

CHANGE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR AI PROJECTS

AI Leadership & Project Management Masterclass

Curtin University

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CHANGE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR AI PROJECTS

Four Principles: Expect Resistance ▪ Involve Early ▪ Communicate Constantly ▪ Navigate the Curve

When to Use This Framework

Use this framework when:

- **Deploying AI to a team** - people will resist change
 - **Asking people to work differently** - new processes, new tools
 - **Rolling out AI to the organization** - not everyone will be ready
 - **Facing skepticism or fear** - especially from experienced staff
 - **Trying to build adoption** - technology is only half the battle
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The Core Insight

Technology changes are only 20% technical. The other 80% is people.

You can have the best AI system in the world, but if your team won't use it, it fails. If your organization doesn't understand it, it gets killed. If people fear it, they'll work around it.

Your job as a PM isn't just to deliver technology. It's to help people successfully adapt to change.

The Four Principles

PRINCIPLE 1: EXPECT RESISTANCE

Most people resist change. This isn't weakness or stupidity. It's human.

Why people resist AI adoption: - **Fear of job loss** - "Will this replace me?" - **Fear of incompetence** - "I don't understand AI, I'll look stupid" - **Loss of control** - "I like doing things my way" - **Distrust of leadership** - "Why should I believe this will work?" - **Real, legitimate concerns** - "This might not work well" (and they might be right)

Your instinct might be: - "Just tell them it's good" (they won't believe you) - "Ignore the resisters" (they'll block you) - "Force adoption" (creates sabotage)

The right approach: - **Expect resistance as normal**, not a problem - **Listen to the concerns**, not dismiss them - **Address the real fears**, not just the stated objections - **Involve the resisters early**, not as a reaction

PRINCIPLE 2: INVOLVE EARLY

The people closest to the work have the best insights.

Who to involve (and when):

DESIGN PHASE (Before you build)

Who: Operations managers, experienced staff, frontline workers **Why:** They know what actually happens, not what's supposed to happen **What to ask:** - "What's the hardest part of your current process?" - "What would make your job easier?" - "What could break this?" - "Who will resist and why?"

Benefit: You build something people actually want, not what leadership thinks people want

BUILD PHASE (While you're building)

Who: The actual users of the system **Why:** They can give feedback on usability, logistics, edge cases **What to do:** - Show prototypes, get feedback, iterate - Involve 3-5 power users who can tell you "this won't work" - Let them shape the solution

Benefit: Users feel ownership before launch. They're not learning a system imposed on them.

PILOT PHASE (During the test)

Who: The team using it in the pilot **Why:** They're the first adopters and can coach others **What to do:** - Weekly check-ins: What's working? What's not? - Celebrate wins, address problems fast - Ask them to help train others

Benefit: Early users become champions instead of complainers

PRINCIPLE 3: COMMUNICATE CONSTANTLY

Silence = people fill the gap with fear and rumors.

What to communicate:

BEFORE LAUNCH

Message: “Here’s what we’re doing and why” - “We’re deploying AI chatbot to handle 30% of queries” - “Why? To free you up for complex issues, reduce wait times” - “When? 6-week pilot starting [date]” - “What happens to you? You’ll work with the AI, not be replaced by it”

Who to tell: Everyone affected (even people not in the pilot)

How often: Minimum weekly, ideally more

DURING PILOT

Message: “Here’s what we’re learning” - Weekly metrics: “AI handled 28% of queries, 89% accuracy” - Issues found: “We fixed a data issue that was causing errors” - What’s working: “Customers love the 3.5-hour response time vs. 26 hours” - What’s changing: “We’re adding return policy questions next week”

Who to tell: The pilot team + leadership

How often: Weekly updates, minimum

AFTER PILOT

Message: “Here’s what we’re doing next” - Decision: “We’re scaling to all locations” - Why: “Metrics support it, team is ready, customers like it” - What changes: “Everyone will use the AI, but in a specific way...” - Support: “Here’s training, here’s your go-to person, here’s how to give feedback”

Who to tell: Everyone (not just pilot team)

How often: Launch update + monthly updates during scale

PRINCIPLE 4: NAVIGATE THE CURVE

Change happens in predictable stages. Understanding this helps you support people through it.

THE CHANGE CURVE (Emotional Journey)

STAGE 1: AWARENESS

- "We're implementing AI"
- Emotions: Confusion, curiosity, anxiety
- Your role: Explain the vision, answer questions, normalize emotion
- What to say: "Some of you are excited, some anxious. Both are normal."

STAGE 2: DENIAL/RESISTANCE

- "This won't work" / "This won't happen" / "This isn't my job"
- Emotions: Fear, frustration, resistance
- Your role: Listen, don't dismiss, find legitimate concerns
- What to say: "Tell me what worries you. That's important information."

STAGE 3: FRUSTRATION (The Valley)

- "This is hard" / "The AI made a mistake" / "Why can't we go back?"
- Emotions: Frustration, doubt, exhaustion
- Your role: Acknowledge difficulty, celebrate small wins, show progress
- What to say: "Yes, this is harder at first. By week 3, it gets easier."

STAGE 4: ACCEPTANCE & ADOPTION

- "I get how this works" / "This actually helps"
- Emotions: Competence, confidence, ownership
- Your role: Let them shine, involve them in improvements, celebrate
- What to say: "You're doing great. Want to help train the next group?"

STAGE 5: INTEGRATION (New Normal)

- "This is how we work now"
- Emotions: Satisfaction, mastery, investment
- Your role: Recognize contributions, keep improving, refresh vision
- What to say: "Look how far we've come. Next challenge: [improvement]"

Key insight: *Most people don't get stuck at resistance. They get stuck at frustration. That's when they need most support.*

How long does this take? - Awareness → Denial: 1-2 weeks - Denial → Frustration: 1-2 weeks - Frustration → Acceptance: 2-4 weeks - Acceptance → Integration: 2-4 weeks

Total: 6-12 weeks for full adoption (This is why pilots are 6 weeks - you're helping people get through frustration)

Change Management Checklist

Before and during your AI deployment:

DESIGN PHASE

- ☐ **Involve frontline staff** in design (not just leadership)
- ☐ **Identify likely resisters** - the experienced skeptics
- ☐ **Understand their real concerns** - not just stated objections
- ☐ **Plan how to address each concern** - don't ignore them

BUILD PHASE

- ☐ **Show prototypes to users** - get feedback, iterate
- ☐ **Design for usability** - not just technical correctness
- ☐ **Plan for training** - people will need help
- ☐ **Identify power users** - people who'll champion adoption

PILOT PHASE

- ☐ **Regular communication** - weekly, not "when we have updates"
- ☐ **Weekly check-ins with pilot team** - listen, address concerns, celebrate wins
- ☐ **Visible progress** - metrics, improvements, learning
- ☐ **Fast problem-solving** - if something breaks, fix it quickly
- ☐ **Celebrate wins** - share successes, build momentum
- ☐ **Support through frustration** - be present when it gets hard

SCALE PHASE

- ☐ **Broader communication** - whole organization knows what's happening
- ☐ **Training and support** - don't assume people will figure it out
- ☐ **Early user community** - pilots become trainers
- ☐ **Continuous improvement** - listen to feedback, make improvements
- ☐ **Celebrate adoption** - recognize the work of getting here

The "Sarah Problem"

Sarah is an 8-year experienced customer service agent. She knows this job better than anyone. And she's going to resist the AI.

Why? - Fear her expertise is being devalued - Legitimate concern the AI might not work well - Loss of autonomy and control - Distrust of management

Wrong approach: - Override her concerns - "Don't worry, we tested it" - Go around her - "We're implementing anyway" - Fire her - "If you won't adapt, we don't need you"

Right approach: - **Listen first** - "What's your real concern?" - **Acknowledge her expertise** - "You're right, AI won't do what you do" - **Involve her** - "Help us design this so it actually works" -

Give her power - “You have veto power on the pilot” - **Paint a future** - “You’ll manage the team, not answer routine questions”

Outcome: Sarah becomes an advocate instead of a saboteur

The Role of Leadership

Your role as PM in change management:

What You Do

- Set the vision (“Here’s why we’re doing this”)
- Listen to concerns (“Tell me what worries you”)
- Address legitimate issues (“Let’s fix that”)
- Communicate constantly (“Here’s what’s working”)
- Celebrate adoption (“You did great”)
- Model the change (“I’m using it too, here’s what I learned”)

What You DON'T Do

- Dismiss concerns (“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine”)
 - Blame people for resistance (“Some people just won’t adapt”)
 - Hide problems (“Everything’s great!” when it’s not)
 - Punish resisters (“You have to use it or you’re out”)
 - Assume people will figure it out (“It’s intuitive”)
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Remember

Change is hard for everyone, including you.

Your job isn’t to make change easy (it’s not). Your job is to: - **Make it clear** - why are we doing this? - **Make it supported** - how can people succeed? - **Make it safe** - it’s okay to struggle at first - **Make it owned** - involve people in shaping it

The best AI project with bad change management fails. The mediocre AI project with great change management succeeds.

Invest in people. Invest in communication. Invest in support.

That’s how you build lasting adoption.