

# How CHROs Can Prevent Common Change Missteps

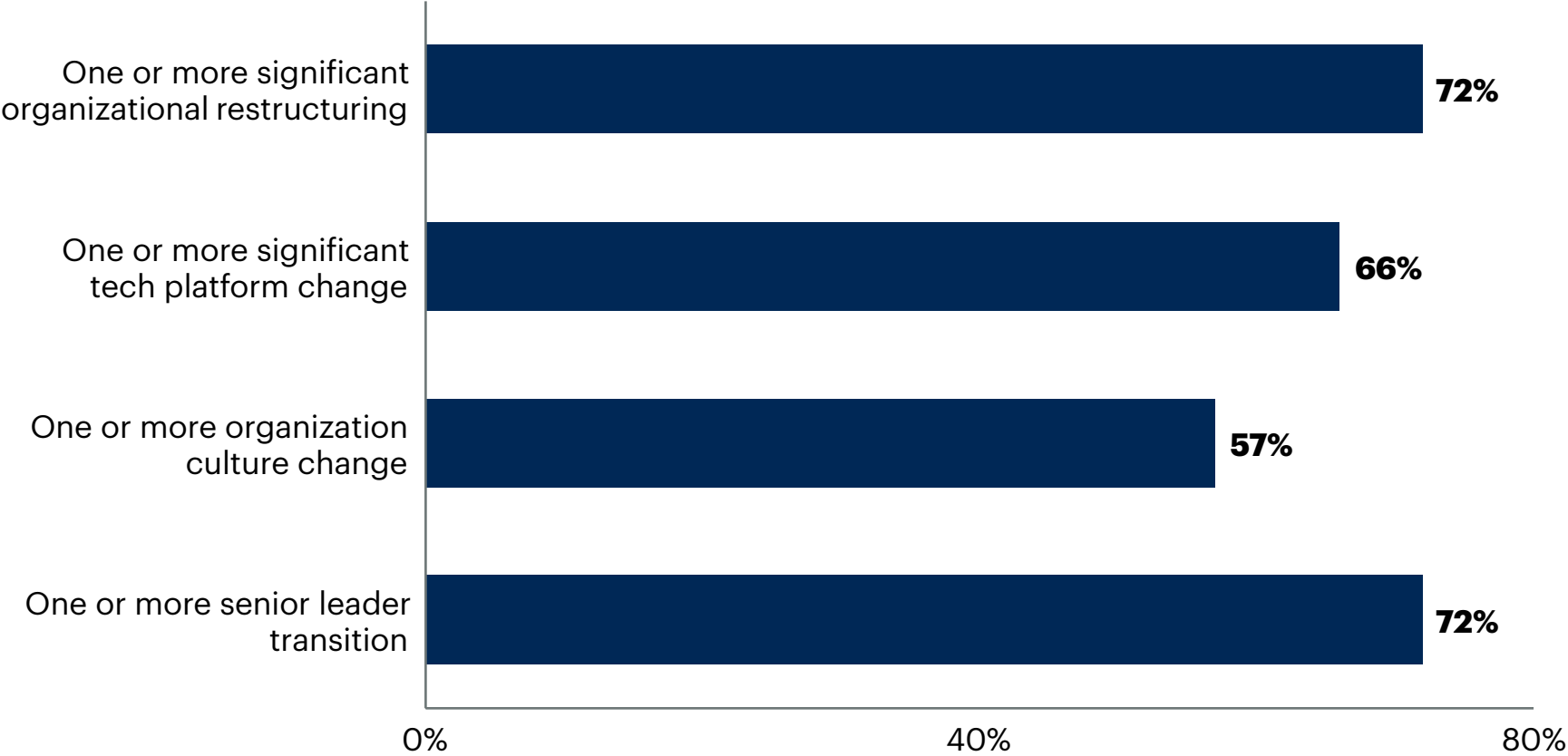
by KaJaiyaiu Hopkins

The unique combination of challenges in today's change environment have fundamentally altered key assumptions CHROs and their teams can make about supporting change. To avoid missteps, CHROs should guide leaders to focus on making progress, helping employees cope with discomfort and building their general change skills.

## Introduction

Organizations continue to face abundant changes, many of which are significant and transformational (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Chief HR officers (CHROs) must create a change culture at their organizations that enables leaders and employees to meet the constant transformation demands that are inherent to today’s business environment.

» **Figure 1: Prevalence of Significant Organizational Changes**  
Significant changes experienced in the past year, percent of employees



n = 2,889 employees  
Source: 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Employee Survey

Our latest research on reinventing change leadership uncovered several deeply held but ultimately incorrect assumptions CHROs make about change that could derail their efforts to create a change-ready culture. These assumptions fall into three categories: change messaging, change feelings and change implementation (see Table 1).

» Table 1: Incorrect Change Assumptions

Category	Incorrect assumption	How to prevent missteps
<b>Change Messaging</b> (the communications and signals that leaders and the organization give about change)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Employees need to understand why a change is happening to act on it.</li><li>• If leaders communicate openly about change, employees will believe them.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus on the need to make progress.</li><li>• Give employees the information they need to act on change.</li></ul>
<b>Change Feelings</b> (employees’ emotional reaction and how employees feel when they are asked to implement a change)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Employees feel better about change if leaders are empathetic to their discomfort.</li><li>• It’s possible to reduce the discomfort change brings to employees.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Push back when change concerns are personal, not operational.</li><li>• Acknowledge the inevitability of change discomfort.</li></ul>
<b>Implementation</b> (the things employees need to do to implement a change)	Every change is unique, so leaders need to lead each change with a unique approach.	Develop general change skills in the workforce.

Source: Gartner

# How to Prevent Change Messaging Missteps

## Focus on the Need to Make Progress

As stewards of the workforce during change, CHROs and their teams invest heavily to get employees to adopt changes. To do this, they often overemphasize the *why* in communications and messaging about change. In fact, 78% of HR leaders believe employees need to understand why a change is happening to be willing to adopt it.<sup>2</sup> However, this assumption is incorrect. We found that when leaders ensure employees know why a change is happening, it did not lead to any statistically significant reduction in rates of change failure.<sup>3</sup>

Employees do not need to know the *why* of change; rather, they need to be able to respond reflexively to change so adopting today’s continuous and increasingly complex changes becomes second nature to them. CHROs can prevent overemphasizing the *why* in change messaging by explaining the *how* of change instead as well as the importance of making progress on changes.

## Give Employees the Information They Need to Act on Change

Change messaging strategy is often shaped by the assumption that if HR can help leaders communicate transparently about change, then employees will be more likely to believe them. HR has made progress in reinforcing transparent communication to build trust between leaders and employees in the context of change. Fifty-six percent of business leaders believe they need to share as much information as possible for employees to be willing to adopt a change.<sup>3</sup> In theory, this would generate employee buy-in and trust in change.

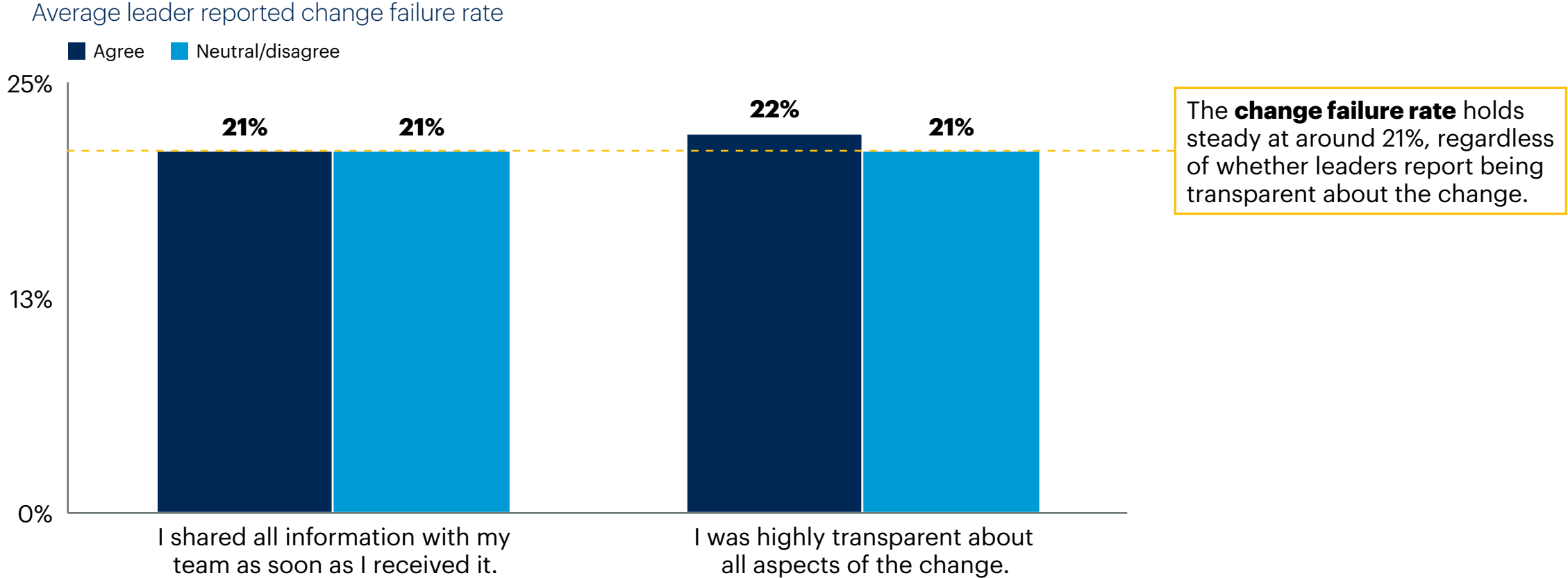
Unfortunately, even if employees trust their leaders, they remain deeply skeptical about change information. Only 28% of employees believe leaders share the genuine reasons why the organization wants to change, and only 21% of employees have high trust in change at their organization.<sup>1</sup>

Change failure was defined as change initiatives that do not meet their initial goals or are not fully adopted within the expected time frame.



Transparent communication is not bad, but it does not lead to any reduction in change failure rates (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> Understanding that employee buy-in to change is unlikely, CHROs and their teams should redirect change messaging effort to focus on giving employees *only* the information they need to act.

» **Figure 2: Impact of Leader Transparency on Change Failure Rate**



n = 987 midlevel to senior-level leaders  
Source: 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Business Leader Survey  
Note: Change failure was measured using the following question: "What is your best estimate of the percentage of change initiatives at your organization that fail? In other words, what is the approximate percentage of change initiatives that do not achieve their initial goals or are not fully adopted in the expected timeframe?"

# How to Prevent Change Feelings Missteps

## Push Back When Change Concerns Are Personal, Not Operational

As organizations have been updating their people strategy to consider employees as whole humans, HR has led the shift by developing more empathetic leaders. This approach also extends to change; 82% of HR leaders believe when midlevel to senior-level leaders address employee concerns about change with empathy, employees will adopt changes more readily.<sup>2</sup> However, we found that when leaders respond to all change concerns empathetically, it was actually associated with a three-percentage-point decrease in healthy change adoption.<sup>3</sup>

Healthy change adoption means the change was acted on in a timely manner, without undue stress to employees.

This happens because most employees’ concerns about change have little to do with the change itself and more to do with their personal discomfort with change. CHROs should feel empowered to push back against the flood of personal feelings about change and teach leaders to do the same.

## Acknowledge the Inevitability of Change Discomfort

No matter if change is big or small, it’s often uncomfortable for employees. Many CHROs and their teams believe they can reduce the change discomfort employees feel, so they train leaders to look for adjustments they can make to eliminate discomfort. We found that, regardless of which approach CHROs and their teams use for change leadership, leaders are unable to alleviate employees’ discomfort.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon persists because discomfort is an inherent element of change that cannot be eliminated.

Understanding this, CHROs should openly acknowledge the discomfort everyone feels about change and proactively equip leaders and employees with the tools to

cope with their change discomfort. When CHROs and their teams take decisive action to help themselves and others cope with change discomfort, this normalizes making progress despite discomfort, rather than trying to reduce it.

## How to Prevent Implementation Missteps

The HR function has a key role in shaping leaders’ approach to each change initiative. HR typically does this by investing in customized approaches for leaders to follow for each initiative. As a result, 60% of business leaders also incorrectly believe that each change is unique and requires its own unique approach.<sup>3</sup>

However, we have found that most changes require similar skills and behaviors to implement them. To increase the likelihood of healthy change adoption, leaders should not just give employees the opportunity to practice the following six change skills but also ensure these skills can be reflexively applied to any change scenario:<sup>1</sup>

- Being open to new experiences
- Effectively managing their time
- Understanding the context in which their business operates
- Using technology effectively
- Working well with anyone, regardless of if they have worked together before or not
- Regulating their emotions

Therefore, to improve change adoption, CHROs and their team should update the change strategy to include developing general change skills in the workforce that can help employees implement any change reflexively.

## Conclusion

The unique combination of challenges in today’s change environment have fundamentally altered key assumptions CHROs and their teams make about supporting change. This new environment has the potential to turn mainstays of change management into missteps. But CHROs can prevent these missteps by reevaluating their assumptions about change and updating their strategy to include best practices for navigating today’s context.

<sup>1</sup> **2025 Gartner Change Leadership Employee Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand the volume of changes in the past year, employee perceptions of change leadership today, what approaches leaders take to lead change and employees’ effectiveness on change-related reflexes. The research was conducted online from 14 March through 14 April 2025 and contains responses from 2,889 employees from various geographies, industries and functions.

<sup>2</sup> **2025 Gartner Change Leadership HR Leader Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand HR leader perspectives on change leadership approaches and challenges. The survey was conducted online from 17 February 2025 through 1 April 2025 and contains responses from 152 HR leaders with representation from various regions and industries.

<sup>3</sup> **2025 Gartner Change Leadership Business Leader Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand change leadership approaches, challenges, effectiveness, and support provided by HR. The survey was conducted online from 10th March 2025 through 27th March 2025 and contains responses from 987 business leaders (managers of managers not belonging to the C-Suite,) with representation from various regions, industries, and functions.

Disclaimer: The results of these surveys do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.



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