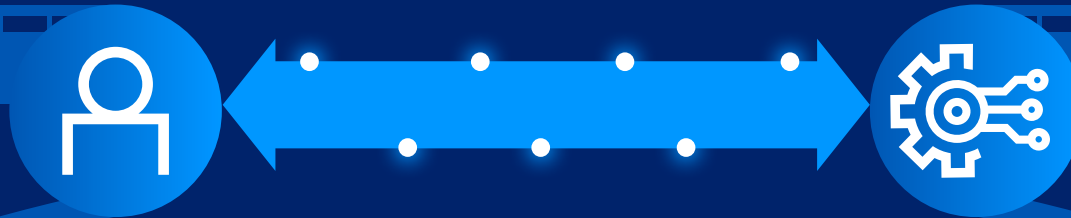


Rethink Executive Communications to Bridge the Employee Trust Gap in AI Transformation



In the era of AI transformation, leaders are no longer employees' primary source of truth during organizational change. To drive AI adoption, chief communications officers (CCOs) must refocus executive voice on business realities and transparent sensemaking, while delivering messages about personal benefits through managers and peers.



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Insights at a glance

Motivating employees to embrace AI transformation presents CCOs with two interrelated challenges. First, company leadership is now just one voice among many, as employees form mental models about AI through media, social networks and peer discussions. Second, default trust in organizational leadership has eroded; employees are increasingly skeptical and quick to question or dismiss top-down executive messaging. In this environment, trust is fragile and easily lost, and silence or inaction from leaders can further widen the credibility gap. To promote change adoption, CCOs must recognize this new reality and rethink legacy communication strategies to meet employees where they are.

Key insights and data points

- Only 26% of employees say leaders are trustworthy and competent; 79% report low trust in change.
- High-trust organizations generate over six times more discretionary effort, driving innovation and performance; employees' reduced intent to stay, fueled by concern about AI-driven job loss, can cost large organizations up to \$47 million annually.
- Traditional “future-state” messaging and executive claims about personal benefits of AI accelerate skepticism and further erode trust.

Recommendations for CCO action

1. **Do not use the “future-state” vision of AI transformation as the headline for internal audiences:** Clearly communicate the necessity of AI for organizational competitiveness, sharing specific market realities and competitive pressures. Acknowledge the shifting employee value proposition and treat employees as informed partners by directly linking decision rationale to industry benchmarks and trends.
2. **Surface and respond to internal narratives that shape behavior:** Move beyond sentiment measurement to actively detect and address emerging narratives through external forums (e.g., Reddit, Blind, Glassdoor), structured manager input and cross-channel pattern recognition. Distinguish between narratives requiring executive clarification (factually inaccurate and widespread) and those better addressed by managers or peers (emotionally charged or experiential).
3. **Don't use executive authority to sell the personal benefits of AI transformation:** Shift communication about AI's individual benefits away from executive voices to those that employees find more credible about their daily work: managers and peers.

Issue

AI transformation fundamentally challenges a core assumption of traditional change communication: That organizational leadership is the primary source of truth for employees during times of change. Because AI transformation is unfolding amid continuous public discourse across news coverage, social media and peer conversations, company leadership has lost primary control of the narrative.

The impact of external narratives has several important implications, not only diluting leaders' ability to control the storyline but also actively shaping how employees respond to executive communications. Mainstream media and social platforms often amplify fears about AI's risks to jobs and economic security. As employees form mental models based on these outside sources rather than internal communications, trust in company leadership erodes. This shift signals broad cultural implications — when employees look outside the organization for meaning, it can undermine psychological safety, belonging and trust in leadership. The result is an executive credibility gap: Only 26% of employees agree that their senior leaders are both competent and trustworthy. Seventy-nine percent report low trust in change. CCOs face not just a crisis of narrative control, but a deeper crisis of executive credibility and organizational trust.

In this environment, legacy change communication approaches that rely on executive authority and top-down messaging are inadequate, and CCOs risk further eroding trust or disengaging employees if they fail to meet employees where they are. The challenge is no longer about restoring narrative control, but about navigating a landscape where skepticism is the default and credibility must be continually earned.

More detail

Do not use the “future-state” vision of AI transformation as the headline for internal audiences

Messaging about productivity, efficiency and a fully realized AI vision may resonate with markets, but internally, these external headlines often accelerate skepticism and further fragment trust, rendering executive claims ineffective. To engage employees and communicate effectively in a skeptical environment, stop trying to “sell the vision” and build an internal communications messaging framework around business viability, clear sensemaking and ongoing adaptation.

1. Anchor messaging in business viability.

- State the “why” clearly: Explain that AI adoption is essential for the company's survival and competitiveness, not just executive ambition.
- Be transparent about market realities: Clearly share data and context about industry trends, competitive pressures and what's at stake.
- Treat employees as partners: Acknowledge their capacity to understand and adapt, rather than minimizing or sugarcoating challenges.

2. Lead with executive sensemaking.

- Explain decision principles: Share the rationale, trade-offs and ethical considerations behind AI-related decisions.
- Acknowledge the shifting employee value proposition: Clearly articulate how the organization is rebalancing expectations and support for employees.
- Replace one-way statements with real dialogue: Use two-way communications such as “ask me anything” (AMA) sessions, town halls and feedback loops.
- Model transparency: Admit what is known, what is uncertain and how leadership is navigating ambiguity.

3. Routinize change.

- Frame AI as a journey: Emphasize that transformation is iterative, with milestones, updates and course corrections.
- Normalize adaptation: Acknowledge uncertainty and reinforce that change is ongoing and directional.
- Highlight learning and feedback: Regularly share what’s been learned and how employee input shapes decisions.

Critically, building an effective internal messaging framework is not about creating a separate or competing narrative for employees versus external audiences. Rather, it’s about being intentional with what you headline and prioritize internally to support understanding and adoption, while avoiding triggering skepticism. Achieving this requires close partnership with corporate affairs, marketing, investor relations, HR and senior leaders to ensure all stakeholder groups hear and see an overall coherent story, despite the tailored approach.

Surface and respond to internal narratives that shape behavior

During AI transformation, employees’ mental models, shaped by external media, online forums and peer discussions, can quickly fuel narratives that drive behaviors and potentially undermine desired change. Most traditional listening tools (pulse surveys, town hall Q&As and focus groups) are designed to reveal how employees feel but rarely uncover the deeper narratives influencing their actions. The limitation is that these tools measure sentiment, not sensemaking. During AI transformation, the primary risk isn’t simply that employees feel uncertain or even negative; it’s that they construct incorrect or incomplete mental models about AI that drive resistance or maladaptive behaviors.

To address this, CCOs need to build listening systems that don’t just track sentiment, but capture how employees are making meaning, surfacing narratives, interpretations and stories. This is the critical gap many organizations overlook, and closing it is essential to guiding successful change.

Effective employee listening during AI transformation requires CCOs to analyze external platforms such as Reddit, Blind and Glassdoor in tandem with sentiment and engagement data. Additionally, gather structured input from managers, who are in the best position to hear and observe emerging narratives within their teams.

When the same story surfaces across multiple forums and teams, it signals that a narrative is taking hold and may be influencing employee behavior. CCOs should then ensure responses are tailored, selective and strategic, only using executive voice when appropriate (see Table 1).

Do not use executive authority to sell the personal benefits of AI adoption

AI transformation exposes the limits of another familiar change communication tactic: Selling the personalized benefits of adoption. Highlighting individual benefits can help build momentum in many change efforts. However, during AI transformation, when executives use their authority to emphasize advantages such as reduced workload and more meaningful work, employees may perceive these statements as promises rather than vision. If employees’ experiences fall short of these expectations, disappointment and skepticism can increase. This is especially problematic for early change adopters who, as influential peers in driving change, may become disillusioned and stall momentum if executive “promises” are not matched by their actual experiences.

Remember that employees interpret executive messaging about personal benefits through a socioemotional and cultural lens. They ask themselves, “Do you really understand my day-to-day reality? Are you minimizing the friction, uncertainty or loss I’m likely to experience?” This human reaction means that even well-intentioned executive messaging can unintentionally widen the trust gap if it fails to acknowledge the emotional complexity of the change.

Table 1: Internal narrative response framework

Narrative type	AI adoption behavior at risk	Recommended response
Factually inaccurate and widespread	Blocks willingness to experiment	Executive clarification
Partially accurate but emotionally charged	Undermines confidence	Manager-led framing
Individual experiences generalized as “how AI works here”	Creates social proof that discourages adoption	Peer storytelling
Fringe or isolated	Minimal risk	Monitor, do not amplify

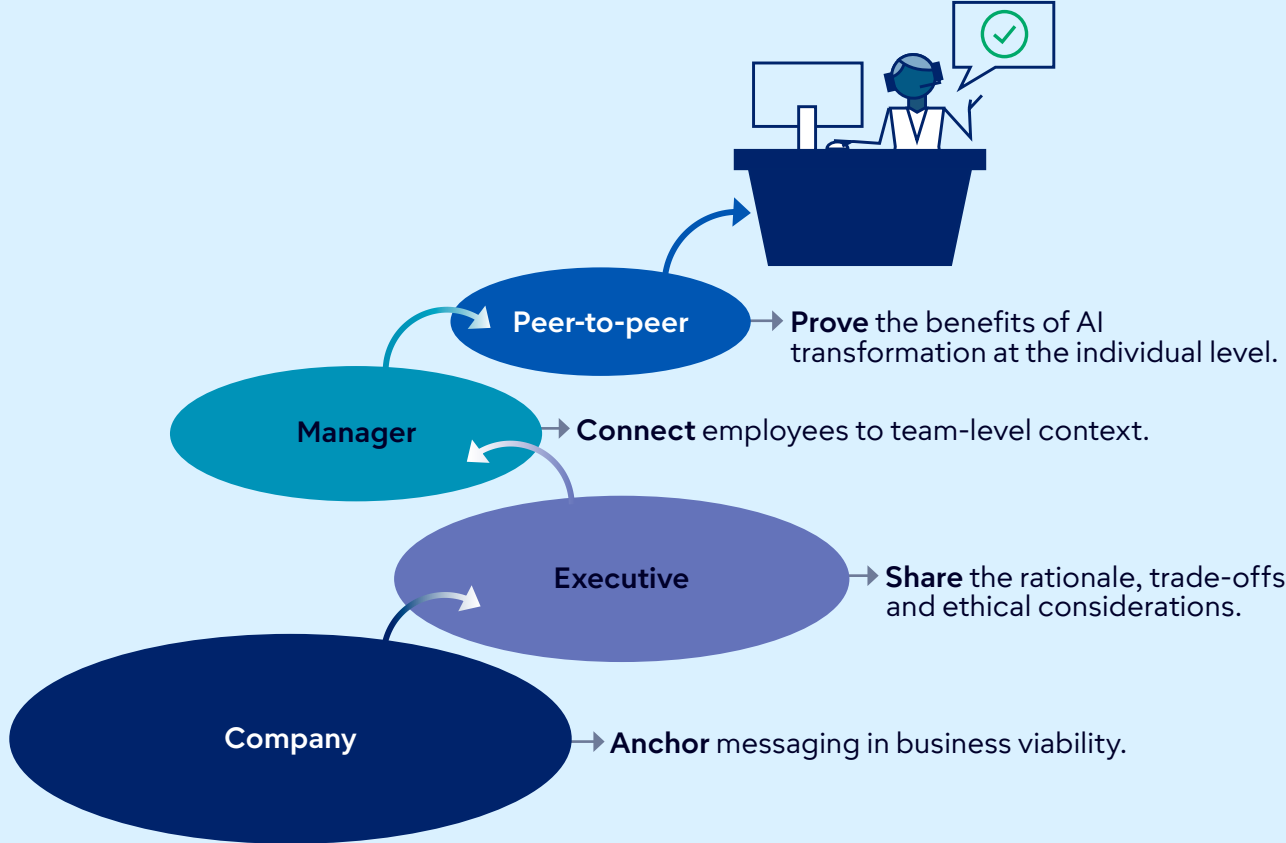
Source: Gartner

To address these risks, CCOs should guide leaders to shift away from using executive authority to “sell” personal benefits. Instead, messages about how AI adoption will impact individual employees should be delivered by managers and peers, who have direct credibility and understand the realities of daily work. This approach enables authentic storytelling about both the opportunities and challenges of AI transformation, helping to build trust, foster honest dialogue and support successful adoption. Overall, effective AI adoption narratives require matching each message to the messenger best positioned to deliver it (see Figure 1).

Effective personal benefit messaging, delivered at the manager and peer level, focuses on:

- Where AI is changing and improving specific workflows or decision points
- Where tools are reducing friction or improving quality of work
- Where upskilling is occurring and where learning curves remain
- How individual employees are already enjoying benefits and how they got there

Figure 1: Align the message with the most credible messenger



Source: Gartner

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