

Adaptive Adoption™ Sprints

Embedded change leadership for AI build teams — so acceptance and scale happen during the build, not after it.

THE PROBLEM

Why AI pilots die

Only **5%** of companies capture AI value at scale (BCG, 2025). Only **26%** of executives are rated AI-proficient by their peers (Gartner, 2025). The distance between those numbers and the money being spent is not a technology gap. The models work. The pilots demo beautifully. Then adoption stalls — and the post-mortem finds the same three culprits every time: **trust, incentives, and leadership**.

The market offers four answers. None of them reaches the problem.

Prompt-pack consultancies. A thousand “McKinsey-skills” prompt packs are in circulation. They assume the blocker is knowledge. It rarely is: awareness, desire and knowledge do not add up to action — the intention–action gap is well documented in behavioural science, and no prompt library closes it.

Design-sprint shops. A four-step workflow is not a methodology — it borrows the word “sprint” for a workshop format. No behavioural science underneath, no trust diagnostic, no theory of why people don’t adopt. A workflow tells you what to do on Tuesday; a methodology tells you why Tuesday didn’t work.

Forward-deployed engineers. The FDE model gets one big thing right: build inside the client’s workflow. But FDEs are engineers — brilliant at integration, with no grounding in trust, incentives, behaviour change or organisational dynamics. They build the thing; adoption is someone else’s problem. That someone never arrives.

Classic change management. Kotter, ADKAR and their descendants sit outside the team: communication plans, training decks, readiness assessments — delivered from the side, after the build. They were designed for a go-live date and a stable end-state. AI has neither. By the time an outside-in programme mobilises, the model has updated twice and the pilot is already dead.

THE THESIS

Change leadership must be **embedded in the build team** — not communicating about the build from outside it. When the person accountable for adoption works inside the sprint, user acceptance and scaling design happen *during* the build, not bolted on after. That is an Adaptive Adoption™ Sprint.

Work in plain sight

An Adaptive Adoption™ Sprint is a build sprint with a change leader **embedded inside the team** — a behavioural scientist working shoulder-to-shoulder with the engineers and, crucially, with the people whose work is changing. Nothing happens to the workforce behind a curtain. The build, the testing, the friction and the decisions are all visible to the people they affect.

“Work in plain sight.”

— PAUL GIBBONS

EMBEDDED PRACTICE — WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

- **Build with the people who'll use it, not for them.** Users sit inside the sprint, not on a stakeholder map. A friction audit picks the starting point — drudgery first, augmentation before automation — so the first thing people experience is relief, not threat.
- **Friction surfaced and named in real time.** Misaligned incentives, political resistance, workflow sludge — named in the sprint room while the build can still respond, not documented in a readiness report after it can't. That takes friction courage, and it is the embedded leader's job, not the engineers'.
- **Trust diagnosed, not assumed.** Trust failures are the primary driver of adoption stalls, and “low trust” is not a diagnosis. RIST diagnostics run during the sprint to locate which trust dimension is failing — and whether the failure is under-trust or over-trust — because each demands a different intervention.
- **Acceptance testing during the build.** Every cycle puts working output in front of real users doing real work. Objections arrive while they are cheap to fix. There is no “user acceptance phase” because acceptance was never deferred.
- **Adoption instrumented from day one.** Desired behaviours are specified observably — who does what, when, where — and measured from the first cycle. Behaviours, not clicks; capability, not training completions.
- **Ethics in the room.** Harm-focused pre-mortems and should-we scans run inside the sprint cadence, not queued for a quarterly committee that meets more slowly than the model updates.

Why this works. People adopt what they helped build. Trust forms through contact, not communication. And behaviour changes when the environment changes — the mindset catches up. Embedding change leadership in the build is not a delivery preference; it is the behavioural-science position on how adoption actually happens.

The methodology: Change Agility™

A sprint without a methodology is a workshop. Adaptive Adoption™ Sprints run on **Change Agility™** — the operational system of the Adaptive Adoption™ framework, developed by Paul Gibbons across eight books and three decades of change work, and treated definitively in *Adopting AI: The People-First Approach* (2025). It is published, inspectable, and grounded in behavioural science, complexity theory and trust research — not a facilitation format.

THE SEVEN PILLARS — THE DIAGNOSTIC LENS THE SPRINT RUNS ON

<p>1 Master the Craft Capability through doing, not curriculum. AI is carpentry, not calculus; the unit of learning is the community of practice.</p>	<p>2 Embrace Complexity Humans, organisation, and a non-human agent in motion — a complex adaptive system. Probe–sense–respond replaces plan-and-execute.</p>
<p>3 Consciously Manage Trust Trust as a named, calibrated variable — the RIST diagnostic — not a communications afterthought.</p>	<p>4 Put People First™ Augmentation before automation. The human is the integration layer, not the end-user; start where the drudgery is.</p>
<p>5 Design and Prototype Every initiative is a prototype until evidence says otherwise. Bounded experiments with explicit kill criteria.</p>	<p>6 Prioritize Behavior Diagnosis before prescription: capability, motivation, trust, or opportunity? Environment design over persuasion.</p>
<p>7 Manage Ethics Always Practical wisdom in the room — pre-mortems and the stop-cord — because no committee adjudicates forty ethical issues in real time.</p>	<p><i>Change Agility™ is one of three systems in the Adaptive Adoption™ framework — alongside the AI Leadership Delta™ and Behavioral Governance. Deployed together in the sprint.</i></p>

RIST trust diagnostics. RIST decomposes trust into four dimensions — **R**elational (do I trust my manager to support me through this?), **I**nstitutional (does the organisation have my interests in mind?), **S**elf (do I trust my own ability to learn this?), and **T**ask (do I trust the AI to do this task reliably?). Each dimension fails differently, in both directions — under-trust and over-trust — and each failure demands a different intervention. The sprint calibrates trust; it does not merely proclaim it.

Behavioural governance guardrails. Governance in the sprint is calibrated, not uniform. Adjustable dials flex between tight control and open experimentation depending on the use case, the data and the risk — so governance designed for high-risk applications never crushes low-risk experimentation, and speed never outruns judgement.

How a sprint engagement runs

Every engagement is shaped to the build it embeds in, but the arc is consistent.

1 • Diagnostic	Before the sprint, we establish where friction concentrates: a RIST trust read, a behavioural diagnostic of the target workflows, and an assessment against the seven pillars. This sets the baseline behaviours the sprint will move — and the hypothesis the scale decision will test.
2 • Embedded sprint cycles	The change leader works inside the build team through successive cycles — acceptance testing continuous, adoption instrumented, friction named in real time and escalated to sponsors with owners attached. Work in plain sight, throughout.
3 • Scale gate	Scaling is a decision, not a hope. At the gate, the evidence — observed behaviours, calibrated trust, governance dials set — determines whether the build scales, iterates, or stops. Killing a build that shouldn't scale is a success of the method, not a failure of the team.

Engagements are scoped by proposal and priced on an engagement basis. Contact us to shape one around your build.

FIT

Who it's for

Organisations mid-build — with forward-deployed engineers, an internal AI team, or an integration partner — where pilots demo well and value stalls at adoption. Leaders accountable for AI *value*, not AI activity.

WHO

About Paul Gibbons

Author of eight books on leadership, change and the future of work, including *Adopting AI: The People-First Approach* (2025). A former Deloitte consultant with more than thirty years advising boards and C-suites, Paul works at the intersection of behavioural science, leadership and organisational change — with senior-team work at organisations including KPMG, HSBC and National Australia Bank. He is the developer of the Adaptive Adoption™ framework and its systems: Change Agility™, the AI Leadership Delta™ and Behavioral Governance.

Start the conversation

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