

Accelerating AI Adoption Through the Psychology of Change: Why Technology-First Strategies Fail and How to Engage People in Transformation

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Abstract

Organizations are pouring significant resources into artificial intelligence, chasing dramatic gains in performance and lower costs. Yet most remain stuck in limited pilots — unable to scale AI across the enterprise and deliver the promised returns. AI may be new technology, but it triggers an old and familiar problem: human nature when organizational change is imposed on people. Like total quality management, Six Sigma, downsizing, and remote work before it, AI risks becoming another expensive disappointment if leaders treat it as a purely technical rollout.

The real barrier is not technology. It is people's natural reactions to imposed, potentially threatening, and unwelcome change. When AI moves faster than people, customers, and stakeholders can absorb it, resentment and fear grow, rework multiplies, and value evaporates. This paper offers a better path. Drawing on the psychology of change (Chodkowski, 2025), postindustrial leadership principles (Rost, 1993), and Josh Bersin's four-stage AI maturity model (Bersin, 2025), we present a practical framework for adopting AI through people rather than imposing it on them. By deliberately addressing employees' cognitive, emotional, and social needs at every stage of the AI journey, leaders can replace compliance with genuine commitment — accelerating adoption, lowering resistance, and realizing more sustainable business value from AI investments.

Keywords: AI adoption, change leadership, psychology of change, postindustrial leadership, mutual influence, collaboration, AI maturity, trust, employee involvement, workflow redesign

Executive Summary

It is widely reported that top-down transformational change efforts rarely achieve their promised returns. The organizational introduction of AI into the workplace is no exception. Most AI deployment efforts stall or underdeliver not only because of technology limitations, but also because of management's unawareness of the predictable human reactions triggered by unwelcome or perceived-to-be-threatening organizational changes.

There is a sequential human adaptation process — the psychology of change (Chodkowski, 2025) — that organizations ignore at their peril. Far too many are still operating under an obsolete industrial change management paradigm (Chodkowski, 2025; Edmondson, 2019). Executives remain excited about AI's promise but too often stay disconnected from the front lines where employees must absorb, adapt to, and implement the change. The people most impacted — and who best understand the ramifications — are frequently the last to be informed, leading to predictable and costly human reactions.

The psychology of change (Chodkowski, 2025) identifies eight universal human needs — organized into cognitive, behavioral, and social domains — that must be addressed at every stage of AI adoption for change to succeed. Josh Bersin's four-stage AI maturity model demonstrates that as organizations progress from AI as assistant to autonomous agents, the human leadership challenge grows more complex, not less (Bersin, 2025). This paper presents a five-phase framework for integrating AI adoption through people rather than pushing it to them, grounded in contemporary scientific principles and the twenty-first century postindustrial collaborative leadership paradigm (Rost, 1993).

C-suite leaders know a painful truth: most top-down transformational initiatives — including AI deployments — fail to deliver the promised return on investment. The problem is not primarily technical. It is human. When AI is imposed through traditional command-and-control methods, it triggers predictable resentments and fears. Employees closest to the work are often the last to learn about changes that directly affect them, leading to surprise, disengagement, and stalled adoption.

The solution lies in shifting from conventional change management — rooted in control and compliance — to postindustrial leadership (Rost, 1993): a collaborative, influence-based approach built on commitment, human agency, and mutual purpose. The five-phase framework presented in this paper enables organizations to adopt AI through their people rather than to them. By addressing employees' core needs at every stage of the journey, organizations can accelerate adoption, reduce costly resistance and rework, and fully capture the performance gains and cost savings that AI promises.

Introduction: The AI Adoption Paradox

Nearly every major organization has announced an AI strategy. Boards are asking about it, investors are demanding it, and consultants are selling it. Yet for all the enthusiasm and investment at the top, the lived experience at the front lines tells a different story: confusion about what AI is actually supposed to do, anxiety about what it means for jobs, shallow use of

tools that were expensive to deploy, and a widening gap between the transformation leaders promised and the change employees are actually experiencing.

AI is not the first workplace initiative to be introduced with promises of transformation and competitive advantage. For decades, organizations have pursued highly promoted change programs — from business process reengineering and downsizing to total quality management and Six Sigma — only to discover that implementation falters when human, cultural, and operational realities are treated as secondary concerns. In many of these waves, the problem was not that the underlying ideas were entirely without merit, but that leaders overestimated the power of formal programs and underestimated the difficulty of helping people understand change, participate in shaping it, and sustain it in practice. AI may be newer, but the underlying challenge is familiar: institutions have long struggled not simply to adopt new tools or models, but to translate ambitious change into trusted, workable, everyday practice.

This is the AI adoption paradox: the more urgently leaders push AI forward, the more resistance, inertia, and underperformance they often generate. In most cases, the reason is not the technology. It is the approach to change (Chodkowski, 2025; Schein & Schein, 2018).

The financial reality is beginning to catch up with the excitement. A growing number of organizations are reporting significant AI-related costs with little measurable return. When employees are left without clear guidance on where and how to use AI for maximum value, they make predictable choices: they automate the tasks they find most tedious rather than the tasks most critical to organizational performance. The result is expensive, underperforming AI that frustrates leaders, confuses employees, and produces neither the efficiency nor the transformation that was promised.

The organizations successfully scaling AI — moving from pilots to enterprise-wide adoption, from productivity experiments to genuine business transformation — are not necessarily those with the best tools or the largest AI budgets. They are the organizations that have figured out how to lead the human side of the transition: how to bring people along, build genuine capability, redesign work in ways that make sense to the people doing it, and create the conditions under which AI can actually deliver its promise (Chodkowski, 2025; Hankinson, 2026). This paper is about how to do that.

The human stakes of this paradox are visible beyond the boardroom. When college graduates booed AI at commencement ceremonies in spring 2026, Microsoft's president called it a wake-up call. But as Dentico (2026) observed, the boos were not about technology — they were about trust and agency. Those graduates were not saying they felt unprepared. They were saying they did not trust who benefits from AI and did not believe they had a say in how it would shape their futures. That is not a technology problem. It is precisely the kind of trust and agency problem that this paper argues organizations must learn to address before, during, and after every stage of AI deployment. The wake-up call was never about the tools. It was about the people holding them.

The Industrial and Postindustrial Approaches to AI Adoption

There are two fundamentally different ways to think about leading organizational change, including the kind of change AI requires.

The first — the industrial or control model — treats change as something done *to* an organization. Leaders decide, experts design, managers implement, and employees comply. Communication is top-down. Involvement is limited. Speed is prioritized. The underlying assumption is that resistance is an obstacle to be overcome, not information to be used (Chodkowski, 2025).

The second — the postindustrial or commitment model — treats change as something worked *through* an organization. Leaders create conditions for collaboration, involve people in shaping the change, build shared understanding, and design for mutual influence rather than one-way authority. The underlying assumption is that the people closest to the work have knowledge leaders need, and that lasting change requires genuine participation, not just compliance (Chodkowski, 2025; Hankinson, 2026). This principle has deep roots in serious management thinking — W. Edwards Deming argued decades earlier that leaders who rely on top-down control without understanding the systems and knowledge of the people doing the work will consistently underperform (Deming, 1986). The postindustrial model extends that insight into the relational and collaborative dimensions of leadership itself.

These two approaches mirror the two paradigms of leadership articulated by Joseph Rost (1993). The industrial leadership paradigm is leader-centric, management-oriented, and grounded in twentieth-century values: control, hierarchy, pragmatism, and materialism. The postindustrial leadership paradigm is relationship-centric, collaboration-oriented, and grounded in twenty-first century values: freedom, collaboration, the common good, diversity, and dialogue.

In the industrial model, AI is a tool that is rolled out. In the postindustrial model, AI is a transformation that is co-created. Organizations that involve employees in AI adoption, build genuine capability rather than mandate tool usage, and redesign work in partnership with the people doing it are more likely to realize lasting value (Edmondson, 2019; Schein & Schein, 2018). The competitive advantage in the AI era does not come only from acquiring better technology. It comes from building a human system capable of using technology well.

When AI Strategy Loses Sight of the Last Mile

Across industries, a consistent pattern is visible: organizations are quick to announce bold AI ambitions but slow to translate those ambitions into changes in how work is actually done. Strategy documents, vendor selections, and pilot projects move quickly. Redesigning workflows, roles, and routines around AI moves slowly — or not at all. In many cases, the people closest to

the work experience AI as something being rolled out to them rather than a change they have helped shape and can influence.

That gap between AI-as-strategy and AI-as-lived-experience is where many adoption efforts begin to break down. Even significant AI investments often produce limited or trivial use cases when employees are given tools without sufficient work design, clarity, or shared purpose. This is not a failure of motivation or intelligence. It is a predictable consequence of pushing technology to people without working *through* them to define where and how it should be used (Chodkowski, 2025; Hankinson, 2026).

A critical distinction underlies this pattern: the difference between *buy-in* and *build-in*. Working to gain people's buy-in after a change has been decided is far less effective than building people into the change initiative at its earliest stage. The people most impacted by AI are too often the least involved in AI change initiatives — and organizations pay a significant price for that gap.

This pattern has a name. As Lawrence-Ortega (2026) observed, many organizations are hiring for AI fluency before they have designed AI-ready systems — asking people to arrive AI-native while onboarding them into AI-foreign companies. The problem, in other words, is not the talent. It is the organizational architecture into which that talent arrives.

Successful AI adoption must therefore be understood not simply as a technical deployment challenge, but as a psychology-of-change challenge requiring clarity, involvement, trust, role significance, and meaningful opportunities for people to participate in shaping the future of work. This means designing AI initiatives that start from concrete business problems and explicitly address three domains of human need: cognitive, behavioral, and social. When leaders design change through these needs rather than pushing change to their organizations, they not only reduce resistance and anxiety — they also unlock the local judgment, creativity, and ownership that AI depends on to produce real, sustained value (Edmondson, 2019).

The Psychology of Change Framework: Eight Human Needs That Drive or Derail AI Adoption

At the heart of this paper is a framework of human needs that is as relevant to AI adoption as it is to any major organizational change. These eight needs are not preferences or nice-to-haves. They are universal human requirements that, when unmet, produce predictable patterns of resistance, resentment, disengagement, and failure — and, when met, produce the engagement, trust, and ownership that change requires.

"It is worth noting that while the Institute for Healthcare Improvement has developed its own Psychology of Change Framework focused on activating human agency in healthcare settings (Hilton & Anderson, 2018), the eight-needs model presented here is a distinct framework developed independently by Chodkowski (2025) within the context of postindustrial collaborative leadership and organizational change. The two share an orientation toward human agency but differ in origin, structure, and application.

Each of the eight human needs is associated with a psychological state — a biologically hardwired predisposition or social instinct. The eight needs are organized into three domains.

Cognitive Domain: The Foundation of Understanding

Need to Know — Curiosity. People need clear, honest, timely information about what is happening, what is changing, and what is expected of them. In AI adoption, this means communicating what tools are being introduced, what they do, and what the organization is trying to accomplish — before deployment, not after resentment and fear take hold.

Need to Understand — Meaning. People need more than information; they need coherent purpose and rationale. They need to understand why the organization is pursuing AI, how it connects to their work and their future, and what the logic is behind specific decisions. Without meaning, information produces anxiety rather than clarity.

Behavioral Domain: The Foundation of Agency

Need to Be Involved — Belonging. People need genuine opportunities to participate in shaping the changes that affect them and to be part of something larger than themselves. Involvement is not a communication strategy — it is a design principle. When employees help create the change, they understand it better, support it more fully, and implement it more effectively (Schein & Schein, 2018).

Need to Maintain Control — Autonomy. People need to retain a meaningful sense of agency over their work. AI adoption that strips away discretion, judgment, and choice — or that is perceived as doing so — triggers resistance and resentment that no amount of communication can fully overcome. Effective AI change design preserves and, in many cases, expands employees' sense of control (Rock, 2008).

Social Domain: The Foundation of Trust, Integrity, and Identity

Need to Play a Significant Role — Efficacy. People need to experience themselves as meaningful contributors and to believe in their abilities. When AI displaces tasks without explicitly naming and honoring the human value that remains — and the new human value that AI makes possible — people experience a loss of significance that undermines adoption and engagement.

Need to Trust — Safety. People need to be able to trust the leaders, systems, and processes guiding the change. Trust is built through consistency, honesty, follow-through, and demonstrated care for employees' genuine interests (Edmondson, 2019; Schein & Schein, 2018).

Need to Be Trusted — Integrity. People need to experience themselves as trustworthy — as professionals whose judgment, expertise, and discretion are valued. AI adoption that treats employees as compliance problems rather than capable contributors erodes this need and, with it, the discretionary effort that great implementation requires.

Need to Be Respected — Identity. People need their identity — their sense of who they are as professionals and as people — to be honored through the change process. Changes to roles, titles, responsibilities, and ways of working that are imposed without acknowledgment of what people are being asked to give up produce a dignity injury that can outlast the transition itself (Chodkowski, 2025).

The relational and identity costs of poorly managed technological change are not abstract — they are measurable. A Freeman study conducted with The Harris Poll found that 69 percent of Gen Z professionals reported that technology has made them feel less connected and more isolated from colleagues and industry peers (Dentico, 2026). This generation averages only 16 strong professional relationships, compared with 40 for Gen X — a gap that reflects not technophobia, but the lived experience of change that has consistently prioritized tool deployment over human connection, meaning, and agency. When people cannot see themselves in the values of the change, cannot act on what they know, and cannot picture who they are becoming, adoption fails regardless of how powerful or well-designed the tools are. The eight needs of the psychology of change framework exist precisely to prevent that outcome — by ensuring that people are not left behind in the transformation being built around them.

Two central principles govern the effectiveness of this framework: sequential order is inviolable, and need satisfaction precedes progression. Stages of psychological readiness cannot be skipped. Leaders cannot expect people to engage behaviorally with AI adoption before their cognitive needs are met, and cannot expect social trust to develop before people have experienced genuine behavioral involvement.

The psychology of change framework also overlaps with David Rock's SCARF model (Rock, 2008), which tracks five social domains that activate social survival circuits: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness. This overlap reinforces the proposition that people do not respond to change only rationally — they respond socially and neurologically as well.

AI Maturity as a Human Leadership Journey

Josh Bersin describes four stages of AI transformation: making existing work easier, eliminating major steps while keeping the same job, re-engineering work around agents, and moving toward autonomous intelligent agents managed by people (Bersin, 2025). What is striking about this progression is that the technical challenges at each stage are relatively well understood. What is far less well understood is the human challenge at each stage — how leaders engage, prepare, and involve the people who must absorb each transition and make it real in their day-to-day work.

The progression can be summarized in human terms:

- **Stage 1 — AI as assistant.** The priority is cognitive clarity. People need to know what the tool is for, how to use it, and why it matters (Bersin, 2025).
- **Stage 2 — AI as process eliminator.** The priority shifts toward behavioral involvement and control. People need to help redesign the workflow and understand where human judgment still matters (Bersin, 2025).
- **Stage 3 — Re-engineered work.** The priority expands to role significance, trust, and identity. People need help understanding where they fit in a redesigned operating model (Bersin, 2025; Chodkowski, 2025).
- **Stage 4 — Autonomous agents.** The priority becomes the redefinition of human contribution itself. People need a respected, trusted, and significant role within a system where intelligent agents perform more of the work directly (Bersin, 2025; Chodkowski, 2025).

The following table connects Bersin's stages to the psychology of change framework: Bersin's stages make clear that AI maturity is not simply a technology question. It is a question of how well leaders redesign work and engage people at each level of the journey. The psychology of change provides the human operating system for making that progression real (Bersin, 2025).

Bersin Stage	Work Reality	Cognitive Needs	Behavioral Needs	Social Needs
Stage 1: AI as Assistant	Same job, better tools	Explain clearly what AI tools are being introduced, why they are being used, and where they fit into current work (Bersin, 2025).	Give people discretion to try AI in their own work with low risk.	Treat early adopters as partners and advisers; recognize their contributions publicly.
Stage 2: AI as Agent	Same job, steps eliminated	Provide a coherent explanation of what is automated, what is not, and how quality and risk will be managed (Bersin, 2025).	Involve employees in redesigning the steps that remain human.	Clarify that people still have a meaningful and valued role; protect the human decisions that matter.

Stage 3: Re-engineered Work	New job, redesigned process	Help people build a new mental model of how value flows end-to-end and how AI and humans coordinate (Bersin, 2025).	Involve employees directly in job redesign, decision rights, and new skills (Chodkowski, 2025).	Rebuild trust, fairness, and status for a reconfigured workplace (Chodkowski, 2025).
Stage 4: Autonomous Agents	New job, people manage and train AI	Provide a compelling narrative for the new role of humans in AI-managed environments (Bersin, 2025).	Give people real levers to intervene, pause, or override AI when needed (Rock, 2008).	Rebuild identity and status by naming AI oversight and orchestration as valued expertise (Chodkowski, 2025).

Bersin's stages make clear that AI maturity is not simply a technology question. It is a question of how well leaders redesign work and engage people at each level of the journey. The psychology of change provides the human operating system for making that progression real (Bersin, 2025).

From AI Maturity to AI Adoption

Advancing in AI maturity does not automatically produce adoption. Organizations may move from assistants to agents, from partial automation to re-engineered work, and still fail to realize meaningful value if people do not change with the system (Bersin, 2025). The technical architecture may improve, budgets may increase, and use cases may multiply — but none of that guarantees that employees will trust the tools, redesign their routines, or incorporate AI into the way work actually gets done.

This is the gap many organizations are now experiencing. They are no longer asking whether AI matters. They are asking why so much effort still produces uneven use, shallow engagement, and limited business impact. In many cases, the answer is not hidden in the model, the platform, or the prompt library. It is found in the way the change itself has been led (Chodkowski, 2025; Hankinson, 2026).

That distinction matters because adoption is not the same as access. Giving employees access to AI tools is straightforward. Building the conditions under which they will use those tools intelligently, consistently, and productively is far more difficult. This is why the psychology of change framework belongs at the center of any serious AI adoption strategy.

People need more than instruction. They need enough clarity to know what is changing and why. They need enough understanding to connect the initiative to the logic of the business and the demands of their role. They need enough involvement to influence how the change will affect their work. And they need enough trust, significance, and respect to believe that the future being built still includes them in a meaningful way (Edmondson, 2019).

The question, then, is not whether AI adoption needs a framework. It clearly does. The question is what kind of framework is equal to the real challenge.

Changing an Organization From Within: A Five-Step Authorization Framework

Market factors, technological innovations, and competitive pressures create legitimate urgency for transformational change. Many executives respond by imposing rapid, top-down directives, convinced that competitive speed demands command-and-control execution. Those closest to the actual work — customers, front-line employees, and operational teams — are often the last to be consulted, or never involved at all. The predictable human response follows: initial surprise, then resentment, followed by fear and possibly active or passive resistance. Factions form. Energy that should fuel the change instead defends the status quo or works around it.

For AI deployments, the costs are especially high. Expensive tools remain under-adopted and poorly utilized. Talent grows cynical. Operational efficiency and projected return on investment underwhelm. Cultural damage lingers long after the initiative is declared a success or quietly shelved. The very competitive advantage sought slips further away.

Sustainable transformational change follows a predictable, influence-driven sequence — not a decree from above. The following five-step framework, rooted in the postindustrial leadership paradigm developed by Joseph C. Rost (1993) and furthered by Matthew Chodkowski (2025), replaces mandate with collaborative momentum. It increases the odds of success by ensuring that the people who must live with the change help shape it.

Step 1 — Leader Awareness. An opportunity or necessity for change is first recognized by an individual or small group within the organization. These people step forward as leaders — not because of title, but because they envision an opportunity or necessity to innovate and begin influencing others to come to their way of thinking. Through dialogue and persuasion, they lead colleagues to see the genuine value of the proposed direction and the envisioned benefits of making a change.

Step 2 — Management Authorization. The leaders advocating for change bring their vision to senior management and request authorization for a formal feasibility review. Management evaluates strategic fit and either grants permission to proceed with a structured assessment or declines — preserving focus and resources. This creates a clear gateway without premature commitment.

Step 3 — The Change Collaborative. When authorized, management convenes a diverse Change Collaborative of subject-matter experts, representatives from groups most likely to be impacted, and other relevant stakeholders. This group is deliberately not limited to the original leaders or authorizing executives. The collaborative operates on postindustrial principles. Members first internalize core principles individually — particularly the shift from positional authority to mutual purposes and interactive influence. They then integrate these principles as a group, defining shared goals for the change and exploring realistic deployment paths through dialogue, inquiry, and joint problem-solving. Recommendations are co-created collaboratively, carrying the credibility of broad ownership rather than top-down imposition.

Step 4 — Management Decision. Management reviews the collaborative's recommendation and makes the critical go/no-go decision, including resource allocation if approved. The decision and its rationale are communicated clearly and promptly to the original leaders and collaborative members. Transparency here builds trust even when the answer is no or not yet.

Step 5 — Change Implementation. If approved, an authorized and resourced implementation team takes responsibility for executing the change. Their plans deliberately integrate postindustrial principles with the psychology of change. Rather than relying on rigid, off-the-shelf models that rarely fit complex situations, they use tailored, inquiry-based change guidance systems. The journey is explicitly phased — introduction and awareness, surfacing reactions, safe experimentation, adaptation and refinement, full adoption and integration, demonstrated efficacy, and realized strategic utility. This phased approach anticipates human dynamics instead of fighting them.

From Authorization to Implementation

These five steps ensure that AI change initiatives are authorized with integrity, co-created with the right people, and launched with genuine organizational commitment rather than top-down decree. They answer a critical question that many organizations skip entirely: *how does a change get decided, designed, and sanctioned in a way that people can trust and support?*

But authorization is only the beginning. Once the decision has been made, the implementation team is resourced, and the postindustrial principles are in place, the deeper work begins: guiding the people who must actually live through the change. That work requires its own framework — one that is grounded in the psychology of change and designed to meet employees where they are at every stage of the AI adoption journey.

The five-phase framework that follows provides that architecture. It picks up where the authorization process leaves off and offers a practical, human-centered path for leading AI adoption through people rather than to them.

A Five-Phase Framework for Leading AI Adoption Through People

Phase 1: Build the Human Foundation Before Deploying the Technology

The most common and costly mistake in AI adoption is leading with the tool rather than the people. The rate of deployment of a new technology can typically far exceed the rates of adoption and utilization by the workforce and customer base. Organizations that deploy AI before establishing a clear human foundation — shared understanding, defined purpose, and a plan for involving employees — almost always find themselves managing resistance, confusion, and shallow use rather than realizing value (Edmondson, 2019).

Before any significant AI deployment, leaders should:

- Define success in human terms, not just technical ones.
- Communicate the *why* before the *what*.
- Establish clear governance and ownership.
- Name the fears directly and honestly.

Phase 2: Engage Employees as Co-Creators, Not Recipients

One of the clearest lessons from decades of change research is that people support what they help create. Employees closest to the work have knowledge that leaders and AI vendors do not. Ignoring that knowledge does not just undermine morale — it produces worse outcomes (Schein & Schein, 2018; Chodkowski, 2025).

In practice, engaging employees as co-creators means:

- Inviting employees into the problem before announcing the solution.
- Creating low-risk experimentation opportunities.
- Following through visibly on what is heard.
- Designing tiered support for different starting points and levels of readiness.

Phase 3: Redesign Workflows, Roles, and Decision Rights

AI does not create value simply by being added to existing work. It creates value when workflows are redesigned so that human judgment and machine capability are aligned effectively. This means clarifying where AI contributes, where humans decide, how exceptions are handled, and how quality is monitored (Bersin, 2025; Hankinson, 2026).

At this phase, leaders should:

- Map current workflows and identify high-friction points.
- Clarify which decisions remain human, which are AI-assisted, and which are automated.
- Redesign roles openly rather than allowing ambiguity to spread.
- Make transparency and guardrails visible to everyone affected.

A useful framework for clarifying decision rights is the loop-position model described by Lawrence-Ortega (2026). In this model, a human in the loop approves each AI-assisted decision before it takes effect. A human on the loop supervises autonomous AI operation and retains the ability to intervene. A human out of the loop has delegated the decision entirely to the AI system. An organization with mature AI workflows can state clearly, for every consequential class of decision, which posture applies and why. Defining loop positions before deployment — rather than discovering them after an incident — is one of the most practical steps leaders can take to make workflow redesign real and trustworthy for the people doing the work.

Phase 4: Create the Conditions for Learning, Trust, and Iteration

AI adoption rarely succeeds through one-time training events or top-down exhortation. It succeeds when employees are able to test, question, compare, and refine new ways of working without fear of embarrassment or penalty (Edmondson, 2019). Leaders who admit their own learning curve, make it acceptable to ask basic questions, and openly discuss what is and is not working create the conditions for genuine adoption (Edmondson, 2019; Schein & Schein, 2018).

This phase requires:

- Regular, open discussion of what is helping and what is failing.
- Visible channels for upward feedback.
- Early pilots in lower-risk settings.
- Metrics that reward learning, not just compliance.

Trust in AI adoption operates at multiple levels: trust in the tool, trust in the leaders introducing it, trust in the fairness of the process, and trust that one's own role will not be carelessly diminished in the transition (Rock, 2008).

Phase 5: Reinforce, Measure, and Institutionalize the New Way of Working

The final phase of AI adoption is where many organizations quietly lose momentum. Initial pilots may succeed, early enthusiasm may be real, and new workflows may begin to take shape — but without reinforcement, the change remains fragile. Employees drift back toward familiar routines, local workarounds reappear, and the productivity and quality gains that were promised never fully materialize.

Sustainable adoption requires leaders to treat reinforcement not as a postscript to implementation, but as part of the change architecture itself. At this stage, the task is not simply to ask whether people are using AI. It is to determine whether the organization is learning how to use AI well (Hankinson, 2026).

This means measuring a broader set of indicators than adoption dashboards typically provide. In addition to utilization data, leaders should monitor workflow cycle time, quality improvements, error rates, escalation patterns, employee confidence, trust in the system, and the extent to which teams are identifying new use cases and refining existing ones.

Reinforcement also depends on visible leadership behavior. Employees watch closely to see whether leaders continue to model the importance of the change once the launch period has passed. Leaders who keep attention on learning, redesign, and responsible use communicate that AI adoption is an ongoing capability-building effort rather than a temporary initiative (Schein & Schein, 2018; Hankinson, 2026).

Just as important, organizations must create mechanisms that turn local learning into institutional learning. Effective reinforcement requires forums, review rhythms, and knowledge-sharing structures that allow lessons from one area of the business to inform and strengthen others.

Leadership Implications

Taken together, the five phases suggest that AI adoption and implementation is best understood as a collaborative leadership discipline rather than a technology program. The central task is not simply to direct change, but to create the conditions under which people can understand what is changing, participate in shaping it, trust the process, and grow into new forms of contribution as work evolves. Successful AI transformation depends less on executive declaration than on the organization's capacity to align leadership, management, and employee collaboration around shared learning and practical redesign (Chodkowski, 2025; Hankinson, 2026).

Several implications follow for senior executives:

- Frame AI in relation to real work and real value, not as a symbolic declaration of innovation.
- Involve employees early enough to shape design, not so late that they can only react.
- Treat workflow redesign as seriously as technology selection.
- Understand trust, safety, and identity as operational variables, not cultural side concerns.
- Continue reinforcement long after deployment so that learning becomes durable and scalable.

These implications also suggest a shift in what executives must become. In the industrial model, the executive's role is to decide, direct, and drive execution. In the postindustrial model, their role is to convene, clarify, involve, and build the conditions for shared capability (Chodkowski, 2025).

Conclusion

The promise of AI is real, but so is the risk of squandering it. Organizations can invest heavily and move fast, yet still see little return if they treat AI as a simple technology rollout rather than a profound human transition in the way people work and add organizational value. The deepest challenge is not the tools themselves. It is whether organizations can guide people through the shifts in work, judgment, authority, and identity that powerful AI creates.

This is also why collaboration is not a cultural nicety — it is an operational necessity. AI changes workflows, judgment, authority, and identity across the organization, which means that those affected by the transition must have meaningful opportunities to interpret the change, influence its design, and help adapt it in practice. When people are treated as collaborators rather than recipients, adoption becomes more credible, learning becomes more durable, and organizational capability becomes more likely to outlast the initial rollout (Chodkowski, 2025).

That is why the psychology of change matters so much. People need to know and understand what is happening. They need to be involved in shaping the change and maintain some sense of control within it. They need to trust the leaders and systems guiding the transition, feel trusted as capable contributors, and see themselves as respected and significant in the future that is emerging (Rock, 2008).

Bersin's maturity model helps explain why this challenge intensifies rather than diminishes as organizations become more advanced in their use of AI. Each movement — from assistance to automation, from automation to redesign, and from redesign to autonomy — introduces not only a technical challenge but also a corresponding human one (Bersin, 2025).

The practical framework offered here is intended to help organizations respond to that reality. Begin with the human foundation before deploying the technology. Engage employees as co-creators rather than recipients. Redesign workflows, roles, and decision points openly. Build trust through transparency, consistency, and shared learning. Then reinforce the new way of working until it becomes institutional capability rather than temporary initiative. This is the work of advancing AI adoption through people, with people, and not merely to people.

In the end, the organizations most likely to benefit from AI will not simply be those with the strongest tools or the fastest rollouts. They will be those that understand something the technology cannot provide on its own: that transformation only becomes real when the people living through it can make sense of it, believe in it, and claim it as their own to co-create a better future (Chodkowski, 2025; Hankinson, 2026).

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Matthew Chodkowski is co-founder and founding director of the Institute for Postindustrial Leadership and has spent more than four decades in business, consulting, and higher

education advancing new understandings of leadership, organizational development, and collaborative change. His professional background includes executive, consulting, and academic roles, and he is the creator of the LEAD Program and LEAD Foundations, both designed to develop leadership capacity through a postindustrial lens. His current work focuses on research, writing, speaking, and helping organizations strengthen their capacity for adaptive, human-centered transformation.

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Andrew Dix is a board-certified executive coach, facilitator, and business adviser based in Indianapolis whose work emphasizes professional development, executive effectiveness, and collaborative change. He contributes to the Institute for Postindustrial Leadership's thinking on the psychology of change and brings an applied perspective to leadership development, motivation, and human-centered transformation. His work helps leaders and organizations translate developmental insight into practical change leadership that people can understand, trust, and sustain.

Holbrook Hankinson, PhD

Holbrook Hankinson is an organizational development and leadership consultant affiliated with the Institute for Postindustrial Leadership, whose work focuses on leadership development, collaborative change, and the practical application of postindustrial leadership principles in organizations. He has developed management and leadership programs for Fortune 100 companies and contributed to enhancements in the LEAD program. He is currently writing on management, leadership, and change, including work on AI adoption, postindustrial leadership, and the human dynamics of organizational transformation.

Kurt Schoch, EdD

Kurt Schoch is a professional coach, educator, and organizational development consultant with more than 30 years of experience in corporate training, performance improvement, and leadership development across healthcare, higher education, manufacturing, utilities, and nonprofit settings. He is the owner of Performance Improvement Consulting and has helped organizations improve performance through systems thinking, coaching, and organizational alignment. His background in adult education and applied coaching informs his work helping leaders and teams strengthen effectiveness, learning, and sustainable growth.

The Institute for Postindustrial Leadership

The Institute for Postindustrial Leadership is dedicated to advancing a transformative, 21st-century leadership paradigm that moves beyond outdated industrial-era models of hierarchy, command-and-control, and leader-centric thinking. Through its flagship Leader Education and Development (LEAD) program, the Institute equips individuals and organizations to embrace leadership as a collaborative mindset of mutual influence, shared purpose, and multidirectional relationships rather than a set of checklists or top-down directives. By fostering self-awareness and internalization of postindustrial principles, and by partnering with progressive organizations, the Institute helps leaders and collaborators build more adaptive, human-centered cultures that drive authentic engagement, organizational change, and sustainable performance. Learn more at <https://collaborationinaction.com>

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