



How to Lead Change

Modern Practices
for Leading People
Through Change

AL DEA | FOUNDER, THE EDGE OF WORK

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Introduction

For most of my career, I've worked at the intersection of change, people, and organizations.

I started in management consulting, supporting Fortune 500 companies through change management initiatives, with a focus on the human side of major technology transformations. I later worked in the software industry with organizations navigating digital transformations. From there, I became a leadership coach, helping hundreds of leaders navigate big transitions: stepping into leadership for the first time, taking on new remits, or expanding into bigger, more complex roles.

Today, I run [The Edge of Work](#), a leadership training and speaking business, and host The Edge of Work Podcast, where I talk with leaders who are either navigating change themselves or responsible for leading change inside their organizations.


I've lived through plenty of change, too. I've changed careers at least three times. At one point, I left the corporate world, became an entrepreneur, moved cities, and got engaged, all within six months.

I don't love change. But after years of studying it and living through it, I've developed a holistic perspective on what change requires from people and leaders. And that's what makes this moment feel especially important.

Right now, leaders and employees across industries, roles, and functions are experiencing constant change. Sometimes change is driven by advances in technology like AI. Other times it's market shifts, customer expectations, organizational restructuring, or all of the above all at once. What I've learned from my work and conversations is that the ability to lead change and respond to uncertainty is no longer a nice-to-have skill. It's becoming a core leadership capability. Most leaders were never taught this capability, nor were they given the tools to approach change in a thoughtful, human-centered way.

Many of the challenges leaders face today feel different in scale, speed, and ambiguity than what came before. What is clear is that leadership still matters. Leaders who can navigate uncertainty, make thoughtful choices, and help others move through change are the difference between organizations that merely survive and those that thrive.

I put together this guide to help leaders like you better understand what it takes to lead change in the modern workplace. It offers a practical lens for thinking about change today, how humans respond to it, where change efforts commonly break down, and what leaders can do differently to improve their chances of success. This guide draws from my experience as well as insights from [*The Edge of Work Podcast*](#) and conversations with hundreds of leaders leading real



What is clear is that leadership still matters.



PwC found

62%

of workers report the pace of change has increased over the past 12 months

53%

say there is simply too much change happening

The Realities of Change in Today's Workplace

Change is a constant in today's workplace. Whether you're leading a formal change initiative, driving a transformation project, helping your team adopt new ways of working (including AI), or simply trying to improve an existing process or program, the reality is the same: most employees are responsible and tasked with leading change, whether you realize it or not. The cumulative effect of multiple, overlapping shifts can feel overwhelming, especially for employees who are asked to constantly adapt while still delivering results.

It may sound familiar, even trite, to say that the pace of change is accelerating, but employee sentiment supports it. PwC found that 62% of workers report the pace of change has increased over the past 12 months, and 53% say there is simply too much change happening.

Through conversations on *The Edge of Work Podcast* with founders, organizational leaders, authors, and researchers, and through my experience speaking and consulting on this topic with organizations, I've seen this reality up close.

So What's Different in 2026?

Change isn't new; organizations and leaders have had to manage change forever. But today's leaders repeatedly tell me that the challenges related to current changes feel overwhelming and uniquely tied to this moment. So for leaders in 2026, what makes leading change so unique and challenging?

Multiple major changes happening at once

Change isn't just constant; it's compounding. Many organizations are juggling multiple enterprise-wide initiatives simultaneously or rolling them out in rapid-fire succession. Overlapping "always-on" change creates a significant emotional and cognitive load, leaving leaders stretched thin and employees unsettled.

Managing change in the short and long term

Some change initiatives are urgent and need to be dealt with immediately for the health of the organization. Other change initiatives are long term or bigger picture. These are still important, but the result may not be immediately noticeable.

General expectation to do the same (or more) with less

Many organizations have to do more with less given economic conditions. Because change takes resources, many leaders are put in positions where they are having to scrape by to achieve the ambiguous goals that continue to rise.

Living in a liminal space

Change feels especially hard right now because we're caught in a liminal space between two worlds. On one side is the present: systems and processes that are still operating, but are outdated and increasingly misaligned with how work actually needs to happen. On the other side is a future we can sense but not yet fully see. New technologies like AI promise powerful new ways of working, but the path forward is unclear and the destination isn't fully formed. Living between what no longer works and what isn't quite ready makes it hard to know where to move or what to do next. We can feel that change is happening, but the "what" and the "how" are still coming into focus.





Where Change Efforts Fall Short

Let's be honest: most of us have lived through a change that didn't work as intended. The aspiration to change is often compelling, but the lived reality rarely looks as good as the brochure. It's a bit like a vacation rental; what's promised in the ad doesn't always match reality once you arrive.

When I talk with leaders about change initiatives that have gone off the rails, a consistent set of pitfalls shows up again and again. These aren't failures of intent. They're failures of execution, design, and most often, human understanding.

Aspirational change management frameworks

Change management frameworks and methodologies can be incredibly useful—especially for large, complex initiatives that require coordination across many people and teams. The challenge arises when frameworks remain aspirational rather than practical.

Methodologies don't always reflect how change actually unfolds in day-to-day work. Employees sometimes struggle to translate frameworks into action. Change isn't successful when a model says it is; it's successful when people consistently behave differently in their roles.

Formulaic approaches that ignore the human side

Change doesn't succeed in a spreadsheet row; it succeeds when people believe in what they're doing enough to act differently. Because change is personal, people experience it in deeply uneven ways. When leaders don't make space for emotion, uncertainty, and sense-making, they strip the effort of its human core.

The WIIFM trap ("What's In It for Me")

Most change efforts emphasize the importance of clearly articulating the benefits to those affected, and that's not wrong. But leaders often underestimate how easily this can backfire.

Several leaders described situations where "what's in it for me" messaging felt bolted on, overly polished, or simply untrue. When the benefits are exaggerated, framed only from the organization's perspective, or disconnected from people's lived reality, trust erodes quickly. Authenticity matters. Compliance Over Commitment.

Many leaders described environments where change was rolled out through directives, new systems, and policies with minimal dialogue or involvement. The result was predictable: checkbox adoption at best, quiet resistance at worst. Commitment takes longer to build, but it creates energy, ownership, and durability.

The Say/Do Gap

Few things undermine change faster than misalignment between what leaders say and what they do. When stated priorities don't match behaviors, incentives, or decisions, people notice. Employees don't just listen to leaders, they watch them. When actions contradict the message, the signal is loud and credibility evaporates.



Human Principles of Change

Recognizing where past change efforts have fallen short is just the start. To lead change effectively, we also need a clear perspective on what needs to be accounted for. Most change efforts fail not because of a flawed strategy, but because they underestimate what's required of the people involved: to think differently first, and then behave differently over time. Decades of research in psychology and science point to a set of enduring principles about how people experience uncertainty, motivation, and adaptation. When leaders understand and intentionally work with these principles, they dramatically increase the odds that change will take hold.

Real change doesn't happen because we announce a new strategy or roll out a new program. It happens when people begin making different choices, first in how they interpret what's happening, and eventually in how they act. If we want change to stick, and avoid the pitfalls that derail most initiatives, we have to start with a simple truth: human beings haven't actually changed all that much.

Any time you're leading change, before you launch it, as you design it, and in every interaction where you ask people to think or work differently, it helps to ground yourself in a few core principles about how humans actually experience change.

PRINCIPLE NO. 1

Humans are wired to survive

The *threat* of change impacts our thinking, beliefs, and behavior. We can acknowledge our hardwired stress response while developing tools to steady ourselves in the face of uncertainty. Even necessary change is difficult because humans aren't wired for logic. We're wired to survive.

The brain's primary job is prediction and protection. We constantly scan our environment for potential threats, trying to maintain safety, certainty, and control. When something disrupts that sense of predictability, like a change in priorities, processes, roles, or expectations, the brain doesn't first ask, "*Does this make sense?*" It asks, "*Is this safe?*"

In today's workplace, threats are rarely physical. Instead, they show up as ambiguity, loss of control, unclear expectations, or fear of falling behind. Even positive or rational changes can trigger a stress response simply because they introduce uncertainty. When that happens, people become more cautious. Cognitive capacity narrows, creativity drops, and decision-making becomes more reactive. What looks like resistance is often a nervous system trying to regain stability.

PRINCIPLE NO. 2

What isn't changing matters as much as what is

In how we talk about change, we often default to phrases like "*change is constant,*" "*the only constant is change,*" or "*change is an opportunity.*" Though there's truth in these platitudes, they can still be hard for people to take when uncertainty is high.

In times of uncertainty, our brains crave predictability. Signals of stability and reliability anchor us and create psychological safety. They calm the brain's threat response and help people re-engage, focus, and move forward.

During times of uncertainty, it is also important to name what's not changing. What remains constant? What can people still count on? Where is there continuity amid disruption? Clarity is a critical part of designing change that works for humans.

PRINCIPLE NO. 3

Change can be hard, and people can change

At first glance, this feels like a contradiction: change is hard, and people are capable of change. You and I are living proof that both can be true. Even when change is difficult or unwelcome, we still have the ability to grow, adapt, and move forward. Neuroscience shows us this through the concept of neuroplasticity. Our brains are not fixed. We're constantly forming new connections, developing new patterns, and building new habits. With intentional practice, support, and repetition, we can adapt. Humans are incredibly resilient. Just think of all the challenges and changes we've all already faced.

PRINCIPLE NO. 4

Agency makes change easier to embrace

Change is often communicated through clear steps, instructions, or expectations. But clarity alone doesn't drive engagement. People also need a sense of agency. Self-Determination Theory tells us that human motivation is driven by three core needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When change is designed in a way that supports autonomy, by giving people voice, choice, and room to exercise judgment, it creates ownership instead of compliance. When people feel empowered by clear expectations and support, they're more willing to try. And when change happens in a relational context, where people feel respected and included, commitment grows.

Agency is what brings these needs to life. Even small opportunities for input, flexibility, or application of expertise can dramatically shift how change is experienced. When people feel like they are participating in a change rather than having it done to them, they bring more energy, creativity, and resilience. Leaders who invite people into change, rather than managing them into agreement, create the conditions for motivation that lasts, and change that actually sticks.

Practices for Leading Change

When leaders design and lead change with human principles in mind, they significantly increase the likelihood that change will actually take hold. That said, no single framework, playbook, or methodology will magically make change easy in a constantly shifting workplace. What does help are intentional, repeatable practices.

These practices are not foolproof plans or recipes. They're practical approaches you can return to that increase trust, clarity, and momentum, and improve your odds of leading change that people don't just comply with, but actually adopt.

PRACTICE NO. 1

Start small with momentum and interest

When leaders are trying to drive change, there's a strong temptation to start big—a bold mandate, a flashy initiative, or a company-wide announcement. On the surface, that makes sense. Big change feels like it deserves a big launch. But in practice, change is almost always more effective when it starts small.

Instead of starting with everyone, start where there is already momentum and interest. People who are already open, curious, or experimenting are far easier to work with than skeptics. Trying to convince people who are resistant can quickly drain time, energy, and political capital—often before you have anything tangible to show for it.

Research on social movements suggests that once roughly 20–25% of a group adopts a new behavior, it begins to spread more naturally. Early adopters help create proof. They generate stories, examples, and momentum that make the change feel real rather than theoretical.

Take the time to map who is already leaning in. Who are the early adopters? Who's experimenting on their own? Who's curious, even if they're not fully bought in? These are your champions. Your job is to invest in them, amplify what they're doing, provide resources, remove friction, and encourage them to go further. Look for early wins, even small ones, and make them visible so others can see what's possible.

PRACTICE NO. 2

Be Clear (and consistent) about what's staying the same

Change feels threatening because it disrupts our brain's need for predictability. We're wired for survival, not ambiguity. We naturally look for stability when things feel uncertain. It's often overlooked that in most change efforts a lot usually stays the same. When leaders focus only on what's new or different, people can start to feel like the ground beneath them is constantly shifting.

Being explicit and consistent about what is staying the same helps people feel stable and grounded. Something familiar helps people adapt to what's new. Naming what remains stable—values, goals, priorities, relationships, or decision-making norms—creates a sense of continuity.

Here's a simple and powerful way to illustrate stability during times of change. Make a two-column list. On one side, clearly outline what's changing. On the other, name what's staying the same. Do this before you launch the change, and revisit it regularly. Share it in team meetings, updates, and informal conversations. As things evolve, update what you know in real time.

Remember to be honest about what you don't know. Being open helps people orient themselves and builds trust. Communicating uncertainty can help reduce anxiety far more than pretending you've got it all figured out. Change doesn't require perfect certainty, but it does require a sense of footing. Being clear about what's staying the same, and honest about what's still unfolding—gives people exactly that.

PRACTICE NO. 3

Look for contributions, not for compliance

The default approach to change is often to rely on mandates, telling people what they need to do, how to do it, and by when. Sometimes mandates are unavoidable, but they tend to produce compliance rather than commitment. Compliance is surface-level box-checking; commitment reflects true buy-in and sustained behavior change.

Most of us don't love being told what to do. Reactance theory explains this well: when people feel forced into something, or feel like their choices are being taken away, they often push back, not because the change is bad or irrational, but because it threatens their sense of autonomy and control. When employees are told they must change how they work, resistance often kicks in, not because the change doesn't make sense, but because it feels like they didn't have a say. Even the most reasonable change can trigger defensiveness when people feel unheard, excluded, or worried about their own survival.

Now, to be clear, there will be times when you have to tell people what needs to change. But even in those moments, leaders still have choices in how they communicate and how they engage people—choices that can help employees feel seen, heard, and respected. Psychology also gives us the IKEA effect, which shows that people place more value on things they help build themselves, even if the final product isn't perfect. When people feel they had a hand in shaping a change—by contributing ideas, helping design parts of it, or taking ownership of specific pieces—they're far more likely to support it and stick with it. Change stops being something that's done to them and starts becoming something they're helping create.

If you want to invite real contribution, focus on three things. First, constraints. Counterintuitive as it sounds, constraints help people be more creative. A blank canvas can be paralyzing. Being clear about where you want input, and where you don't, gives people something to react to and build from.

Second, highlight what's working. During change, wins and learnings are fuel. Take the time to surface what's going well, share examples, and invite people to talk about what they're doing so others can learn from it.

And third, strengths. Everyone brings something different to the table. When you connect the change to what people are already good at, you're not just increasing the odds of success, you're increasing engagement. People are far more willing to participate when they can show up as their best selves.

PRACTICE NO. 4

Practice aligning say/do/reward (credibility loop)

Change almost never happens overnight. More often, it takes hold gradually as people adopt a new way of thinking, which then shows up in different behaviors, practices, and ways of working over time. But that kind of shift doesn't usually happen naturally—at least not at scale. While a small group of people may immediately lean into a change, most people are looking for signals and reinforcement to help them understand what the change really means and what's expected of them in practice.

What I call the “Credibility Loop” is about consistency across three powerful levers you have when leading change. The first lever is what you say: the messages you communicate, the language you use, and how clearly and consistently you reinforce what's changing and why. The second is what you do: the actions and behaviors you model yourself. People pay close attention to what leaders actually do, not just what they say they value. And the third, often the most underestimated lever, is what you reward: the behaviors you recognize, praise, support, and elevate as examples of success.

Simply telling people about a change isn't enough. If employees hear one thing but observe something else, the change quickly loses credibility. This isn't just about “walking the talk.” Humans look to their environment for cues about how to survive and thrive. Our leaders' actions help us to know what's safe and what will be rewarded. That's why what you do matters so much.

When leaders intentionally reward behaviors aligned with the change, through recognition, visibility, encouragement, or support, they send a powerful signal. The more that you start to reward positive behavior, the quicker change catches on. The real power of the Credibility Loop comes from alignment and consistency over time. When what you say, what you do, and what you reward all point in the same direction, people don't just understand the change intellectually, they start to believe it. And belief is what drives action.

PRACTICE NO. 5

Meet people where they are (and bring them on the journey)

In any change effort, how someone experiences that change is shaped by their role, their history, and what's at stake for them. Yes, processes, frameworks, and steps can help manage change at a macro level. But at a human level, everyone experiences change differently. A new opportunity for one person might feel like a loss to another. When a change effort implicitly calls into question who people are, what they're good at, or why they matter, leaders aren't just managing a process, they're navigating a threat to identity. These threats are rarely spoken out loud. They're emotionally charged and often invisible. As a result, leaders may misinterpret resistance as stubbornness or lack of buy-in, when it's actually a very rational attempt to preserve dignity, competence, and belonging.

What's often missing in change efforts is personalization. While you can standardize a change process, the experience of change is never uniform. If you want real results, you have to work with that reality, not against it. Frameworks are useful, but how individuals experience change, and what motivates or worries them, isn't universal. Human emotions don't fit neatly into a spreadsheet.

One leader once told me, *"People only see from their seat."* That idea stuck with me. How someone reacts to change depends on their vantage point, not yours, and not the organization's.

Meeting people where they are means intentionally creating space to listen, to understand, and to see how people are actually experiencing the change. That extra effort becomes a two-way channel that strengthens your change efforts. The insights and feedback you gather along the way can, and should, shape how you lead the change itself.

How to Get Started

If you're getting ready to lead a change, preparing to launch a new initiative, or simply trying to show up as a more human-centered leader, the good news is that you don't need to overhaul everything at once. There are a few foundational steps you can take that will immediately improve how you lead change in the modern workplace.

■ NO. 1

Put on your oxygen mask first

Before we jump into the practical and tactical aspects of leading change, there's an often-overlooked step we need to address first: before you can lead others through change, you need to check in with yourself. If you're not grounded, it will affect your energy, your decision-making, your communication, and your ability to support others. The airline safety analogy applies here: you have to put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others.

Leading change requires internal work before external action. First, you likely have your own relationship with change, or with this specific change. And second, you're going to be responsible for helping others work through their reactions, uncertainty, and resistance. If you aren't willing to reflect, adapt, or show up differently yourself, it becomes very difficult for others to take the change, or your leadership, seriously.

How you show up matters. Your emotional state, your mindset, and your level of clarity all influence how others experience the change. If you haven't taken time to understand what's going on for you internally, it will inevitably surface when you show up to lead others.

ACTION: Review the following reflection questions so you can understand your part in how you are going to change as a result of this change

- What is the nature of the change I'm facing?
- How is my day-to-day work being affected?
- What behaviors or actions might I need to shift?
How will I operate differently as a result of this change
- What role do I play in helping others navigate this change?
- What support or resources do I need to show up at my best?

■ NO. 2

Check on your team's change readiness

In addition to checking in on your own readiness, it's equally important to assess the readiness of your team, or anyone who will be impacted by the change. If you're about to launch a change, or if you've already started and are running into friction, this is often the most useful place to pause and take stock. Rather than pushing harder, take a step back and ask: where are my people actually at right now?

Evaluating change readiness is a diagnostic. It helps you understand what kind of support is needed, where to focus, and how to move the change forward in a realistic and sustainable way. One simple and effective way to do this is by looking at readiness across three dimensions: Capacity, Capability, and Commitment.

1. Capacity: Can they realistically take this on?

Capacity is about time, energy, and resources. Do people have the bandwidth to support this change on top of their existing day-to-day responsibilities? Many change efforts assume people will simply "make time." In practice, that usually means the change competes with core work and the change loses. If capacity isn't addressed, even highly motivated employees will stall.

Key question:

What would they need to stop, pause, or deprioritize to make this change possible?

2. Capability: Do they know how to do what you're asking?

Capability is about skills, knowledge, and confidence. Are people actually able to demonstrate the new behaviors, make the new decisions, or work in the new ways the change requires? If the answer is "I'm not sure," that's already your signal. Capability gaps don't resolve themselves. They require clarity, practice, feedback, and ongoing support.

Key question:

If I watched them try to do this tomorrow, would they succeed—or struggle?

3. Commitment: Do they genuinely want to support and sustain this change?

Commitment is about motivation and meaning. Do people understand why this change matters, to them, to their work, or to the organization? Are they willing to show up consistently over time, not just comply once? You can mandate compliance in the short term, but you can't mandate commitment. Sustained change only happens when people believe the change is worth the effort.

Key question:

What would make this change feel important, not just required?

You can assess individuals or groups across capacity, capability, and commitment, not as a judgment, but as a temperature check. This gives you a practical way to identify where resistance is really coming from, decide what kind of support is actually needed, and avoid pushing harder when the real issue is something else entirely.



Conclusion

While the pace of work has changed and the kinds of change leaders are being asked to navigate have evolved, one thing has remained remarkably consistent: humans haven't. We're still wired the same way. We still look for safety, clarity, meaning, and belonging. And recognizing that reality gives us a powerful advantage when it comes to leading change.

Leading change effectively has become a core leadership skill in today's workplace. Change isn't a one-time event or a special initiative anymore—it's a constant. Whether you're leading a formal transformation, launching a new program, building a coalition around an idea, or trying to shift how work gets done, your ability to work with people through change will shape your results.

Doing this well requires more than good intentions or strong communication. It requires an understanding of human behavior and a commitment to being intentional about how change is designed and led. Because change ultimately asks people to think and behave differently, grounding your approach in how humans actually work, not how we wish they worked, allows you to be far more strategic and effective. When leaders take a more human-centered approach to change, they don't just increase the odds of success, they build trust, momentum, and resilience along the way.



About The Author

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Al is a facilitator, speaker, and advisor. He is passionate about helping individuals and organizations flourish in the changing world of work, and in unlocking individual purpose and potential to achieve organizational performance.

Al works at the intersection of the future of work, talent, and leadership development. His insights have been published in outlets such as *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, and *Business Insider*. He is also the host of *The Edge of Work* podcast, which explores the future of work and leadership, and a LinkedIn Top Voice in the Future of Work and Leadership.

Previously, Al worked at organizations such as Deloitte Consulting LLP and Salesforce. He holds a bachelor's degree in Business and Theology from Boston College and an MBA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Thank you for reading. If I can help partner with you or your organization to solve any of these challenges please let me know:

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- **Workshops & Strategy Sessions:** Half-day and full-day workshops designed to build capability around AI adoption, leading through change, and modern leadership practices. Sessions combine original research, interactive frameworks, and peer learning to help teams diagnose where they are and build a clear path forward.
- **Advisory & Executive Coaching:** Ongoing strategic partnership for executives and organizations navigating transformation, talent and team development, and organizational change. Engagements range from advisory retainers to 1:1 executive coaching for senior leaders building the influence, clarity, and resilience to lead effectively in a rapidly changing environment.

I'd love to work with you and your organization. Contact me at al@al-dea.com