

Change-Ready Leadership: Why 70% Of Transformations Fail on Behavior

Forbes | Tracy Lawrence | July 1, 2026

Many leaders overestimate their teams' adaptability, often seeing delayed decisions and suppressed innovation instead. This disconnect stems from a lack of psychological safety, where leaders fear speaking up or challenging ideas. True adaptive leadership isn't a belief but a set of observable behaviors. Organizational transformations frequently fail, not due to strategy, but because leadership teams lack readiness. Key indicators include how teams handle uncertainty, genuinely challenge each other, learn from failures, and base decisions on current realities. Manager behavior is crucial, driving 70% of team engagement and shaping whether an environment fosters curiosity and openness. Readiness is an ongoing practice, not a declaration, determined by daily interactions and the safety to be candid.



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Transformation failure

In the course of my advisory work, I often ask senior leaders to describe how their teams handle uncertainty. The answers I hear are revealing, but not always in a good way. Most leaders tell me their teams are adaptable. They believe in innovation. They welcome change. Then I watch those same teams in action, and I see something entirely different: delayed decisions, avoided conflict, and a quiet suppression of any idea that feels too risky.

There is often a gap between what leaders believe about their teams and what is actually happening in those teams. Eliminating that gap is one of the hardest things an organization can do.

"Adaptive leadership" has become shorthand for almost everything. It appears in job descriptions, town halls, and board presentations. Leaders mean it genuinely. They understand

that the future calls for agility. What they often miss is that agility is not a belief system. It is a set of measurable behaviors.

Before you can build a transformation strategy, you need to answer a more fundamental question: Is your leadership team prepared to execute it?

The Gap Between What Leaders Believe And What Teams Actually Do

I was recently working with a senior leader who had been brought into a mid-sized company specifically to drive a department turnaround. Several months in, he had identified real institutional obstacles that would delay or prevent the results his CEO expected. He knew it. He could see it clearly.

But he did not feel safe saying so.

So here's what usually happens: The leader keeps performing the motions of progress. The CEO doubles down on unrealistic expectations. Months pass. The gap widens. What appears to be a transformation effort is actually an organizational system quietly working against itself.

This is not a communication problem. It is a readiness problem.

McKinsey research has found that 70% of organizational transformations fail, and that the barriers are rarely technical. They are behavioral and cultural. One reason is that organizations launch transformation initiatives without asking whether their leadership teams have the behaviors that transformation actually requires.

What Change Readiness Actually Looks Like: Four Behaviors To Assess

Readiness for change is different than enthusiasm or good intentions. It is a set of operating behaviors that either exist in your leadership culture or do not.

Here is what I look for.

How does the team respond to uncertainty? Leadership teams that are ready for change treat ambiguity as part of the job. They make decisions with incomplete information, monitor outcomes, and adjust. Teams that are not ready do the opposite. They delay. They search for certainty that will not come. By the time they feel ready to act, the window has often closed.

Do leaders genuinely challenge each other? Healthy leadership teams do not reach an agreement too quickly. Innovation requires friction. It requires people willing to name the thing that is being glossed over. If your leadership discussions consistently and quickly end in consensus, that is not a sign of cohesion. It is a sign that something important is being left unsaid.

How does the team treat failure? Adaptive organizations know that some of the best data comes from failed experiments. They examine what was learned, recalibrate, and keep moving. In organizations that are not ready for change, failure carries reputational risk. People become

more cautious. Proposals grow safer. The experimentation that innovation requires gradually disappears.

Are decisions driven by precedent or by the current situation? Experience is incredibly valuable, to a point. Leadership teams that are ready for transformation use the past as a reference point, not a ceiling. They ask whether the assumptions that formerly guided decisions still hold. Teams that are not ready solve yesterday's problems and call it strategy.

Why Psychological Safety Determines Whether Change Succeeds

Here is the hard truth about most "adaptive leadership" conversations: they focus on what leaders should aspire to do, and they skip the harder question of what is actually preventing it.

In many of the organizations I work with, the real obstacle is not strategy or capability. It is safety. Leaders do not speak up because they do not feel safe doing so. They do not challenge each other because the culture, implicitly, does not allow it. They process their reservations privately and perform confidently publicly.

Research consistently shows that psychological safety, or the ability to speak candidly without fear of backlash or punishment, is foundational to organizational performance. When people decide it is safer to stay quiet rather than voice ideas or concerns, critical information goes unshared. That is precisely what was happening in the advisory session I described above. The leader had critical information. The CEO needed it. But the organization's culture and systems quashed the sharing of that information.

Manager Behavior Drives 70% of the Variance in Team Engagement

Organizations that want to build change-ready leadership teams often look to strategy or structure. They redesign processes. They commission workshops. They announce new values.

What the data consistently points to is something more direct: the behavior of the managers running those teams.

Gallup research shows that managers account for at least 70% of the variance in team engagement across organizations. The difference between a team that is ready for change and a team that is not is, in most cases, the person leading it. Not the culture initiative. Not the company values statement. The direct manager and how they run the room.

If you want a leadership team that tests assumptions and learns from failure, the senior leaders running those teams must visibly model and reward traits like curiosity, openness to being wrong, and meaningful follow-through on dissenting input. These behaviors determine whether the people around you will take the risks that transformation requires.

Learning Agility: The Difference Between Valuing Change And Being Able To Adapt

Building change-ready leadership also means being honest about which leaders on your team can actually adapt, and which cannot.

Korn Ferry research on leadership and disruption found that nearly 66% of leaders identify agility and flexibility in the face of change as critical leadership traits. But there is a difference between identifying agility as important and possessing it. Change-ready leaders walk the talk. They collaborate across the organization, embrace continuous learning, and listen to their people. They make bold decisions when conditions call for it, not when they feel fully certain.

Leaders who have built successful careers on expertise and proven approaches are often the most resistant to modifying those approaches when the environment shifts. This is not a character flaw. It is a human characteristic. It becomes a problem when organizations fail to name it, and when leaders at the top are not actively building the behaviors that disruption will require.

Four Questions To Assess Your Leadership Team Before A Transformation

You do not need a formal diagnostic tool to assess whether your leadership team is primed for change. The signals are already visible in how your team operates, if you are willing to look at them honestly.

Ask yourself these questions:

- How openly do the leaders on your team question assumptions, including those that have made the organization successful?
- How quickly do they adapt when conditions change in ways they did not anticipate?
- How comfortable are they acknowledging that a decision they made was wrong?
- What happens when an experiment fails? Who talks about it, and how?

Readiness Is A Practice, Not A Declaration

Organizations often treat transformation as a strategy problem. They invest in new operating models, new technologies, and new capabilities. Those investments matter. But strategy alone does not produce change-ready teams.

Real readiness shows up in the everyday behaviors of leadership. How people debate. How do they respond when they are wrong? Whether the leader at the top of the room makes it safe to say what is actually true.

Transformation rarely fails because the strategy was wrong. It fails because the team running it was not ready to do what the strategy required.

That is the question worth asking before anything else.