

# Making Change Stick

## *How Communication Influences Behaviour*

Why transformation is moving faster than people can absorb it and how communications can close the gap.

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# 01 | Introduction – *The Missing Link*

Transformation is now constant. Many organisations are running multiple change programmes at once - each with its own goals, timelines and audiences. The pace has accelerated, but people's capacity to absorb and adapt hasn't.

Our research with 70 organisations - and senior leaders across HR, Communications and Transformation - shows a widening gap between the volume of change being pushed out and what people can realistically take in.

- **85% say the pace of change has accelerated in the past year.**
- **45% are managing three or more major transformations at the same time.**
- **Only 17% say employees fully understand or are motivated to support change, and just 23% believe leadership provides clear direction.**

Our study shows that communications is often treated as an output, the final step in delivery, rather than a tool that helps people adapt as change unfolds.

Every organisation knows communication matters in landing change. But knowing it, and designing it in a way that shifts behaviour, are two different things.

***Communication is the missing link between transformation that is delivered and change that truly lands.***

Many organisations can explain the strategy. They are adept at launching new systems, restructures, divesting or mergers, but if people do not change what they do, transformation will not deliver the return on investment.

# 01 | Introduction – *The Missing Link*

Industry research confirms that communication plays a decisive role in whether change succeeds.

- When communication helps employees understand how change affects their daily work, success rates increase by 4.4×.
- When managers are equipped to communicate the change in practical, tangible terms, success rates increase by 5.2×.

(McKinsey)

As one senior communications leader told us, *“There is always something big about to happen, or that has just happened.”* In an environment where people are at different stages of awareness and readiness, a single approach to communications cannot address the level of complexity.

This study explores that gap: how communication influences behaviour within organisations that are managing continuous and overlapping change. It identifies what separates organisations that simply announce change from those that truly deliver.

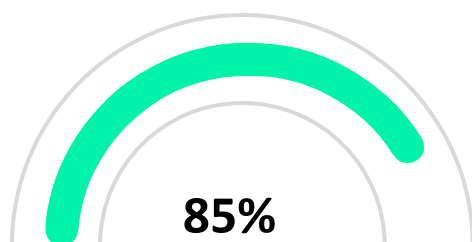
In the pages that follow, we explore three themes that define the difference between change that is delivered and change that lasts:

1. **The Load Has Outpaced Capacity** – managing the volume and speed of change.
2. **Clarity Is the New Leadership Currency** – creating coherence amid competing demands.
3. **Behaviour Is the Real Measure of Change** – building habits that turn transformation into everyday action.

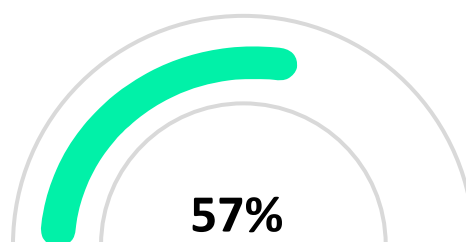
## 02 | Insight A: *Too Much, Too Fast*

In almost every organisation we spoke to, transformation is constant, no longer occasional. Programmes overlap, messages compete, and employees are expected to adapt continuously. The combination of volume, pace, and urgency creates what one participant in the study described as *“a permanent state of change-fatigue.”*

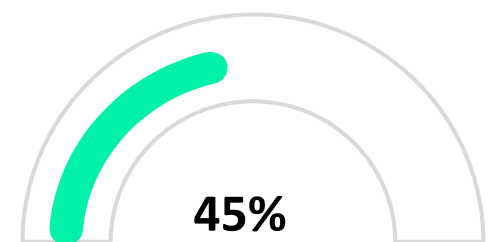
### What the data tells us



say the pace of change has accelerated



say multiple change messages are being communicated at once



are managing three or more major initiatives

Employees are trying to navigate shifting priorities, new systems, and evolving expectations - often without a clear sense of what matters most. Added to this is an urgency and impatience from leadership to *“get it done”* which collides with people’s finite capacity to absorb change.

***“Change today is everything, everywhere, all at once.” –***  
Communications Director, Global Multinational

The question organisations should be asking is, how much change can people take and still perform? Or as one senior leader put it: *“How much can you change before the foundations completely crumble?”*

## 02 | Insight A: *Too Much, Too Fast*

### Case Study – Kai's World

Kai's organisation is juggling three major changes in six months: outsourcing corporate functions, integrating an AI tool into forecasting and reporting, and finalising a major acquisition. As a finance manager, he's navigating redundancy conversations, new system training and fresh reporting demands while keeping the day-to-day business running.

Emails keep coming, from different teams, each one marked urgent. Every initiative is critical, each has its own milestones, and each demands immediate attention. Priorities shift weekly. Morale dips. One of Kai's best analysts leaves.

*"It feels like everything's changing at once," he says. "I'm trying to keep my team focused, but there's no time to process one thing before the next hits."*

Kai and his team are overwhelmed. Each change makes sense on its own but together they blur into competing demands with no guidance on which is more important.

### The science: Cognitive Overload

The human brain can only process so much at once. If messages hit faster than people can absorb them, confusion increases while focus diminishes.

Even strong messages lose impact when audiences are saturated. When overwhelmed, people revert to familiar habits, meaning new systems and processes fail to stick.

## 02 | Insight A: *Too Much, Too Fast*

### How Resistance Shows Up

Resistance to change rarely looks like outright refusal. More often, it's hesitation, people slowing down, waiting for clarity, or deferring decisions until they feel safe to move.

As one senior HR leader observed, *"With change comes uncertainty. And with uncertainty sometimes comes inertia. People say, 'I can't make a decision on this because I'm not clear what's happening over here.'"*

In practice, resistance is often silence, delay, or a return to familiar habits, which is not rebellion, but self-protection.

Use communications to provide clarity and reassurance - making the next steps obvious, safe, and doable.

### The reality

Although the pace has picked up, many organisations still communicate as if change were a single event, one campaign at a time. When multiple initiatives land at the same time, employees face a wall of competing priorities.

To be effective, communications must evolve to become more targeted, sequenced, and conscious of what else people are being asked to take in. Change communications today is as much about managing information overload as managing messaging.

### The Opportunity

The best communicators think about how much change people can realistically absorb. They plan around that, to curate, triage and prioritise so they are managing the load, cutting the noise, and keeping trust intact. See What You can Do on Page 8.

### In short

Change isn't slowing down, but communications that are clear, paced, and connected help people keep up - and help the business keep moving. When communications enable people to reasonably absorb and act on change, they are delivering measurable commercial return. And this is where clarity becomes vital.

# Too Much, Too Fast: What you can do

Do	Why it matters	Outcome
<b>Triage before you talk</b>	When everything feels urgent, people can't tell what matters. Acting as an editor of change ensures focus on what's truly critical.	People know what to pay attention to now - reducing noise and confusion.
<b>Establish a steady cadence</b>	Mindful, curated communication creates stability amid flux.	Trust grows, change fatigue is reduced, and employees stay tuned in.
<b>Personalise by impact</b>	Audiences are at different stages of change. Tailoring content, timing, and channel keeps communications relevant.	Messages resonate more deeply and cut-through improves.
<b>Measure and adjust</b>	Attention is finite. Tracking engagement helps you adapt before fatigue sets in.	Higher engagement, and increased chance of behaviours shifting.

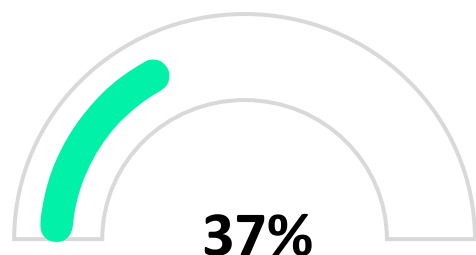
## 02 | Insight B: *Making Sense of the Noise*

People can handle change. What they can't handle is confusion. Many employees say they don't fully understand where their organisation is heading as a result of the change.

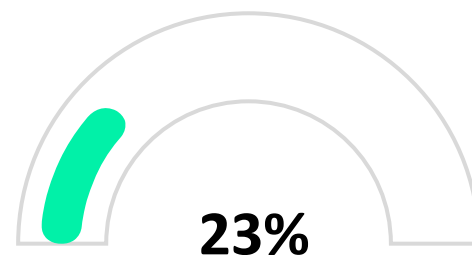
As transformation programmes multiply, many employees say they struggle to see how different initiatives connect or where they are leading.

Our data points to a lack of clarity rather than a lack of commitment, meaning people are willing to adapt, but they need to understand how the moving parts fit together. With so many changes landing at once, even leaders can find it hard to keep the story straight. Strategies evolve, priorities compete, and the bigger picture can get lost along the way.

### What the data tells us



agree there's a clear link  
between current changes and  
the organization's future.



agree that leadership gives clear  
direction during change.

***“The danger is thinking you’ve ‘set the context’ with a few high-level statements. If your communication doesn’t bring it to life for people on the ground, you’re losing.” - Transformation Director***

## 02 | Insight B: *Making Sense of the Noise*

### Case Study – Kai's World

As outsourcing progresses and the acquisition closes, the new AI system launches. The tech teams says it's 'a breakthrough that will transform how we work.' Finance calls it 'a cost-saving tool to reduce headcount.' HR describes it as 'an enabler for our colleague experience strategy.'

Meanwhile, Kai's team now spans three countries with some colleagues leaving, some joining, some adapting. Systems vary from place to place, time zones are a challenge, and email tone varies by sender.

For Kai, *"It feels like three different conversations running at once,"* he says. *"We just want to know what's real and what's next."*

To steady things, Lina, Kai's leader, begins weekly check-ins to share what's confirmed, what's still moving and what teams can control. Attendance is much lower than expected.

#### The science: Threat Vs. Safety

Neuroscience shows that when people face uncertainty, the brain's threat response activates. This triggers anxiety, hesitation, or silence. Clarity, by contrast, signals safety. It lowers threat and keeps people in learning mode, able to absorb information and act.

## 02 | Insight B: *Making Sense of the Noise*

### The reality

In a world of constant transformation, clarity isn't a one-off message, it's a moving target. Leaders juggle multiple timelines: new strategies, ongoing restructures, and initiatives that were already in flight before the latest change was announced. It rarely follows a neat sequence of *strategy → change initiative → communication*.

***“Getting the messaging wrong can create even more of an impact on the culture than the redundancies themselves.”*** - Senior Global Transformation Leader

More than one contributor described being forced to announce change early to avoid leaks or due to market pressures, only to find that employees weren't ready, leaders weren't aligned, and trust took months to rebuild.

*“We launched before we could substantiate. We hadn't done enough on sentiment. People weren't bought in, and resistance significantly delayed the return.”*

Employees need to know what's happening, why it matters, and how their work today links to the future the organisation is building, even if every detail isn't known yet.

One senior communications leader compared it to, *“Publishing a book one chapter at a time. If we wait for the full book to be written, it will already be out of date.”*

## 02 | Insight B: *Making Sense of the Noise*

### Is Simplicity Really the Answer?

In recent years, internal communications has increasingly mirrored external communications so that it's shorter, simpler, and optimised for speed. But when organisations apply that same formula to change communications something important gets lost.

For example, where people's livelihoods are affected, their terms and conditions are shifting or they're being asked to significantly reskill, too much simplicity can backfire. Cutting out necessary complex detail, like consultation processes, contractual changes, or new regulatory obligations, can have the opposite effect of that intended and slow people down.

In moments of uncertainty, people look for depth, credible information, and access to leaders or experts who can explain what's really happening and why. Communications can still be understandable, engaging and not littered with jargon or legalese.

Psychologically, when the future feels unpredictable, the brain's threat response activates and we actively seek more information as a form of self-protection. The instinct to know more is an attempt to feel safe.

### The Opportunity: Creating Clarity in Motion

When multiple changes land at once, clarity isn't a single message, it requires continuous sense-making. Different teams experience different impacts, often at different times. Leaders can't control every programme or timeline, but they can help people see how it all connects.

### In short

When change is constant, clarity depends on rhythm and consistency more than control. Leaders who embody clarity don't wait for certainty. Instead, they keep aligning people around the same purpose, adjusting the message as reality evolves.

They connect the dots, show progress, and are open about what's still unfolding.

But understanding alone doesn't make change happen. It depends on what people do next i.e. how they act, adapt, and embed new habits. That's where influence comes in.

# Making Sense of the Noise:

## What you can do

### Do

**Keep one overarching narrative**

### Why it matters

When all communications connect to a shared purpose and direction, it prevents mixed signals and competing priorities.

### Outcome

People see how each initiative fits into the bigger picture - creating a sense of alignment and progress rather than chaos.

**Layer the communications**

Different audiences need different levels of detail. Consistency of message with flexibility of depth keeps everyone aligned without overload.

Communications feel relevant and digestible, improving understanding and recall across diverse audiences.

**Own the uncertainty**

People don't need perfection - but they expect honesty. Transparency about what's known and what's still in progress builds credibility and psychological safety.

Trust is increased, anxiety lowered, and productivity remains level even when details are still emerging.

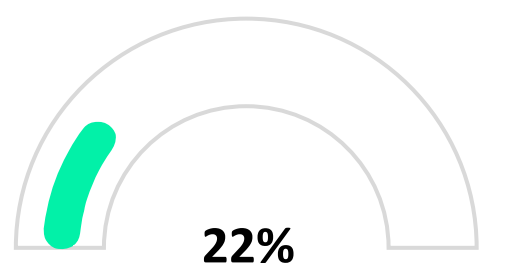
## 02 | Insight C. *From Inform to Influence*

Most change programmes, whether new systems, restructures, culture shifts or mergers, are expensive and complex. They take months or years to plan and deliver. But launch isn't the finish line. It can take just as long, or longer, for change to truly take hold.

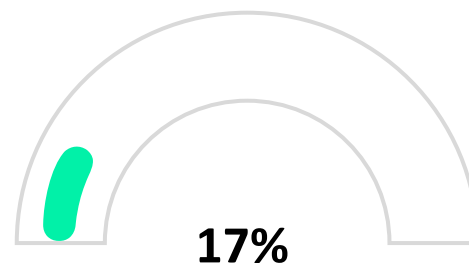
Transformation only happens when people build new habits around it. Yet focus and investment often fall away just when people need the most help to change how they work.

*"They need to think about the next day, and the day after, and the months after ... but that tends to be less resourced."* - Senior Global Transformation Leader

### What the data tells us



strongly agree change communications were timely, relevant, and engaging.



strongly agree employees understood and were motivated to support change

People may not be actively pushing back on change, but many just aren't connecting with it. They know what's happening, but not why it matters or what to do differently

## 02 | Insight C. *From Inform to Influence*

### Case Study – Kai's World

A few weeks after launch, the AI system is technically live, but usage is patchy. Reports aren't being generated and workarounds are multiplying.

After months of continuous change, Kai's team is tired. They've adapted to outsourcing, new reporting lines and now another tool. They aren't resisting; they're depleted.

To re-engage them, Lina introduces short Friday Focus sessions where teams share what's working, what's blocking progress and small wins. At first, Kai doesn't join but a few weeks in Lina asks him to, so his team can see he's supportive. He dials and finds people are swapping tips he finds useful, so he advises his team to join.

Six months in, adoption is uneven but improving. "We're not there yet," Lina says, "but we can see it working and that helps people believe again."

New ways of working are beginning to take hold through experience and reinforcement.

### The Science: Habit and Social Proof

Information on its own doesn't change behaviour. Neuroscience shows that repetition helps the brain form new habits and communication keeps that repetition going until the new behaviour sticks. People also learn by watching others. When leaders and colleagues model the change, it builds confidence and shows what 'good' looks like.

## 02 | Insight C. *From Inform to Influence*

### The Maturity Gap

One senior communications leader described a culture where transformation is no longer a disruption. His organisation has spent more than a decade in near-continuous evolution, with a clear strategic narrative that frames every new initiative as part of a long-term direction of travel.

*“Change isn’t something that happens once. It’s how we run the business. People understand that nothing stays the same for long, and that helps them roll with it.”*

But not every organisation has reached that level of maturity. As another leader reflected: *“The pace itself hasn’t necessarily increased, just that people feel it’s harder.”*

After years of continuous transformation, the capacity to keep changing is lower. Both perspectives point to the same truth: it’s not the amount of change that matters, but the organisation’s capacity, and capability, to help people keep absorbing it while also acting on it.

### The reality

Many organisations still treat change as something to be delivered rather than lived. They build the system, restructure teams, announce the merger and assume understanding will lead to adoption.

But real transformation happens in the day-to-day. It’s visible when people make different decisions, collaborate differently, or speak up in ways they didn’t before.

That shift starts with leaders themselves. The Chair of a national representative body reflected: *“Even simple stuff that I take for granted doesn’t appear obvious to others. I’ve had to work much harder to make what I think is obvious clear to everybody.”*

Leaders can’t assume that change will cascade naturally through hierarchy. It needs visible, ongoing influence, through everyday actions that show what good looks like and make it safe for others to follow.

Communications sustains that process. It keeps repetition alive long enough for new ways of working to become habit and for those habits to build a new culture.

## 02 | Insight C. *From Inform to Influence*

### The Opportunity

Influence doesn't happen by accident. In many organisations, big change programmes are led by dedicated transformation or consultancy teams and then handed to communications when it's time to 'tell the story'. That handover is where momentum is often lost.

When communications isn't embedded early, the central communications team are left to translate technical jargon into something human, often without the context, visibility or influence to shape understanding. The result is accurate but disconnected messaging that fails to resonate.

The solution is to set expectations that the central communications team needs to be involved early on as guardians of the overarching change narrative. This way communications moves from a downstream activity to a driver of behavioural change.

### In Short

Real transformation doesn't end at launch. That's when the hard work starts. Change only sticks when people understand it, see it lived by leaders, and build new habits around it. Communications is what keeps that momentum alive long enough for new behaviours to become business as usual.

# Information to Influence:

## What you can do

Do	Why it matters	Outcome
Start with behaviour	Effective communication begins with clarity about what needs to change.	When messages are shaped around specific behaviours - what people need to do differently and why it matters - they resonate more deeply and are easier to act on.
Embed communications early	Communications works best when it's built in early and aligned to change impact assessment.	Early access allows communicators to design communications that support the organisation's desired behavioural shifts.
Show the why	People are more likely to commit to change when they understand its purpose.	Showing employees how their actions contribute to progress, builds understanding and motivation to change helping to maintain productivity.
Model visibly	People mirror what leaders do, not what they say.	Visible modelling from leaders and peers turns abstract expectations into observable behaviour. Over time, these consistent signals create social proof by showing what's new ways is real.
Recognise and Reinforce	Reinforcement keeps change alive long enough to stick.	Acknowledging progress i.e. recognition, feedback or visible outcomes, helps people see that change is working. As habits are embedded, behaviour begins to shift and ROI is realised.

## 03 | Return on Investment

Every transformation is justified by numbers which reflect greater efficiency, reduced cost or stronger growth. But none of those results are realised until people change what they do every day.

Return on investment is created by adoption - by people choosing to use new tools, adapting their ways of working, and aligning their decisions with the direction of the business.

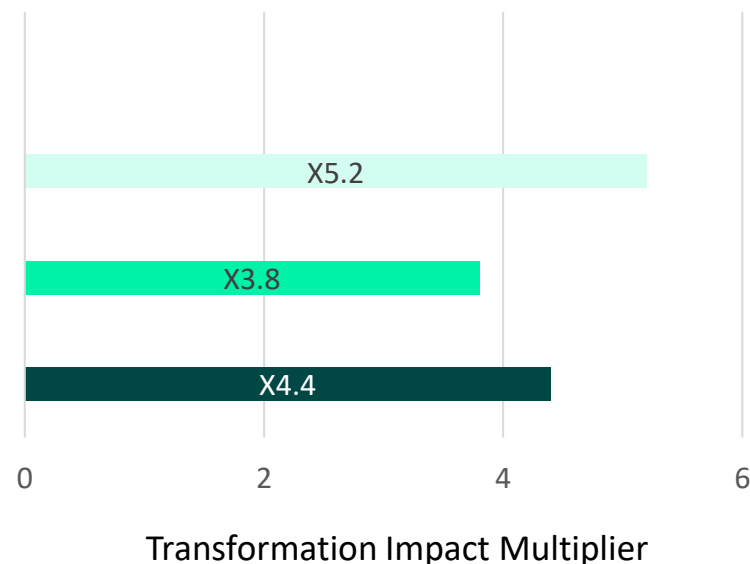
Industry research from McKinsey shows that top-performing organisations capture much of their transformation value early - 74 % in the first 12 months. Delays in embedding change and integrating new ways of working reduce momentum and narrow the window for value realisation.

### Communication Drives Change Success

Line managers can communicate change tangibly for teams

A consistent change story aligning people on transformation goals

Communicating what the change means for employees day to day



Graph 1 - Source, McKinsey, 2015 & 2021

That's why *effective* change communication is commercial. Research (Graph 1) shows that behaviour-led communication is a key differentiator in making change land and stick. It connects design to delivery - helping people understand the why, see what it means for them, and behave in ways that make the change real.

When project management, change management and communications work together, each focused on enabling action, not just announcing progress, behaviours start to shift and this is where the return on investment is realised.

# 04 | The Mature Change Communications Function

In a world where change never stops, the role of Central Communications Teams is evolving. Large transformation programmes often have their own embedded communications workstreams. These teams know their programme in depth and understand its impact, but their focus is understandably narrow.

Traditionally, a central communications team helps launch change across the wider organisation, an approach that works when programmes run sequentially. But when multiple initiatives happen at once, that model breaks down.

Mature organisations instead use central communications to see across programmes, connect messages, and link today's activity to future direction. The role shifts from broadcasting updates to curating, prioritising and translating information so it makes sense on the ground. In this model, communications acts more like a strategy function, taking an enterprise view to design messages that enable behaviour change rather than competing for attention.

## Changing Measurement Focus

Traditional metrics such as reach, clicks and attendance show who heard, not who changed.

When communications drives understanding and action, success is seen in adoption, confidence and consistency.

It's visible in teams using new systems correctly or managers holding effective conversations before a change moves to its next phase.

Delivering in this new world calls for new skills.

# New Capabilities for Change Comms

## Mature Capability

**1. Orchestration:** connecting the dots across programmes and pacing communication so people can absorb, priorities and act.

**2. Narrative Alignment:** aligning every message to the broader strategy so people see where they fit and why it matters.

**3. Behavioural Insight:** shaping communications planning around how people react to change and whether they are adopting new ways of working.

**4. Embedded Influence:** communication as a co-creator of transformation outcomes.

**5. Cultural Stewardship:** maintaining clarity, tone and connection so that culture stays steady even when the destination is still emerging.

## What it Takes

Sequence, curate and connect changes by understanding what impacts who and when, helping to minimise fatigue and remove barriers to adoption.

Position each change within the organisation's wider direction by linking communications to purpose and the changes required to get there.

Track whether change is taking hold and use that insight to guide timing, tone and reinforcement, keeping communication active until new habits stick.

Work side by side with HR, Transformation and leaders to shape how change lands, influencing the design as well as the delivery.

When outcomes are still evolving, communications helps leaders hold the line by owning uncertainty without eroding confidence, and protecting belief and trust while plans take shape.

## 05 | Conclusion

This report highlights a simple truth. Transformation succeeds in everyday behaviour. That's where communications earns its place, helping people understand, connect and act in ways that make change real.

To close the gap between recognition and reality, communications must evolve from informing to influencing, shaping not just what people know, but what they do.

That requires new capability. At Papillo, we help organisations build that capability, blending the science of behaviour with the craft of communications so change is not only delivered, but lived.

***“The real transformation isn't the programme - it's the behaviour change required from people.”*** - Global HR Leader

### Let's Continue the Conversation

If you'd like to explore how communication can become the engine of real, lasting change in your organisation:

- Join a Papillo Masterclass on change communications design
- Book a discovery session to assess your change communications maturity
- Or simply get in touch to share your own experiences and insights by emailing us [alison.mills@papillo.ie](mailto:alison.mills@papillo.ie) or [pippa.halley@papillo.ie](mailto:pippa.halley@papillo.ie)

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# References

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- McKinsey & Company. (2015). How to Beat the Transformation Odds

## Research Approach

This study used a mixed-methods approach to explore and understand experiences of and attitudes to change communications during transformation.

### Quantitative:

We surveyed 70 organisations across the UK and Ireland in September 2025. The quantitative research was conducted via LinkedIn and by Censuswide among senior leaders and managers in Transformation and Change, Change Communications, Corporate Communications, HR, and Operations. All respondents worked in enterprise-sized organisations that had undergone significant change within the previous 12 months. Data was collected between 26 and 29 September 2025.

### Qualitative:

In addition, twelve in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted by Papillo principals Alison Mills and Pippa Halley between 5 and 30 September 2025 with senior leaders in Transformation, HR, and Communications from large multinational and indigenous organisations.

## About Papillo

By combining strategic communications with behavioural science and practical insight, we help change move beyond awareness, so it's not only explained, but understood, embraced and sustained.

Our approach is grounded in experience - years of helping organisations lead transformation and watching what really helps people shift how they work. We found that most change models describe what needs to happen, but not how to help people actually do it.

That insight led to the **Papillo Change Communications Playbook: a practical, four-phase approach that helps leaders and teams communicate change in ways people can understand, connect to, practice and sustain.**

The playbook blends the clarity and storytelling of communication with the rigour of behavioural science. It draws lightly on established models such as Fogg's Behaviour Model (B=MAP), COM-B, the Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW) and ADKAR - but is built on what we've seen work in complex, real-world transformations. It combines behavioural insight with practical communications that drives real adoption.