CHANGE MANAGEMENT WAS A BREAKTHROUGH. IS IT ENOUGH?

THE CASE FOR ADAPTIVE ADOPTION™

DISCUSSION DOCUMENT — BETA

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And the Case for Something New.

ADAPTIVE ADOPTION

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Paul Gibbons
Paul Gibbons Advisory
paulgibbonsadvisory.com

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I Was There When It Worked

In 1995, I became a change specialist. This wasn't a career choice, it was infatuation. I'd seen strategy and re-orgs fail repeatedly in the early 90s; I wanted to make a difference.

The world of enterprise transformation was entering a new phase. Large-scale re-engineering projects and systems rollouts were making the average business initiative substantially larger and more complicated than anything the prior decade had prepared organisations for. ERP implementations carried eight-figure budgets. Process redesigns cut across entire business units. The scale of coordinated human effort required to land these programmes was unprecedented for most firms.

Onto the scene came a generation of change thinkers who gave practitioners something they had never had: a common language and a repeatable method. Kotter's eight steps. Conner's framework for managing at the speed of change. These were novel and useful contributions. They distilled hard-won anecdotal experience into practical, accessible, simple-looking sequences that could be taught, shared, and applied across industries.

At PricewaterhouseCoopers, these models improved our success rate. They gave us a shared vocabulary with clients. They gave project teams a way to think about the human side of transformation that wasn't just instinct and improvisation. They helped clients through their 1990s transformation journeys, and I built them, taught them, used them, and built a career on them.

Through the 2000s, the world didn't get any simpler. Change programmes carried eight- and nine-figure budgets. They were complicated — often brutally so. But the models of the 1990s proved they still had utility. They handled complicated problems reasonably well. You could define the future state, marshal sponsorship, train the workforce, execute the plan, and stabilise. The logic held, more or less.

What follows is not ingratitude. It is an honest accounting of what changed while the models didn't.

What Everyone Already Knows

The standard critiques of orthodox change management are, by now, familiar. Change isn't linear. "Resistance" is a patronising frame that blames the recipient

rather than interrogating the system. Most change methodologies rely on one-to-many influence methods — cascade briefings, town halls, communications plans — that assume information creates action. They handle emergence poorly, offering no mechanism for adapting when the plan meets reality. And they don't reliably achieve behavioural results, because they operate at the level of attitudes and intentions rather than observable conduct.

Organisational scholars identified these problems decades ago. Argyris showed that organisations systematically defend against the learning that change requires. Mintzberg argued that strategy itself is emergent, not designed — a critique that applies with equal force to the change programmes built to execute it. Stacey demonstrated that planned approaches collapse in complex, responsive environments. The critique is not new. What is new is that the profession built its certification infrastructure as if these critiques didn't exist.

In the 1990s the goal for big enterprises, and for change, was to make change:

- Universal — generalisations about how individuals learn and change, i.e. change curves
- Predictable — if we do X, humans will respond Y, that is, the tools, workshops, diagnostics, training, and other interventions
- Manageable — we can predict and orchestrate a process, or cascades
- "Template-able" — we can use the same models and slides over and over

Today, the critiques are widely accepted, but the centre of gravity in change models — and the certification programmes — remains untouched.

The 2010s: The Undiscovered Countries of Evidence and Behaviours

In 1998, a seminal paper on Evidence-based Medicine sparked a decades-long change in hundreds of years of how medical knowledge was used. It was a very difficult birth, and even a few years ago, a surgeon friend said, "I'd rather rely on my experience." Doctors, with decades of study and experience, have their identity tied up in "being the person who knows how to intervene." (Notice the parallels with change.)

In the same decades, behavioural science began to corral ideas from neuroscience, cognitive science, economics, decision-theory, sociology, and psychology into an

integrated view of how humans change. (It is fair to say that the battle has been joined, but not been won.)

My 15-year research programme began in the undertow of those two forces. The burning questions driving my research became:

1) Are the models, frameworks, and assumptions testable? When IBM says, "this is our digital transformation approach," do we accept that because they are IBM, or can we ask "what evidence do you have that your approaches are better than other approaches?" When people say "70 percent of change fails" — as they do almost daily on LinkedIn — do they have evidence?
2) Do traditional approaches to change management (the certifications, the historical models) change behaviour?

What I found distressed me to my core. In 1996, I stumbled upon research that suggested "10 percent of management training transfers back to the job." Ten percent! And as I explored the foundational concepts clients were using — change curves, learning styles, ADKAR, and MBTI — I discovered that academic psychologists had long dismissed those as pseudoscience.

It was as if science had done a huge rug pull under what I believed to be true and useful in change. I used to open change certification programmes I taught in the 1990s with Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance. Discovering that one had been talking nonsense for a decade was less than enjoyable.

But despite my research and publication of a change bestseller, the centre of gravity of change management remained largely unmoved. There are LinkedIn gurus who will die on each of those ideological hills. When I re-joined IBM after two decades, I discovered that their change "base model" was largely identical to the one I helped develop at PwC in the mid 1990s. (PwC had been acquired, methodologies and all, by IBM.) It was like jumping into Orson Welles's time machine and arriving back in the decade of big hair and brick phones.

This was essentially true of every major change model, from Gartner, through Deloitte, Kotter, and Prosci. It was as if the final words on change were written in the last century and had been cryogenically frozen.

And as someone whose decades-long research programme was to change change, I consider the failure to alter the centre of gravity a personal failure.

Despite working at or consulting to three of the "big-5" consulting firms to bring 21st century thinking to their change practices, I honestly left them little better than I found them.

The irony of being a change expert singularly unable to move the needle on change is neither lost on me, nor pain-free.

Where Orthodox Change Management Still Works

Before making the case for something different, it is worth being precise about what orthodox change management was designed for — and where it still functions.

These models were built for **planned, episodic, structurally complicated change**. The hallmarks: a clear start and end date, a known future state, a defined scope, and a primary challenge that is coordination and communication rather than behavioural transformation. ERP rollouts. Office relocations. Merger integrations. Process re-engineering with a defined target operating model.

In these contexts, orthodox change management is a reasonable approach. Stakeholder analysis, sponsor engagement, communication planning, training delivery, resistance management — these activities are useful when the destination is known and the path, while complicated, is broadly predictable.

And though those methods are outstandingly weak on behavioural science, they aren't completely useless. The problem is not so much that orthodox change management is wrong. The problem is that the proportion of organisational change that is "template-able," predictable, and universal, is shrinking rapidly.

The jurisdiction of these models has narrowed. And most of the interesting, high-stakes, career-defining problems now sit outside it.

What Changed While the Models Didn't

Three shifts moved the centre of gravity beyond orthodox change management's reach. Each, on its own, would have been sufficient to strain the old models. Together, they broke them.

The Behavioural Science Revolution

In 2008, Thaler and Sunstein published Nudge. In 2011, Kahneman published Thinking, Fast and Slow. These books brought fifty years of behavioural research — from Tversky, from Gigerenzer, from the entire cognitive bias literature — to public attention. They didn't just popularise existing science. They changed how policymakers, economists, and designers thought about human decision-making.

By 2013, when I began deep research into the intersection of behavioural science and organisational change, I discovered something extraordinary: not a single major change management framework had incorporated these ideas. An entire professional discipline dedicated to changing human behaviour had ignored the most significant advances in understanding human behaviour.

The implications are severe. Orthodox change management frameworks rest on an implicit model of the rational actor — someone who, given sufficient information, motivation, and support, will adopt the desired behaviour. Behavioural science has spent decades demonstrating that this model is empirically false. People are loss-averse. They discount the future. They anchor to the status quo. They are influenced by defaults, framing, social proof, and friction far more than by rational argument. The intention-action gap is not an anomaly. It is the norm.

A change methodology that does not account for this is not merely incomplete. It is operating on a falsified model of the human being.

The Tumultuous 2020s

Then the context itself broke.

COVID-19. Remote work. Return-to-office. The Great Resignation. Skills disruption across entire industries. Political polarisation entering the workplace. ESG backlash. Supply chain upheaval. Regulatory turbulence.

Change became continuous, not episodic. There was no "go-live date" for a pandemic. No Gantt chart for cultural upheaval. No stabilisation phase when the next disruption arrived before the last one was absorbed.

Orthodox change management has no mechanism for continuous, emergent, overlapping change. Its architecture assumes a bounded project with a beginning, middle, and end. When the change itself becomes the permanent condition, the project model collapses.

The AI Disruption

And then, in 2023, the change world became harder still.

The release of ChatGPT triggered the fastest technology adoption cycle in corporate history. Within months, organisations that had spent years on cautious digital transformation found themselves scrambling to respond to a capability that rewrote assumptions about knowledge work overnight.

But the initial scramble was only the beginning. By late 2025, the landscape had shifted again: agentic AI, autonomous coding assistants, AI systems that could orchestrate multi-step workflows without human intervention. The technology didn't pause to let governance catch up. It accelerated.

AI adoption is behavioural, continuous, trust-dependent, politically complex, and has no defined end-state. It is the purest example of a problem class that orthodox change management cannot address. The change profession is now being asked to manage something fundamentally different from what its tools were designed for.

SAP had a go-live date. AI does not.

Six Ideas That Run Through Adaptive Adoption™

Adaptive Adoption has three interlocking systems — the Change Agility Framework, the AI Leadership Delta, and Behavioral Governance — comprising twenty dimensions in total. I am not going to walk through all of them here.

Instead, I want to surface six ideas that run through the entire framework. These are the commitments that distinguish Adaptive Adoption from what came before. They are not architectural descriptions. They are philosophical positions — positions that, once accepted, make the architecture inevitable.

1. Behaviours, Not Plans

Orthodox change management operates at the level of plans, communications, and training schedules. Its implicit theory of change: if people are informed and trained, they will adopt. This premise is refuted by decades of behavioural science, and the refutation is not subtle.

Adaptive Adoption is built on a different premise: the unit of change is behaviour, not knowledge. Every intervention across all three systems is specified in behavioural terms. Not "leaders should support the change" but "leaders demonstrate Active Modeling — observable behaviours with developmental progressions and a named archetype (The Carpenter) that makes the standard

memorable and coachable." Not "employees should follow the AI policy" but "the system makes responsible adoption the easiest path available."

The diagnostic model at the heart of the operational methodology — Capability, Motivation, Trust, Opportunity — forces practitioners to diagnose the actual behavioural blocker before designing the intervention. Too much orthodox change management starts by prescribing communications when the problem is friction, training when the problem is trust, or vision when the problem is workflow design.

Orthodox change management asks: "Have people been told?" Adaptive Adoption asks: "Have people changed what they do?"

2. Frictions — Remove Them, Don't Install Them

Most governance and change frameworks add frictions: approval gates, review committees, access controls, mandatory training prerequisites. The implicit logic is that slowing people down makes them safer.

Adaptive Adoption takes the opposite view. Every friction you install is a tax on adoption. When governance is slower than bypass, shadow AI forms — not because people are reckless, but because the formal system has made doing the right thing harder than doing the unofficial thing.

The question isn't "how do we control this?" but "how do we make the right thing the easy thing?"

This thread connects two of the framework's most distinctive elements. Friction Courage — one of the seven Leadership Delta dimensions — is specifically about leaders having the nerve to dismantle barriers rather than add them. The archetype is The Liberator: the leader whose primary contribution is removing the obstacles that prevent others from acting. In Behavioral Governance, the same principle operates structurally: governance as enablement, not policing. If your governance framework's primary verb is "prevent," you've built a system optimised for stasis.

The great mistake of our era is designing AI governance that installs more frictions than it removes — and then wondering why adoption is slow.

3. Trust — Diagnosed, Not Assumed

Orthodox change management either assumes trust exists or treats it as a communications problem. "We need better messaging." "We need more visible sponsorship." "We need town halls."

Adaptive Adoption treats trust as a structural condition with four independent dimensions, each of which can fail independently: Relational (do the people asking me to adopt this have my interests at heart?), Institutional (is the system around this trustworthy?), Self (can I do this — am I still relevant?), and Task (does the technology actually work?).

Each dimension has distinct failure modes — including overtrust, which orthodox change management doesn't even conceptualise. You can have high relational trust and zero task trust. Treating that as a single "trust problem" guarantees you'll intervene on the wrong dimension.

The RIST Framework operationalises this. Trust Calibration — a Leadership Delta dimension — asks leaders to set a ceiling and a floor on trust simultaneously. The archetype is The Empath: someone who manages multiple dimensions of uncertainty at once, neither naive nor cynical.

Trust isn't a feeling to be managed through town halls. It is an architecture to be diagnosed and built.

4. Ethics as Practice, Not Compliance

In orthodox change management, ethics doesn't appear. In most AI governance frameworks, ethics means a principles document and a review board — something that exists on paper, invoked retrospectively when something goes wrong.

Adaptive Adoption treats ethics as a frontline practice. Manage Ethics Always is a Change Agility pillar. Ethical Stewardship — The Helmsman archetype — is a Leadership Delta dimension. The question isn't "do we have an ethics policy?" but "do people make different decisions because of how we've designed the ethical environment?"

This matters acutely for AI adoption, where novel ethical questions arise at the speed of a prompt, not at the cadence of a quarterly review board. The organisations that handle AI ethics well will not be those with the most sophisticated policy documents. They will be those whose practitioners have internalised ethical reasoning as a daily cognitive habit — practical wisdom in the Aristotelian sense.

5. Accelerated Workforce™ — Build Capability, Don't Rent It

Most organisations approach AI adoption as a procurement exercise: buy tools, train users, measure adoption rates. The metric is "X% of employees using Copilot." That measures utilisation. It does not measure capability.

Adaptive Adoption frames AI adoption as a capability-building exercise. The goal is a workforce whose capability is expanding faster than the rate of disruption. Not the stock of current skills, but the rate at which new capability is being acquired — what the framework calls 1st-Derivative Talent.

This is why Behavioral Governance measures Capability Expansion Rate as one of the Five Dials at board level. An organisation that scores well on utilisation today but poorly on capability expansion rate is living on borrowed time. It has deployed tools without building the human capacity to evolve with them.

Put People First — the fourth Change Agility pillar — reinforces this: augmentation before automation. Start with tools that make people better at their work before making their work smaller. People embrace what helps them. That builds skill and trust simultaneously. The question isn't "which jobs can AI replace?" but "how do we make every person in this organisation meaningfully more capable than they were six months ago?"

6. Adaptability — Recursive Self-Improvement

Orthodox change management assumes a stable target state. You plan the change, execute the change, embed the change, close the project. But what if the target is moving? What if the environment shifts faster than any plan can accommodate?

Adaptive Adoption is designed for continuous adaptation. Embrace Complexity — the second Change Agility pillar — draws on complexity theory and the Cynefin framework (Snowden's model for categorising problems by their knowability): probe, sense, respond. Not because planning is useless, but because planning without experimentation becomes fantasy. Design and Prototype builds safe-to-fail experimentation into the methodology itself.

But the deepest expression of this thread is structural. The Five Dials at board level — Utilisation Depth, Capability Expansion Rate, Trust Stability, Iteration Velocity, Leadership Delta — create feedback loops that modify the organisation's adoption approach based on what is actually happening, not what the plan said would happen. Governance Intelligence, one of the six Behavioral Governance dimensions, is the nervous system: the measurement apparatus that governs governance itself, detecting friction, drift, and decision failure before they become crises.

This is antifragility applied to organisational change: a system that doesn't just withstand disruption but improves because of it. The framework is designed to be recursively self-improving — adapting its own operation in response to what it observes.

Orthodox change management is a project. Adaptive Adoption is an operating system.

When to Use Which

This discussion document is not an argument for abandoning change management. It is an argument for understanding its jurisdiction — and recognising when the problem has moved beyond it.

Dimension	Orthodox CM	Adaptive Adoption
Change type	Planned, episodic	Emergent, continuous
End-state	Known and defined	Evolving and discovered
Primary challenge	Coordination and communication	Behaviour and capability
Leadership model	Sponsorship and champions	Developmental (Leadership Delta)
Governance model	Policy compliance and oversight	Behavioural enablement
Trust approach	Assumed or addressed through comms	Diagnosed across four dimensions (RIST)
Behavioural science	Absent	Central to methodology
Ethics	Out of scope	Frontline practice
Frictions	Installed for control	Removed for enablement
Measurement	Plans, training completion, self-report	Observable behaviour across three evidence layers
Capability model	Training delivery	Accelerated Workforce (1st-Derivative Talent)
Timeline	Project-bound with stabilisation	Ongoing, recursive
Adaptability	Plan, execute, embed	Probe, sense, respond

If you are managing a bounded project with a known end-state — an office move, a system migration, a process redesign — orthodox change management gives you a serviceable toolkit. Use it.

If you are managing AI adoption, continuous disruption, workforce transformation, or any change that is behavioural, trust-dependent, continuous, and has no defined end-state — you need something built for that problem class.

That is what Adaptive Adoption is.

What This Means for You

If you are a change practitioner, your skills are not obsolete — and this is not flattery. The competencies you have built transfer directly. Your stakeholder analysis maps onto the RIST trust diagnostic. Your sponsor engagement becomes Leadership Delta coaching. Your communication planning evolves into behavioural intervention design. Your ability to read organisational politics and hold space for difficult human conversations is irreplaceable. What Adaptive Adoption adds is the behavioural layer, the leadership development layer, and the governance layer that orthodox models left out. This is not a replacement. It is an expansion of your professional capability.

If you are a CHRO, Chief AI Officer, or senior leader navigating AI adoption, the question worth asking is whether your current change approach is specified at the level of behaviour, trust, and leadership development — or whether it is still operating at the level of communications plans and training schedules. The Leadership Delta assessment provides a diagnostic starting point.

If you lead an organisation where the pace of change has outstripped the models you inherited, Adaptive Adoption offers a framework designed for the world you actually inhabit — not the world those models were built for.

The framework is open-source, non-fee-gated, and designed to evolve in public. The value is not in hiding the intellectual property. It is in the diagnostics, implementation, and authority that come from having built it.

The full framework, diagnostic tools, and model cards are published at **paulgibbonsadvisory.com**

This paper was developed using the Corpus — a knowledge system synthesising ~4,000 pages of published work on leadership, change, and organisational behaviour. It represents my research; I review and refine every output. This is how I work now, and I believe it is how most serious knowledge work will be done within five years.

Paul Gibbons
paulgibbonsadvisory.com
thinkbiggerthinkbetter.substack.com

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