

New structures, old habits

Why change doesn't stick — and what you can do about it

It's always the people:

The hard, joyful, human work of leading nonprofits

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**People
Centered
Change**



Hi, I'm **Julia**

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People Centered Change

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Today's purpose & outcomes

PURPOSE

To help nonprofit leaders understand why organizational changes so often fail to produce the outcomes they were designed for — and to explore the practical, people-centered work that makes the difference between a change that's been **designed** and a change that's **actually taken hold**.

INTENDED OUTCOMES

In service of this purpose, together we will...

- Explore why structural changes so often don't produce the outcomes they were designed for;
- Identify the categories of work involved in helping people adopt and sustain new ways of working; and
- Discuss practical approaches for leading the behavioral, relational, and cultural work that makes change stick.

When change doesn't get us where we expected

Organizations invest real energy in structural change — new roles, restructured teams, governance redesigns, strategic plans. **When those changes don't produce the expected outcomes, we tend to reach for one of two explanations:**



PATH A

"The design was wrong."

We second-guess the structure and go back to the drawing board.



PATH B

"The people are the problem."

We label people as resistant, disengaged, or unwilling to change.

Think about a change effort you've led or been part of — where the results didn't quite line up with what you were trying to achieve.

What's **your hypothesis** for what got in the way?

Enabling behavioral change is the missing layer

➤ We define our intention through **structural design choices** — org charts, governance models, job descriptions, performance goals, strategic plans.

➤ But intention doesn't produce outcomes on its own. **Behavior is the mechanism through which structural changes produce results.** And the pathway from intention to behavior is its own distinct layer of work, and the one that a lot of change processes tend to skip.

A COMMON TRAP



**Implementation gets
reduced to mechanics**

When organizations **do** plan for implementation, the focus tends to be mechanical: new SOPs, training, updated process documentation. This is all necessary, but it doesn't reach the cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions of actually changing how people think and operate.

Three categories of behavioral adoption work

Understand and honor what change asks of people

Recognize the cognitive, emotional, and relational demands of operating differently — and design your approach around them.



Build the conditions that make new behavior automatic

Create the scaffolding, infrastructure, and norms that lower the threshold for new ways of working.



Lead the change through your own behavior

Model what you're asking of others — even though it's just as hard for you — and make sure accountability flows in every direction.



Accountability — the agreements and practices that help people give and receive feedback in service of the change — runs through all three.

Understand and honor what change asks of people

Why the pathway from old behavior to new behavior is harder than it looks.



Change is cognitively and emotionally demanding



Cognitive demands

- Brains reinforce familiar patterns — neural pathways persist even when conditions change.
- New habits of thinking, deciding, and collaborating draw on attention, working memory, and emotional capacity.
- When changes compound, cognitive load increases and small shifts feel disproportionately hard.



Psycho-emotional demands

- Every change involves a loss — of familiar routines, relationships, competence, or comfort.
- The neutral zone — where the old way isn't gone and the new way isn't solid — is uncertain and uncomfortable.
- It also can be a deeply creative time, where real innovation can happen if people have safety to experiment (and fail!).

WHAT THIS TELLS US ABOUT "RESISTANCE"

People who seem resistant are often **grieving, cognitively overloaded, or struggling in the "neutral zone"** without enough support. Making them the villain damages trust and makes adoption harder.

What this looks like in practice

- 01 **Name the experience** — acknowledge openly that change is cognitively, emotionally, and socially demanding.
- 02 **Create space** for people to process, ask questions, and voice concerns — not just once, but throughout a change process.
- 03 **Recognize different paces** — people and teams move through change at different speeds.
- 04 **Provide consistency** where you can, to shore up resilience to the unpredictability you can't control.
- 05 **Plan for the neutral zone** to be uncomfortable rather than trying to rush through it. Anticipate changes in performance and efficiency.

Build the conditions that make new behavior automatic

Scaffolding, connective tissue, and holding the container long enough.



How do we make the new way of working easier?

The goal isn't to convince people to change. It's to make the new behavior **as easy, clear, and well-supported as possible** — so that over time, it becomes the default.

IF YOU WANT...

People to make decisions without escalating —

Make the decision-making criteria explicit and visible, so they're not guessing.

Cross-functional collaboration — Put it on the calendar; don't wait for it to happen organically.

Written updates — Create a simple, consistent format so people aren't starting from scratch each time.

People to raise concerns early — Build a standing prompt into existing meetings rather than asking them to initiate a new conversation.

Scaffolding that builds the muscle, then falls away

Temporary, structured supports that are **deliberate and explicit at first** — and become unnecessary as the behavior is internalized.

- A RACI model used rigorously for the first six months to build a shared muscle around responsibility conversations.
- Routine meetings that check on progress toward specific changes — intentionally time-limited.
- A template for supervision check-ins that prompts questions about strategic plan alignment.
- Structured agendas for new cross-functional teams until they develop their own working norms.

KEY QUESTION

What upfront supports would make it easier for people to do the new thing consistently enough that it becomes the default?

Building the connective tissue the new structure assumes

Structural changes assume operating behaviors that usually don't exist yet. The infrastructure, norms, and channels that make those behaviors possible **have to be built deliberately**.



Infrastructure

Shared repositories, documentation systems, communication platforms. If the new structure assumes people will share information in writing – does the system to do that actually exist?



Norms

Shared agreements about how things get done – how decisions are communicated, how meetings are used, how people flag concerns. These have to be named, practiced, and reinforced.



Feedback & accountability

Mechanisms for noticing when behavior drifts from what was agreed – and for naming it constructively. At every level and in every direction.

Hold the container long enough to stick the landing

Behavioral adoption isn't a moment — it's a **sustained period of intentionality**. There's often real energy at the front end, but then the day-to-day takes over and the adoption work gets crowded out.

This work needs to be **explicitly resourced and protected** — with time on agendas, with someone accountable for holding the process, and with a realistic understanding that this phase takes months, not weeks.

Lead the change through your own behavior

You are the first variable.

The change is just as hard for you – and you have to model it anyway

Your behavior is the **strongest signal in the system** about whether the change is real and expected of others. Common patterns to watch for in your own behavior:

PATTERNS TO WATCH FOR

- Overriding a decision you delegated because the stakes feel too high
- Holding something up because you're genuinely uncomfortable with what the change requires of you
- Moving so fast toward the next thing that you skip the bridging work people need
- Saying the right things while your day-to-day behavior reinforces the old way

KEY QUESTION Does accountability flow toward you, not just away from you?

Cross-cutting priorities



STAY RESPONSIVE

Plans become irrelevant as soon as the ink is dry

If you're getting data that says the plan isn't working — from staff, from friction patterns, from outcomes — **adjust**. Don't rigidly adhere to a plan the real world has moved past.



DESIGN FOR DIFFERENCE

Change lands differently for different people

How people experience change is shaped by identity, positionality, belonging, and the support systems they carry. **Designing for adoption means designing for difference.**

BRINGING IT BACK TO YOUR EXPERIENCE

Think about the change you identified earlier.

What's **one thing** — a norm, a habit, a piece of infrastructure — that the new way of working assumed, but that was maybe never explicitly built or supported?

The behavioral adoption work

When structural change doesn't produce the outcomes it was designed for, the answer usually lives in one or more of these three areas.

01

Understand & honor

Recognize the cognitive and emotional demands of change and **design your approach around them** .

02

Build the conditions

Create scaffolding, infrastructure, norms, and feedback mechanisms that make new behaviors the **path of least resistance** — and hold the container long enough for them to become automatic.

03

Lead through behavior

Model what you're asking, even when it's hard — and make sure **accountability reaches you too** .

How is this landing?

What's resonating? What feels like the most relevant **next step** for your organization? What questions are you sitting with?

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

Thank you!

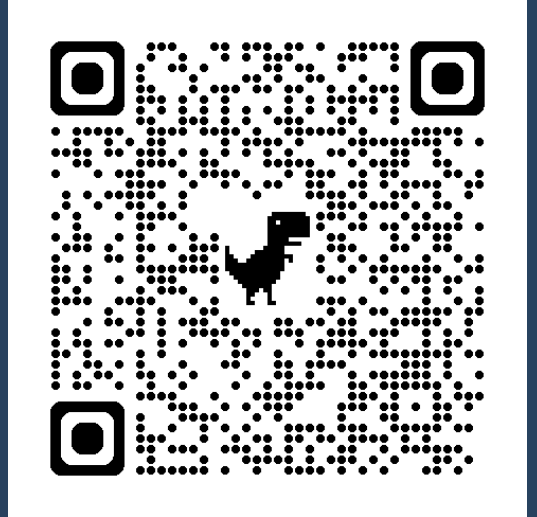
If today's conversation gave you something to take back to your team, here are two ways to keep it going.



PRO BONO CHANGE ASSESSMENT

What's holding your change up?

Have a live change process that you'd like to get unstuck? I'll conduct a pro-bono staff assessment to help you figure out what's getting in your way. Use the QR code to set up a 30-minute scoping session to get started.



SHARE FEEDBACK

How was today?

I'd love your reflections on this session and what topics you'd find valuable next.

