

Barriers to Change

Why Change Efforts Fail and
What Great Leaders Do Differently

Leadership Insight Report



Introduction

Change isn't new to business. Markets shift. Strategies evolve. Organizations transform. Yet despite our experience with change, a surprising amount of it still fails, and not because the change itself was wrong, but because the real barriers to change were never named or addressed.

Most leaders don't struggle with setting direction. They struggle with helping people transition from what was to what will be. And that transition is rarely blocked by strategy, tools, or resources. It's blocked by how humans think, lead, react, and make sense of uncertainty.

In our work with leaders and organizations, we've identified six recurring barriers that quietly undermine change efforts. They're subtle. They're often invisible. And they show up again and again in companies of every size and industry.

This guide is designed to help you recognize these barriers, understand their impact, begin addressing them with intention before they stall progress and reflect on how you can begin to lead change management more effectively.

Our goal isn't to add more theory to your world. It's to help you see change more clearly so you can lead it with greater confidence, alignment, and humanity.

Because when leaders understand the true barriers to change... they can finally remove them.



1. Cognitive biases

Leaders and teams often rely on unconscious shortcuts in thinking, anchoring on old information, seeking evidence that confirms what they already believe, or assuming the future will look like the past. These biases distort decision-making and cause people to underestimate risks, resist new information, or dismiss early warning signs. As a result, they delay action or choose the wrong course, even when evidence suggests change is needed.

Example: A leadership team continues investing heavily in a product line that's been declining for years because they believe it's still their "core strength." Even when new data shows customer demand shifting elsewhere, they dismiss it as an anomaly, delaying needed innovation.

Reflect:

- Where might I be relying on past success rather than current reality?
- When was the last time I actively sought out information that contradicted my assumptions?
- Who in my organization feels safe enough to challenge my thinking and how often do they?

Bonus: The Cognitive Bias Assessment on Page 3 will help you determine which, if any, you may be operating with and tips on how to begin challenging your own cognitive biases.



2. Leaders not understanding their role in change

Many leaders think their job is simply to announce the change and hold others accountable for implementing it. In reality, leaders must model the behaviors, reinforce priorities, remove barriers, support people through uncertainty, and communicate consistently. When leaders don't recognize this responsibility, teams experience confusion, misalignment, and low confidence in the change - and progress stalls.

Example: A CEO announces a new strategic direction and assumes the organization will naturally follow. However, the CEO doesn't adjust priorities, reinforce decisions, or communicate consistently, so teams keep working the old way because nothing else changed except the announcement.

Reflect:

- Have I clearly modeled the behaviors I'm asking others to adopt?
- Do my words, priorities, and resource decisions fully align with this change?
- How often am I personally reinforcing the "why" behind the change?



3. Trying to make sense of changes (while they're in motion)

When change is happening around them, those under your leadership often find themselves reacting instead of leading, or trying to interpret what the change really means, how it impacts priorities, or whether it will “stick.” This sense-making delay creates hesitation, lack of clarity, and inconsistent direction for teams. Employees feel stuck in limbo — unsure what to do or how to move forward — which slows execution and drains momentum.

Example: A department hears that the company is restructuring but isn't sure what it actually means for their work. Managers wait for clarity before making decisions, so projects stall and employees feel anxious. In fact, productivity drops long before the restructuring even begins.

Reflect:

- Where might my uncertainty be slowing my team down?
- Have I clearly defined what is known, unknown, and still evolving?
- What clarity do my people need from me right now to move forward confidently?



4. Leaders not engaging in rapid scenario planning

Effective leaders constantly scan their environment - customers, operations, markets, technology, regulations - looking for weak signals that indicate what may be coming next. When leaders fail to do this, they are repeatedly caught off guard. They then resort to rushed pivots, emergency restructures, and reactive decision-making. This creates instability, burnout, and confusion across the organization, not because change was needed, but because it was poorly anticipated.

Example: A competitor releases a disruptive new service model, but leadership doesn't take it seriously until customers begin leaving. At that point, they rush to redesign pricing, roles, and processes — creating confusion and chaos that could have been minimized with earlier planning.

Reflect:

- How intentionally am I scanning for early signals of change?
- Do we regularly explore “what if” scenarios or mostly react when issues surface?
- What changes would catch us off-guard today and why?



5. Creating a moving target instead of managing change

Most leaders don't believe they're "changing their minds." In fact, the goal often stays exactly the same. What changes-sometimes weekly or even daily-is how leaders want the team to get there. One week the message is speed. The next it's quality. Then it's innovation. Then it's cost control. None of these are wrong. The problem is that when priorities shift without being intentionally managed, the team experiences the destination as a moving target. People stop knowing which direction to run, what to optimize for, or how success will be measured. Progress slows, confidence erodes, and execution feels chaotic rather than aligned.

Example: A leadership team sets a clear annual goal: grow revenue by 15%. In Q1, managers are told to push aggressive sales targets and close deals fast. In Q2, the focus shifts to customer experience, and teams are criticized for moving too quickly. In Q3, leadership emphasizes process discipline and margin protection, slowing approvals. In Q4, urgency returns and teams are again pushed to "just get deals done." The goal never changed. But the rules of the game did-without explanation, prioritization, or reset. The result? Teams hedge, wait for the next shift, and stop committing fully to any approach because experience has taught them it won't last.

Reflect:

- Where might we be changing the path without clearly acknowledging it?
- Are our teams clear on what to prioritize when trade-offs arise?
- How often does a new emphasis to take hold before introducing another one?
- If we asked our team, "What direction are we running in this quarter?" would we get the same answer?



6. Treating change as an HR communications project

Too often, "change management" is reduced to email updates, town halls, and messaging plans instead of preparing leaders and managers to guide people through the uncertainty, fear, and disruption that real change creates. When change is handled only as a comms effort, employees receive information but not support. Managers feel unequipped to respond to questions or resistance, and the organization misses the opportunity to strengthen trust and alignment during transition.

Example: HR sends out a well-designed email campaign explaining a major organizational change. But managers haven't been coached on how to address employee concerns. So, when questions arise, leaders freeze or give conflicting answers and trust erodes quickly.

Reflect:

- Have leaders and managers been equipped to lead people through transition?
- Do employees receive support — or just announcements?
- How am I strengthening trust and connection during times of uncertainty?

Reading this guide is easy. **Leading change is not.**

The barriers outlined here don't fail organizations because leaders don't care or aren't capable. They fail because these dynamics live inside our own thinking, habits, and instincts—the very places we're least objective.

That's why the reflection questions matter.

They aren't meant to be answered quickly, intellectually, or with the version of yourself you want to be as a leader. They require honesty about how you actually think, decide, react, and lead—especially under pressure. Without that honesty, change efforts don't stall because of strategy or structure. They stall because leaders unknowingly recreate the same conditions that caused failure before.

This is also why we included the Cognitive Bias Assessment.

Cognitive biases aren't flaws. They're human. Every leader has them. The risk isn't having biases—it's leading change without knowing which ones are influencing you. When left unexamined, they quietly shape priorities, distort decision-making, and undermine execution long before results show up in the data.

Great leaders don't eliminate bias.

They surface it, challenge it, and design around it.

If you want change to stick - if you want alignment, confidence, and execution to follow - start here:

- Be honest in your reflections.
- Resist the urge to justify or defend.
- Take the Cognitive Bias Assessment with curiosity, not judgment.
- Use what you learn to lead more intentionally, not perfectly.

Because meaningful change doesn't begin with an announcement or a plan. It begins when leaders are willing to see themselves clearly and lead differently as a result.

Let's Unleash More Effective Thinking and Decision-Making

Since we all have cognitive biases, it's worth understanding which ones most often shape—or limit—our thinking. Take a few minutes to honestly reflect on each bias and consider where it may be showing up for you. Remember, the effectiveness of this self-assessment lies in your willingness to be transparent with yourself.

I tend to:

1. Have excessive confidence in my own answers to questions

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

2. Escalate commitment to a course of action in which I have made substantial prior commitments of time, money or other resources

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

3. Place more emphasis on the information and evidence that is most readily available to me when making decisions.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

4. Place greater emphasis on recent events (including new people, ideas, information or events) especially those that were unusual or emotionally charged

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

5. Gather and rely on information that confirms my existing views and to avoid or downplay information that disconfirms our existing hypothesis

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

6. Allow an initial reference point to distort my estimates. We begin at the original reference point and adjust from there even if it is completely arbitrary

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

7. Jump to conclusions about the relationship between two variables when no relationship exists

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

8. See past events as having been predictable, despite there having been little or no objective basis for predicting it

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

9. Attribute more credit or blame to myself for a particular outcome than an outside party would attribute

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

10. Allow position or functional role to influence my perspective on an issue; "Where you sit is where you stand"

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

11. Do or believe things because many other people do or believe them

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

12. Overestimate how much other people agree with me

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

13. Over-emphasize personality-based explanations for behaviors observed in others while under-emphasizing the role of external factors

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

After you finish, review the ideas on how to suspend these biases by asking these questions:

- Which tendencies have you seen manifest in your thinking?
- Which does the organization fall prey to most frequently?
- Which create the most challenges for you to achieve your goals?

Notes:

Thinking in Opposites to Suspend Our Biases

The way we define a situation (e.g., as a problem or opportunity) strongly influences the choices we perceive. These mental models or frames are commonly knee-jerk reactions. These frames drive us towards the kinds of solutions we consider or develop. To overcome our natural tendencies and biases we can reframe each situation.

One technique is to shift that perspective by looking at opposites. For example, if at first blush a situation appears to be a threat or risk, ask yourself, “How might this be an opportunity?”

Or, when deciding a course of action for a situation, you can ask:

- What if we did nothing?
- What if we did the opposite?

By fully exploring these types of questions you can unearth a whole range of options and ideas. The same approach can be used to overcome cognitive biases. Based on the results of your self-assessment, use the questions below to help overcome your natural tendencies.

Note: The question number is aligned to the Cognitive Bias as listed below. So for example, if you marked “Agree” on question four, we encourage you to spend time answering the questions listed for Cognitive Bias four below.

If you tend to have this bias:		Ask yourself these questions:
1	Overconfidence Bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the implications if I am wrong? • Which respected stakeholders have a different view than mine? • How is their view valid?
2	Sunk Cost Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much time or money would it save if I changed course now? • Am I willing to accept the consequences and responsibility for any negative impact if we continue this course of action?
3	Availability Bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I had unlimited time and resources, what additional exploration would I do to inform my decision? • What are the potential risks of not uncovering additional insights now?

4	Recency Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What information can I depend on to confirm the validity of my thinking about recent events or influences? • (If people focused) How can I reaffirm for myself the value contribution of existing team members so I don't disproportionately value the newer person's contribution? • (If strategy focused) Does this new idea or area of focus fit within my stated guidelines for shifting strategy before execution is complete? • What does my experience suggest to me about this situation?
5	Confirmation Bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What information can I find that disconfirms my hypothesis? • What is the opposite to what I am considering? • What are the merits to that approach/idea?
6	Anchoring Bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was there an initial reference point given to me or that I thought of? • How does it affect my thinking if I eliminate that reference point?
7	Illusory Correlation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What data or verifiable facts exist that these two events are related? • How does my thinking change if I assume that they are NOT related?
8	Hindsight Bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was surprising or unexpected about that situation? • What in that situation was unique from any other experience I have ever had? • What can I learn from and apply from that situation?
9	Egocentrism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are all of the stakeholders who contributed to the outcome? • Using only data, observable facts and behaviors, (i.e., not opinion) what contribution did each stakeholder make to the outcome?

10	Positional Bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If I disassociate the title and functional role of stakeholders from my thinking, how would it change my view?• If I most heavily weight the thoughts of those who are closest to the work, the customer, or the situation, how would my thinking change?
11	Bandwagon Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What does the minority group think?• What value is there in that perspective?• Is there a silent majority? What are their thoughts?
12	False Consensus Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What evidence do I have that each stakeholder agrees with my perspective?• How would my actions change if I assumed that nobody agreed with my approach?
13	Fundamental Attribution Error	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What external factors could be impacting his/her behavior?• How would my thinking about the situation change if I assumed that external factors were driving the behavior of the other person?

Notes:



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Accelerating Growth.
Unleashing Excellence.*