

# How Change Really Works: The Science Behind Successful Transformations

BCG has developed a unique reputation for successfully driving high-stakes, large-scale change. The origin of that capability dates back more than three decades, when we began to recognize just how critical it is to create better models for integrating employees into the process.

Jeanie Duck, a now-retired BCG senior partner, published her best-selling book *The Change Monster* in 2001 to help leaders understand and navigate the ups and downs of these journeys. Jeanie argued that the core reason change efforts often failed was behavioral; companies might have had sound strategies, but they weren't getting the people side right. Her thinking, confirmed by years of additional research and real-world client experience, was that addressing the human and emotional component of large-scale change was essential for success.

Now, as the stakes of transformations continue to rise, the BCG Institute (formerly the BCG Henderson Institute) decided to pursue the next level of insight, with the largest research program on this topic ever undertaken.

The resulting book, [\*How Change Really Works: Seven Science-Based Principles for Transforming Your Organization\*](#), by Julia Dhar, Kristy Ellmer, and Philip Jameson, is being released today by Harvard Business Review.

Julia leads our North America People & Organization practice, Kristy leads our North America Transformation practice, and Philip is a senior expert on organizational change. Julia and Kristy also cofounded BCG's Behavioral Science Lab. Their book draws on case studies and research involving 6,000 executives and employees from 15 countries around the world. It offers an important body of evidence about why most transformations fail, and the practical moves leaders can take to improve the odds.

The book starts with a number that has barely moved in decades: 75% of transformation efforts fail to achieve their stated goals in the short and longer term. This is not because of a lack of investment; organizations have spent trillions undertaking major change programs. They often come up short, the authors argue, because the people leading the change and the people living through it experience it very differently.

Among executives, 68% feel positive about a change before they have even heard the details, compared with only 45% of employees. When asked whether a change is likely to succeed, 72% of leaders said yes, but only 49% of employees share that confidence. The book calls this gap *change distance*: the difference in behaviors, feelings, and thoughts between those who design change and those affected by it. Closing that gap is the work that most leaders have not yet learned to do.

The authors lay out a path toward addressing that problem through a set of seven principles—all grounded in science but with immediate practical applications and case studies that bring them to life. I'll give you a taste by describing three:

- **Understand emotions through feedback, not instinct.** Organizations are consistent about tracking customer sentiment, yet they rarely apply the same discipline to employee experience during change. The tendency to give past events a positive spin and to imagine that other people think, feel, or want the same things you do hinder your judgment. Stop guessing how your people feel and start measuring it.
- **Expect take-up to be earned, not automatic.** It's important to be curious about the reasons employees don't

easily adopt change—whether it’s because of lack of capability, opportunity, or motivation. You need to earn employee take-up by eliminating the barriers you discover: gaps in knowledge and skills, constraints on time and resources, the perception that there’s little to gain, and the feeling that there’s something to lose. The authors offer a five-step process to get there.

- **Create momentum throughout, not just at the start.** Seeing progress motivates humans to go further, and in the workplace, employees are highly sensitive to their own perception of achievement. It’s important to intervene before early momentum fades, showing belief, promoting wins, setting new challenges for overperformers, and finding fresh starts for underperformers. Leaders of successful transformations invest heavily in creating and maintaining momentum.

The other four principles are *get true agreement, not false alignment*; *increase agency, not just involvement*; *use a process with rituals, not reactions*; and *share stories and symbols, not just dollars*.

I found all seven principles to be highly relevant at this moment, when leaders are navigating incredible pressure to change and to do it quickly. The evolution of AI and the pace of its adoption are compressing the time organizations have to reshape workflows and change business models.

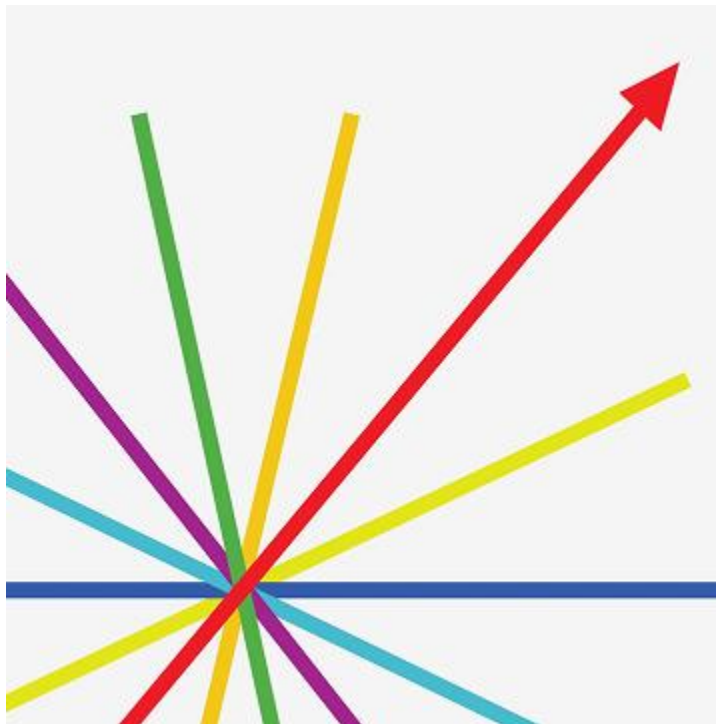
Leaders continue to face pressures to improve near-term performance while sustaining vitality and longer-term growth. They are also making enormous bets on technology and AI investments. How these programs are delivered will define their organizations and shape their legacies—and none of it works unless they also get the people side right. I think you’ll find this book an extremely helpful guide toward making that happen.

Until next time,



**Rich Lesser**  
Global Chair

### Further Insights



#### How Change Really Works

Executives invest in change, but they fail more than they succeed. Discover how to manage organizational change with *How Change Really Works*.

**LEAD CHANGE  
THAT WORKS**



**CEOs Are Betting Big on AI Transformations. Science Is How They Win**

In *How Change Really Works*, BCG experts reveal why most transformations fail and how behavioral science principles can help CEOs beat the odds.

TURN AMBITION INTO ACTION



**The False Alignment Trap**

This *Harvard Business Review* article explains that leaders often mistakenly believe they've found true agreement on why things need to change, what will be changing, and

how that  
change will  
occur.

**BUILD TRUE  
ALIGNMENT**

