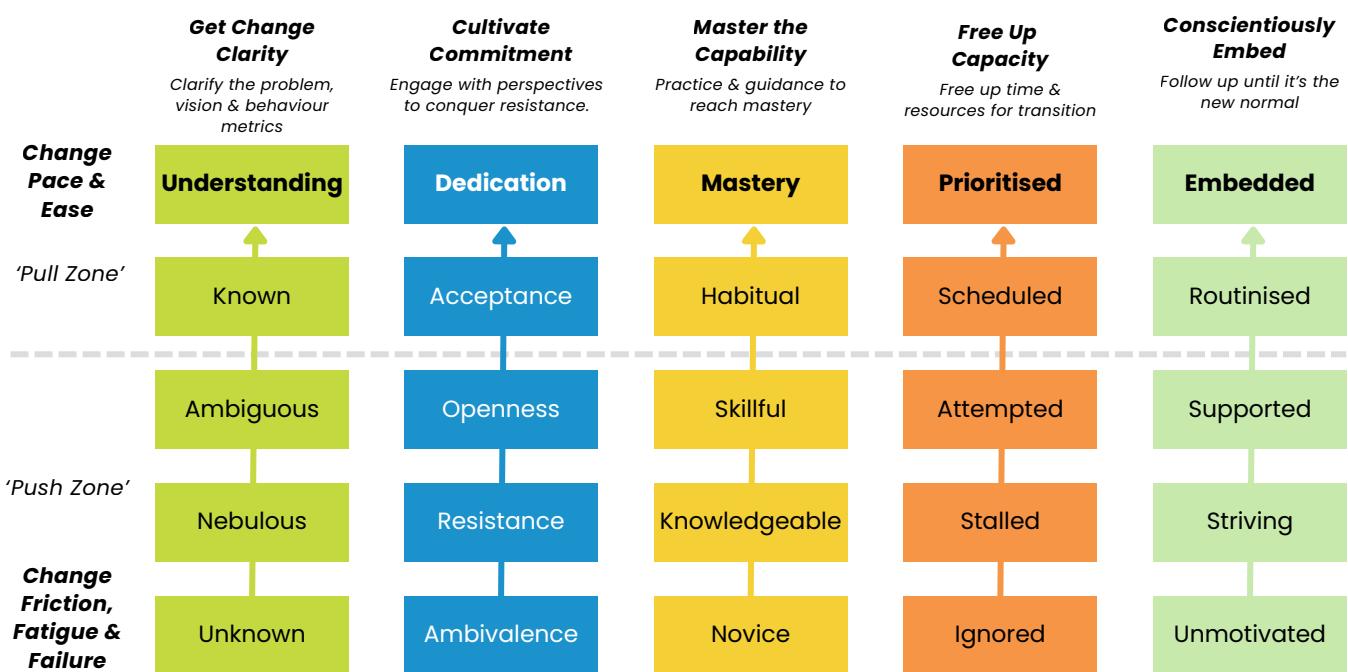
The How-to-Change-Anything model is about change *leadership*. It focuses on the requisite human needs that facilitate change, not what a project needs to deliver. As you'll see reading this playbook, it is built on evidence-based psychology and neuroscience research combined with a unique perspective from my experience helping organisations of all sizes. It aims to be insightful as well as practical and useful for busy senior leaders like you.



# THE HOW TO CHANGE ANYTHING MODEL

**Whether influencing behaviour change and performance at an individual, team or organisational level, the job to be done is assigning adequate time, effort and resources to influence these five elements up to the adequate levels of the 'Pull Zone' (refer to model below).**

Most change frameworks focus on leader competencies or cookie-cutter project methodologies. But change isn't about the leader or the project. It's about the people impacted by the change. The How-to-Change-Anything (HTCA) model identifies what the people impacted by the change need, to overcome resistance and successfully change. It's about outcomes not activities. Leaders can then more easily identify the jobs to be done, to help their people change.



**Model:** How to Change Anything: Where on each pillar are you or your organisation, for your change aspiration?

The next chapter summarises the key reasons we resist change and the implications for organisational change leaders. Knowing why we don't change is a critical starting point for understanding and overcoming what is commonly termed 'change resistance'. Following that we'll go into the How-to-Change-Anything model, with one chapter for each of its five elements. Each of these chapters includes a page for you to apply the model and insights to strategize your own change, whether it's for yourself, your team or your organisation.



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# WHY WE RESIST CHANGE, INDIVIDUALLY AND ORGANISATIONALLY

Large-scale organisational change is regularly approached as a logistical, project management challenge. While that is part of it, the most overlooked aspect and common reason for failure is that employees' essential psychological needs and developmental support requirements are not adequately addressed.

Let's talk about that other big 'why': why we don't change. Our innate psychological needs and unconscious biases emerge and will derail success if not attended to during change.

## 1. Our need for agency and autonomy

In organisations, executives are rightfully delegated authority to make strategic decisions. But authority does not motivate change. In fact, it's quite the opposite: **the harder you push, the more they resist**. When we feel forced to think or do something by someone else, we immediately distrust them and resist. When we feel a part of the change, like we have a say, our sense of agency and autonomy increases. We then feel involved and engaged. We take ownership and responsibility for the change.

Autonomy is one of the three basic psychological needs in **self-determination theory** (Edward Deci & Richard Ryan, 1985) along with competence and relatedness. Humans are intrinsically motivated when they feel a sense of choice and volition. When external control is imposed (authoritarian command, micromanagement), it undermines intrinsic motivation and produces resistance. Deci & Ryan's research shows that people are more engaged, resilient, and fulfilled when they perceive their actions as self-endorsed rather than controlled.

Jack Brehm also introduced the concept of psychological reactance: when people feel their freedoms are threatened, they experience an aversive motivational state to restore that freedom. This explains why people push back against authoritarian rules or excessive regulation, even when the rules might benefit them. A classic example is saying "*don't press the red button!*" makes you want to press it.



Throughout human history, survival depended on agency: the ability to make one's own choices in hunting, gathering, alliances, and migration. Being overly controlled by a dominant leader or tribe could reduce survival odds (loss of resources, reproductive autonomy). Therefore, a bias toward resisting coercion and valuing self-determination likely has evolutionary roots.

### **Change must be done with people, not to them**

It is unavoidable that executives and boards are delegated decision-making authority to initiate changes. However, expert employees can be involved prior to the decision and business case development, to ensure their needs are catered for and to generate insight and support before substantial investment takes place. Later too, if employees sense they are not allowed to be involved in the process of executing the change, their buy-in and the effort they apply to making it a success will be far from optimal. Beware the Ivory Tower Syndrome, where head office decision-makers are seen as out-of-touch with frontline demands of the business.

Wharton Business School professor of marketing, Jonah Berger, pointed out that the keys to countering Reactance are to create a sense of agency, that is, that people are given options and some degree of choice and control with associated consequences. ('Catalyst: how to change anyone's mind', 2000). During organisational change, this translates to involving people early in the process of defining, designing and implementing change. When scale is such that not everyone can be involved, engaging and empowering the most influential managers and employees is often enough to trigger widespread buy-in and action.





## 2. We fear loss and undervalue what we don't have: Loss Aversion and the Endowment Effect

We tend to fear and protect ourselves against losses, more than we accept sacrifice for greater gains. This is our innate bias to avert losses & under-value what we don't have.

Introduced by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979), loss aversion suggests that (on average) people tend to fear losses more than they pursue and value gains. This means that the psychological pain of losing something is often felt more intensely than the pleasure of gaining something of similar value. It also means we prioritise our thoughts, feelings and efforts accordingly, focusing more on the risk of loss.

Similar to Kahneman's theory, Richard Thaler coined the term 'the endowment effect': that people value things they currently own more than identical things they don't own. In short, **what we already have is not as objectively valuable as we think it is**. Over time we attribute exaggerated meaning and value to what we have. We unconsciously tell ourselves change is not as valuable as our present stasis.

These are our brain's default settings but we can reset it by raising the extent of current problems up to the conscious level, so we're encouraged to part ways with the present and embrace new possibilities.

## 3. We perceive change as a threat, until proof of safety arrives: the amygdala survival response.

In the pre-modern tribal era (think thousands or even millions of years ago), humans faced constant threats to survival. Those that possessed a rapid threat response tended to survive, procreate and disperse this ability through the human gene pool. When we sense a change in our surroundings, we consider it a threat until proven otherwise. In ancient times, this could be hearing a twig snap behind us, seeing the silhouette of a potentially dangerous animal ahead or even a bad smell that indicates sickness or a hygiene risk (ever notice how a bad smell causes you to physically recoil?). The threat triggers a stress hormone and behaviour in the form of aggression (fight), stillness (freeze) or avoidance (flee).

**Imposing a massive change on your workforce triggers a similar threat response in our mind but the outward behaviours are different.** While we don't face daily threats to our life these days, we have the same brain. Instead of throwing a spear, employees actively verbalise their rejection of the change. Instead of physically freezing, they ignore the call to action. Instead of running away, they disengage or quit their job. The question to address when implementing change today is **how do we demonstrate the change is not as threatening as it seems? How do we heighten their confidence and make it feel safe?**



## 4. Old habits are hard to break: neurological habit formation and efficiency bias

**Sustaining the status quo requires limited cognitive effort, while change requires us to be consciously awake at the wheel.**

You may have noticed when you drive a familiar road, perhaps from home to work, you hardly need to concentrate. You know when to slow down, which turn to take, when to indicate, even patterns in the traffic lights. You don't need to read the signs as you already know the speed limit, when to give way and when to stop. Now imagine driving an unfamiliar road. It's dark, foggy and hard to see the signs. The road winds around a mountain in a country area. There's a fork in the road ahead and you're not sure which way to go. In this scenario, your brain is firing, as you limit distractions, perhaps telling the kids in the back to be quite and turning the music down.

Habit formation makes any new behaviour harder to develop and embed than simply repeating an existing one. When we step into the uncertain territory of change, our brain experiences a cognitive strain. We need to think deeply about how to traverse it and our brain physically develops new neural pathways which act as a memory for future reference. When we develop habits by repeating an activity, the neural pathways are strengthened.

**Changing our habits is like navigating an unfamiliar road: you need to be awake at the wheel until it's routinely repeated.**

Continuing our existing habits is literally the path of ease and least resistance. Snapping out of our unconscious habits is hard and requires support from others.

Too often, the expectation of organisational change management is to tell employees about it via some 'comms' (an email or two), teach them how to use the solution (system/process) with a few hours of knowledge-based training, then we can assume they'll 'get it' and automatically transform how they work each day.

The cognitive ease of following existing habits means employees will find ways to avoid the difficult task of adapting how they work to leverage the solutions you provide. Your fancy new software might promise incredible data-driven insights and reporting but if your employees stick with their old habit of not entering the correct data, those insights and reports yield no value. You've implemented a new system but has it really changed anything if the people haven't changed to accommodate it?



## 5. A threat to our tribe is a threat to our self-concept and group identity

According to Henri Tajfel and John Turner's **social identity theory** (1979), individuals derive a sense of identity from collective affiliations (e.g., teams, organisations or social groups). When organisational change threatens the values, norms, or power structures of the group, it can lead to resistance because it threatens the individual's sense of belonging and identity within the group.

For example, if an organisation changes its structure or culture in (perceived) ways that conflict with the values of the employees, they may resist because it challenges their social identity within the group. People will seek to protect their identity, even at the cost of potential organisational benefits. When people switch managers or teams they may feel a temporary identity insecurity as they let go of the old and seek to identify within the new. If the new identity doesn't form into something desirable quickly enough, they may look elsewhere and leave.

Even minor changes disrupt identity as we unconsciously find deeper meaning in what we have. When Instagram changed their app icon in 2016 from a Polaroid-style camera to a flat, modern, and colourful gradient design, social media was awash with outrage. More than an app icon, it was a symbol of identity felt within individual users.

Psychologists will tell you that operating in a tribe or community, in prehistoric times, meant you were far more likely to survive. Hence individuals would develop relationships and make personal sacrifices for the group for their own safety.

During change we should allow time for people to process feelings of identity loss and facilitate connection to create a new group identity.

**Summing up: humans are complex. The best remedy is to simply tune in and adapt to their frequency.**

These are just some of the most potent sources of change resistance. I could go on about others such as distrust in management, politics, bureaucracy, individual personalities and demographics. Many of these are context-dependent or closely linked to the psychological forces already discussed.

The human brain is complex and varies by person. While there is no perfect solution, the five elements discussed in the model that follows hopefully simplifies your job as a change leader.

The following pages explain the science and practice underpinning each of the five elements of the How to Change Anything model. As you'll see, the model can be applied to any behaviour change to drive growth and performance at an individual level or at scale.



# CHANGE CLARITY: THE PROBLEM, THE VISION AND THE RIGHT METRICS

## Why most change initiatives fail before they begin

'Change Clarity' determines whether your people influence outcomes or resist them. It means accurately framing the situation and aspiration in ways that lower resistance and motivate productive action. Change Clarity provides a clear and compelling case for the change, along with specific direction. This chapter outlines the key components of Change Clarity: the current problems, the inspiring vision, and the behaviour change metrics that define success.

## Using loss aversion to our advantage

With loss aversion as our default mindset, we worry about losing what we have as a result of change. However, we can also trigger openness to change by showing people the losses they are already experiencing. This means articulating current problems clearly. When people recognize what they stand to lose by maintaining the status quo, they become more willing to part ways with the present and embrace new possibilities.





## Create openness to change by amplifying the problem

Clarifying the problem before proposing the solution or change initiative in detail reduces initial resistance. If we propose a vision of the future before establishing understanding of the current problem, people default to focusing on the transition effort and risk—the 'losses' we naturally want to avert. They'll concoct all sorts of reasons not to act. To paraphrase an old adage: **"If it isn't broke, I'm not open to fixing it."**

The current-state problem is half of the equation. The other half is painting a vivid picture of the benefits and value of a desired future—a vision of successful change and the measurable outcomes that define it. This is where we switch from establishing openness to fuelling motivation for the change.

## Spark motivation to act with an appealing future-state vision

**If we don't know where we're going, we won't be motivated, we won't take the right action, and we'll never arrive.**

While understanding the problem creates openness to change, avoidance alone doesn't motivate. For that, we need an explicit and compelling target. We need precision in our vision.





## Pinpoint the target and show why it's worth it

When coupled with an understanding of current-state problems, vision clarifies precisely why we must commit to the change. Crafting and conveying the future-state vision is an opportunity to generate the minimum level of buy-in required to kick off change efforts in earnest. It should be repeated throughout the transition effort to sustain energy and progress.

With a defined vision of success, we brush aside small hurdles, knowing they are worth the effort to overcome. Without vision, any discretionary effort—the extra time, energy, and focus people must voluntarily contribute—feels too great.

**Critical insight:** Thaler and Kahneman's studies on loss aversion and the endowment effect showed we tend only to risk what we have when the potential gain has significantly greater upside. Their research revealed the approximate upside must be 2.6 times greater than the potential loss. Most people won't risk \$100 to gain another \$100 betting on the flip of a coin. But if you offered them \$260 for betting \$100 with 50/50 odds, that's the point people consider buying in.

**The upshot? If the change doesn't yield more than a >2.5x return your people won't see it as worth it, so you'd better amplify the value of success in their minds.**

The case for change depicted by your statement of the problem and the vision must be compelling. Everyone impacted must know it *and feel it*. Their perception matters and as a leader, you can shape it.

## Define success: behaviour change metrics matter most

Organisational change requires human behaviour change. New systems, processes, and other 'solutions' only deliver value if people adapt their behaviour to leverage them. This requires clarifying and tracking behaviour change metrics.

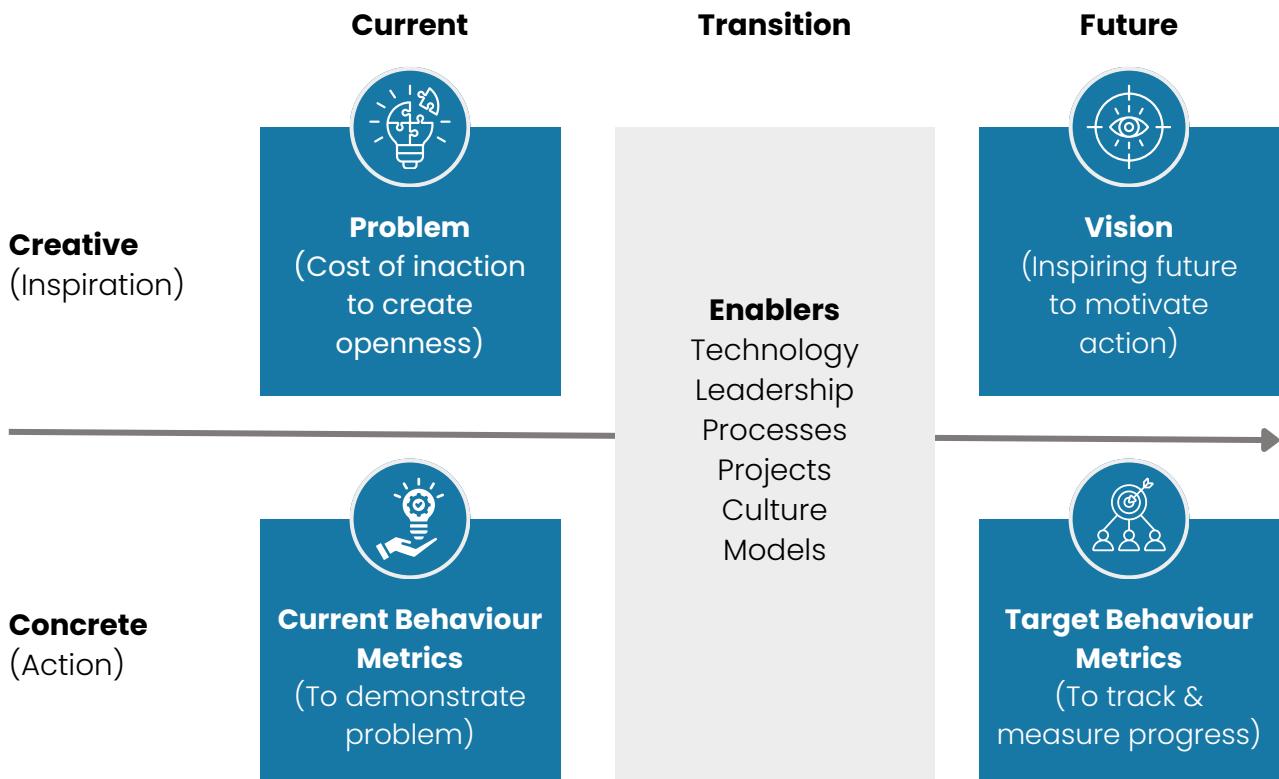
Consider this analogy: I once joined a gym with a vision of changing my level of health and fitness. When the trainer asked what fitness looked like for me, I wasn't sure. He pressed: "Do you want to lose weight? How much? Gain muscle? Improve cardio?" Without a specific metric for success, the trainer had no idea what workout plan to design. A vague goal to 'get fit' is not as useful as defining a measurable shift like 'lose 3kg of body fat in the next six weeks.' The latter demands a specific plan, leads to productive action, and can be tracked and confirmed when achieved.

Our change metrics are often absent. Other times they're simply misdirected.



## The critical mistake: tracking activity metrics instead of behaviour change outcomes

A common mistake made in large-scale organisational change is tracking only enabling tasks, solutions, and activities while failing to track and achieve explicit behaviour change metrics.



**Model 1:** A framework for change clarity. Organisations often over-index on transition enablers while losing focus on the problem to solve, the vision to strive for and the metrics to track. As a consequence, the enablers take the spotlight while the vision and target metrics are forgotten and never reached.

**We confuse transition effort for change.** Change comes later. Change is complete only when the problem is solved, the vision is a reality and behaviour change metrics are achieved and sustained. Only then is lasting value likely to be captured from the effort.



**A common mistake made in large-scale organisational change is tracking only enabling tasks, solutions, and activities while failing to track and achieve explicit behaviour change metrics.**

For example, IT project managers tend to prioritize time, cost, and solution quality as their measures of success. That's great, that's what they're trained to do. But what if no one adopts the solution? What if employees fail to prioritize learning it? What if they don't adapt their weekly habits to leverage the most valuable features?

Solution implementation metrics ensure a solution is implemented. But your 'solution' is only an enabler of change, not the change itself. Behaviour change metrics ensure necessary behaviour change occurs. In this case, both are needed to deliver change and capture business value from it.

Behaviour change metrics might include things like:

- The number or percentage of people utilising a value-generating feature of a new system
- The increased percentage of sales tasks executed per rep since implementing a new CRM
- The percentage reduction in HR enquires since implementing a self-service solution
- The reduced human error rate since implementing a new manufacturing operating model.

Ask yourself: Who in your organisation is making sure the necessary behaviour changes take place? Has it been defined in a measurable way?

## The Bottom Line

Change Clarity is more than just a powerful 'why.' It establishes a concise change strategy. It is about targeted value, not just exertion.

Without understanding the problem, we aren't open to change. Without vision, we're unmotivated. Without metrics, we can't track progress or know when we've arrived. Without all three, your change initiative may be wasted effort.



## Case Study: finding the inspirational angle

A media company I worked with was undergoing a major transformation into streaming services. The large program involved decommissioning old hardware and restructuring teams to save costs. On day one, I asked the executive sponsor why they were implementing the project.

"To cut costs," was their answer.

I knew we'd struggle to get much workforce buy-in with that messaging. I also knew from experience that cost-cutting really means reallocating investment to other areas, so I probed further to uncover what the 'cost-cutting' would enable.

"Well, it will ensure we stay in business and stay competitive for a start. It will also mean we can reallocate funding to more cutting-edge technologies and invest in diversifying our service, produce better content for customers, reskill our people, and lead the local market transition into streaming."

This was the compelling vision we needed to communicate.

What started as a cost-cutting exercise now had a broader, more inspiring vision to share. Through a blend of business analysis and strategic questioning, this exploratory conversation helped clarify what the change was truly about, so we could direct our efforts toward realizing this authentic vision—not just the enabler of 'cutting costs.'

## Key Takeaways – Clarify the Change

- Amplify the problem to create openness by helping people see what they lose through inaction
- Paint a compelling vision that is 2.6x more valuable than the perceived risk to motivate commitment
- Define behaviour change metrics alongside implementation metrics to ensure lasting value
- Communicate all three consistently throughout the transition to sustain momentum and focus



# CLARIFY THE CHANGE:

the problem, the vision and the right metrics

## *Strategize your change*

*What is the central problem to address?*

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*What will success looks like and feel like (our vision)?*

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*What are the few behaviours that, if shifted, will ensure we've succeeded? How will we measure them?*

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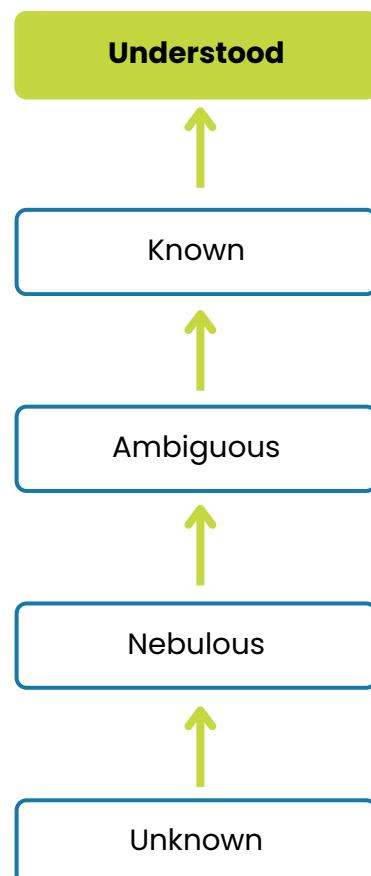
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*How will you ensure people understand the problem, the vision and the metrics that define success?*

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# CULTIVATE COMMITMENT: ENGAGE WITH PERSPECTIVES TO CONQUER RESISTANCE

*Commitment is a state of mind. It is a force multiplier. It is the antidote to fear and doubt. And it is simply a decision. As a change leader, your job is to address people's innate resistance and raise their commitment to overcome it.*

Too often senior leaders and project teams mistakenly assume that providing more information and how-to knowledge to employees means they will understand and support the change. Or worse, they assume they don't need employees' commitment; that an executive's authority means employees will simply obey and make the change successful, as if employees have no free will or independent thoughts.

Appropriate delegations of authority are vital for sound decision-making, strategy and risk management in organisations. However, authority does not drive change. Leadership does.

Without commitment, change is sluggish, like herding cats. A committed workforce on the other hand, unlocks a tidal wave of ease, momentum and is an unstoppable, transformational force.

**When we're 100% committed, we consider no alternative but to change.**

Ancient Chinese philosopher and military general Sun Tzu, author of the 1000-year-old strategy book *The Art of War*, famously instructed military commanders to "burn the boats and bridges" behind them when advancing into enemy territory so the soldiers do not think of home. Pretty terrifying, isn't it?

Now, of course I don't condone such a forceful approach in the workplace and I could argue in the modern changing world we equally need to build new boats and bridges to continually pivot to changing priorities. But what I like about this famous quote is that Sun Tzu knew the incredible power and discretionary effort that comes from being 100% committed; from seeing progress toward our aspiration as the only option. The idea today is: how can we help our people see that the status quo is simply no longer an option?

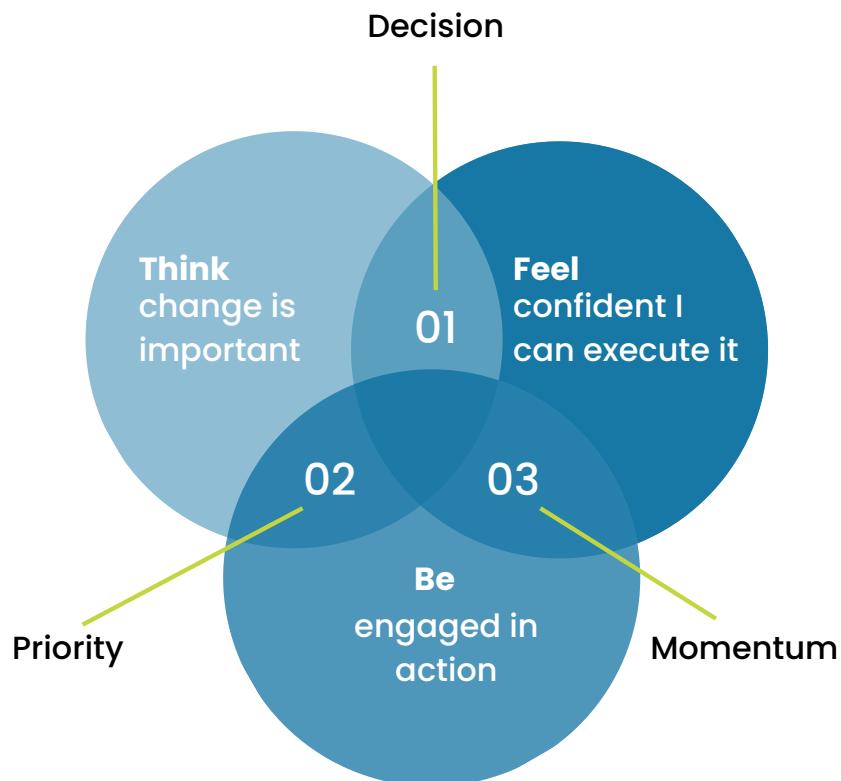




To commit and conquer our resistance we need to think the change is important, feel confident we can execute it and be engaged in collective action.

American psychologist Dr. Valerie Hoover studied ambivalence of change at an individual level: when we know we should change but don't do anything about it. She identified that to overcome our ambivalence to change we need to think the change is important and feel confident we can execute it successfully.

I like Dr. Hoover's simple thinking here. However, when reflecting upon it I wondered if we think a change is important and feel confident but are not taking any action toward it, can we really claim to be committed? Hence I added a third dimension: we need to be engaged in action. At an organisational level, this means collective action.



**Model 2:** Three elements of commitment. When we think the change is important and feel confident to tackle it, we decide to support it. When we think it is important and are engaged in action, we prioritise it. When we feel confident and are engaged in action, momentum kicks in. These elements cater to the hearts, minds and behaviours required to elevate commitment.



## Summary: How do we fuel up the three components of commitment in our people?



### Importance: communicate the problem, the vision and the measurable value of the change

The key elements of Change Clarity are central to raising the sense of importance, required for commitment. Everyone impacted needs to comprehend the problem, vision and metric shift or they won't think it is important. Deeply knowing all three raises the sense of importance of the change.



### Confidence: mitigate fears, role-model confidence, co-create plans and make progress visible

Fear and doubt emerge when departing from engrained habits. What if I can't learn the new way? What if something goes wrong? Will I still like my job? While uncertainty is the norm, a leader's role is to create certainty. We do this through viable plans; showing progress; role-modelling confidence and optimism; and placing faith in others by making them responsible for their role in the change while making it safe to be imperfect.



### Action: involve people to facilitate agency and accountability.

We can't simply push change on others – the harder you push, the more they resist. The counter to this is to facilitate agency. Offer options and delegate some control over their destiny. For example, consult influential managers throughout a change program and offer freedom to implement the change in their area in accordance with their preference.

**In organisations, change is a collective leadership game. Share the load. Do change WITH them, not TO them.**



## Key Takeaways – Cultivate Commitment

- ▶ Change is driven by conversations, not by announcements. Most communication should be dialogue not monologue, to surface and address resistance.
- ▶ Create a sense of importance by emphasising the current problem and the value of the change vision.
- ▶ Make it feel safe, role-model confidence, co-create implementation plans and make progress visible so people feel confident to tackle the change
- ▶ Develop a sense of agency and accountability by engaging people throughout the change process





# CULTIVATE COMMITMENT:

engage with perspectives to conquer resistance

## ***Strategize your change***

***What kind of resistance can we expect (circle/write)?***

Fear of personal/team loss	Lack of confidence
Current capability or fear of failure	Deeply engrained habits
Trust in leadership	Competing priorities
Recency bias (track record)	Uninspiring vision
Other:	Group/self identity loss

***Importance:*** why is the status quo not an option? Why is the change so valuable?

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***Confidence:*** how can we make change feel safe for people and provide support to raise confidence?

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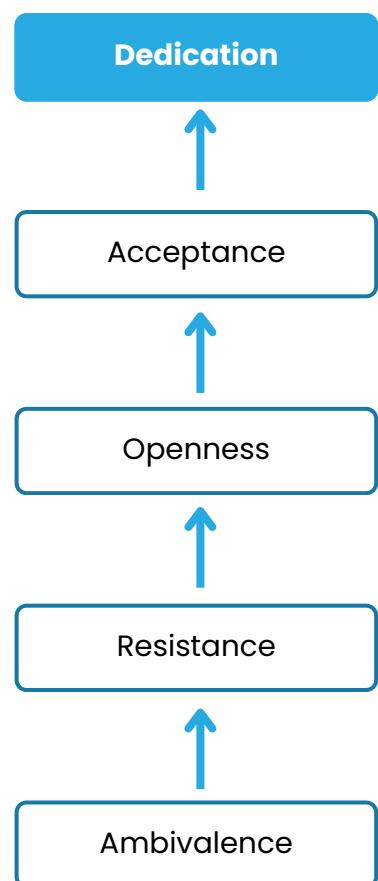
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***Engage in action:*** how can we involve others to create a sense of agency and ownership of the change?

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# MASTER THE CAPABILITIES: HABITUAL PRACTICE & GUIDANCE FOR MASTERY

**Training alone doesn't cut it. Knowledge is just one step. You must bridge the knowing-doing gap. For significant changes, mastery takes months, with support needed along the way.**

Reliance on formal, knowledge-based readiness training isn't enough during change. People leaders must facilitate habitual skill development & guidance to drive mastery and a learning culture. MIT Sloan Management Review found that the biggest predictor of successful learning cultures was not just access to training but whether senior leaders were actively involved as coaches and capability-builders.

***"Leaders who teach, rather than delegate learning, create environments where behavioural capability change becomes possible."***

***- Saabye and Kristensen, MIT Sloan Review, 2021***

This reinforces the need for a staged, supported journey. Capability is not delivered once; it is developed, practiced, and reinforced over time. This is why people leaders across your business are best-placed to support this.

It should be noted too that mastering the capabilities delivers more than practical skill outcomes. Capability strengthens commitment. When we're capable, we're confident we can tackle the change, which is one of the three ingredients of commitment. Capability development mitigates fear and uncertainty thereby helping overcome other forms of resistance like engrained habits and loss aversion.

Leaders should be assigned responsibility and equipped with the mindset and skills to facilitate capability growth. The Capability Ladder model outlined on the next page frames the learner's journey, with associated activities and outcomes at each stage. When managers know this and practice facilitating the journey for their people, mastery is assured and change is more likely.



### ***Implications for change leaders: capability-building must be:***

- 1. Role-specific:** Generic training is rarely sufficient. Tailor by job family, maturity level, and current capability
- 2. Behaviourally focused:** Define the observable behaviours you want to shift, then train, coach, and support them in context.
- 3. Scaffolded:** Move people from knowledge → practice → feedback → reflection → habit.
- 4. Coached, not just trained:** Peer coaching, stretch assignments, reflective dialogue, and shadowing are often more effective than workshops alone.
- 5. Measured:** Use pre/post self-assessments, 360s, manager feedback, and business KPIs to track actual behaviour change.

## **A model for the learner's capability journey through change**

When implementing employee readiness activities for large-scale change and transformation initiatives, the spotlight tends to shine on knowledge-building through once-off training events like workshops, virtual webinars and web-based training. The assumption is once impacted employees are trained, they will understand what to do and immediately do it.

However, significant change requires a learning process that takes months. Throughout the learning process, risks emerge in the form of employee resistance when applying the learning is challenging or time-consuming and short-cuts or avoidance set in.

While change project teams and specialist learning and development teams can provide learning content and structure, leaders throughout your organisation should facilitate the employee learning process to ensure progress to mastery.



## Level 1: The novice stage

We all start here. Whether it's learning a new system at work, stepping into a new role, or even picking up a new hobby like an instrument or a sport, we begin as novices. This is the stage where everything is new and unfamiliar.

## Level 2: Becoming knowledgeable

As we gain some exposure, we reach the knowledgeable stage. Maybe we've read a book, attended a training, or had someone show us the ropes. At this point, we have some "how-to" knowledge, but we're not yet fully skilled.



## Level 3: Developing skills

Think of learning a new capability like learning a golf swing. At first, it's all about understanding the mechanics—how to hold the club, how to stand, the theory behind the swing. You can get that from a YouTube video. But that's just knowledge. To become skilful, you have to practice that swing out on the course, over and over again. It's the repetition and the real-world application that transform that knowledge into skill.

## Level 4: Forming habits

If we push through the resistance and keep practicing, the skill becomes a habit. Just like a golfer who no longer overthinks every swing, we start performing the new behaviour more naturally and consistently. Our capabilities strengthen, and the new behaviour starts to feel like second nature.

## Level 5: Achieving mastery

Finally, we reach mastery. At this stage, the behaviour is as natural as a seasoned golfer's swing. We no longer need constant refreshers or support. We've fully integrated the new capability into how we operate.

## Key Takeaways – Master the Capabilities

- ▶ Knowledge-based training alone is usually inadequate. Create a multi-month learning path to mastery.
- ▶ Managers play an important role of learning facilitator, ensuring learning is prioritised and commitment sustained during the discomfort of skill-building.
- ▶ Managers are also positioned to facilitate individualised learning support, ensuring all capability levels are catered for in their team.



# MASTER THE CAPABILITIES:

facilitate habitual practice & guidance for mastery

## *Strategize your change*

What fresh **knowledge** must be acquired, from where?

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How will we facilitate ongoing practice, reflection and feedback, to build **skills**?

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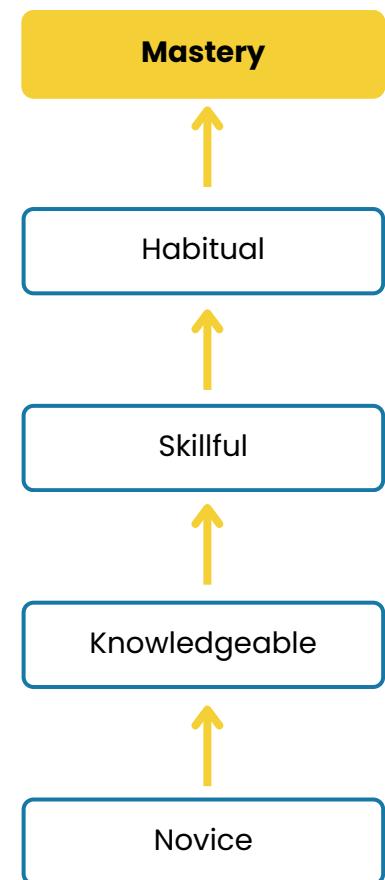
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What **barriers** may prevent ongoing capability development up to mastery and how can we overcome them?

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# FREE UP CAPACITY FOR CHANGE: MAKE ROOM TO MOVE

In any organisation embarking on change, the most overlooked, but absolutely essential, resource is capacity. Not money. Not talent. Not vision. In the context of change, capacity is about Time and Prioritisation.

Change is too demanding to be something you do on top of everything else. Too often change is viewed as a side-project squeezed into the margins of everyday activities. And it doesn't happen just because executive orders dictate to simply "try harder." Change demands focus. Energy. Attention. It demands that we make space for it to happen.

*The illusion of infinite capacity kills more change projects than anything.*

## The bucket is already full

Imagine capacity as a bucket. That bucket is already filled to the brim with existing responsibilities, routines, metrics, meetings, and expectations. When leaders announce a new change initiative, it's like trying to pour more water into a full bucket. You can't. It spills over. And in practice, what spills is usually the change effort itself; left undone, deprioritised, or quietly resisted.



Most leaders vastly underestimate this. They believe they can just add change to the top of the pile. But unless something comes out of the bucket, nothing meaningful can go into it.

Creating capacity for change starts with a deliberate act of subtraction.



## Subtraction is good strategy

Steve Jobs once said, “**People think focus means saying yes to the thing you’ve got to focus on. But that’s not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas.**” This from a founder-CEO of one of the most successful companies in history, who have always centred their strategy around one central product.

The same is true for change. Saying yes to a transformation means saying no to some current priorities, even if they’re familiar, habitual, or comfortable.

This subtraction can take many forms:

- ▶ **Pausing** low-impact, pet-projects
- ▶ **Decommissioning** legacy procedures and reporting
- ▶ **Reducing** recurring meetings
- ▶ **Deliberately deferring** non-essential initiatives
- ▶ **Reassigning or restructuring** roles to free up capacity

Freeing up capacity for change is about making conscious choices about what matters most right now. **Sacrifice is inherent in change.** We can’t adopt the new until we ditch the old. And transition requires even greater, albeit temporary sacrifice. Otherwise, you force people to choose between the change effort and everything else they’re being measured on. And when that happens, change tends to lose in favour of the path of lesser resistance.

## Making space is an act of leadership

In their research on organisational change, Heracleous and Barrett (2001) describe successful change as a discursive strategy, where leaders don’t just communicate a new vision, they reshape the organisational narrative and structure to make that vision possible. In other words, change isn’t only about adding something new. It’s about subtracting what no longer fits.

Yet most leaders fail to ask the crucial question:

*“What are we willing to take off people’s plates to make this work?”*

Too often, the answer is “*nothing*.” This means the change effort becomes the 11th priority on a list of 10, destined to die a quiet, slow and costly death.



## Helping people focus

In his book *Essentialism*, Greg McKeown argues that **success doesn't come from doing more. It comes from doing less, but better**. The same principle applies to organisational change. If everything is a priority, nothing truly is. Most organisations today fail dismally at this. They've perpetually loaded more and more into the organisational system which is like adding more traffic into an already congested road until it becomes gridlocked. It's no wonder that most change efforts are delayed, are chaotic or simply fail to succeed.

If leaders don't clarify priorities and assertively clear the way, people default to the familiar. They go back to business-as-usual. The neural pathway exists in their brain for the familiar, so that's where they know how to succeed. Comparatively, **change is the harder thing and feels like the 'extra' work; something to do if time allows (which it never does)**.

That's why effective change leaders don't just communicate the vision. They operationalise it:

- ▶ They adjust performance metrics.
- ▶ They change how time is allocated.
- ▶ They reshape workflows and rituals.
- ▶ They hold space for the messiness of learning.

Executives and managers must be clear about what to stop, what to focus on, and how to structure time for new behaviour to take root. They must provide prioritisation guidance to clear roadblocks and excuses.

## You can't delegate prioritisation in transformative times

Even in agile or decentralised organisations, the responsibility to create capacity for change starts at the top. As an executive, if you ask managers to lead transformation without showing them what to take off their team's plate, you get snagged. Accelerating transformation necessitates changes to systems, incentives and workloads, to free up capacity. This is a somewhat top-down aspect of transformation, where managers and employees are looking to executives to make decisions that re-direct priorities.

The most effective leaders behave similarly to personal trainers. They customise plans. They observe and provide feedback. They change the routine. They adjust the weight to suit individuals. They shorten the set so form improves.



## Make room or stay stuck

If your organisation is struggling to change, peer inside the bucket. Has anything been poured out to make room for what's being poured in?

Change doesn't stick because you said it matters. It sticks when you make space for people to live it.

Change deserves space in the schedule.

## Key Takeaways – Free Up Capacity

- ▶ Subtract to add – decisively pause, stall and abort lower priority work to make way for high priority changes
- ▶ As executives and senior managers, if you don't prioritise for your people, they will decide their own priorities (and it may not be what is right for the organisation)
- ▶ Change is equally about sacrifice and letting go as it is about embracing the new. Managers need the awareness and leadership to help their people with this.





# FREE UP CAPACITY

prioritise time & resources to transition & embed

## *Strategize your change*

**When** will we tackle the transition effort and **how much** time will it take?

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What must we **sacrifice** or say no to, to clear the way?

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What **limiting beliefs** might prevent us prioritizing the change effort?

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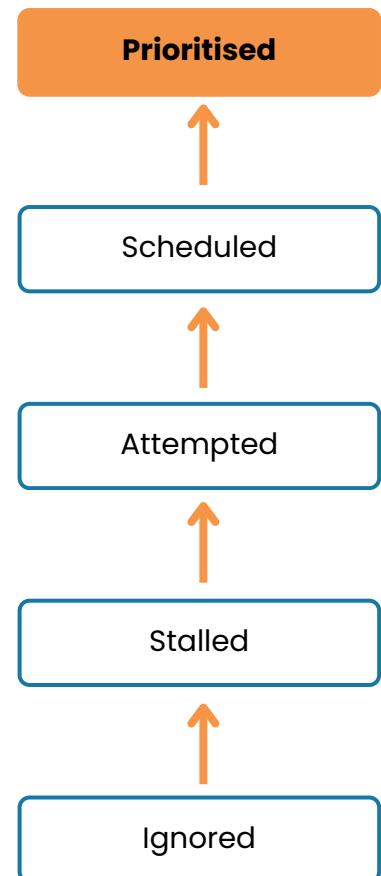
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What **tangible obstacles** might get in our way?

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# CONSCIENTIOUSLY FOLLOW THROUGH TO EMBED CHANGE

In the journey of mastering change, one of the most overlooked but essential phases is what happens after the initial implementation. It's one thing to launch a new system, roll out a new process, or announce a cultural shift. It's quite another to ensure that this change actually takes root and becomes the new normal in people's day-to-day behaviours.

## Lead beyond transition to lock in new habits

When we talk about embedding change, we're talking about moving beyond just the transition phase. Transition is that initial period where everyone is trying to get used to the new way of doing things. But to truly succeed, we need to focus on how to turn those new actions into ingrained habits. This is where conscientious follow-through comes in. Without it, the initial enthusiasm can fade, and people may revert to old ways.

## The importance of behaviour change metrics

To ensure that change is genuinely happening, we need to measure it. Think of it like a fitness journey. If your goal is to lose a certain amount of weight or to exercise three to four times a week, you don't just rely on memory or guesswork. You track your progress with specific metrics: the number of workouts, the weight lost, the time spent at a target heart rate. In the same way, in an organisational change, we need behaviour change metrics. Are people using the new system? Are they adopting the new processes? Are they engaging with all the features, or are they slipping back into old habits? How do we know? By creating dashboards and tracking these indicators, we can see whether the change is truly taking hold. **For a high likelihood of sticking the change, it should be tracked for several months.** Only then can you be confident it has become the new normal.

Research supports this need for follow-through. Studies have shown that a significant percentage of organisational changes falter not during the initial rollout, but afterwards, when the ongoing support and reinforcement is missing. Harvard research points out that many changes fail simply because organisations stop paying attention after the go-live date (HBR: Change Management Needs to Change, 2013). The lesson? Sustained attention to behaviour change is crucial.



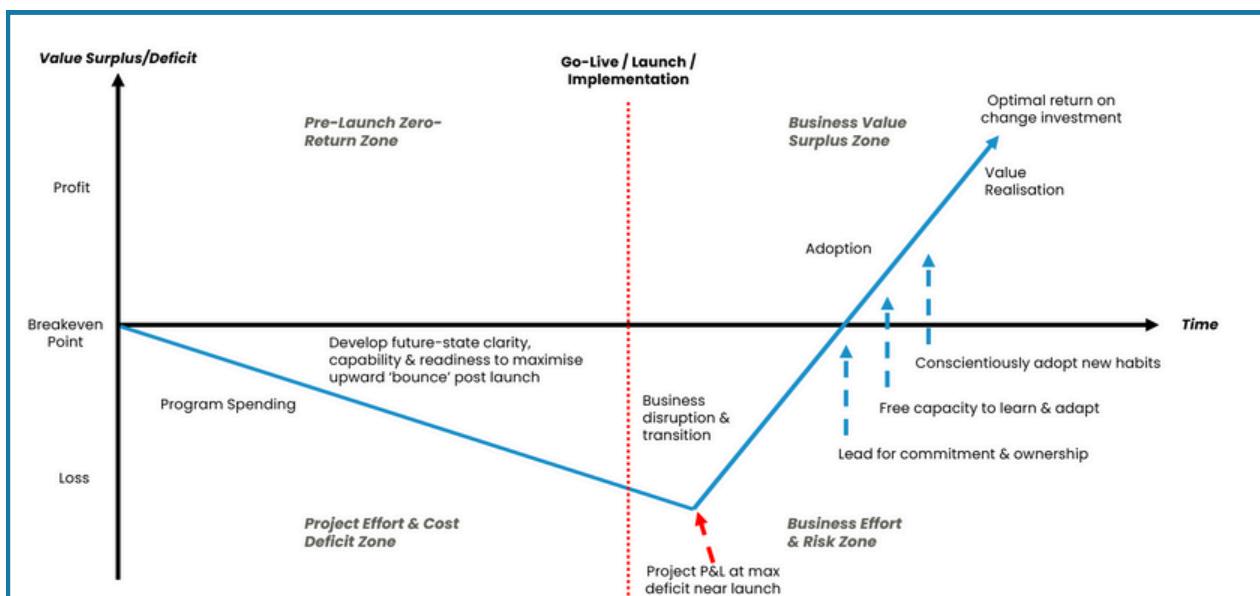
## Sustain effort for return on change investment

Finally, when it comes to organisational change, real success isn't about declaring victory as soon as the change is "live." In fact, **at the point of go-live, you're at significant financial deficit.** This is the point at which maximum project dollars and effort have been spent but no business value has been returned yet (refer to the model below, *The Profit and Loss Progression of Change Programs*). When leading a change program, this is the point where a '**return on change investment**' (ROCI) mindset comes into its own. Without a conscientious drive to embed change at this point, you risk wasting all that prior investment or time, money, blood, sweat and tears.

Conscientiously embedding change is about ensuring new ways of working become the norm. Too often, companies celebrate too early. They think the job is done when the new software is launched or the new structure is announced. The real measure of success is whether people continue to embrace and sustain the associated new ways of working over time.

Humans find starting things easy. It's this later consolidation of initial effort, pushing past our innate psychological resistance and the competing priorities on our plate, to level-up to a new normal that we find much harder. This period may require the greatest change leadership effort to ensure the change is truly embedded.

In summary, **embedding change is about moving from transition to habit**, using behaviour metrics to guide us, and maintaining a conscientious follow-through. By doing so, we ensure that change isn't just a transitional moment in time but a lasting transformation.



**Model: The P&L Progression of Change Programs**



### ***Case study: architecting conscientious follow-through***

An organisation asked me to investigate a problematic project. They just implemented a new system where employees and managers were required to manage employee leave requests and approvals in the system, independent of HR. They were hearing reports that some teams were using it but others weren't.

I suggested getting system data to identify patterns of adoption. I also spoke to regional managers and the HR team. Some managers told me their people were 'too busy' to attend the required training. I also discovered two helpful HR managers were still accepting the old paper-based leave request forms. They hadn't exactly "burned the boats and bridges!"

I advised the COO to schedule more training and explain to all managers that the paper-based forms would no longer be accepted for leave requests after the end of next month. The training was attended and the subsequent data showed full adoption.





## Common change errors that cost organisations millions in lost benefits and wasted capital investment

While there can be many reasons why change fails, in my experience the following bad change habits are all-too-common. Watch out for them!

### The seven deadly sins of poor organisational change that have devastating consequences

- #1 Distributing 'information', assuming it will miraculously motivate employees for the change effort (it never does).
- #2 Making declarative change announcements before engaging employees to understand the problem and build openness to addressing it (the more you push the harder they resist).
- #3 Over-reliance on once-off training to build capability and failing to provide ongoing learning support and monitoring (training mostly builds know-how only, not skills and habit).
- #4 Mistaking implementation of a system or process for the occurrence of change and value creation (change and value creation occurs only when people adopt and adapt).
- #5 Over-burdening employees with excessive concurrent changes, leading to distillation of focus, one or more failures, and wasted effort and investment.
- #6 Failing to help employees prioritise, leading to overload and change fatigue. Failing to clear the way for change means employees either drop the ball or burnout (and fail either way).
- #7 Thinking organisational change projects are only about methodology and templates, rather than influencing, monitoring and measuring human behaviour change.



## Key Takeaways – Conscientiously Follow Through to Embed Change

- ▶ Any solution you implement is only valuable if people understand it, want to use it and are supported to do so until it's the new normal.
- ▶ Change is not just about transition. It's about re-designing and locking in new habits across the workforce.
- ▶ Adoption and embedding of new ways of working is the link between your change investment and the benefits that make the effort worthwhile





# CONSCIENTIOUSLY EMBED:

follow through until it is the new normal

## *Strategize your change*

*How and when will we **track progress** of our behavioural metrics?*

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*What do the **new routine and habits** look like, to sustain the change as a new normal?*

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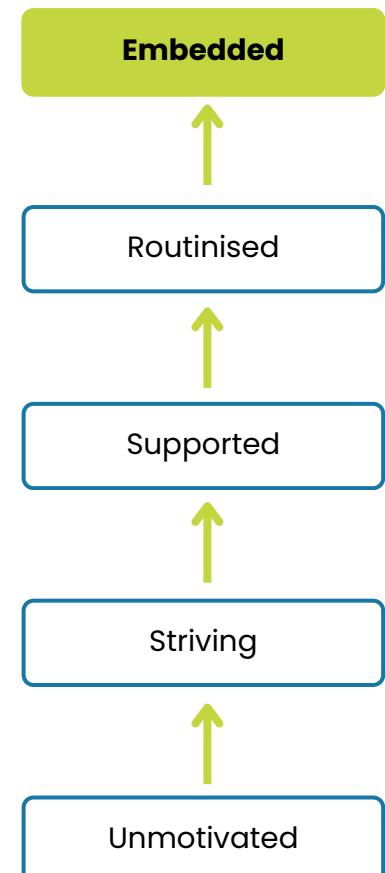
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*What **behaviour-reinforcing mechanisms** can we put in place to sustain and embed the change, until its the new normal?*

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# CONCLUSION

You don't just need change management. You need change leadership.

## Making change inevitable

While humans are somewhat resistant to change by nature, leaders must take responsibility to help them overcome it. That is, if you want to keep up with the pace of change and out-compete competitors. Too often organisational leaders misunderstand what humans actually need in order to change successfully.

You now have a framework that respects the reality of human psychology instead of fighting against it. The How-to-Change-Anything model is built from evidence-based research combined with thousands of hours working alongside leaders like you who were wrestling with the messy, human side of transformation.

When you clarify what you're really solving, cultivate genuine commitment instead of demanding compliance, build capabilities over time rather than through once-off training, free up actual capacity instead of piling change on top of everything else, and follow through until new behaviours stick, change stops being a battle. It becomes momentum. It becomes a rhythm. It becomes part of the culture.

The executives I've helped treat change as more than a project with a go-live date. They treat it as a leadership capability that needs to be distributed throughout their entire management structure and employee culture. Because here's the truth: your project team can implement a solution, but only your people leaders can help humans navigate the discomfort of changing how they work.

The organisations that thrive in our rapidly shifting world aren't the ones with the best strategies on paper. They're the ones whose leaders understand how to move people from resistance to commitment, from knowledge to mastery, from transition to transformation.

This playbook gives you the map. The journey is yours. But you don't need to do it alone. I can help equip your managers with these insights and skills, apply them to your next initiative, and watch what becomes possible when you finally work with human nature instead of against it.

The question isn't whether change is hard. It is. The question is: are you prepared to lead it properly?

**Imagine if every executive and manager across your organisation understood change resistance and applied the principles and practices of the How to Change Anything model? I can help you make it happen. Let's talk.**



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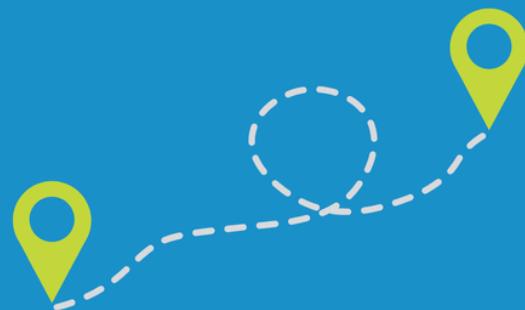
## COMING SOON...

Keep an eye out for Huw's forthcoming book in 2026.

# HOW TO CHANGE ANYTHING

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Without the friction,  
fatigue and failures



HUW THOMAS



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