

Gartner Insights

New CSO Mandate: Hit Targets and Manage Relentless Transformations

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Initiatives: Drive Sales Transformation While Managing Risk; CxO Leadership

CSOs are rewarded and retained for both revenue and transformational leadership. Yet, in this climate of constant change, 89% of CSOs struggle to balance the risks of change with the obligations of hitting sales targets. This research shows how CSOs manage transformation risks and maximize gains.

Insights at a Glance

CSOs who hesitate or attempt to wait out the next wave of change — like the AI mania — signal complacency or even obsolescence to their CEOs and boards. Sales transformations are a necessity to not only outpace competitors but to keep pace with the market.

Today's catalysts for change are prominent and unavoidable. Gartner data shows that sales organizations completed an average of three to four transformations per year since 2022 ^{1,2} and the results weren't favorable. Most transformations took longer than anticipated and were more difficult than expected. Only 11% of sales organizations were able to drive commercial success while executing a transformation. ²

It seems dire. Nearly 90% of CSOs fail in transformation initiatives because many treat them as incremental change. Leaders must recognize that transformations are a rearchitecture around a new working paradigm. For sales, it's particularly challenging since transformations reimagine the very status quo designed to help sellers execute. Plus, it's likely disrupting sellers while they chase their near-term targets.

While it introduces new risks, transformations are required for future success. As a result, CSOs must:

- Make fewer, bolder bets
- Lead actively, grounded in reality

- Build a two-horizon operating model
- Embrace systems thinking
- Detect and act on emerging realities

Impact Brief

CSOs face a new reality. Their performance is measured not only by their ability to hit revenue targets, but by their capacity to do it while leading through transformational change. Today, transformation is not just about outpacing the competition. It's about remaining relevant in a world that is moving faster than anyone anticipated. Unfortunately, few leaders can successfully balance the dual imperatives of delivering commercial success while navigating their organizations through transformation.

The stakes are high: nearly 90% of CSOs fail in these efforts, ² often because they underestimate the disruptive nature of true transformation. Unlike incremental change management, transformations fundamentally challenge the operating environment and disrupt an already difficult endeavor of selling. This not only jeopardizes growth, but also introduces new and significant risks.

The urgency is clear: CSOs must reexamine how they approach transformational change, or risk being left behind in a world that refuses to wait.

Actions and Cautions

Actions

- Ruthlessly prioritize down to a few high-leverage, non-negotiable goals, eliminating low-impact initiatives that create noise and fatigue.
- Lead actively and authentically as a transformation champion grounded in reality.
- Establish two parallel working horizons with one track set on near-term sales results and the other track established for intermediate changes for long-term transformation.
- Break down silos and reimagine commercial execution as an end-to-end, integrated engine for sustainable value.
- Leverage forward-looking metrics and empower teams to experiment then iterate.

Cautions

- Hedging risk through a broader portfolio of smaller investments may seem like risk management, but it divides the team's attention and increases change fatigue.
- Overly delegating executive sponsorship to subordinate leaders may result in less organizational attention and confusions around C-suite priorities.
- Avoiding the realities of change fatigue, understaffing and outdated infrastructure ignores the organizational realities and reduces team confidence in the CSO's strategic plans.

How to Execute

Make Fewer but Bolder Bets

CSOs looking to manage near-term success with longer-term transformations require a fundamental reset of organizational priorities. CSOs must eliminate low-impact initiatives that contribute only noise, risk, and change fatigue. Instead, they should set their sights on achieving fewer aspirational and audacious goals – **prioritize transformations with durable and exponential impact, rather than incremental improvements**. This is a reimagining of the entire sales ecosystem – integrating people, processes, technology, and data to create a fundamentally new infrastructure.

The modern CSOs must thrive amid relentless disruption. Playing it safe with scattered initiatives is a recipe for chaos. Winning CSOs ruthlessly prioritize, driving relentless progress through disciplined, high-impact experiments – one bold move at a time.

While a diversified approach may appear to offer balance, it results in divided attention and internal competition for resources. In contrast, concentrated efforts on a single transformational domain – such as commercial GenAI or GTM redesign – yields scalable, compounding benefits.

To escape the trap of spreading resources too thin, CSOs must ruthlessly prioritize their areas of focus. These larger scale initiatives can be managed through linked and sequential, staged phases. These are not dilutive and disparate initiatives but rather phases of a focused and bolder, cohesive strategic transformation.

Lead Actively and Grounded in Reality

Effective transformational leadership demands that the CSO be grounded in the realities of the organization. CSOs must be keenly aware of when and where aspirations become unrealistic and reckless. **Transformational success will not come from an organization who doesn't have the capability and capacity to change.** CSOs must honestly assess what their team can do and when significant investments are required to increase the chances of transformational success.

CSOs must balance the risks of overdelegation with the essential appointment of a transformational leader to manage the day-to-day execution. The transformational leader role requires full commitment and a blend of detail orientation, GTM expertise, executive presence, and strong communication skills. This is not a side hustle but rather a dedicated role.

This leader does not replace the CSO as the transformational champion; the CSO must remain actively engaged throughout the transformation. This includes frequent, public support, realistic expectations setting, and appropriate resource allocations.

Transformational CSOs Communicate Effectively

CSOs must clearly and frequently communicate the rationale behind transformation initiatives, and stay in front of the organization to build momentum and celebrate early wins. The best CSOs excel not only in communicating but establishing a closed-loop communication channel – they:

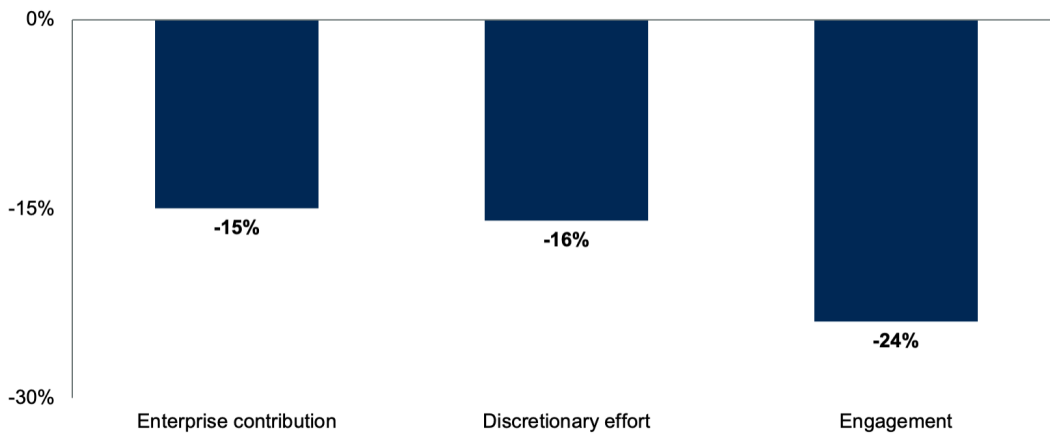
- Foster relationships and empower trusted individuals to serve as the “voice of the field” to surface the genuine sentiment from sellers, customers, and partners.
- Receive the “voice of the field” in the spirit in which it is delivered. This is not the time to be defensive or abrasive in hearing the seller’s realities.
- Respond to all feedback, when possible. Closed-loop communications require a full circle of communications where no feedback is avoided, discarded or lost.

Communication remains a cornerstone of effective transformations. However, many well-intentioned communications miss their mark in terms of simplicity and focus – while 70% of employees recall receiving senior leader communications about change, only 20% find these communications useful for guiding their behavior or providing meaningful context. ³ This gap contributes to a “perceived crisis of competence,” threatening transformation success and the broader strategies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Impact of Perceived Low Leadership Credibility of Key Talent Outcomes

Impact of Perceived Low Leadership Credibility on Key Talent Outcomes

Percentage of employees who received a message from senior leadership in last six months



n = 2,141
 Source: 2025 Gartner Reluctant Managers Survey
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By remaining present, communicating effectively, and anchoring ambitions in what is truly achievable, CSOs can drive meaningful change, inspire confidence, and deliver sustained business results.

Build a Two-Horizon Operating Model

To effectively manage performance risk and drive sustainable transformations, CSOs must adopt a two-horizon operating model. This approach balances the immediate imperative for sales results with the strategic need for long-term transformation. The two-horizon operating model ensures that sellers remain protected and motivated in the short term, while simultaneously advancing the organization’s capability to adapt and thrive in the future.

Near-Term Execution Horizon

The shorter horizon focuses on managing the in-quarter performance risk where sellers prioritize hitting targets. Within the near-term execution horizon, CSOs look to eliminate obstacles and ensure the team operates efficiently and predictably.

Resistance to transformation among sales teams often stems from fear, uncertainty and conflict more so than outright opposition. Sellers have significant pay at risk and need to perform well to earn their on-target compensation. Introducing new tools or processes creates confusion about priorities and execution, leading to pushback or passive adherence to old habits.

Protecting the sales team's ability to sell and earn during change reduces conflict and encourages openness to transformation.

CSOs must take deliberate actions to manage performance risks and keep their teams focused on revenue-generation. These actions include:

- Communicate the importance of near-term performance.
- Empower sales managers to delay changes until after critical times like quarter close.
- Isolate key opportunities and critical accounts from being exposed to experimental strategies.
- Set clear boundaries with support and transformation teams to ensure they understand the links between change efforts and seller impacts. Allow these teams to revise transformational timelines.

Longer-Term Transformation Horizon

The transformation horizon spans planning efforts across six to 18 months. Planning through the transformational horizon requires the CSO's active and visible support. Along with the transformational lead, the CSO must ensure that transformational efforts get the appropriate attention and resourcing. When change efforts are paused to manage performance risk, the CSOs must actively engage the teams to regain momentum when the time is appropriate.

CSOs must embrace an experimentation mindset to avoid the risks of misfired decisions. Experimental pilots are small, isolated explorations of something new. They are quarantined changes designed to test the feasibility of an idea in a controlled environment. The goal is to stage and incubate ideas so they strengthen and improve before reaching broader scale.

Experiments should not violate the principle of “fewer, bolder bets.” Instead, experiments are used as part of the concept of fewer, bolder bets. This approach not only isolates risk but also generates anticipation and demand for successful innovations.

To create a greater connectivity and avoid confusion, a unifying narrative is essential to prevent the dual horizons from feeling competitive with each other. CSOs must consistently articulate how **today’s successful execution funds tomorrow’s innovation – and, how transformation efforts secure the future relevance and competitiveness of the organization.**

Embrace Systems Thinking

CSOs must adopt a systems thinking mindset and see the organization as an interconnected whole to ensure transformations fix root causes and optimize the entire system. CSOs must be asking their team and their peers, “When we change this, who and what else does it affect?” and consider possible unintended consequences.

Systems thinking is the holistic recognition of interdependencies and ripple effects, enabling strategic design for long-term, sustainable value across the entire enterprise.

For CSOs, the systems mindset approach requires moving beyond addressing surface-level symptoms and delving into the underlying root causes that impact performance. Rather than optimizing for sales and perpetuating organizational siloes, CSOs must reimagine commercial execution as an end-to-end, integrated commercial engine. For information on this, see [Strengthen Commercial Executive Alignment With a B2B Go-to-Market Council](#).

Mapping the End-to-End Revenue System

A high-performing sales organization operates as an interconnected system, tightly linked with marketing, product, finance, IT and customer success. It is essential to visualize and understand these interdependencies across the entire revenue execution model. Revenue execution spans from product roadmaps through marketing engagement and sales process, and finally through post-sales support and customer retention. Changes at any point in this value chain will have ripple effects that may negatively impact commercial results.

Systems thinking requires that sales transformations document process steps before and after sales is involved – the goal is to expose the interdependencies and factors that drive performance:

- Map out continuous feedback loops that fuel improvement.
- Pinpoint and eliminate workflow bottlenecks, systemic delays, and friction points.
- Surface every manual workaround, error source, and productivity killer.
- Make your mapping a catalyst for transformation, not a box-checking exercise.

To achieve successful transformative change, CSOs must ensure cross-functional involvement in all phases and workstreams. The goal is to transform without introducing new pain points or risks.

Shifting From Individual Performance to Systemic Improvement

Many CSOs focus productivity investments on individual success. However, when many are struggling – or when new technologies emerge – the opportunities for improvement typically exist at the systemic level.

When making fewer, bolder bets, CSOs should identify key points of leverage – areas where targeted changes drive substantial, sustainable improvements across the entire organization. For example, many CSOs have struggled with CRM utilization and data entry. Instead of continually fighting this battle, CSOs could invest in conversational intelligence platforms that record, transcribe and analyze seller interactions.

These platforms provide better data and introduce new possibilities around sentiment analysis, deal health, competitive intelligence and more.

Systemic improvements drive lasting, broad scale improvements that rely less on individual adoption and success.

Detect and Act on Emerging Realities

A holistic approach to sales transformation demands the courage to objectively assess both performance and sentiment. CSOs must act decisively on emerging realities. This is not the time for ignorance or delusion. To detect the emerging realities through the sales transformation, CSOs must track:

- Real-time KPI and sales performance dashboards

- Progress against transformation phases and critical milestones
- Direct employee feedback, pulse surveys, and sentiment analysis
- Customer and partner feedback, including satisfaction and loyalty metrics

One of the most sensitive indicators of imbalance is the allocation of time and energy among sellers. Transformation efforts invariably impose a “tax” on their capacity and productivity. CSOs must enlist frontline managers to help assess whether this burden is impeding core execution. Unfortunately, any issues with productivity may unfairly result in the transformation being blamed for the underperformance. CSOs must stay objective and when possible use tools like Gartner’s Seller Time Spend Assessment to reveal how transformations may be impacting seller capacity.

CSOs should work with their leaders to define a small set of core, measurable behaviors required by the transformation. These could include the usage of new tools, compliance with updated processes, or participation in cross-functional meetings. Beyond quantitative metrics, qualitative feedback loops are essential. Metrics may reveal what is happening, but personal feedback uncovers why. Establishing dedicated forums for both execution and transformation tracks is critical.

Finally, internal mobility and attrition rates within the transformation team serve as hidden barometers of organizational health and belief in the transformation agenda. Monitoring the voluntary movement of high-potential sellers – and support staff across operations and enablement – is particularly telling. If top talent is leaving the transformation team for more traditional roles, it may indicate a lack of confidence in the long-term vision or unsustainable pressure on midlevel leaders.

Success Measures

- Target revenue achievement
- Transformational pilot targets and KPIs
- Seller regrettable attrition rate
- Transformation team regrettable attrition rate
- Employee and partner satisfaction
- Customer retention
- Transformation budget and schedule adherence

Contributors

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Evidence

¹ **2026 Gartner CSO Priorities Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand how sales leaders are preparing their organization for future uncertainties, defining their sales culture and prioritizing seller skills to drive sales outcomes. The survey was completed from August through September 2025 with an online sample of 227 CSOs and senior sales executives across North America (n = 152), Western Europe (n = 38) and Asia/Pacific (n = 37). Qualifying respondents belonged to a sales function of an organization with enterprisewide annual revenue in 2024 of at least \$100 million or equivalent. Industry segments included manufacturing, information technology and high tech, banking and financial services, and healthcare. Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

² **2024 Gartner Sales Org DNA Survey.** This survey was conducted to identify productivity levers that are most effective for chief sales officers (CSOs) to elevate sales performance, including role design, sales leadership, sales culture and sales technology. The survey was completed from May 2024 through June 2024 with an online sample of 234 heads of sales and senior sales leaders across North America (n = 159), Western Europe (n = 48) and Asia/Pacific (n = 27). Qualifying respondents belonged to a sales function of an organization with enterprisewide annual revenue in 2023 of at least \$100 million or equivalent. Industry segments included manufacturing, information technology and high tech, banking and financial services, and pharmaceuticals. Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

³ **The 2025 Gartner Reluctant Managers Survey** was conducted to gather insights on how to develop leaders and employees in today's business environment and sentiment of managers who did not opt to be managers. The research was conducted online from 16th April 2025 until 19th May 2025 and contains responses from 3,002 employees representing various regions and industries. This survey was designed and developed by Gartner's HR Practice research team.

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