Crucial Influence®

ACCELERATING AI INNOVATION

4 VITAL BEHAVIORS FOR SUCCESSFUL AI ADOPTION AND RESULTS

Crucial Learning

Knowledge changes nothing. New technologies change nothing. Only *applied* knowledge and *adopted* technologies change the world, improve lives, and boost performance. Said another way, breakthroughs happen only when new technological ideas merge with new human habits.

There's a lot of hubbub these days about how artificial intelligence (AI) will transform everything from the way we work to the results we generate. And yet, **most companies report failure** with their initial forays into employing it. Why? Because the human system, not technical progress, is the constraint to real change.

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For example, in 1747 a Scottish naval surgeon named James Lind made a discovery that promised to solve one of the most vexing business problems of the day. Fortunes were being made at the time in the shipping industry. As profitable as the industry was, however, trading magnates lamented the need to hire twice the number of crewmen necessary to complete a voyage at initial launch because half could be expected to die before the journey was complete. Of the myriad ways a sailor could be lost, the most lethal began with painful joints, lethargy, bleeding gums, and seeping wounds. In a word, scurvy.

Given the enormous human and financial cost of scurvy, you'd have thought that businessmen would immediately adopt Lind's low-cost solution. In the first ever documented clinical trial, Lind found that administering a teaspoon of citrus juice each day completely prevented the disease. And yet, it took a full fifty years before departing ships were commonly stocked with a few simple gallons of orange juice. For half a century, ships continued to sail with twice the necessary crew, expecting to lose many to preventable death. The technology was there. The behavior wasn't.

If we're tempted to dismiss Lind's lethargic results as artifacts of backward times, look at the rise and fall of myriad management fashions of past decades. For example, business process reengineering, total quality management, and lean management were in succession introduced as the citrus juice of their decades. And for good reason—most who sincerely applied the principles exposed massive opportunities for enterprise-wide improvement. The eventual disappointment of most adherents was not the failure to produce new ideas, it was the failure of the human system to embrace them.[1] The constraint on how fast new ideas turn into better results is and always has been the behavioral lethargy of humans.

[1] In "Beyond the Fads: How Leaders Drive Change with Results" (Human Resource Planning 17, no. 2 [1994]:25–44), Ron Ashkenas suggests the failure rate of these program was 75 percent or more. Other studies suggest much higher. A past Crucial Learning survey of relevant studies puts it in the 85 percent range.

HOW HUMANS CRIPPLE AI

For many, AI has become a personal productivity tool on steroids. Once a person knows its limits and capabilities, they can put it to work immediately on tasks like preparing proposals, planning trips and even conversing in a new language. The distance between introduction to the technology and payoff is often just a matter of minutes.

However, when it comes to reaping *organizational* benefits, the path is usually more tortured. The constraint on producing organization-wide benefits has less to do with the muscularity of your AI system and more to do with the agility of your *human* system. Unless human habits keep pace with AI insights, the results can be anything from disappointing to disastrous. What your human system needs is **behavioral agility**—the ability or capacity to adapt to change.

For example, at one large multinational tech firm deploying GenAI across business units, many front-line staff quietly opted out of the initiative—not because the technology failed, but because they felt they couldn't raise their concerns or ask how to use it safely.

For writers and other creatives, AI can be a boon. But it can be their bane if they don't develop a habit of reality-testing its product. *The Chicago Sun Times* learned this when the author of a syndicated literary column failed to check his AI-generated Summer Reading List. It wasn't until post-publication that readers discovered that while many of the authors were real, their fascinating book titles were not.

In the financial services industry, AI has shown great promise in identifying highly creditworthy loan applicants that might otherwise be overlooked by underwriters. But in many cases those golden leads go unmined when the humans continue to reject them out of habit or outdated criteria.

No industry has the potential to make greater strides in improving results through AI than healthcare. But once again, the impact will be negligible unless AI insights are coupled with behavioral agility. For example, AI has shown a marked potential to protect the lives of mothers and unborn children through far more nuanced assessment of fetal heart rate (FHR) monitors during high-risk childbirths. But not if a busy nurse fails to consistently record FHR readings; and not if AI warnings go unreported to the OB/GYN who is prickly when awakened in the middle of the night; or the caregiver ignores AI's warnings when they conflict with their personal predilections and subjective judgments.

AI insights without human cooperation rarely yield massive organizational benefits.

We've argued for the past 35 years that **leadership is intentional influence**. It's the capacity to influence others to behave in ways that lead to great results. An organization's behavioral agility is evidence of the competence of its leaders. The winners in the race to harvest the potential benefits of AI will be those who are most intentional about creating human systems that more quickly and thoroughly turn new insights into new habits.

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FOUR VITAL BEHAVIORS FOR BEHAVIORAL AGILITY

If the argument we're making here is true, then some organizations are far better suited to reap rapid benefits from AI implementation than others. We recently wondered whether these differences were both measurable and predictable. Our study questions were:

1. Are there dramatic differences in adoption velocity from one organization to the next?

2. And, if so, do those differences relate to differences in cultural patterns? Do cultures where the adoption velocity is slow look different than those where adoption happens quickly?

After asking these questions to more than 1,700 professionals across every industry, the results were striking and clear. To the question: "Are there velocity differences?" the answer is an emphatic yes. The most behaviorally agile organizations are not just marginally faster at adopting new ideas, they are exponentially so.

12X The quickest are **twelve times faster** than the slowest.

6X They are **six times more likely** to succeed in full adoption of breakthrough ideas.

2X And, given the higher likelihood of adoption, employees in these organizations are understandably **twice as likely** to make a habit of looking for ways to improve results.

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Our second question was, "What's different in the cultures of the most behaviorally agile?" In over a hundred studies over the past forty years, we've seen time and again that the health of most any social system is a function of the lag time between when problems or opportunities are identified and when they are thoroughly discussed. The capacity to hold Crucial Conversations, independent of the level or position of those involved, has been shown to relate to everything from mine safety to software engineering productivity to nurse engagement to retention of church worshippers. We suspected the same might be true of technology adoption and found the pattern held yet again.

Specifically, we found four vital behaviors that explained *almost half* of the difference between the fastest and slowest cohorts of organizations. As we describe these behaviors, refer back to the examples of the tech company, *The Chicago Sun Times*, the bank, and the hospital as a test of the face validity of our findings:

1. Speak Up

In agile organizations, employees are three times more likely to speak up when they see problems or have ideas.

For example: Do employees raise concerns when AI tools cause confusion or misalignment—or do they stay silent, letting fear or uncertainty stall adoption?

2. Remind

In agile organizations, employees are five times more likely to remind those who fail to adopt a new approach when it's called for.

For example: Do peers remind harried writers to follow protocols for validating copy written by AI?

3. Confront

In agile organizations, employees are two-and-a-half times more likely to hold people accountable who resist adopting new ideas.

For example: Do employees hold a manager accountable who denies a loan that AI suggests should be underwritten even though it differs from past practices?

4. Challenge

In agile organizations, employees are four times more likely to challenge sacred cows, even if a leader appears ego invested in them.

For example: Do nurses challenge the doctor to follow new guidelines when AI identifies escalated risk in a childbirth— even though the doctor is grumpy?

BUILDING A BEHAVIORALLY AGILE CULTURE

The reluctance to speak up runs deep in many organizations. It won't disappear through slogans or software updates. As we said before, leadership is intentional influence. If leaders do not intentionally shape a high-performance corporate culture, their culture will devolve by default. Silence will become the norm and politics will prevail. A century of social science research shows that there are unique six sources of influence that shape all human behavior. Leaders who learn to engage all of them are over ten times more likely to see rapid, profound and sustainable behavior change of the kind needed to accelerate adoption of new technologies.

Drawing from our Crucial Influence model, here are some essential elements of creating a behaviorally agile organization:

Build Ability Through Deliberate Practice

Most people stay silent not from fear alone but from lack of skill. Teach Crucial Conversations skills in small, spaced sessions. Let leaders model them, coach them, and demonstrate that this is how we work. Make it expected that every manager both learns and teaches these skills—the act of teaching ensures they walk the talk.

Create Motivation Through Meaning

Data alone won't change hearts. Tell stories that make the cost of silence and the payoff of candor real. Use team meetings to share examples where someone's voice prevented a mistake, accelerated adoption, or improved a decision. Celebrate these moments as cultural wins.

Measure What Matters

If you don't measure it, you don't care about it. Survey your organization to establish a baseline of how often employees raise concerns, challenge assumptions, or remind peers. Publicly set goals (e.g. "Increase proactive dialogue by 25% in twelve months) and report progress regularly.

Sustain Attention

Culture doesn't shift in a single campaign. Keep dialogue visible in dashboards, reviews, and recognition systems. Reward those who raise risks early, not just those who deliver results late.

Master the Four Crucial Conversations

To turn intelligence into innovation, individuals must be able to surface concerns, test assumptions, and challenge habits without fear. These are the core habits of a speak-up culture:

MAKE IT SAFE

Create an environment where people can disagree, challenge authority, and share data that contradicts the norm. As Rich Sheridan, CEO of Menlo Innovations, says, "My job as a leader is to suck fear out of the room." Don't dismiss or discourage others from sharing ideas and points of view.

SHARE YOUR GOOD INTENT

When introducing a tough topic, start with mutual purpose ("I care about what you care about") and mutual respect ("I care about you"). This reduces defensiveness and keeps the dialogue open.

STATE MY PATH

Be clear about your facts and reasoning, then invite others to share theirs. The best question you can ask is one that genuinely invites a different view.

INVITE DIFFERENCE

Encourage dissent. Reward curiosity. Follow the data, even when it challenges your preferences or past practices.

AI promises unprecedented intelligence, but it will be your organization's agile people who will turn that intelligence into innovation. Organizations with employees who master these Crucial Conversations won't just adapt to AI, they'll redefine how humans and technology learn and grow together.
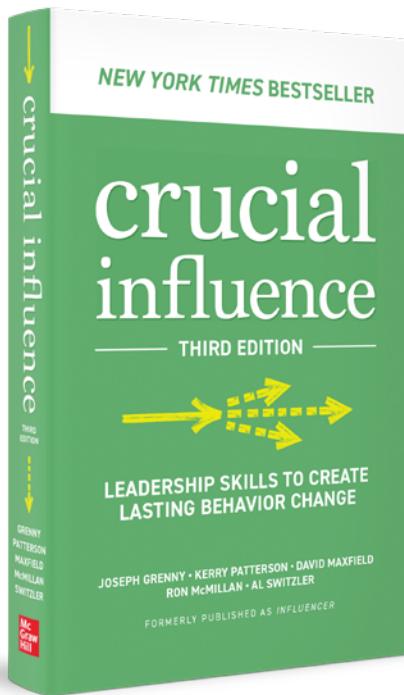
Learn More

These tips come from the bestselling book *Crucial Influence* and the award-winning course of the same name. Crucial Influence explains why people do what they do and how you can help them change—quickly and permanently. Leaders who know how to leverage the six sources of influence are exponentially more successful at securing change and achieving results. The course is available in on-demand, virtual, and in-person formats. Learn more at CrucialLearning.com.

Get Started

To bring Crucial Influence skills to your organization, contact us to learn more about our in-person, virtual, and on-demand courses.

Call 1-800-449-5989 or visit us at **CrucialLearning.com**

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