WAVESTONE

Beyond traditional change management

Accelerating AI-enabled business transformation and sustainable adoption

AI is advancing rapidly, reshaping how organizations think about productivity, decision-making, and customer engagement. Yet despite the excitement, most AI-enabled transformations fail to deliver their full promise. The reason is almost never the technology.

The real barrier is people. Discover why AI is only as good as the people who adopt it..

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Summary

Executive summary

Tools are launched but not embraced. Dashboards are delivered but go unused. Models generate insights, but employees continue making decisions the same way they always have. In short, AI initiatives stall not because they can't work, but because people don't change.

AI does not create value. People do.

AI creates benefits such as speed, insight, and automation. But those benefits only translate into value when people adopt the technology, change how they work, and integrate it into their day-to-day decision-making.

This paper introduces the **Transformation Change Journey;** a five-phase model built specifically for AI-enabled initiatives. It addresses what Organizational Change Management (OCM) cannot: sustained user adoption, deep behavior change, and measurable value realization.

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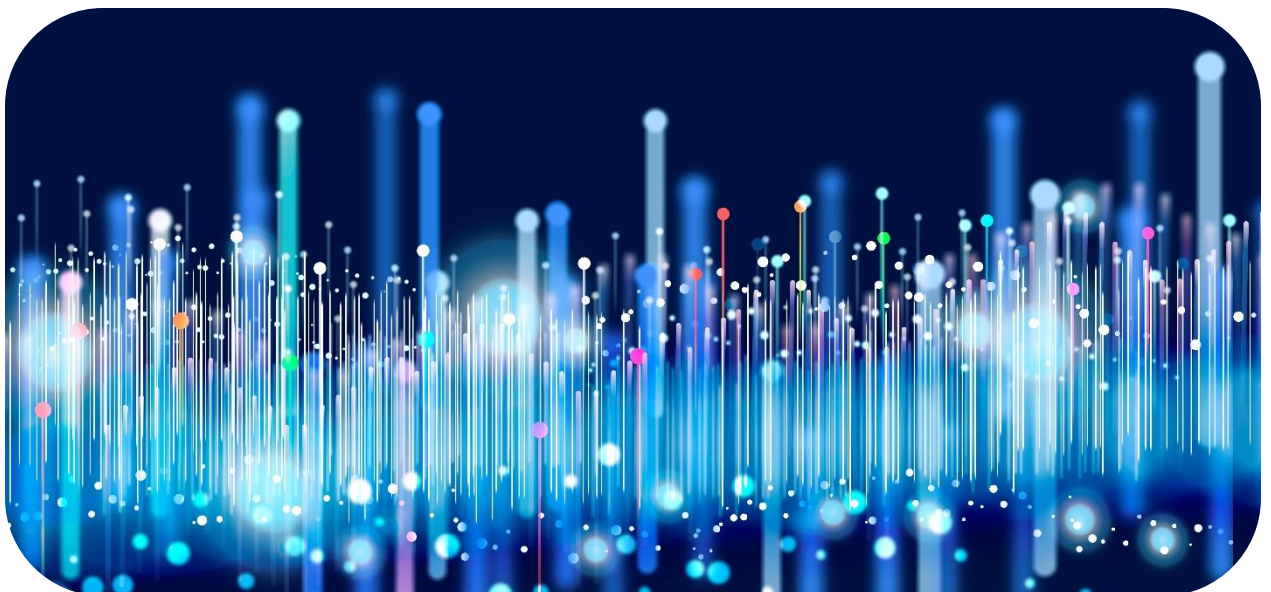
The hidden failure point: adoption, not deployment

Access to a tool doesn't equal adoption. Knowing about a capability doesn't mean trusting or using it. Installing a solution doesn't guarantee transformation. This is where most organizations go wrong. They assume deployment equals success. But, according to McKinsey, **70% of business transformations fail**. BCG puts the number closer to **78%. How can enterprises face these odds, and improve upon them, particularly with to AI transformations?**

Many of you will be familiar with **Organizational Change Management (OCM).** In many scenarios, it supports change – and it's a good place to start.

OCM plays a critical role in helping organizations manage transformation. It's designed to guide people through transitions, whether implementing a new process, rolling out a system update, or responding to a reorganization. OCM excels at building awareness, reducing resistance, and preparing employees to operate in a new environment.

However, AI-enabled transformation introduces a different kind of challenge, one that goes beyond awareness and readiness. It requires deep, sustained behavior change that traditional

OCM practices were not designed to deliver.

AI doesn't just alter workflows. It reshapes roles, redefines decision-making, and introduces tools that evolve continuously. It asks people to:

- Trust unfamiliar algorithms
- Collaborate with systems that feel opaque or unpredictable
- Make sense of dynamic outputs in real time
- Shift from executing tasks to interpreting insights.

These changes require **mindset shifts**, **behavioral reinforcement**, and **cultural evolution**. And that's where OCM often reaches its limit.

OCM approaches typically concentrate on upfront engagement: preparing communications, providing training, managing stakeholder concerns. **But for AI**, **the real work begins after go-live**, when people first try to integrate the tools into their day-to-day work—and often hesitate, struggle, or revert.

Without sustained reinforcement, usage is inconsistent, and confidence remains low. The new tools exist, but they aren't relied upon. And critically, the promised business value is delayed or never realized.

A new approach: The Transformation Change Journey

AI-enabled transformation requires a new framework. So – what is it, and how does it work?

Introducing the Transformation Change Journey? It includes:

1. **Awareness**: Sparking curiosity and relevance
2. **Readiness**: Building confidence and practical capability
3. **Proficiency**: Reinforcing usage, overcoming friction, and normalize new behaviors
4. **Adherence**: Institutionalizing the change through recognition, culture, and accountability
5. **Value Realization**: Measuring business outcomes and reinvest gains to create lasting impact

Each phase is tailored to how people change over time, through experience, with the right support and incentives.

Adoption requires a journey. Not a launch

To close the value gap, organizations need more than a launch plan. They need a **transformation adoption strategy** that:

- Recognizes behavior change as a multi-phase journey
- Provides ongoing support beyond training
- Builds user confidence and trust over time
- Embeds adoption into operations, culture, and performance metrics
- Ties usage directly to business value realization

That is the purpose of the **Transformation Change Journey**. It complements and extends OCM, offering a path from early awareness to measurable outcomes through structured phases, role-specific support, and feedback-driven iteration.

A framework built for AI transformation

AI is only as impactful as the people who adopt it. Thereby, adoption can't be treated as a footnote to deployment. It must be treated as a strategic process that is planned, supported, measured, and refined just like any other part of transformation.
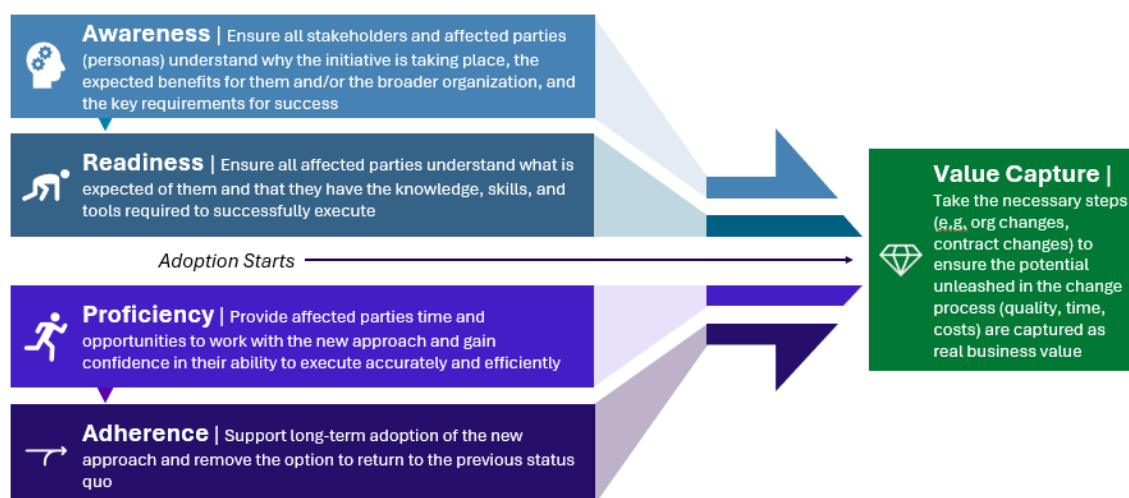
That's where the Transformation Change Journey has been successful for forward-looking enterprises.

The framework is built specifically to support the kind of sustained, behavioral, and business-aligned change that AI demands. It moves organizations past the launch moment and into the long tail of transformation, through the months and quarters where value is truly realized.

Unlike conventional change approaches that focus on readiness and training, this approach:

- Recognizes that **behavior change unfolds over time**, not all at once
- Provides distinct strategies for each stage of adoption, from initial curiosity to full value realization
- Builds **confidence and trust progressively**, rather than assuming one-size-fits-all rollout tactics will suffice
- Aligns success measures to **real business outcomes**, not just communication reach or training completion.

At its core, the framework is about aligning **people, roles, and reinforcement systems** to unlock AI's potential at scale.

Awareness | Ensure all stakeholders and affected parties (personas) understand why the initiative is taking place, the expected benefits for them and/or the broader organization, and the key requirements for success

Readiness | Ensure all affected parties understand what is expected of them and that they have the knowledge, skills, and tools required to successfully execute

Adoption Starts

Proficiency | Provide affected parties time and opportunities to work with the new approach and gain confidence in their ability to execute accurately and efficiently

Adherence | Support long-term adoption of the new approach and remove the option to return to the previous status quo

Value Capture | Take the necessary steps (e.g, org changes, contract changes) to ensure the potential unleashed in the change process (quality, time, costs) are captured as real business value

Why this approach drives results

Incorporating **eight key design principles** makes this framework uniquely suited to AI transformation. It involves:

1. **Continuous and iterative engagement:** Adoption is treated as a journey, not an event. Support is delivered in structured phases that evolve as user needs shift.

2. **Explicit focus on user confidence and proficiency:** Adoption isn't assumed. It is earned through layered training, peer support, and just-in-time guidance that help users build trust and competence.

3. **Data-driven feedback loops:** Real-time metrics, including usage quality, confidence ratings, and legacy system fallback, help change teams adjust strategy dynamically.

4. **Embedded cultural and behavioral change:** Peer storytelling, leadership modeling, and reinforcement mechanisms help make the new way of working not just accepted but expected.

5. **Clear leadership accountability and sponsorship:** Leaders and champions are activated in specific, ongoing ways that go beyond kickoff support. This helps create alignment and momentum across all levels of the organization.

6. **Tailored and role-specific approaches:** Communications, training, and reinforcement are customized by persona and context, meeting people where they are with what they need.

7. **Gamification, recognition, and behavioral reinforcement:** Lightweight but meaningful motivators such as peer recognition, spotlight stories, and usage-based milestones reinforce good habits and promote cultural traction.

8. **Sustained value capture and reinvestment:** Rather than ending at go-live, the framework's final phase focuses on realizing and reinvesting gains. Change teams help stakeholders identify where efficiencies have occurred, measure their impact, and reallocate time, resources, and budgets accordingly. Wins are communicated clearly, new practices are reinforced through planning and performance structures, and teams are equipped to reinvest freed-up capacity into higher-value work.

Together, these principles make adoption **trackable, adaptable, and human-centered**. They turn it into a strategic discipline, not just a compliance effort.

Putting the framework into practice: *Phase-by-phase guidance*

Each phase of the **Transformation Change Journey** is designed not just to move a project forward, but to shift how people think, feel, and act. Behavior change takes time, and the support required in one phase is not the same as in the next.

That's why each stage includes tailored strategies for communication, training, leadership engagement, and value activation, all aligned to the real-world experiences of different user groups. When people receive the right message, in the right format, at the right time, they do more than comply with change. They engage with it, believe in it, and carry it forward.

"The first step toward change is awareness. The second step is acceptance."
— Nathaniel Branden

Phase 1:
Awareness

Spark curiosity, set expectations, and align on value

The **Awareness** phase begins before tools are launched or workflows change. It's where transformation takes root - not just in employees' minds, but in the business' understanding of what success looks like and what it will take to achieve it.

At this stage, users are typically unaware, skeptical, or concerned. But leaders may also be unclear on what success means. Without shared clarity on both **value potential** and **behavioral readiness**, transformation efforts are likely to stall before they begin.

This phase sets the foundation for both.

A dual purpose: people and the business

For individuals, the goal is to generate understanding, relevance, and curiosity. People need to know what is coming, why it matters, and how it might improve their day-to-day work.

For the organization, the goal is to establish clarity around business impact. This means defining how success will be measured, where value is expected to show up, and what changes to people, processes, and systems are required for that value to materialize.

What makes this phase different

Effective transformation begins with alignment. In the Awareness phase, that includes:

- Defining **targeted business outcomes** and how they will be tracked
- Assessing the **change impact** for each persona or role
- Identifying the **minimum readiness conditions** needed for successful rollout
- Embedding these metrics into **planning and governance**, not just dashboards

Value isn't just measured at the end but is shaped and activated from the start.

Common user mindsets at the start

- "This sounds like more work."
- "I've seen things like this come and go."
- "Why are we doing this now?"
- "How will this affect me?"

By the end of the **Awareness** phase, users should begin to say:

- "I'm curious about what this could mean."
- "I can see how this might help."
- "This seems different from past initiatives."
- "I want to learn more."

Communication objectives	Training objectives	Value enablement objectives
• Create visibility, clarity, and curiosity about the change • Communicate both vision and practical relevance, especially by persona • Use real-world stories, testimonials, and social proof to make the change feel credible and human • Help leaders communicate with confidence using tailored messaging kits and role-specific examples	• Introduce key terminology, value concepts, and business rationale • Use "day in the life" vignettes, demos, or teaser content to illustrate benefits • Avoid deep process training - instead, focus on painting a clear and motivating picture of what's coming and why	• Define the **expected business impact** and align stakeholders on how it will be measured • Translate that impact into **clear, actionable metrics** embedded in minimum readiness criteria • Ensure business, functional, and site leaders understand their role in value realization planning • Position the transformation as a lever for strategic business outcomes, not just workflow updates

This phase ensures that everyone understands not only what is changing, but also the business outcomes it is expected to deliver, along with how success will be measured from the start. For most enterprises, this will require a phased communication approach involving stakeholders across business units.

Hypothetical scenario

A global logistics company was preparing to roll out an AI-based route optimization tool. In past initiatives, adoption was limited and leaders struggled to demonstrate ROI. This time, during the Awareness phase, **the change team partnered with Finance and Operations to define specific metrics**: expected time savings per route, on-time delivery rate improvements, and customer satisfaction scores. These were built into readiness plans.

At the same time, they launched a teaser campaign that followed "Jason," a dispatcher, as he navigated his work before and after the change. His story brought the benefits to life. Curiosity among drivers rose sharply, and regional leaders reported strong alignment on what success would look like and how to enable it.

Success in this phase looks like:

✔ **Cultural and behavioral readiness**

• Employees express curiosity not skepticism
• Leaders can clearly articulate business value and expectations

✔ **Strategic alignment and planning**

• Value metrics are embedded in local and program-level planning
• Minimum readiness criteria are documented

✔ **Operational change preparedness**

• Change impact is understood by person and function

Phase 2:
Readiness

Equip people and the organization to begin

Once awareness is established, the focus shifts from curiosity to capability. In the **Readiness** phase, the goal is to ensure that both users and the business are fully prepared to begin using the new capability or process, not just in theory but in practice.

This phase is where confidence is built, expectations are clarified, and everything behind the scenes is aligned for a smooth start. It's the difference between being told that change is coming and being ready to step into it.

A dual focus: empowering users, enabling operations

For individuals, readiness means more than attending a training. It means feeling equipped with the knowledge, tools, and support needed to begin using the new capability in their real-world context.

For the organization, readiness means that baseline metrics have been collected, tracking is in place, and the systems, roles, and workflows required to capture value are fully prepared.
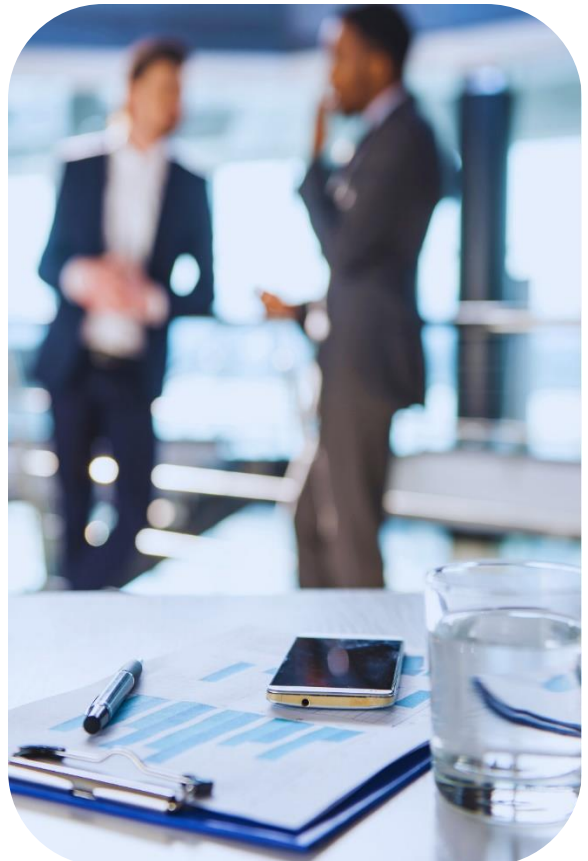
This is not the moment to move fast and hope for the best. It is the moment to align precisely so that the transition to new ways of working happens with clarity, support, and a shared sense of purpose.

Common user mindsets at the start

- "I know what is changing, but I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do."
- "Will I get enough time to learn this?"
- "What happens if I make a mistake?"

By the end of the **Readiness** phase, users should feel:

- Informed about what is expected
- Capable of beginning with confidence
- Supported by peers, champions, and leaders

Communication objectives	Training objectives	Value enablement objectives
• Clarify roles, timelines, and expectations specific to each persona • Reinforce the purpose behind the change by connecting it to everyday tasks • Share where and how to get help, including super users, training materials, and support channels	• Deliver task-based, role-specific training that reflects real daily work • Use multiple formats such as instructor-led sessions, recorded demos, quick reference guides, and practice environments • Reinforce readiness standards and clarify expected behaviors before launch	• Confirm that baseline metrics for value tracking have been collected • Ensure that adoption conditions, including system access, process updates, and support structures, are in place across all teams or sites • Activate local leaders and champions to take ownership of readiness in their areas • Integrate value metrics into early launch plans so that measurement begins with initial use

This phase ensures that both users and the business are positioned to start strong and that tracking begins on Day 1. Enterprise organizations should be prepared to roll out highly customized and specific trainings for varying business units.

Hypothetical scenario

As a global retailer prepared to implement AI-driven inventory analytics, store managers were uncertain about how the tool would change their routines. The change team delivered hands-on, role-based training that walked managers through their specific workflows, showing how the tool would make planning easier and reduce stockouts.

At the same time, business leaders identified baseline metrics such as manual adjustment rates and replenishment lead times. These were incorporated into team reviews from the beginning. As a result, adoption launched with confidence and clarity across both store operations and leadership expectations.

Success in this phase looks like:

✓ **User readiness and confidence**

• Users understand what to do and feel confident doing it

• Training participation is high, and confidence is rising

✓ **Local engagement and support**

• Super users and local leaders are engaged and proactive

✓ **Infrastructure and value enablement**

• Baseline data is in place to support value tracking

• The organization is fully prepared for rollout, with necessary systems and supports ready

Phase 3:
Proficiency

Build confidence, normalize usage, and refine for value

The **Proficiency** phase is where users move from trial to habit. They begin to apply the new capability in their day-to-day work, often for the first time under real pressure. This is a critical inflection point. The decisions made and support provided during this phase will determine whether usage deepens or starts to drift.

The goal is not just to achieve functionality, but to foster confidence, identify friction, and refine both behavior and systems to support sustained, meaningful use.

A dual focus: reinforcing behaviors, delivering early value

For users, proficiency means more than just following a new process. It means understanding how the new capability makes their work better, faster, or easier. It also means having the confidence to rely on it, especially in critical moments.

For the organization, proficiency is when value signals start to emerge. Teams can see where usage is driving improvement and where unexpected challenges are surfacing. Early feedback, if captured and acted on, becomes a powerful accelerator.

Common user mindsets at the start

- "I've tried it a few times, but I still feel unsure."
- "It worked in training, but I'm not sure it fits in my real workflow."
- "I'll go back to the old way if I'm under pressure."

By the end of the **Proficiency** phase, users should feel:

- Confident using the tool or process regularly
- Clear on how it improves their work
- Comfortable troubleshooting or helping others

Communication objectives	Training objectives	Value enablement objectives
• Normalize new behaviors by sharing peer stories and highlighting success • Acknowledge challenges and communicate how feedback is being addressed • Reinforce help channels and remind users they are not alone	• Provide just-in-time support including microlearning, tip sheets, and embedded help • Reinforce correct usage through peer-led demos, Q&A, and office hours • Adapt materials based on actual usage patterns and questions	• Monitor usage quality, performance data, and early signals of value • Identify friction points and respond with changes to systems, workflows, or communications • Spotlight emerging success stories and make metrics visible to drive momentum • Use early feedback to validate or adjust assumptions about where value is showing up

The focus during this phase is not just on reinforcing what is working, but on making visible progress and celebrating small wins that signal the transformation is taking hold. Leaning into early adopters will help streamline the process.

Hypothetical scenario

At a large healthcare system rolling out AI-powered diagnostic tools, early usage was inconsistent. Some physicians relied heavily on it, while others avoided it. The change team launched weekly "Lunch and Learn" sessions, led by early adopters, where real diagnostic wins were shared.

One such story involved Dr. Patel, who used the tool to detect a rare condition that changed the patient's outcome. This story became a reference point across departments. At the same time, feedback about usability gaps was compiled and addressed, leading to system updates. Over the next quarter, confidence and usage rose dramatically.

Success in this phase looks like:

✓ **Real-world adoption and behavior change**

• Users are actively applying the new capability in real work scenarios

• Confidence is increasing, and peer support is visible

✓ **Responsive support and learning loops**

• Common friction points are addressed quickly and transparently

• Early value signals are captured and used to guide iteration

✓ **Social proof and momentum**

• Success stories are being shared across teams

Phase 4:
Adherence

Make the new way stick

In the **Adherence** phase, the focus shifts from learning and experimentation to consistency and reinforcement. By this point, users are capable, but sustained behavior still requires support. Without deliberate reinforcement, people may revert to old habits, especially under stress or deadline pressure.

The goal of this phase is to embed the new way of working into the routines, expectations, and culture of the organization. This includes removing legacy options, celebrating consistent use, and ensuring that both individuals and leaders see the transformation as the default, not a project.

A dual focus: reinforcing habits, sustaining value

For users, adherence means that the new capability no longer feels "new." It has become part of how work gets done. Recognition, peer reinforcement, and visible impact help strengthen this sense of permanence.

For the organization, adherence is when business value begins to stabilize. Teams can rely on consistent data, repeatable behaviors, and clearer metrics. This enables leaders to identify where further improvement is possible and

where value may be at risk due to drift or workaround behaviors.

Common user mindsets at the start

- "I know how to use it, but I still slip back under pressure."
- "Everyone says we should use it, but the old way still works too."
- "I'll keep using it if I see that leadership really supports it."

By the end of the **Adherence** phase, users should feel:

- Comfortable and fluent using the new capability
- A sense of shared ownership and accountability
- Motivated by recognition and confident the change is here to stay

Communication objectives	Training objectives	Value enablement objectives
• Celebrate consistent use through public recognition, peer stories, and leader shout-outs • Reinforce expectations through business reviews, dashboards, and performance routines • Show how consistent usage is contributing to business results	• Provide periodic refreshers and deeper learning to evolve user proficiency • Tailor support to new features or complex use cases as adoption matures • Highlight best practices and peer-led tips to strengthen knowledge sharing	• Integrate adoption metrics into business rhythm reviews, team meetings, and dashboards • Identify where usage is inconsistent and determine whether technical, behavioral, or cultural barriers are in play • Retire or restrict access to legacy tools or workarounds that undercut adherence • Promote value stories that connect consistent use to outcomes that matter

At this stage, success depends on embedding change into systems of accountability and recognition, not just systems of support.

Hypothetical scenario

At a financial services firm that had implemented AI-driven risk management tools, usage was strong immediately after launch but began to decline under deadline pressure. Analysts reverted to familiar spreadsheets, and the new system was seen as optional.

The change team responded by embedding usage metrics into team reviews, recognizing high adopters in monthly town halls, and decommissioning redundant templates. They also spotlighted a case where a team using the AI tool flagged a risk earlier than expected, preventing a compliance issue. Over time, adherence increased and legacy processes were phased out.

Success in this phase looks like:

✓ **Embed usage and behavior changes**

• Users consistently rely on the new capability, even in high-pressure situations

• Legacy tools and workarounds are removed or restricted

✓ **Reinforcement and cultural integration**

• Recognition programs and leader reinforcements are active and visible

• Cultural ownership of the transformation is growing across teams

✓ **Measurable and ongoing business value**

• Business value is being delivered at a steady, reliable pace

Phase 5:
Value
realization

Convert adoption into measurable Business Impact

In the Value Realization phase, the focus moves from usage to impact. By this point, adoption is embedded and behaviors are consistent. The opportunity now is to translate those behaviors into tangible, visible outcomes that matter to the business.

This phase is not about reporting for the sake of closure. It is about surfacing where value is truly being delivered, how it can be reinvested, and how that momentum can be used to inform future decisions.

The transformation is no longer just a success in deployment. It becomes a success in measurable, strategic value.

A dual focus: measuring outcomes, reinvesting gains

For users, this phase is about clarity and ownership. They can see how their efforts have led to real improvements in quality, speed, or outcomes and they know those gains are being acknowledged and used to fuel further progress.

For the organization, this is the point where efficiency gains, time savings, or other benefits are intentionally converted into operational value. Leaders use that insight to reshape roles, redesign workflows, reallocate resources, and inform future investment.

Common User Mindsets at the Start

- "I'm using the new tools, but I'm not sure what the results are."
- "It feels better, but is it actually helping?"
- "What happens to the time we're saving?"

By the end of the **Value Realization** phase, users should feel:

- A clear connection between adoption and business impact
- Proud of their role in delivering value
- Motivated to continue improving and innovating.

Communication objectives	Training objectives	Value enablement objectives
• Share tangible outcomes and link them to team behaviors • Use success stories and metrics to build momentum for future improvements • Position value realization as an ongoing effort, not a final report	• Equip leaders and teams to interpret data and identify new opportunities • Offer scenario-based exercises to help teams make informed reinvestment decisions • Reinforce strategic thinking through advanced use cases and peer examples	• Quantify benefits that have been captured and connect them to strategic business goals • Help business units translate efficiencies into budget shifts, new capabilities, or expanded capacity • Promote enterprise-wide visibility of outcomes through dashboards and executive reporting. • Use success to inform future transformation efforts, creating a feedback loop between impact and strategy

Value realization is not the end of the journey. It is the point where transformation becomes self-sustaining, where results drive reinvestment, and reinvestment drives new results.

Conclusion

Transformation is not an outcome. It is a capability.

Most AI-enabled initiatives fail not because the technology doesn't work, but because the organization fails to change around it. That failure is not about resistance or readiness alone. It is about underestimating what real adoption requires.

The **Transformation change Journey** reframes adoption as a strategic capability. It provides a clear structure for supporting users, aligning teams, and capturing value, step by step, phase by phase. It moves organizations beyond launch events and into the sustained work of embedding new behaviors, evolving culture, and realizing measurable impact.

This framework is not a replacement for traditional change methods like OCM. It is a **complement** and an **extension**, built specifically for the type of deep behavioral and operational shifts that AI, automation, and digital transformation demand.

A call to act differently

Organizations that succeed with AI are not the ones with the best tools. They are the ones that invest in helping people trust, use, and ultimately reshape how value is delivered.

That means:

- Planning for behavior change as early as system design,

- Engaging champions and leaders as active enablers,

- Treating value realization as a design requirement, not a reporting task,

- And equipping teams with more than communication. They need clarity, confidence, and continuous support.

Ready for adoption?

Whether you're preparing for your **first AI launch** or **scaling** across multiple sites and systems, Wavestone can help you embed the Transformation Change Journey into your roadmap.

Contact us today:

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Acknowledgements

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About Wavestone

Wavestone is a consulting powerhouse, dedicated to supporting strategic transformations of businesses and organizations in a world that is undergoing unprecedented change, with the ambition to create positive and long-lasting impacts for all its stakeholders.

Drawing on more than 5,500 employees in 17 countries across Europe, North America and Asia, the firm offers a 360° portfolio of high-value consulting services, combining seamlessly first-class sector expertise with a wide range of cross-industry capabilities.

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