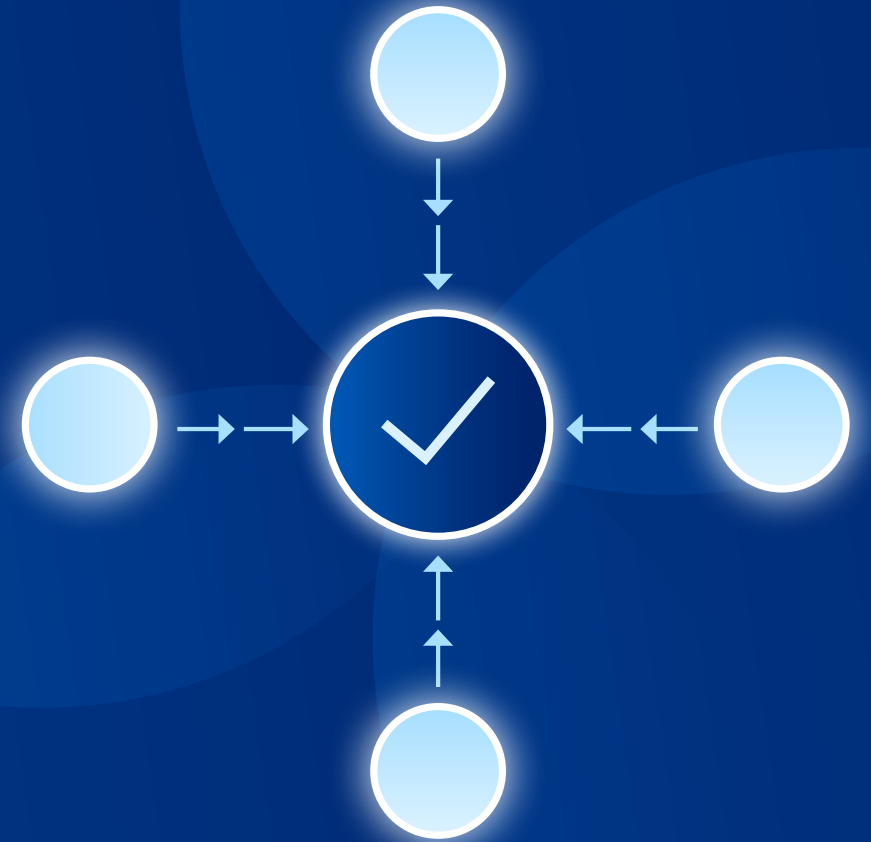


4 Actions for R&D Leaders to Improve Change Success



Introduction

As organizations pursue transformative growth amid ongoing disruption, R&D leaders face mounting pressure to drive change successfully. Yet many change initiatives fail to deliver expected outcomes, and employees often report that leaders lack the skills needed to guide teams through transition.

In R&D environments, resistance to new technologies, processes and ways of working can slow innovation, reduce productivity and jeopardize strategic objectives. Successful change leadership requires more than communication and project management. It demands a deliberate approach that accounts for both the operational and human dimensions of transformation.

Many organizations rely on standardized change management approaches regardless of the situation. However, not all change creates the same level of disruption, uncertainty or employee response. Effective R&D leaders tailor their approach based on the type of change they are leading and the needs of the organization.

This eBook outlines four actions that help R&D leaders improve adoption, build trust and navigate change more effectively.

Four actions consistently separate successful change efforts from unsuccessful ones:

- 1 Accurately diagnosing the mode of change**
- 2 Aligning leadership behavior to the situation**
- 3 Forming change design groups to support transition**
- 4 Balancing rigid governance with generative dialogue**

Together, these actions help leaders improve adoption, reduce resistance and strengthen organizational resilience during periods of change.

Action 1

Diagnose and identify the change mode

Not all change creates the same level of disruption, uncertainty or employee response. One of the most common causes of failed initiatives is misdiagnosing the type of change underway and applying the wrong leadership approach. Effective R&D leaders begin by identifying the change mode before selecting actions, allocating resources or launching programs.

Organizations typically experience five change modes: **planned/strategic**, **emergent**, **incremental**, **transformational** and **turnaround**. Each presents distinct challenges and requires a different response. A digital transformation may begin as a planned initiative but quickly shift into an emergent or transformational effort as business priorities evolve.

For this reason, change diagnosis should be treated as an ongoing leadership discipline rather than a one-time assessment. Leaders who continuously monitor internal and external conditions can adapt more effectively and keep change efforts aligned with organizational needs.

Five change modes

Change mode	Key indicators	Typical triggers
Planned/strategic	Clear vision, stable context, defined milestones	Strategy refresh, digital transformation
Emergent	Ambiguity, shifting priorities, external shocks	Market disruption, regulatory change
Incremental	Continuous improvement, stable operations	Lean/Agile, process optimization
Transformational	Major disruption, culture/business model overhaul	M&A, AI integration, CEO change, cultural shift
Turnaround	Crisis, existential threat, severe performance gap	Financial distress, reputational risk

Source: Gartner

Action 2

Match your leadership posture to the change mode

Different change environments require different leadership approaches. Leaders who rely on a single style often create confusion or slow adoption. Instead, effective change leaders adjust their posture based on the organization’s circumstances.

Planned change requires structure, clear communication and disciplined execution. Emergent change calls for experimentation, learning and rapid adaptation. Incremental change benefits from empowerment and coaching that encourage continuous improvement. Transformational change requires leaders to articulate a compelling vision while helping employees navigate uncertainty and cultural shifts.

During turnaround situations, leaders must be decisive, directive and focused on urgency. By intentionally matching leadership behavior to the mode of change, R&D leaders can maintain organizational alignment while creating conditions for innovation and progress.

Required leadership posture

Change mode	Required leadership posture	Recommended action steps for the head of R&D
Planned/strategic	Provide structure and clarity; ensure disciplined execution and reporting.	Provide clear process guidance and communication on expected outcomes — overcommunication is still undercommunication.
Emergent	Act as sense maker and connector; enable fast experimentation and allow for adaptation.	Sponsor and directly participate in return on the future projects.
Incremental	Delegate and empower; reward learning loops and improvement. Focus on empowerment and coaching.	Reexamine and, if needed, adjust phase/process to identify areas of inefficiency.
Transformational	Inspire collective vision; create space for emotional and cultural adaptation. Be inspiring and emotionally intelligent.	Articulate and share future vision with the R&D team, internal stakeholders and, if possible, external audiences, including innovation and supply chain partners.
Turnaround	Focus on urgency; be directive and decisive.	Partner with other stakeholders to develop alternative technology and project investment strategies.

Source: Gartner

**Action
3**

Form change design groups to support transition

Change is not adopted simply because employees understand what is happening. Adoption occurs when people can process the impact of change and determine what it means for their daily work.

To support this transition, R&D leaders should establish change design groups composed of trusted employees from different functions and influence networks. These groups help interpret change within local contexts, surface concerns early and shape practical solutions that improve adoption. A typical group includes four to eight members representing diverse perspectives and ways of thinking.

Acting as a bridge between leadership and employees, the group helps ensure change efforts are grounded in operational realities rather than assumptions made at the executive level.

“It isn’t the changes that do you in, it’s the transitions. Change is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new policy. Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation.”

William Bridges, “Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change,” 2009

**Action
4**

Integrate rhythmic dialogue with governance

Change succeeds when employees can make sense of what is happening, not simply comply with new processes. While governance provides structure and accountability, leaders must also create opportunities for ongoing dialogue, reflection and learning. Practices such as anecdote-sharing sessions, open forums, quote gathering and learning reviews help teams surface challenges, identify emerging patterns and adapt more effectively as change unfolds.

R&D leaders should supplement traditional progress reviews with questions that explore what teams are experiencing and learning, such as “what surprised us?”, “what assumptions are being challenged?” and “what is shifting?”

These conversations often reveal barriers that dashboards and status reports miss, including workarounds, adoption gaps or cultural resistance. By embedding sensemaking into regular governance rhythms, leaders can uncover issues earlier, improve adoption and better support the human side of transformation.

Recommended practices

- Anecdote circles to surface stories about how change feels on the ground.
- Quote gathering where teams are required to share at least one quote or verbatim from their colleagues in addition to their own perspectives.
- Open-space sessions to explore possibilities and patterns.
- Collective story harvest to capture learning across projects.

Actionable, objective insights

Explore these additional complimentary resources and tools for R&D leaders:

 Insights 4 Strategies to Improve R&D Portfolio Management Improve your portfolio management practices to deliver results. Download Now	 Webinar Why Traditional Change Management Fails and How R&D Leaders Can Improve Results Learn why change management often fails to reflect change realities. Register Now	 Insights 3-Step Playbook to Speed Up New Product Development in R&D Learn how leading R&D organizations accelerate new product development. Download Now	 Tool Gartner R&D Score Benchmark your R&D function's maturity and plot the path to improvement. Learn More
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