

AI Change Management and Developing an AI Culture

John W. Moran¹

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology is advancing rapidly and creating new challenges for organizations. To successfully adopt AI, leaders must understand the current AI landscape, the role of change management and culture, and the actions required to support employees throughout the transition. This paper discusses these topics and introduces empathy mapping as a tool for understanding employee perceptions of AI adoption.

AI Current Situation:

- AI is moving faster than organizations are adapting.
- AI technology is outpacing organizational readiness and capacity to absorb the change.
- Leaders face a rapidly shifting landscape where traditional roles and new organizational structures are evolving quickly, resulting in cultural challenges.
- The rapid pace of AI adoption often results in fragmented ownership and unclear accountability.
- Employees are not always adequately managed and supported throughout a major transition.
- Many employees have concerns about job security.
- Employees often distrust automated decisions they cannot see or understand, leading to resistance.
- Organizations often skip the critical steps of developing a strategy and communication plan, rushing into implementation without a thoughtful approach.
- Leadership must understand that AI cannot lead change. Leading change is the responsibility of leaders.
- Successful AI implementation requires organizations to blend technology with a people-first approach in which AI serves as an *enabler* rather than a replacement.

Change Management and Culture: Is There a Difference?

Change Management is a structured process for transitioning individuals, teams, and organizations from a current state to a desired future state. It establishes the strategy and steps needed to support AI adoption.

Culture consists of the values, beliefs, and norms that shape the behaviors of individuals and groups within an organization. Culture is the terrain and climate leaders must navigate when

¹ Sr. AI and QI Advisor at PHF

transitioning to AI. It plays a critical role in change management because it influences how people perceive and respond to change.

Culture can significantly influence the success of AI adoption. For example, if an organization has a risk-averse culture but attempts a rapid AI transformation, it will likely face heavy resistance.

Change management operationalizes your culture. If leadership decides to shift toward a more innovative, agile culture, change management provides the mechanisms to support that shift through training, clear communication, and well-developed AI usage guidelines.

Leadership Imperatives:

Leaders must serve as the architects of AI culture and take ownership of the cultural transformation required for successful AI adoption. They are responsible for designing and shaping an organizational environment that encourages employees to embrace AI. This cultural transformation cannot be delegated to others in the organization. The following steps can help leaders establish an AI-ready culture.

Step 1: Identify the Characteristics of the Change

Leaders should first assess the nature and impact of the AI initiative by considering the following questions:

- What is the scope of the change?
- Who will be impacted internally and externally?
- How many employees will be impacted?
- How will employees experience the change?
- What is changing (systems, processes, or roles)?
- What is the timeframe for the change?

Step 2: Upskill Leadership

Leaders should develop their own AI knowledge first. They need a clear understanding of how AI will affect their organization in order to formulate a vision, strategy, and implementation approach.

Step 3: Create a Purposeful Vision and AI Strategy

Leaders should craft a purposeful vision and AI strategy that aligns with business goals and is communicated consistently throughout the organization. A clear vision with strategic priorities establishes direction and influences employee commitment to the transformation.

Step 4: Establish Transparent and Consistent Communication

Leaders should demonstrate transparent, consistent communication that builds trust and reduces the uncertainty surrounding AI adoption. Leaders must articulate strategic priorities clearly so employees can align their efforts accordingly. Leaders must explicitly communicate the "why" behind AI adoption and clearly define its role within the organization.

Step 5: Build Trust Through Employee Support

Leaders should build trust with impacted employees and communicate that the organization will support them in their new roles throughout the transition rather than replace them.

One useful method for understanding employee concerns is the Empathy Mapping Tool². This tool can help leaders identify, articulate, and visualize the organization's current culture and how employees perceive AI adoption. The four quadrants of the tool, as seen in Figure 1, provide an organized way to explore what employees are saying, thinking, doing, and feeling about AI adoption. Empathy mapping also can be used to assist leadership in understanding and overcoming an AI-resistant culture.

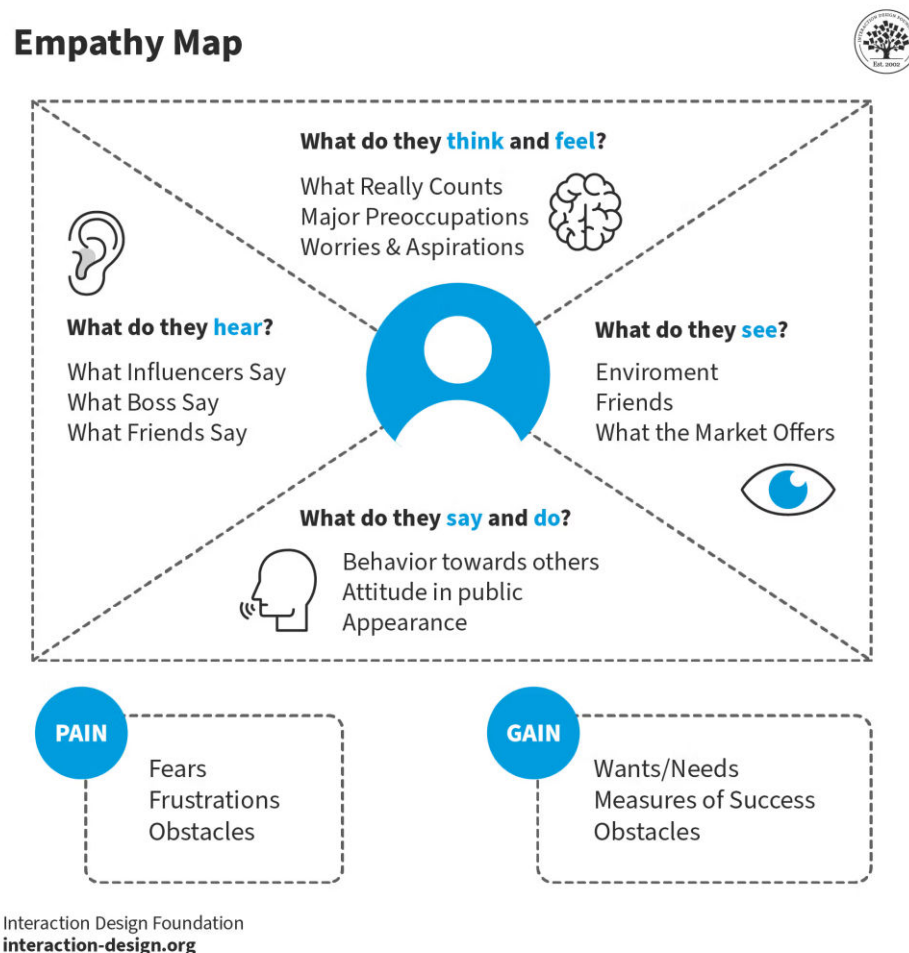


Figure 1

² <https://ixdf.org/literature/article/empathy-map-why-and-how-to-use-it>, Accessed 8/15/2026

Summary:

The challenge for leadership with any AI change is to blend AI technology with a people-first approach in which AI serves as an enabler rather than a replacement. A people-centric approach is essential to empower individuals in the AI era.

Effective AI adoption requires leaders to transition from passive adoption to actively designing an AI-ready culture that prioritizes a people-first, "human-first" approach, where AI acts as an enabler rather than a replacement. Leaders must act as architects of cultural change by formulating clear strategies, ensuring transparent communication, and utilizing empathy mapping to understand and address employee sentiment throughout the transition. An AI transformation can be viewed as a change to something better, rather than simply a change to something different. This can be achieved with leaders adopting a human-first, AI second approach in which technology supports people, strengthens performance, and helps achieve organizational goals.

Looking for Help? The Public Health Foundation (PHF) can assist you with change management and empathy mapping in your organization. If interested in exploring, contact Ron Bialek, rbialek@phf.org.