From Resistance to Resilience: Our Role as Change Agents in AI Adoption

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This essay addresses AI Adoption, so it's probably not going to age well; things around us are shifting exponentially.

I am writing to you all, Dear Leaders, on August 19, 2025. AI Adoption is no longer merely about **implementing** GenAI tools. That's so last month, right? From here on, AI Adoption is more about humans **partnering** with AI. And with that shift, AI Adoption (especially as part of the change management parlance) should be seen as a human disruption issue as much as—if not more than—a technical/digital one.

I am not implying this partnership to be a literal mind-meld (yet!) between humans and robots, but I am suggesting that as discerning AI interpreters, we humans are already sitting alongside the robot in our **everyday** work and life. This is, understandably, unsettling for many. As one of my coaching colleagues said on a call the other day, "People are really freaking out."

"Freaking out" is just one way we are **resisting** the inevitable. There are myriad ways we are experiencing these feelings of loss, fear, anxiety, disappointment, and surprise, which show up as stuckness, being frozen and falling behind, and, in some cases, losing jobs. On the other hand, some **seek out** change far more demonstrably (perhaps these folks are scared shitless on the inside, even though it doesn't show).

My vote: **expect and embrace** this AI-human **partnership**, and ensure we intentionally **integrate** our minds and bodies around it, as well as support others to do the same.

This essay explores why leaders must act as responsible **change agents** to help make the unprecedented AI–human partnership run smoothly. The leaders I work with who prioritize this give their organizations the best shot at successful AI Adoption.

Allow me to summarize my framework for being a responsible change agent, and then I will go into more detail with several personal and client success stories along the way.

1. **Role:** Wake up every day and embody being a **change agent**; make it a leadership cornerstone.
2. **Mindset:** Instead of "dealing with" or "being burdened by" change, **expect and embrace** it.
3. **Practices:** Most importantly, our practices need to shift to a higher frequency of **empathy and inspiration** in our day-to-day with peers and directs.

These three pillars draw from my study of Design Thinking, Organization Development, Adult Learning, and Buddhist practices over the past 30 years. In that same span, I have skewed more toward real-work practices than theory in my executive coaching. **Integrating** these pillars into our work will help us move from **resistance to resilience** and make the AI-human partnership a softer landing.

Summary of leaders' influence in effective AI Adoption

Role	Change agent	■ Commitment to facilitating transformation in people, teams, and org
Mindset	Expect and embrace change	■ Recognize that change + resistance is a natural occurrence ■ See change as growth, not disruption ■ Comfortable with ambiguity
Practices	Demonstrate empathy and positive inspiration	■ Show deep understanding of others' needs and feelings ■ Energize with hope and authenticity

Role of a change agent

Leaders play many roles. For example, in the class Ethan Evans and I teach together—**Cracking the C-Suite**—we address what we have deemed to be the four most relevant roles for executive success: Steward, Conductor, Coach, and Energizer. These are tied to four parallel focus areas, respectively:

Steward	▶	Strategic Influence
Conductor	▶	**Scale Culture**
Coach	▶	**Develop Talent**
Energizer	▶	**Executive Presence**

A good list, to be sure; and up until this summer, it seemed appropriately aspirational and comprehensive. But given the state of business now, adding "**change agent**" in the context of AI hasn't been a marketing move on our part; it's what we strongly believe leaders need to embody in order to influence and impact their companies.

Changing the way we think about change is a strategic imperative now more than ever. So, for our next course cohort, Oct 18-19, the role of **change agent** is front and center, and AI Adoption is the primary case study.

The term "role" is purposely delineated from mindset, skills, traits, or practices. "Roles" do show up as thinking and acting (which I address in the next two sections), but first, leaders have to make a **decision to accept a role**—and in the case of the change agent role—to make a difference in the lives of peers and directs. So, yeah, it's a **commitment**, and for some of us, it borders on obligatory. If we have the courage to do this, we should go for it. And while all of us aren't cut out for **change agent** as our *leading* role, some may add it as a *supporting* role. Yay!

Further, the concept of **role** doesn't mean being in the same role all the time. Even within the same day, we wear different hats depending on the situation. Parts of our workdays, we are in **coach** mode—and put everything aside to be present with our direct report. When we put on the **steward** hat, we dedicate time to thinking about the future of organizations.

With the **change agent** role, we are making a difference in our organizations by understanding *and* inspiring others. We are not only getting others to move the needle with intention; we are bridging our pace with theirs. This is how we stem the tide of resistance.

As the CEO of Mariposa Leadership, I made a **commitment** years ago to keep up on trends, so it's no surprise we are ahead of the curve on how AI affects our industry (executive coaching) and our clients' leadership success. I

wake up every day and think about how we can make this world a better place, even with so much of it being in the dumpster. I have deemed the AI revolution as the most interesting business issue in my lifetime and see it "trumping" all the other seemingly intractable ones we face. Might I suggest you put on your **change agent** hat and join me?

Many of the executives I am honored to work with have done this, and, in fact, one of them—the Head of AI for a medium-sized tech company—recently took a job there for less pay because he knew he could make a bigger difference in that company culture and industry. He signed up to be a **change agent** as a *leading* role. Bravo!

Mindset

Words matter. Self-talk matters. How we frame "change" matters, and we have choices.

We can see **change-ups** as burdens or threats, which often come with **resistance**. For example, being surprised (from a change-up) often causes stress and leads to anxiety, worry, and rumination. To make matters worse, we judge ourselves for being anxious, which causes even more worry. It's a vicious circle.

Alas, we humans have the gift of reframing. We can see "change" less as a threat to resist and more as something we **expect**; thus, we can **embrace** change and see it as growth.

Perhaps think of change as a **sandpile**: imagine dropping grains of sand one by one onto a pile. Eventually, one grain causes an avalanche. Sometimes it's small, sometimes massive. The point is, you can't predict which grain will trigger it, and there is no typical size. What we do know is that the avalanche—the change—is going to happen at some point, so we are expecting it.

Freaking out is one response to surprise, but if we e**xpect and embrace change**, our response can be: "Ah, there it is, I expected something was coming, and it's happening…Now what can I learn from this?" (Yes, I realize this is a highly evolved response and takes a lot of practice.)

This Buddhist-inspired response is helpful in all realms of work and life; AI is just so disruptive and so in-our-face right now that it challenges us more than most phenomena. Borrowing from an everyday life example might be instructive; we can apply it back to the avalanche AI is creating.

You don't have to be a parent to relate to the following: if we stop being so surprised—and expect it's not *if* but *when* our teens mess up—we can reframe the experience as it's happening and use that mindset to stay calm and move through it (and, thus, not freak out).

Last month, my teen and I toured Japanese language schools. Besides the tours and dinners we shared each evening, mostly we did our own thing: he hit anime-land (Akihabara) practically every day, and I was lost in sushi bars midday in between museum and flea-market hopping. Even though Tokyo is likely the safest big city in the world, and I knew, logically, he'd be fine, it still took everything I had—breathing, reframing—not to spiral one evening when he missed his self-imposed curfew by 2.5 hours. When he finally got back to the hotel at 2:30 a.m., I just said, "You might want to hydrate," and went to bed.

My takeaway: This was a small example of the "letting go" process—a gift that'll keep on giving when he moves to Japan full-time next April. I am more **resilient** now (and so is he).

Here's another way mindset and language come into play: last week, three colleagues and I did a Zoom dress rehearsal for a live panel next month on AI Adoption. The moderator asked many relevant questions to get us ready, and the most thought-provoking one was, "What does being **resilient** look like?" My very simple answer was: **expects change**. Yep, I know it's more complex than that, as this essay espouses. However, think about how powerful those two words are as applied to individual and company AI journeys. In fact, I am writing it on a stickie right now and pasting it on my laptop. You too?

Practices

Both the **change agent** role we embody and the growth **mindset** are "inside jobs." While they certainly guide our intentions, **practices** are where the "rubber meets the road" and have the greatest impact on our organizations.

Being a change agent in practice usually conjures up a leader who drives fast and breaks things. That's not what I am suggesting. Instead, we remind ourselves of the biology, that **change + resistance go hand in hand**. If we put this into action, then our first move isn't to drive change, and certainly not to break things. Instead, it's to **take a step back** and see what's getting in the way of change. Thus, we need to understand scenarios and people's specific struggles. Best if we take a page out of the **Design Thinking** playbook and start with **empathy**.

Whether we are helping one person with upleveling their AI skills or trying to adopt a full-scale AI strategic roadmap, **involving** the people affected by any such change with *how* the change is being unveiled will go a long way to diminish the resistance to the change itself. Don't practice top-down change management; it needs to be bottom-up/across, especially because of the "freak-out" factor AI is causing.

A couple of weeks ago, I was in a coaching session with the Chief AI Officer of a Fortune 200 company. He walked me through an aspect of his AI adoption process (he's well-steeped in **Design Thinking**) with **empathy** at its core. Here's a glimpse:

> "It's important we iterate quickly, but first we must earn trust. Talk the same language. How are AI tools helping them? So, we contextualize for them by knowing their pain points and iterate *with* them. We identify and align on the problem, develop rapid prototyping, and continue to iterate by getting feedback."

Last weekend, I asked one of my former clients—the CTO of a major, privately held Fintech—to weigh in on AI Adoption. Here are many examples of practicing empathy:

> "We recognize that AI adoption is as much a people and process change as a tech change. Here are some ways it has played out:
>
> 1. Training programs: Creating an environment of learning and being curious in partnership with dominant players in AI space, workshops, etc.
> 2. Role-based enablement: Teaching AI through the lens of *your* job, not as a generic tool. Creating cohorts who can learn and provide feedback.
> 3. Psychological safety: Open forums, "ask me anything" sessions, and hands-on labs so fear can be replaced with curiosity.
> 4. Success stories: Highlighting early adopters internally to show peers that this is empowering, not replacing."

Last week, I was in a coaching session with the VP of Product Marketing at a Fortune 1000 Tech company. I know he is a big proponent of GenAI, so I asked him how he is rolling it out to his organization, and what he's noticing. Off the bat, he said, "It's harder than I expected," and without missing a beat, he pivoted to saying he sees himself as an **AI whisperer** (his version of change agent) and how much patience this is going to require. He and I agreed that this doesn't scale from him alone but was encouraged that it could cascade through his organization if his modeling took hold.

My client put his AI whisperer hat on and listened to what his colleagues had to say, particularly what they are struggling with:

> "I coached a peer the other day because she felt like she was cheating using Perplexity on a finance model she was building. I reassured her—that to get over the hump on the modeling—that this is not cheating. 'Use GenAI tools to do the basics,' I said, 'then you can spend more time on the more complex options later. Think of the tool as your assistant.'"

Empathy is the primary skill that contributes to your and your organization's ability to go from **resistance to resilience**. As leaders, we also have to stay **upbeat** and **inspirational** in the midst of whatever sandpile—or worse, dirt pile—that causes fear and anxiety, resulting in demonstrable blame and disappointment. This doesn't mean we deny our feelings, but I suggest we reframe "**blame to aim**" and remain as consistently positive as possible in 1-1s, team meetings, and organizational gatherings.

I know this is challenging, given all that we are facing as large and small businesses right now. AI might be the most dominant matter to tackle in business for the foreseeable future, but there are also geopolitical, societal, and health-related "threats," not to mention the constant pressure of industry competition.

Watching TV news often exacerbates this, as does social media scrolling; yet we leaders need to know what's going on. Cutting intake down to the bare minimum is also problematic because we still need information to make wise and strategic decisions. This is a personal decision: how much to take in without the media *itself* causing one to go from being a "glass-half-full" type of person to one that is chronically "glass-half-empty."

My advice to myself and to my clients has been: be very **targeted on the publications/podcasts/GPT prompts** you use to get the best ROI on your time. I choose a variety of voices that give me a wide spectrum of tech, business and political views—including some I don't agree with. Aim to get your thinking challenged as a jumping off point, instead of spiraling about bad news.

Now, **translating** what we explore, learn, and conclude into positive and practical **messaging** is one important side of the equation (Ethan and I call this **Strategic Influence**). The other side is checking in with yourself about where you are on the sunny-or-not disposition scale. Find that edge of positive energy, however thin it feels. In the end, each small notch toward optimism makes both you and your organization more resilient.

I want to share that this is a personal essay and not GenAI-generated. I used ChatGPT to copy edit grammar, especially lessening the em dashes; ChatGPT usually adds them. LOL.

I also wanted to thank Allison Adams, Jason Yoong, and Ethan Evans for their feedback.

Sue Bethanis, San Francisco, 8/19/25

Email me and connect with me on LinkedIn
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