

## When the Plan Is Sound and the Shift Still Stalls

*The discipline most change efforts are missing — and what senior leaders can do about it.*

By Brad Smith and Kristy Braden | Inflection Point Leadership

### Three in ten

In our diagnostic work with **more than 1,200 leaders and individual contributors** inside organizations actively navigating significant change, **fewer than three in ten** believed their organization's change effort would succeed.

These were not failing organizations. The plans were credible. The communications had gone out. Milestones were tracking. Execution was disciplined.

And most of the people inside the effort still did not believe it would hold.

That gap is the work this paper is about. It is the work IPL has done since our inception. And it is where the actual leadership work of continuous change increasingly lives.

### Change is what happens. Shift is what it triggers.

Even a well-built change plan, executed competently, produces friction, fatigue, and regression — because people do not respond only to plans. They respond to the experience those plans create.

**Change management** addresses the plan: it sequences activities, drives alignment through information and milestones, and reduces implementation risk. It remains essential.

**Shift Leadership** addresses the *lived experience* the plan creates — what it disrupts, exposes, threatens, and asks of the people who must move through it.

The same event almost always splits along these two tracks:

- A new strategy is announced (**change**). People begin questioning their role, capability, and future (**shift**).
- A new system goes live (**change**). Work feels clumsy, competence feels threatened, collaboration breaks (**shift**).
- A senior leader moves on (**change**). Identity, trust, and informal influence rearrange (**shift**).

Change management handles the announcement, the rollout, the org chart. None of those tools touch the experience. **Shift Leadership does not replace change management. It expands what change management is equipped to address.**

### Most leaders are responding at the wrong layer

Here is the uncomfortable diagnosis: most of the friction inside a managed change is not produced by poor planning or weak intent. It is produced by leaders responding to the right person at the wrong layer of experience.

A meaning problem gets answered with information. An overload problem with encouragement. An ending problem with a push toward what is next. The friction does not resolve — it migrates.

The diagnostic data sharpens this. When we asked respondents what they needed to engage more fully with the change underway in their organizations, roughly **two-thirds** named what we would

categorize as **Heart needs** — concerns about role, standing, contribution, and what the change said about how leadership saw them.

The most common leadership response, observed across the same organizations, was to provide more information.

That is the wrong-layer mismatch in a single data point. It explains why thoroughly explained changes still stall.

**The IPL Shift Leadership Model™**

We organize the experience side of change into four interconnected layers. Each one answers a different question the friction is raising.

Layer	The question the friction is raising
<b>Shift Filters™</b>	How is this being interpreted? ( <i>Head, Heart, Hands</i> )
<b>Transition Phases</b>	Where is someone in the internal journey? ( <i>Ending, Neutral Zone, New Beginning</i> )
<b>Traction Conditions™</b>	What conditions are shaping the experience? ( <i>the 6Cs</i> )
<b>Transition Personas™</b>	How is someone currently showing up? ( <i>nine recognizable patterns</i> )

*Intervene at the right layer and movement increases. Intervene at the wrong layer and friction migrates.*

**The lever most senior leaders miss: Traction Conditions™**

Senior leaders can usually read interpretation, recognize transition, and sense individual patterns when they slow down enough to look. The layer most often missed — and most often the actual lever — is Traction Conditions.

Traction Conditions are the six conditions that determine whether a shift lands. Each pairs with the lived experience it produces when it is strong. We call this the **6Cs and 6Es**.

Condition (6Cs)	The question it answers	Experience when strong (6Es)
<b>Clarity</b>	<i>Do I understand what is happening well enough to move?</i>	<b>Enlightened</b>
<b>Connection</b>	<i>Am I still part of something – and does it matter?</i>	<b>Engaged</b>
<b>Confidence</b>	<i>Do I believe this can work, and that I still matter within it?</i>	<b>Entrusted</b>
<b>Capability</b>	<i>Do I know how to do what this shift now requires?</i>	<b>Equipped</b>
<b>Capacity</b>	<i>Do I have enough room to absorb this?</i>	<b>Effective</b>
<b>Change-Agility</b>	<i>Can I keep adapting as this shift continues to move?</i>	<b>Empowered</b>

The reframe behind the model matters as much as the model itself. When a shift stalls, the instinct is to read the room and draw conclusions about people. *That person is resistant. That team is disengaged. Those two are not bought in.* The read feels accurate because the behavior is real. What is usually wrong is the source.

- Someone who looks **disengaged** is missing **Connection** — they no longer feel part of something worth contributing to.
- Someone who looks **skeptical** is missing **Confidence** — they are not convinced this will hold.
- Someone who looks **slow** is missing **Capability** — they want to move and do not yet know how.
- Someone who looks **resistant** is missing **Capacity** — they are already carrying more than the shift accounts for.

*The behavior is the signal. The condition is the lever. “Resistant” is a conclusion. Naming the missing condition is a move.*

The diagnostic data sharpens this further. The lowest score across the entire dataset was on the personal experience of being **Effective** during change — **47 on a 100-point scale**. **Capability** scored **48** from the individual’s perspective, even as people rated their organization’s investment in change-related capability at **58**. The investment was real. It was not landing.

And capacity strain is not evenly distributed. It falls disproportionately on people with less structural authority, fewer organizational relationships, or roles that require them to absorb more ambient friction. The same change does not produce the same shift for everyone. The people most often labeled “resistant” or “disengaged” are frequently the ones being asked to carry the most without the formal authority to reduce it.

## The operating discipline: a single, repeatable loop

Reading the layers without a discipline to act on the read produces analysis, not movement. The IPL operating loop is the same in every section, every tool, and every conversation:

### **DETECT → UNLOCK → CHOOSE → ACT → LEARN**

- **DETECT** — Notice what is loudest now.
- **UNLOCK** — Understand what that layer is asking for.
- **CHOOSE** — Pick the one lever that matters most.
- **ACT** — Make one small, specific move, sized to the next 24 to 72 hours.
- **LEARN** — Check what changed. Assume the driver will migrate.

Under pressure, the mind builds a persuasive case for breadth. It tells you everything matters at once. The sharper question is smaller: *If I could only improve one thing in the next 24 to 72 hours, what would most change how this person — or this team — is experiencing the shift?* That is the move worth making. Not the comprehensive plan. The next accurate one.

## Three governance moves to make this systematic

Most senior leaders do not need another framework explained. They need a different question being asked at the moment leaders are most prone to defaulting to the comfortable one.

1. **In transformation reviews, do not only ask “Are we on plan?” Ask “What experience is the plan creating?” — and require evidence.** Adoption is a result. Conditions are the lever.
2. **Equip your leaders to be adept at naming the layer that is driving resistance or disengagement before prescribing a fix.** The four-layer diagnostic is a fifteen-minute conversation; it changes which interventions get approved.
3. **Build a re-read cadence into major changes.** The driver migrates. What worked at month two is rarely what works at month four. Schedule the re-read before it is needed.

None of these require new budget. They require a different read.

## What this looks like in practice

Three ways IPL helps senior leaders, CHROs, and HR business partners build this into how their organizations work:

- **Equip every leader with personal practice.** *When Shift Gets Real: The Personal Leadership Field Guide* puts the IPL Shift Leadership Model™ — including the nine Transition Personas™ and 17 Field Note Worksheets — into the hands of individual leaders and contributors. Built for use in the moment, not for the shelf. Available in bulk for organization-wide rollouts.
- **Build shift leadership as an organizational capability.** Our diagnostic instruments, learning modules, and team-level workshops convert shift leadership from individual practice into systemic capacity — surfacing where Endings are concentrated, where New Beginning energy is building, and where targeted support will have the highest leverage.

- **Partner directly on consequential change.** For organizations navigating high-stakes, multi-shift transformations, IPL works alongside senior leadership teams to read the experience the plan is creating, sharpen the next move, and build the in-house discipline to keep doing it after we leave.

### **The work lives in the gap**

The leaders who navigate continuous change best are not the ones who communicate most, push hardest, or try to address everything at once. They are the ones who read the experience accurately enough to make the next useful move — and then read again as conditions evolve.

That discipline is teachable. The gap between managing the plan and leading the shift is, increasingly, where the actual work of leadership lives.

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**Brad Smith and Kristy Braden** are co-founders of Inflection Point Leadership and authors of *When Shift Gets Real: The Personal Leadership Field Guide*.

**Methodology note.** Diagnostic findings cited in this paper are drawn from IPL surveys administered to more than 1,200 leaders and individual contributors inside organizations actively navigating significant change. Each survey is anchored to a specific organizational shift at a specific point in time; the findings reported here are aggregate patterns across that body of work, not a longitudinal study.