



# CHANGE MANAGEMENT 101: Empowering Human Services Agencies to Embrace Innovation

## **CHANGE IS INEVITABLE. AND CHANGE IS IMPORTANT. BUT CHANGE IS HARD.**

This is especially true in human services, where many workers across the industry are change agents themselves. When you're so committed to empowering clients and families to change their own behaviors, it can be challenging to flip the lens and see the value of change for yourself—especially when you're overburdened, and your capacity is already limited.

Change is also hard because change often involves loss. Even if what you're doing today hurts you (we call it a pain point after all!), it's familiar, it's muscle memory. Making a change means losing that familiarity and entering a new kind of discomfort called growth.

If you've ever started a new health or fitness regimen, you know the feeling: you recognize that trading in your existing habits for something better will have a positive impact on your well-being. But getting started seems so ... daunting. Once you do get started, it can be equally tough to stay motivated and make your new habits stick. The well-trod neural pathways in our brains make it all too easy to fall back onto what's familiar.

In human services, the same goes for making change on an organizational level. Whether you're implementing a new tool, technology, policy, or practice model, it may seem scary at first. And once you get going, you're bound to encounter some bumps in the road. But change is possible, and necessary in today's world, especially with the right resources in place to support you along the way and ease the journey.

Northwoods has been helping agencies embrace change and embed technology into their daily work for 20 years. The majority of our services team has worked in an agency and has personal experience putting organizational change management initiatives into practice. This guide is a combination of best practices and lessons learned over the past two decades. Our goal is to help your human services agency approach change in a way that leads to lasting and measurable success.

# OVERCOMING OBSTACLES THAT SLOW DOWN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Not enough time and resources. Too busy and struggling to keep up. Comfortable with the way things have always been done. There are plenty of reasons that human services agencies may be hesitant to change that often boil down to the same key issue: workers are already so overwhelmed they simply don't have time and energy to add one more thing to their plate.

On the surface, this key issue can make change seem impossible. In fact, for many agencies, the pain of change is perceived as being so great that it seems easier to simply live with the pain of staying the same. But this can be a costly mistake, as [inaction can hurt human services agencies](#) in the long run.

One of the critical first steps to any successful change management initiative is identifying the obstacles you're most likely going to face. By knowing what questions and concerns to expect ahead of time, you can mitigate risk by being prepared to address them when the time comes. A few common examples:

- **Why are we doing this?** You've likely heard of "[Start with Why](#)," the book, TED Talk, and general concept made famous by author Simon Sinek. If not, it's quite simple: every individual has a personal why—a purpose, cause, or belief—that drives everything they do. If someone can't see how a change directly connects with that "why," it'll be very difficult, if not impossible, to get them on board. You have to connect your efforts to each individual worker's internal motivation and values. For example, knowing that so many human services workers are driven by a desire to connect with and help others, show them how the change you're asking them to make can help them do just that.
- **How will this change provide value?** Many workers and supervisors are comfortable in the way that they practice. They view change as a direct threat to their competency or a fundamental loss of familiarity and expertise. Here's where you'll have to help them see that the gain outweighs the loss. Similar to connecting with each person's why, you also need to explain in their own words how the change will help them do their job better. Think about the "What's in it for me?" principle. Will a child welfare worker have more time to spend with families? Will an eligibility worker be able to process applications faster? Will an adult & aging worker have an easier time collaborating to streamline services? Similarly, if you need to secure budget or support for the project from upper management, stay focused on operational efficiencies, productivity gains, and the expected return on investment (ROI).
- **How will we make time for this?** You'll most likely have at least one person who thinks, "this isn't in my job description, so I'm not doing it." Even the workers who are excited about a change may initially be hesitant to get started because they can't imagine how they'll find time to learn and adopt something new. You have to meet them where they are. A new process, practice, or tool should be so simple, logical, and meaningful that workers don't have to give up their already limited time to learn how to make it part of their daily routine or be convinced why they should. (Think back to 2007 and how many people were willing to wait for hours in the rain to get their hands on the iPhone because they believed it held tremendous, unimaginable value.) You have to be able to help workers think long-term here too. Even though it may take a bit of extra time and effort to adapt to the change now, prove that it'll be worth it by showing them how much they'll be able to save time in the future. *Showing vs. telling* is especially important here, as you have

limited time to influence someone's decision to accept or reject change before you lose their attention.

- **How will we know it's working?** Finding ways to save workers' valuable time is always important. But it's likely not the only thing that matters to your agency. Beyond giving thought to how a change will impact each person individually, you also have to define why it matters on an organizational level. [How does your agency define success?](#) What financial, operational, or community-driven goals are you hoping to achieve? What specific indicators will you use to measure if you've met them? Nobody wants to waste time on a project that's bound to fail, but if you can't define what "getting it right" looks like, it'll be difficult to do anything else.

A word of warning as you think through how to answer these questions: Stick to the facts and don't use hype. Overpromising results will only create unrealistic expectations—which if they aren't met, could discredit you, slow down your momentum, and stop change in its tracks.

Another critical factor for helping your workers embrace change is by tying your efforts back to a very specific, well-established [problem that's creating ripple effects across your agency](#). (To be clear, this problem should be determined before you even decide to make any changes.) Each person may feel those effects differently, but you can often trace all of them back to a singular root cause—think lack of staffing and resources or struggling to keep up with documentation amid ever-changing mandates).

Keep in mind that a clearly defined problem will also help you answer each of the questions above. For example, being able to demonstrate how a change will solve your workers' most pressing problems is a compelling way to help them understand how it will provide value and connect to their why. Similarly, this problem statement will help determine what factors you should evaluate to measure success.

## CORNERSTONES OF SUCCESSFUL CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN HUMAN SERVICES

Once you've planned how to overcome obstacles, mitigate risk, and help your staff embrace a change mindset, there are a few core concepts that will help you succeed. It all boils down to putting people at the center of every phase of the change.

### Champions: Internal Influencers Throughout the Organization

Change is everyone's responsibility. Even if the organization is managing it, everyone has a role to play. After all, changing a business process requires individual changes on the part of every worker impacted.

Leadership may set the expectations and determine success measures, but you need people across all levels of the organization who share the vision for what change will bring to participate and champion your efforts. Supervisors are often the key here, as they're not too far removed from the frontlines and have similar firsthand experience as workers. They can help drive the energy and excitement, as well as coach individuals on their teams through change and hold staff accountable.

As you think about the team who should manage your efforts, consider a few tips:

- Include various internal roles and departments to help champion the change and promote it within the organization to ensure things go smoothly.
- Analyze the entire process that’s changing to make sure you’re not overlooking anyone who needs to be involved, including other business units and support staff.
- Select individuals who communicate well, are respected by their peers, work well under pressure, and respond positively to change.
- The person who has the most time isn’t necessarily the best person to lead a change initiative if they don’t bring the right energy or commitment to the idea.
- Some agencies have found success adding a person to the team who has been harder to win over in previous initiatives because it carries a lot of weight with the rest of the staff if that person responds positively.

Another way to think about who can help drive change, and how people will be impacted by it, is to break things down by job role. Here’s an example using leadership, supervisors, and workers:

	Leadership	Supervisors	Workers
<b>Objections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Already struggling to keep staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My team doesn’t have time to learn something new</li> <li>• I don’t have time or knowledge to train my team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too overwhelmed</li> <li>• Comfortable in the way they already practice</li> <li>• Nobody knows my job better than me</li> </ul>
<b>Key Questions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What value does this add for the agency?</li> <li>• How does this translate to external partnerships?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will this help my workers?</li> <li>• How will this support my ability to do my job?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What’s in it for me?</li> <li>• When is this change going to happen?</li> <li>• What will I need to do differently?</li> <li>• How will you support us?</li> </ul>
<b>Role in the Change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set the expectation (but not actively involved)</li> <li>• Connect the change to the agency’s mission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drive energy and get buy-in from workers</li> <li>• Encourage adoption and usage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most impacted by new initiatives</li> <li>• Have power to stop change if they won’t adopt the new thing</li> </ul>
<b>Success Measures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficiency</li> <li>• Keeping momentum as staff changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My workers feel supported</li> <li>• Less burnout and turnover</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More time to focus on things that matter</li> <li>• Less stress</li> <li>• Feel more supported</li> </ul>

	Leadership	Supervisors	Workers
<b>How to Get Me on Board</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help me demonstrate ROI and smart use of agency resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involve me in readiness and planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep me in the loop about what's coming</li> <li>• Offer support when and where I need it</li> </ul>
<b>How I Can Help</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead by example</li> <li>• Provide top-down support</li> <li>• Communicate clearly and often</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Model behaviors that you want from your workers</li> <li>• Reiterate the value we stand to gain by enacting this change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give it a chance!</li> <li>• Provide honest feedback</li> </ul>

## Communication: Setting and Managing Expectations

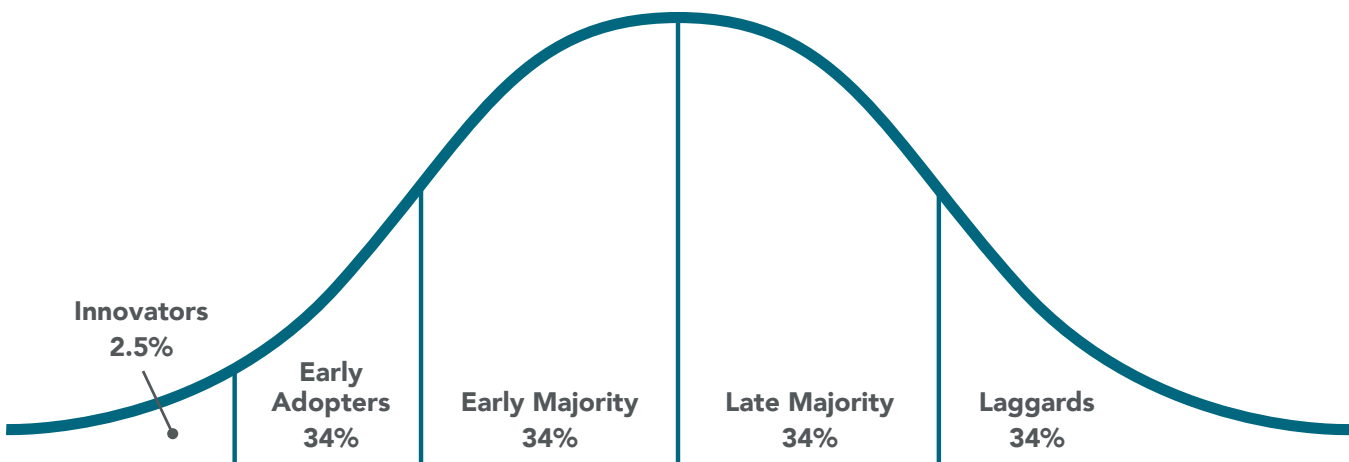
Open communication is another important, yet often overlooked, factor that can make or break a change management initiative. Communication is how you constantly reinforce your goals, value, and desired outcomes: here's what we're doing and why we're doing it.

However, [insufficient communication is often cited as one of the top reasons strategic initiatives fail](#), so it's important to develop a detailed plan to set expectations from the beginning—and maintain them as the project continues.

Don't leave anyone who will be impacted by a change in the dark. Agency leaders can be hesitant to share progress before they have all the answers. However, this can lead workers to make their own assumptions that a new initiative isn't going as planned.

Encourage staff to ask questions or express concerns, and then make sure you respond in a timely manner—even if the response is, "we're still working on it." You may not be able to completely alleviate concerns, but making staff feel heard goes a long way in building trust in the project.

## The Diffusion of Innovation



Another helpful concept as you think through your organizational change management strategy is the [Diffusion of Innovation Theory](#) that explains how an idea, product, or behavior gains momentum over time. The foundation of this theory is that some people are more likely to adopt a new idea than others, and you'll need different strategies to appeal to the individuals in each category to ensure the change spreads (or diffuses) through your organization:

- **Innovators:** Individuals who are willing to take risks, seeking new ways to conduct business, and actively involved in researching and investigating best practices.
- **Early Adopters:** Individuals who are willing and ready to change and try new processes that have been introduced by innovators (think of this group as the "guinea pigs" or beta testers).
- **Early Majority:** Individuals who are eager to change once the new idea or process has been tested, feedback has been provided, and some tweaks have been made.
- **Late Majority:** Individuals who are willing to adopt change once all the kinks have been worked out, but often wait to start until they're required.
- **Laggards:** Individuals who are resistant to change and will slowly make progress toward the change once it's required, often making them the hardest group to bring on board.

All five roles can be valuable influencers in a change management project based on your agency's needs. We've seen plenty of human services agencies fall into a trap of focusing their efforts solely on the early adopters because they're willing to withstand the discomfort of change and see the value to be gained. They are likely to support the journey from the very beginning and will become your most vocal advocates to help others seeking the same rewards. But the laggards also have important, influential perspective.

Laggards are typically the people who have been with the agency the longest and have the deepest knowledge about how the job and industry works. That means they're going to feel the greatest loss when things change. If laggards aren't on board or don't feel heard, they could quietly, but effectively, spread seeds of doubt and potentially disrupt your change management process. But, if you can convince just one of the laggards to go out on a limb and give something new a try (and they like it!), they can help convince the rest of the laggards and the late majority to commit too.

## ALIGNING PEOPLE, PROCESSES, AND TECHNOLOGY TO DRIVE CHANGE

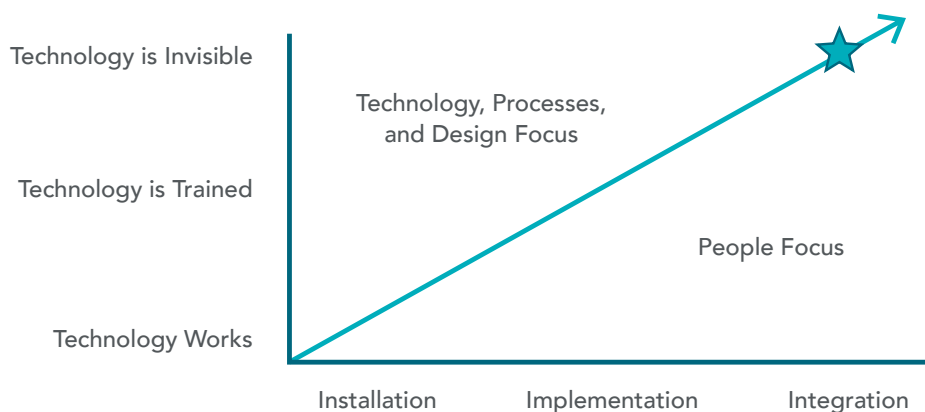
Technology is improving efficiencies in the workplace like never before, yet many human services agencies still struggle with getting their teams to adopt these new tools. Why do some agencies implement a new software solution, only to watch it fail on the front lines?

You may have heard the adage "technology projects are people projects." This is because the technology itself isn't what drives the change. People do. If workers aren't willing to open their minds or change their habits,

the project will fail, and the ROI and hopes for the impact will not be realized. For a technology project to be successful, you have to lead with change from start to finish.

Think about your workers who have been in the same position, or worked in the same program area, for years. They have a significant investment in the way things have been operating and the tools that are in place to help them do their work. And when you come in with a new solution that disrupts all that, it's a change with a very personal impact.

## The Path to Integration



There are three common approaches to software projects to keep in mind as you read this section:

- **Installation:** The software is installed, configured, and ready to use with little to no training or confirmation of end user adoption.
- **Implementation:** The software is made available to a small group of users to learn first so they can train the remaining staff. This training is limited to how the software works.
- **Integration:** The software's functionality is woven into business processes so that it becomes an integral part of daily work.

As the graphic above illustrates, the magic becomes possible when you reach integration. The greater the level of integration, the more naturally the technology blends into and truly supports the day-to-day work of each user—the ultimate goal of the project! Knowing that each person's transition process is unique is why it's so important to have strong change management strategies in place throughout the journey.

As you work toward integrating a new solution, here's a look at how champions and communication will influence your success:

## Champions

At the end of the day, technology is just a tool unless you can align and integrate it with your business to

achieve success. During the project, your technology vendor or training team will lead the way—communicating what’s going to happen and collaborating with you on how to get there. But what happens when they leave? If no one is there to keep pushing things forward, you’re more likely to revert to your old ways.

Having the right people involved from the very beginning is critical to ensure technology adoption. Frontline workers may not be too thrilled to learn that “another system” is coming their way, so you need champions to help them overcome their skepticism and embrace the opportunity.

## Communication

It’s powerful for end users to hear from leadership about why you’ve decided to try a new tool, what positive impact it will have, and what they should expect. From planning and design to implementation and training, regularly provide updates so everyone feels involved and make sure the expectations that have been communicated at the leadership level get passed down the line. (Pro tip: Incorporate this communication into a variety of settings and formats, such as regular meetings that already occur, as relying solely on email blasts can prove ineffective. [Our communication matrix has additional tips!](#))

Part of your communication efforts need to focus on helping your team see that the rewards of a new technology tool will outweigh the risks. For example, [digitizing casework and forms can help increase efficiency and timeliness](#), while moving all of your program areas to the [same software solution can boost collaboration and streamline service delivery](#).

## Leading with Change

Here are a few more strategies to lead with change from the moment your agency decides to purchase a new software solution to the time you start using it:

- **Readiness and planning.** The more prepared you are, the less scary it’ll be when it’s time for staff to step out of their comfort zone. Document your current processes to better understand: Where do things stand today, and what actions will you need to take to get where you want to go? How are workers currently completing tasks, managing information, making decisions, and delivering services? When you take a step back to evaluate how work currently gets done, you’ll likely find that different workers or units are doing the same things but in entirely different ways. Consistency is critical—you have to get everyone on the same page before introducing a new tool or way of working. This will also help you ensure that the technology is integrated into these new processes once you establish them.
- **Gather staff input early.** Survey your staff to understand what types of technology they’re comfortable using, what they struggled with, and how they view solutions they’ve been given in the past. The goal is to identify the potential barriers you’ll have to overcome, ranging from user fatigue with new technology to resistance to change. Sample questions might include: How would you describe your ability to adapt to change? What previous solutions have you been given that haven’t worked, and why? How comfortable do you feel using technology while interacting with clients or families? When you think of technology changes, how would you describe your ability to stay ahead of the curve?
- **Find the right tool.** The technology you choose can have major implications on the likelihood that



your staff will be open to using it. Workers and supervisors have been given too many tools in the past that didn't live up to their expectations or work the way they intended, which exacerbates their fears to try something new. To ease the difficulty of change, the number one thing is finding a product that makes sense. This new thing you are asking a caseworker to learn, and incorporate into their already difficult day-to-day, has to be simple and intuitive. It must solve problems they didn't even realize could be solved. As we mentioned earlier, the tool has to bring value that outweighs the loss of familiarity.

- **Accommodate schedules.** Be cognizant of how introducing new technology will impact people's workloads, as well as any other initiatives they're involved in. For example, if your lead intake worker is going to be part of the implementation team, you may need to reduce the number of intakes assigned to that individual, so they have time to focus on this new project. If economic assistance or child support workers need to participate in a lengthy training session, you may want to avoid scheduling appointments for an hour or so after they're done so that walk-ins who are waiting can be served.
- **Training and support.** Without a solid foundation of training and a safety net of support, there's a high probability that workers will revert to the "old ways" of doing things. Knowing that workers are expected to juggle a lot of priorities at once, training and support need to fit into daily work. This is where features like in-app help or walk-through videos come in handy so that workers can get answers as quickly as possible in the way they want. Support bots, live chat, or screen share capabilities should also be built in.

## LONG-TERM CHANGE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES TO SUSTAIN MOMENTUM

Organizational change doesn't happen overnight. In fact, [research shows that it can take 18-24 months](#) until something new becomes something normal. Plus, your world is ever-changing and so are your goals. Consider these strategies as your agency works to maintain new processes over time:

- **Coaching and communication.** Are you noticing a theme? Communication is critical at all stages of a change management initiative—even months or years later. Whether it's a weekly huddle or a monthly meeting, continue to check in on how things are going, how things have changed, and what else your team needs to continue moving forward. What's working? What's not? What other tools or resources could help? Discuss best practices and success stories, as well as challenges and concerns. The key is to make sure everyone has space to share their experience and stays connected with a mentor, coach, or peer support.
- **Reinforce the why.** When in doubt, always remember why you decided to make a change in the first place. What were your hopes and dreams—both individually and organizationally—when you first got started? How have you been able to better connect with clients and families? How have you been able to make a more positive impact on someone's life? Don't lose sight of that original cause, belief, or purpose that drives your efforts.
- **Take baby steps.** If at any point a change seems too consuming, break it down into smaller chunks to make it more manageable. For example, if you're a supervisor, focus on helping one unit at a time and making sure they have enough confidence and resources (plus a champion!) to maintain the new processes

you're establishing. If you're a worker, start with one task that you'll do differently. Once you've incorporated that into your daily work, move onto the next one. (Pro tip for our customers: a good way to put this idea into practice is to focus on one form at a time.) Continue to add new competencies incrementally so you're not overwhelmed, plus you'll be more comfortable adapting as processes evolve or new features become available. Remember, you have to learn to walk before you can run!

- **Celebrate your successes.** Change can be fun! Whether it's a little win or a large milestone, make sure to pause and take time to acknowledge your achievements, results, and outcomes. (If your change involves software, many tools today have gamification built in to incentivize new activity.) Sharing these successes across departments can also help expand your network of evangelists throughout the agency—for example, if one program area sees the results of another team and decides they want to do the same.
- **Emphasize accountability.** Celebrating success and being supportive are important, but so is holding people accountable when they're not doing what they should be. This can be a tough concept for many agencies to embrace, especially if you're already worried about losing staff who don't feel like they have enough resources to keep up with everything on their plate. It's critical to remember here that this culture of accountability isn't limited to leadership. Coworkers need to be comfortable holding each other accountable as well to create that groundswell of adoption and truly integrating something new until it becomes the norm.
- **Ownership and onboarding.** Staffing changes are inevitable. What happens if one of your champions leaves the agency, moves to a different program area, or needs to shift their focus to a different project? Have conversations up front about how you'll transfer ownership if your internal team changes. Who will take over managing all the measures you've put in place to sustain your new processes? What resources will they need to keep things moving forward without losing momentum? The same goes for onboarding new hires and making sure they have what they need to hit the ground running. Outline who will provide training, mentoring, and ongoing coaching, as well as resources to help new hires take what they learn and put it to use. The training resources identified in the previous section (think in-app help, educational videos, etc.) can help with onboarding future workers too.
- **Plan for regression.** Even the most successful change initiatives can get off track down the line—especially several years later as people, processes, and policies continue to change. If you have measures in place to realize when things are going downhill, you can get them back on track before it's too late. For changes related to technology, here's where the right partner can make a difference. Find out early on what resources exist to help your agency sustain your new business processes and identify areas for continued growth. Ideally, your partner will help you establish a clear vision and roadmap for the future to ensure long-term success.

## CONCLUSION

There may never be a perfect time to launch a new initiative, implement a new technology, or turn a big idea into actionable results. But there will always be a new and better way of doing things that allows your agency to make a greater impact on your clients and community. Adapting to this change may seem daunting, but with the right resources and support, you've got it! Get in touch if you want to discuss how Northwoods can help.