

Leading Change: Why One Size Doesn't Fit All

Picture this scenario: You're in the middle of a meeting when someone suddenly announces, "Let's stop this meeting and go run a 5K right now!"

What would happen? The room would instantly divide into distinct groups. Some people would jump up excitedly, already lacing up their imaginary running shoes. Others would smile and say they're up for a brisk walk. A few might offer to cheer from the sidelines with encouraging signs. And inevitably, someone would suddenly remember they have something very important to do elsewhere.

This simple example perfectly illustrates one of the most overlooked truths in organizational change: people don't adapt to change at the same rate or in the same way. Yet too often, leaders approach change initiatives as if everyone will respond identically to their brilliant new strategy.

The harsh reality? Seventy percent of all change initiatives fail, largely because change agents overlook how different groups of people experience and respond to transformation. Understanding these differences isn't just helpful—it's critical to your success as a change leader.

The Five Groups in Every Change Initiative

When faced with any change, people often sort themselves into five distinct groups, each with their own timeline and approach to adaptation.

The Racers are your change champions. These are the people who hear about your initiative and immediately start sprinting toward the finish line. They're energized by the possibility of something new and different. They see opportunity where others see uncertainty.

The Runners are your steady adopters. They may not be first out of the gate, but once they understand the direction, they maintain a consistent pace toward the goal. They're willing to embrace change but appreciate having a clear path forward.

The Walkers prefer a more measured approach. They're not opposed to reaching the destination, but they want to take their time, ask questions, and fully understand what they're walking into. They need reassurance and support along the way.

The Cheerers are your supportive bystanders. They believe in the change and will encourage others, but they prefer to contribute from the sidelines rather than actively participate in the transformation themselves. Their support is valuable, even if their involvement is limited.

The Missing are those who opt out entirely. When change is announced, they suddenly have somewhere else to be. They may be overwhelmed, fearful, or simply resistant to any form of

change. Some may eventually come around, while others may need to be addressed directly about whether they're committed to the journey.

Understanding the Change Adoption Curve

These five groups align closely with Everett Rogers' famous Diffusion of Innovation theory, which identifies how new ideas spread through populations. Your Racers are the **Innovators**—the risk-takers who embrace change for its own sake. The Runners represent **Early Adopters**—opinion leaders who adopt changes thoughtfully but relatively quickly.

Your Walkers split into two categories: the **Early Majority**, who adopt change before most others but need to see proof of concept first, and the **Late Majority**, who are skeptical and adopt change only after it becomes the norm. Finally, the Missing often include the **Laggards**—those who resist change until they have no choice.

Here's the crucial insight: these categories are change-specific, not personality traits. Someone who races toward a new technology implementation might walk cautiously toward a cultural change initiative. A person who champions a new sales process might go missing when asked to adopt new communication styles. Your early adopter for one change could be your laggard for another, depending on their expertise, beliefs, and current circumstances.

This is where most change initiatives break down. Leaders identify their Racers and Early Adopters, get them excited about the change, and then assume everyone else will naturally follow suit. They use the same communication approach, the same timeline, and the same success metrics for everyone.

But each group needs different leadership strategies. Your Racers need freedom to innovate and champion the change. Give them the resources and authority to lead by example. Your Runners need clear direction and scripted critical moves—show them exactly what success looks like and provide a roadmap to get there.

Your Walkers need you to shrink the change into manageable pieces. They need to see bright spots—examples of where this change is already working. They need emotional connection to understand not just what's changing, but why it matters. Most importantly, they need you to invest in growing their capabilities and confidence.

Your Cheerers need different support entirely. They may need you to tweak their environment so they can contribute in ways that feel comfortable to them. Focus on building new habits rather than asking them to take big risks.

And for those who are Missing? You need to make a fundamental decision about whether this change is optional. If it's not, you need to have direct, empathetic conversations about what's holding them back and what support they need to rejoin the group.

Most successful changes start with the Racers and Early Adopters—and there's wisdom in that approach. These groups provide the energy, proof points, and social influence needed to build momentum. But here's where many leaders make their critical mistake: they assume that momentum will naturally carry everyone else along.

It won't.

Each subsequent group needs intentional leadership, customized approaches, and sustained attention. The Early Majority needs to see concrete evidence that the change is working before they'll fully commit. The Late Majority needs peer pressure and social proof. Even some of the Missing can be brought along with the right combination of support, clear expectations, and sometimes, difficult conversations.

The most successful change leaders don't just start with their early adopters—they create specific strategies for each group and execute them with the same rigor they bring to the overall change initiative.

Leading change effectively isn't about finding the one perfect strategy that works for everyone. It's about recognizing that your organization contains all five groups, understanding what each group needs to succeed, and having the patience and skill to lead each one appropriately.

The question isn't whether you'll encounter resistance or varied adoption rates—you will. The question is whether you'll be prepared to lead through that complexity with strategies tailored to meet people where they are.

If you are ready to transform how you approach change in your organization, work with Intara. Our change coaches specialize in helping leaders navigate exactly this journey. We can help you identify which groups exist in your organization, develop targeted strategies for each, and build the leadership skills you need to guide everyone from your first Racers to your most cautious Walkers toward successful change.

Don't let your next change initiative become another statistic in the seventy percent failure rate. Let's talk about how to lead change effectively, one group at a time.