ADAPTIVE ADOPTION EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

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DISCUSSION DOCUMENT — BETA

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Why Orthodox Change Management
Cannot Solve AI Adoption — and What Can.

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The Gap That Matters

I spent three decades in change management — at PwC, IBM, and Deloitte — before concluding that the profession I helped build was not equipped for what was coming. That is not a comfortable admission. But the evidence is now inescapable.

Seventy-two percent of organisations score high on AI readiness — the policies, the governance documents, the executive commitments are in place. Six percent score high on operational maturity — the enacted behaviours, the workflow integration, the demonstrated capability (BCG Henderson Institute, 2024).

That is not a communication problem. It is not a training problem. It is a structural failure of the methods being used. The 72 percent have done exactly what the change management playbook told them to do. The 6 percent figure is what it produced.

The consulting industry's response has been to apply the same twentieth-century toolkit to a fundamentally different kind of problem: more impact assessments, more change champions, more steering committees, more communications plans, more readiness surveys. These tools were useful — genuinely useful — when the change was an ERP rollout with a go-live date, a defined future state, and a primary challenge of coordination and communication.

AI adoption has none of those characteristics. There is no stable end-state. The technology changes monthly. Required skills cannot be predicted in advance. Trust failures run in two directions

simultaneously — undertrust and overtrust coexist in the same organisation. And governance that waits for the quarterly committee meeting has already fallen behind.

SAP had a go-live date. AI does not.

Meanwhile, the evidence on existing methods is damning. Research consistently finds that only 10 percent of management training transfers back to the job (Saks, 2002). The foundational concepts that many organisations still rely on — change curves, learning styles, ADKAR, MBTI — have been dismissed by academic psychologists for decades. Science has done a rug pull under orthodox change management, and the profession has largely not noticed.

The question for CHROs is not whether your organisation has a change management capability. It is whether that capability is specified at the level of behaviour, trust, and leadership development — or whether it is still operating at the level of communications plans and training schedules.

What Changed While the Models Didn't

Three shifts moved the centre of gravity beyond orthodox change management's reach. Each, alone, would have strained the old models. Together, they broke them.

The behavioural science revolution. Since Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) and Thaler and Sunstein's *Nudge* (2008), we have known that intention does not reliably produce action. People are loss-averse, anchor to the status quo, discount the future, and are governed by defaults, friction, and social proof far more than by rational argument. The intention-action gap is not an anomaly — it is the norm. Yet not a single major change management framework incorporated these findings. An entire professional discipline dedicated to changing human behaviour ignored the most significant advances in understanding human behaviour. A change methodology that does not account for this is not merely incomplete. It is operating on a falsified model of the human being.

Continuous, emergent change. COVID, remote work, the Great Resignation, skills disruption across entire industries, regulatory turbulence — change became the permanent condition. There was no go-live date for a pandemic. No GANTT chart for cultural upheaval. No stabilisation phase when the next disruption arrived before the last one was absorbed. Orthodox change management has no mechanism for continuous, overlapping, emergent change. Its architecture assumes a bounded project with a beginning, middle, and end. When the change itself becomes the permanent condition, the project model collapses.

AI itself. The fastest technology adoption cycle in corporate history, compounded by agentic systems that operate with increasing autonomy. AI configures itself to you; you adapt back; the system shifts beneath you. No stable equilibrium — touch one element and everything moves. AI adoption is behavioural, continuous, trust-dependent, politically complex, and has no defined

end-state. It is the purest example of a problem class that the old toolkit cannot address. And it is the first enterprise technology to generate organised intellectual and ethical counter-movement. Nobody said "over my dead body" about Salesforce.

What Adaptive Adoption Is

Adaptive Adoption™ is a three-part framework for building AI adoption as a durable organisational capability rather than managing it as a bounded project.

The three parts map to three distinct organisational registers: what people do (operational method), who leaders are becoming (behavioural leadership), and how the system governs itself (measurement and control). One of the deepest failures of orthodox change management was to blur these — solving leadership by naming sponsors, treating governance as a periodic oversight function, and measuring progress mainly through plans, communications, and training completions rather than through what leaders and teams do.

AI exposes those weaknesses brutally.

Change Agility Framework™ — the operational methodology. Seven pillars that define what an organisation does to adopt AI effectively: Master the Craft (build capability through practice, not courses), Embrace Complexity (probe-sense-respond, not plan-execute-stabilise), Consciously Manage Trust (diagnose and calibrate across all four RIST dimensions), Put People First (augment before you automate), Design and Prototype (sprint, learn, iterate — no 90-day plans), Prioritise Behaviour (change what people do, not what they think), and Manage Ethics Always (ethics as a frontline daily practice, not a quarterly committee). Each pillar is operationalised through tools, process, skills, behaviours, and leadership actions. They form a flywheel — interdependent, mutually reinforcing, and designed to run continuously rather than sequentially. There are no GANTT charts. There is no "done." The flywheel is a machine, not a project plan.

AI Leadership Delta™ — the leadership layer. The orthodox change management answer to leadership was sponsorship: identify the sponsor, brief the sponsor, activate the sponsor. But sponsorship is a role. Leadership is a behaviour. Organisations have spent decades pretending those are interchangeable. They are not. The Leadership Delta specifies seven behavioural dimensions — the 10x Narrative, Active Modelling, Innovation Climate, Friction Courage, Trust Calibration, Ethical Leadership, Systems Orchestration — each tied to an unprecedented condition that AI creates and no prior leadership model addresses. The Delta is the gap between where leaders are now and where AI needs them to be.

Behavioural Governance™ — the live control system. Every governance framework on the market measures structures, policies, and processes. None measure what people do. This is the espoused/enacted gap — inherited from Argyris's distinction between "espoused theory" and

"theory-in-use," and validated by implementation science research finding that only 25–50 percent of adopted programmes achieve sufficient fidelity (Proctor et al., 2011). Behavioural Governance applies this insight through seven dimensions — Decision Rights, Executive Accountability, Risk and Ethics, Data Stewardship, Governance Intelligence, Antifragility, First-Derivative Capability — each measured across three evidence layers (self-report, artifact, behavioural observation). The diagnostic power comes from the spread between layers. When self-report is high and observed behaviour is low, the organisation has adoption theatre. That gap is where most enterprise AI adoption fails — and no existing framework is equipped to detect it.

Three Ideas That Distinguish This Framework

Behaviour, not plans. The unit of change is behaviour, not knowledge. Every intervention across all three systems is specified in behavioural terms. Not "leaders should support the change" but "leaders demonstrate Active Modelling — observable behaviours with developmental progressions." Not "employees should follow the AI policy" but "the system makes responsible adoption the easiest path available." Orthodox change management asks: have people been told? Adaptive Adoption asks: have people changed what they do?

Trust diagnosed, not assumed. Orthodox change management either ignores trust or treats it as a communications problem. Adaptive Adoption diagnoses trust across four independent dimensions — Relational, Institutional, Self, and Task (the RIST Framework™) — each of which can fail in either direction. Undertrust and overtrust are simultaneously present. The intervention for a Self-Trust failure (learning architecture) is categorically different from the intervention for a Relational Trust failure (behavioural leadership). Applying the wrong one wastes time and signals incompetence.

Ethics as practice, not compliance. In orthodox change management, ethics does not appear. In most AI governance frameworks, ethics means a principles document and a review board — something invoked retrospectively when something goes wrong. Adaptive Adoption treats ethics as a frontline capability — ethical reasoning as a daily cognitive habit in the Aristotelian sense of *phronesis*, not a committee that meets quarterly to review incidents after the fact. A short list of AI ethical issues runs to twenty items. No previous technology has been so powerful while so capable of misuse. When novel moral questions arise at the speed of a prompt, the compliance model is structurally inadequate. Compliance frameworks did not stop Volkswagen, Enron, Wells Fargo, or Boeing. Every catastrophic ethics failure happened inside organisations with ethics codes and governance dashboards.

The People-First Sequence

Most organisations approach AI adoption as a procurement exercise: buy tools, train users, measure adoption rates. The metric is "X percent of employees using Copilot." That measures utilisation. It does not measure capability.

Efficiency-first pilots routinely trigger fear, skill deficits, identity threat, and resistance before they create value. Adaptive Adoption reverses the sequence. Start with augmentation — tools and workflows that make people better at their work before making their roles smaller. People embrace what helps them. That builds skill and trust simultaneously. When more ambitious automation comes, the workforce has capability and confidence rather than fear and deficits.

This is the People-First Flywheel: augmentation builds trust ☐ trust enables experimentation ☐ experimentation builds capability ☐ capability enables automation. In that sequence. Inverting it produces the failure pattern observable in most enterprise AI rollouts.

The paradox: you get to the efficiency gains faster by not starting with them.

Domain knowledge, tacit knowledge, and contextual judgment are more valuable in the age of AI, not less. Human judgment, taste, conviction, and curiosity are the superpowers. The question is not "which jobs can AI replace?" It is "how do we make every person in this organisation meaningfully more capable than they were six months ago?"

What the Board Sees

The Five Dials provide board-level visibility without drowning in metrics:

Utilisation Depth — AI embedded into core workflows versus superficial tool use. Not licence counts or login rates. An organisation where 80 percent of employees have logged into Copilot but 12 percent use it in consequential work has high utilisation and low depth.

Capability Expansion Rate — the rate at which new capability is being acquired. Not the stock of current skills, but the first derivative. An organisation that scores well on utilisation today but poorly on capability expansion rate is living on borrowed time. It has deployed tools without building the human capacity to evolve with them.

Trust Stability — trust fragility, recovery speed, incident frequency. Undertrust and overtrust behavioural signatures across all four RIST dimensions. A single AI hallucination incident in a high-stakes context can collapse trust for months if the recovery architecture is absent.

Iteration Velocity — speed from experiment to safe deployment. Governance throughput: reviews completed versus backlog. How fast the organisation learns what is working versus how fast the environment is changing.

Leadership Delta — observable leadership behaviour shift. AI literacy distribution in the top team — variance matters more than mean. Quality of governance questions leaders ask. Whether leaders model AI use visibly or delegate it entirely.

What Existing Frameworks Miss

Every major AI governance and change framework — McKinsey, BCG, Prosci, NIST AI RMF, Gartner — measures some combination of structure, policy, readiness, and technical maturity. None measure enacted behaviour. Governance is treated as compliance-shaped. Ethics is absent or compliance-shaped. Leadership is gestural — acknowledged as important, but not behaviourally specified. Trust is either absent or treated as a single variable rather than disaggregated across its four dimensions.

Adaptive Adoption covers all four Wilber quadrants: interior-individual (Leadership Delta), interior-collective (culture), exterior-individual (behaviour), exterior-collective (Behavioural Governance). The dominant frameworks operate almost exclusively in the exterior-collective quadrant. That is the structural reason they measure the 72 percent and miss the 6 percent.

The intellectual lineage is broad: organisational development (Argyris, Schein, Senge), complexity science (Snowden, Stacey, Taleb), behavioural science (Kahneman, Thaler, Michie), design thinking (Brown, Ries), trust research (Mayer et al.), safety culture (Bradley's Ladder), implementation science (Proctor et al.), leadership scholarship (Burns, Heifetz, Ekvall, Edmondson), and practical ethics (Aristotle, Floridi). The claim is not novelty in any single domain but the integration of domains that have not previously been combined — and the insistence that the integration be measured behaviourally, not merely described.

How It Is Delivered

Adaptive Adoption is open-source, non-fee-gated, and designed to evolve. The framework is published as a living repository — the first management framework built in code rather than static PDFs. That is not a gimmick. A method for adaptive systems must itself be adaptable. Proprietary change frameworks need change management to be static; their revenue depends on controlling it.

The commercial model is not the framework itself. It is what the framework makes possible:

Diagnostics. The Adaptive Adoption Maturity Index (AAMI) is the first AI adoption maturity model grounded in behavioural science. It measures enacted behaviour across three evidence layers — producing a Gap Score that reveals the distance between what the organisation claims and what an observer would see. That gap is the intervention target.

Advisory and implementation. Diagnostic-led engagements that start with the AAMI, identify the behavioural blockers, and design interventions specified at the level of what people do — not what they should think or feel.

Keynotes and executive education. The framework is designed to be teachable. The six leadership archetypes (The Steward, The Gardener, The Liberator, The Monk, The Empath, The Prophet) make the behavioural dimensions memorable and coachable for senior audiences.

The Leadership Delta™ programme. A structured leadership development experience — cohort-based, behaviourally specified, with pre/post measurement against the seven dimensions.

The framework is designed to be forked by industry — healthcare, financial services, government, manufacturing — and contributed to by practitioners. The value is not in hiding the intellectual property. It is in the diagnostics, implementation, and authority that come from having built it.

What Adaptive Adoption Rejects

It rejects the idea that change can be understood mainly as communication, training, sponsorship, and reinforcement.

It rejects the idea that naming a sponsor solves leadership.

It rejects the idea that policy maturity is the same as adoption maturity.

It rejects the idea that awareness and desire reliably become action.

It rejects the idea that governance can remain periodic while the environment becomes continuous.

It rejects the idea that the method itself can stay static while the thing it governs changes every month.

Orthodox change management is a project. Adaptive Adoption is an operating system.

The organisations that win with AI will not be those with the most polished launch communications or the largest use-case libraries. They will be those that build continuous adaptive capability — and measure it at the level of what people demonstrably do. That is the gap this framework exists to close.

Next Steps

If you are navigating AI adoption and the gap between your readiness scores and your operational reality is wider than it should be, the starting points are:

Read the full framework. The Adaptive Adoption repository and discussion documents are available at paulgibbonsadvisory.com. The framework is open, forkable, and free.

Run the diagnostic. The AAMI assessment reveals whether your organisation's behaviour matches its claims — and where the gaps are widest. The output is not a score. It is a Gap Score: the distance between what the organisation claims and what an observer would see.

Book a keynote. The Adaptive Adoption keynote is designed as both a provocation and a working session. It is the highest-impact way to shift a senior leadership team's mental model from "managing a change project" to "building an adaptive capability."

Start a conversation. A 30-minute diagnostic call to assess fit: paul@paulgibbonsadvisory.com.

Paul Gibbons is the creator of Adaptive Adoption™ and the author of eight books on leadership, organisational change, and business ethics, including The Science of Organizational Change (2015, 2019) and Adopting AI (2025, AI Book of the Year). He has led organisational change programmes at IBM, PwC, and Deloitte, and advises Fortune 500 organisations on behavioural approaches to AI adoption. He holds advanced degrees in philosophy, psychology, organisational behaviour, and related disciplines.

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