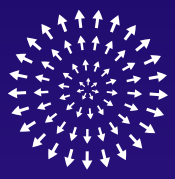
CULTURE PARTNERS



The Change Activation Index

Why well-managed change still falls short—and what it takes to turn strategy into results.

New research reveals five measurable conditions associated with stronger organizational execution.



Create a *Culture* That Means *Business*

Executive Brief

Change can be well managed and still fail to move people.

At the heart of every change initiative is a human question: are people's hearts and minds actually moving towards the change? Do they believe in where the organization is going—and are they thinking differently, acting differently, and taking ownership of the result?

The problem is that most of the measures leaders use to track change do not answer that question.

The training is complete. Executive sponsors are engaged. Communications have gone out. We can track how the change is being managed, yet that still fails to answer the question that ultimately matters: **are people coming along for the ride?**

Without visibility into that question, the first unmistakable evidence often arrives at the end of the process—after the budget is already spent, the implementation team has moved on, and the initiative has been declared complete. The risk is not only a failed change. It is a successful-looking change that never changes how work gets done.

Culture Partners calls this the Change Management Gap: the distance between a change being organized and a change becoming how people actually work. Change management remains essential. The gap appears when the completion of change activities is mistaken for evidence that people have shifted how they think and act.

Closing that gap requires Change Activation: the organizational capability to shift the beliefs, behaviors, and accountability required for a change to produce its intended result. Beyond asking simply whether the change is on plan or whether employees are engaged, organizations should ask whether the conditions are present for people to think differently, act differently, and take accountability for the result.

The Change Activation Index (CAI) measures those conditions.

For leaders, that means a clearer view of where the organization is equipped to move, where change may be getting stuck, and where to focus leadership attention. It provides a basis for deciding what to reinforce, what to change, and whether those conditions are strengthening over time—while there is still an opportunity to act, rather than waiting for a missed business result to reveal the problem.

Change Management gives structure.
Change Activation creates movement.

The Missing Measurement

We've been measuring two questions. There is a third.

Most executive teams already have visibility into implementation and employee engagement. Neither one, by itself, tells leaders whether people are actually moving around the result the change is supposed to produce.

EXECUTIVE QUESTION	MEASUREMENT	WHAT IT REVEALS
Is the change being implemented?	Milestones, communications, training, adoption, project status	Progress against the implementation plan
How are employees experiencing work?	Engagement	Employees' experience of the organization
Are the conditions for execution present?	**Change Activation Index**	**Whether or not the conditions for people to think differently, act differently, and take accountability for the result are present.**

The traditional change dashboard tells you whether the implementation is moving. The Change Activation Index helps tell you whether the organization is. The next generation of change leadership requires both: structure for the change and visibility into the movement of people. This is about whether or not the hearts and minds of employees are coming along for the ride.

The Research Findings

Now we can measure the conditions for movement.

Culture Partners examined **38,011 consenting employee response records across 45 organizations**, collected from January 2023 to February 2026. The research asked:

What distinguishes organizations that turn strategic intent into everyday execution?

Five conditions stood out as a strong combined signal: **Shared Direction**, **Leadership Reinforcement**, **Problem-Solving**, **Activation Energy**, and **Feedback Seeking**.

38,011	5	85.2%
RESEARCH-BASE RESPONSES	CHANGE ACTIVATION CONDITIONS	VARIATION IN REPORTED EXECUTION

In the primary analysis of **34,944 responses**, the five conditions together accounted for **85.2%** of the variation in a set of outcomes that drive results. Called the **"Outcome Index"**, it captures employees' reports of follow-through on commitments, communication of progress, difficult decisions, planning, and cross-functional execution. Some survey versions also include perceived speed to market and successful product or service launches.

For leaders accustomed to treating culture as intangible, this is consequential: the conditions employees experience have a strong measurable relationship with how they report their organization executes. Leaders can investigate those conditions while change is underway, rather than waiting for a missed business result.

What the Change Activation Index Reveals

Change Activation is more closely tied to execution than engagement alone.

Employee engagement gives leaders valuable information about employees' experience of work. But does it tell them whether the organization is equipped to execute?

In this dataset, a five-item employee engagement and experience score accounted for approximately **70%** of the variation in the employee-reported Outcome Index. The five CAI dimensions accounted for approximately **85%**.

What does this mean? Engagement had a strong relationship with reported execution. Yet the conditions measured by the CAI—shared direction, leadership reinforcement, problem-solving, activation energy, and feedback seeking—had a stronger relationship with being able to drive results.

For leaders, the implication is to look beyond engagement when assessing whether a strategy can become reality. Understanding how employees experience work is valuable. Understanding whether their everyday working conditions support execution adds another essential view. People may care deeply about their organization while still encountering competing priorities, delayed decisions, or leadership behaviors that reinforce the old way of working.

The leadership question becomes: are we creating a workplace people want to be part of—and the conditions that help them achieve what we need to accomplish?

Research note: These comparisons used the same 34,674 responses and the same employee-reported Outcome Index. The engagement measure was an internal five-item composite, not a standardized external engagement instrument.

Shared Direction carries the strongest execution signal.

All five CAI dimensions have strong standalone relationships with the Outcome Index. **Shared Direction is strongest at r=.888**, followed by **Problem-Solving (.869)**, **Leadership Reinforcement (.859)**, **Activation Energy (.844)**, and **Feedback Seeking (.719)**.

Communicating the strategy is not the same as aligning the organization around how the strategy changes everyday choices.

The strongest relationship belongs to a dimension that goes beyond knowing the strategy. Shared Direction includes willingness to shift priorities and agreement about how people need to think and act to achieve key results. The leadership question is whether that shared understanding survives the competing demands of everyday work.

This finding echoes Culture Partners' earlier Adaptive Alignment research, conducted in collaboration with Stanford Graduate Business School. In that study of **243** organizations, full alignment among purpose, strategy, and culture was associated with average reported **three-year revenue growth of 44.5%**, compared with **10.7%** for partial or no alignment. The CAI examines a different outcome and finds shared direction carries the strongest signal.

The leadership implication is that shared direction cannot end at the strategy launch. As circumstances change, leaders must keep purpose, strategy, and culture aligned, making sure that what people experience and believe supports what the organization now needs to achieve. That ongoing work is Adaptive Alignment.



Adaptive Alignment

CULTURE PARTNERS & STANFORD RESEARCH REPORT

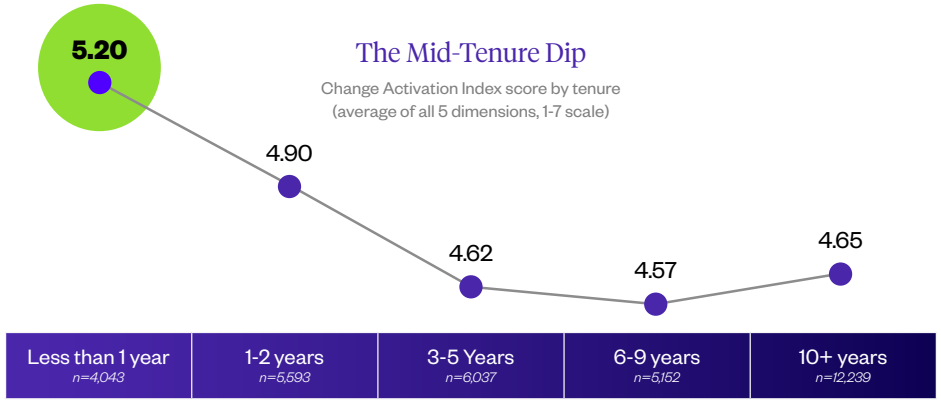
To achieve strategic goals, you must adapt culture quickly—but that's hard when there's a disconnect between objectives.

READ THE REPORT

Stanford

Longer-tenured employees report weaker activation conditions.

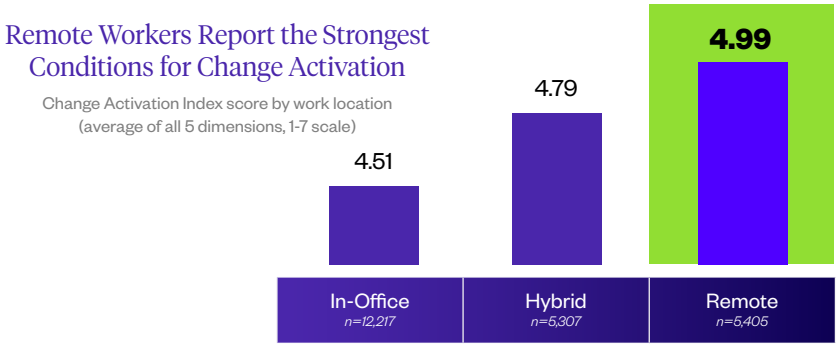
Employees with less than one year of tenure reported the **strongest average Change Activation conditions: 5.20** on a seven-point scale. Scores fell to **4.90** at one to two years, **4.62** at three to five years, and **4.57** at six to nine years before ticking up to **4.65** among employees with ten or more years.



The pattern raises a useful leadership question: what do employees repeatedly encounter after joining the organization that teaches them how things really work here? The comparison is cross-sectional, so it does not track the same employees declining over time. It gives leaders a reason to examine whether everyday experiences sustain the initiative and confidence people bring when they arrive.

Physical presence is an unreliable shortcut for judging activation.

Remote respondents reported the **strongest average activation conditions** in the sample: **4.99**, compared with **4.79** for hybrid respondents and **4.51** for employees working in-office. Remote respondents also scored highest on each of the five CAI dimensions in the pooled data.



These pooled comparisons do not establish that work location causes the difference or prescribe an office policy. They challenge leaders to look directly at the conditions people experience rather than infer them from where people work.

The Five Dimensions

Five lenses on whether an organization can move.

The CAI organizes **26** survey items into five dimensions. Each brings a different part of everyday work into view: shared direction, leadership experiences, responses to problems, initiative, and openness to feedback. Together, they help leaders investigate where the conditions for execution are strong and where they may be breaking down.

The dimensions should be seen as overlapping diagnostic lenses, as opposed to independent causal levers or a five-step change process. The workplace examples below illustrate what leaders might investigate if they find they need improvement.

1. Shared Direction

Are people clear on the direction, key results, priorities, responsibilities, and how they need to think and act to achieve them?

2. Leadership Reinforcement

Do leaders create experiences that reinforce the desired culture, build trust, recognize the right behavior, and treat culture as part of the work?

3. Problem-Solving

Do people seek different perspectives, challenge old approaches, take smart risks, offer alternatives, and learn from failure?

4. Activation Energy

Do people take initiative beyond narrow job boundaries, move ideas into action, and adapt when circumstances change?

5. Feedback Seeking

Do people ask for feedback, acknowledge their contribution to problems, solicit input, and stay open rather than defensive?

Shared Direction

Shared direction measures whether people are working towards one goal, understand the key results and their responsibilities, and are willing to shift priorities and ways of working to achieve them. A strategy can be familiar to everyone while daily choices still pull the organization apart. For example, a company may call customer retention its top priority while sales pursues new accounts and operations protects efficiency at the expense of existing customers. Each team can defend its choices, yet the result remains out of reach. A weak shared direction score invites leaders to ask: where are people making different assumptions about what matters most, and what must change in their work?

Leadership Reinforcement

Leadership Reinforcement examines the experiences leaders create, recognition of desired cultural behaviors, trust across the organization, and whether managing culture is treated as a priority. Employees learn what matters through repeated experiences. A leader may ask for collaboration but celebrate the person who wins at another team's expense. Over time, that recognition teaches people which behavior is rewarded. This dimension helps leaders investigate whether daily experiences support the culture the strategy requires. The practical question is: what are people learning from what leaders consistently recognize, prioritize, and allow—and does that lesson support the desired result?

Problem-Solving

Problem-Solving measures whether people consider different perspectives, seek ideas from others, offer alternatives, take risks to find better solutions, and learn from failure. These behaviors become especially visible when the familiar approach stops working. A team might recognize that a process is failing yet keep using it because earlier suggestions were dismissed or unsuccessful experiments were punished. Another team might openly examine the failure and test a different approach. A weak score invites investigation into what happens when someone challenges the established way: do people receive support for finding a better solution, or learn that keeping quiet is safer?

Activation Energy

Activation Energy captures willingness to take responsibility beyond narrow job boundaries, leaders' courage to execute quickly on ideas, and adaptability when circumstances change. People may agree with a strategy and still hesitate to move. An issue crosses two departments, neither considers it theirs, and a workable idea waits for someone senior to act. This dimension directs attention to whether initiative survives the everyday realities of the organization. Leaders can investigate where ideas stall, how people respond when circumstances shift, and what employees experience when they step beyond their formal responsibilities to help achieve a shared result.

Feedback Seeking

Feedback Seeking measures whether people actively ask for input, remain open when receiving it, and acknowledge their contribution to problems. It includes feedback sought by supervisors and colleagues, even when the information may be difficult to hear. An organization can have regular feedback meetings while employees still avoid the conversations that would challenge their assumptions. A weak score invites leaders to examine what happens when someone offers uncomfortable information: is it explored, dismissed, or met with defensiveness?

The value is in the profile. An organization may have a clear destination while leaders reinforce old routines, or welcome new ideas while struggling to act on them. The dimensions help leaders frame more precise questions about what employees experience and what may need to change.

The Index in Practice

At the Georgia Department of Corrections, the plan was moving forward. The deeper question was whether employees were moving with it.

The Georgia Department of Corrections (GDC) knew it had a retention problem. Correctional-officer turnover was approaching **40 percent**, and the agency had already put substantial machinery behind changing the organization.

A Culture Committee coordinated the effort. Roughly **350 Culture Champions were charged with modeling**, **coaching**, and **reinforcing the desired culture**. Employees participated in a one-day culture alignment workshop. The committee met monthly, communicated progress to executive sponsors, and identified systems that needed to align with the new culture.

In other words, GDC could measure whether the work was being implemented. Workshops happened. Champions were in place. Communications went out. Leaders could see activity and progress.

Employee sentiment provided another view. After the first year, employee engagement was measured. Only **44 percent** of employees said they would recommend GDC as a great place to work. That revealed a difficult employee experience, but left another question to investigate:

Were the conditions in place for people to work differently and produce a different result?

The Change Activation Index provided this diagnostic view of how those conditions changed over the course of the culture journey.

The earlier assessment produced an overall CAI score of **3.92** on a seven-point scale. Relative to other items, employees were clearer about the destination: clearly defined organizational key results scored **4.48**. Clarity had been created. But the conditions underneath that clarity were much weaker.

Leadership Reinforcement was the lowest dimension, at **3.65**. Trust across the organization scored **3.21**, and leaders consistently creating experiences that reinforced the desired culture scored **3.81**. The profile suggested a gap between stating the direction and making the desired culture credible in daily work.

Seen through this lens, more communication about the destination would address only part of the challenge. Employees also needed experiences that supported a different way of thinking, acting, and taking ownership.

GDC's three Cultural Beliefs—**Better Together**, **Change Agent**, and ***Take Ownership***—gave that work a shared language. Leaders recognized employees who demonstrated the beliefs and shared their stories, allowing others to see what the new culture looked like in practice. Culture Champions reinforced Above-the-Line thinking in everyday conversations. At the training academy, weekly pinning ceremonies gave cadets opportunities to recognize one another, making the culture something new officers experienced from the beginning.

The difference was visible inside the organization. Sabrina Henry, a GDC Culture Champion, described facilities where the culture was taking hold differently from those where it was not. The difference, she said, came back to leadership: in some facilities, leaders consistently practiced Focused Recognition and reinforced the cultural behaviors; in others, they did so less consistently.

In the later assessment, the reported conditions were stronger.

The overall CAI rose from **3.92** to **4.21**, with improvement across all five dimensions. Leadership Reinforcement, initially the weakest dimension, showed the largest gain: from **3.65** to **4.09**.

The item scores made that movement tangible. Recognition for behaving consistently with the desired culture rose from **3.84** to **4.34**. Employees' rating of leaders creating experiences that reinforced the desired culture increased from **3.81** to **4.28**. Trust rose from **3.21** to **3.60**.

And the Outcome Index moved with them: from 4.02 to 4.33.

MEASURE	FY2023	FY2024
Shared Direction	4.09	4.39
Leadership Reinforcement	3.65	4.09
Problem-Solving	3.91	4.19
Activation Energy	4.10	4.39
Feedback Seeking	3.86	4.05
Overall CAI	3.92	4.21
Officer Turnover	39.93%	30.69%

GDC assessment scores on a seven-point scale.

The external scoreboard also improved.

GDC reported correctional-officer turnover **falling from 39.93 percent in FY2023 to 30.69 percent in FY2024**.

What makes this case useful is the distinction between carrying out the implementation plan and understanding how employees experience it. Implementation activity was visible throughout. The Change Activation Index scoring added visibility into whether or not the employee experience was strengthening beneath that activity, while retention provided an external measure of progress.

How We Bring Movement to Achieve Results

The CAI makes the conditions for movement visible. The next question is what leaders do about them.

A weak Shared Direction score does not tell a leader which experience is teaching employees to protect their own priorities. A weak Problem-Solving score does not explain why people have learned to wait for permission. Measurement helps leaders locate the problem. Moving people requires addressing what keeps the problem in place.

Culture Partners helps organizations achieve results by changing the experiences that shape what people believe, how they act, and what they take ownership of. **The Results Pyramid explains the mechanism: experiences shape beliefs, beliefs drive actions, and actions produce results**.



The Results Pyramid®

Our work begins with a business result the organization needs to achieve. When the CAI is useful, it gives leaders a disciplined way to move from measurement to action.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE SCORE?

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
START WITH THE RESULT	SEE THE CONDITIONS	INVESTIGATE WHAT'S BEHIND THEM	ACT ON WHAT YOU FIND	MEASURE WHAT MOVES

The score is a starting point, not the answer. Begin with the business result the organization needs to achieve. Use the Index to see where the conditions for execution appear strongest or weakest. Then investigate the experiences, beliefs, priorities, and operating realities behind those signals. What leaders do next depends on what they find: clarify the result or competing priorities, change experiences that are reinforcing the old way of working, strengthen ownership, or remove barriers that keep people from acting.

Then measure again. Are the conditions for movement getting stronger? Are people thinking and acting differently? And, ultimately, is the business result moving? The CAI provides one source of evidence. The external scoreboard remains the test.

That work comes to life through three practical questions:

Clarity: Are people clear on what we need to achieve—and what must change?

An executive team can agree on a strategy while holding very different assumptions about success. We help leaders define the results that matter, resolve competing priorities, and make the direction concrete enough to guide everyday decisions. Purpose, strategy, and culture must work together to produce the result.

Alignment: Does the organization people experience support the strategy leaders describe?

People learn what matters from what leaders do, reward, measure, and allow. If the strategy calls for collaboration but recognition favors individual wins, the experience speaks louder than the announcement. We help leaders uncover the beliefs keeping old behaviors in place and deliberately create experiences that make a different way of working credible.

Accountability: Are people taking ownership of the result?

Assigning responsibility does not automatically create a sense of ownership in the assigned. We help leaders and teams build the practices to surface problems, work across boundaries, find solutions, and act—so progress does not depend on senior leaders stepping into every difficult decision.

Clarity, alignment, and accountability connect three things every organization already has: a purpose that defines why it exists, a strategy for achieving its goals, and a culture—the way people think and act to get results. A strategy depends on what people do with it in everyday work. When their priorities, beliefs, and behaviors pull in another direction, even a well-designed strategy can fall short.

Culture Partners calls this The Results Equation®:

P+S+C=R

Purpose + Strategy + Culture = Results

THE **WHY** | THE **HOW** | THE **WAY**

Every organization already has an equation producing its current results. Achieving different results requires understanding what must change—and creating clarity, alignment, and accountability around that shift.

The Change Activation Index brings a diagnostic lens to this work. Its five dimensions help leaders see whether the conditions employees experience support the execution their strategy requires. Leaders can then investigate what is getting in the way and create experiences that help people think differently, act differently, and take ownership of the result.

An example of how it all comes together.

Clarity

A company is focused on customer retention. Within the organization, different departments have different goals. Sales celebrates new accounts. Service emphasizes closing tickets. Operations protects cost. Each department can meet its targets while the customer leaves. Creating clarity means defining the retention result, agreeing on how progress will be measured, and resolving which priorities should guide decisions when departmental goals conflict.

Alignment

In this example, employees describe a familiar belief: "Helping another department means falling behind on my own targets." Another collaboration workshop will struggle to shift that belief if daily experience keeps confirming it. Leaders need to create different evidence. A manager might recognize someone who stays with a customer problem through the handoff, then work with the receiving team to resolve the competing priorities. Public recognition of that sort is a powerful experience for others observing it. Repeated experiences like this can make a different belief credible: "We succeed when the customer stays, not just when our part is finished."

Accountability

Now the question becomes whether people take ownership of the retention result when the handoff breaks down. Instead of saying, "That belongs to Service," or escalating every problem to a senior leader, employees see the customer outcome as something they have a role in advancing.

A salesperson who notices a customer getting stuck does not simply complete the handoff and move on. They bring the right people together, surface what is getting in the way, help solve the problem, and follow through until the customer is back on track. Leaders reinforce that ownership by clarifying decision authority and removing barriers employees cannot resolve themselves.

Over time, accountability shifts from "I did my part" to "I own my part in the result." That is when retention stops being one department's metric and becomes a shared business result people actively work to achieve.

Bring us one result your organization cannot afford to miss. We will help you identify what people need to think and do differently—and what leaders need to change to make that movement possible.

About the Author



Dr. Jessica Kriegel

Chief Strategy Officer of Workforce and Labor

As Chief Strategy Officer at Culture Partners, Jessica leads global research work focused on a defining challenge: how to activate change that produces measurable results. She challenges outdated models of control and compliance, advancing a rigorous framework built on ownership, belief shifts, and accountability.

Her #1 USA Today bestselling book, Surrender to Lead, explores the paradox at the heart of high performance: sustainable results don't come from tightening control, but from knowing what to release.

With a doctorate in leadership, a master's degree in business, a second master's in social transformation, and a Master of Divinity underway, she has yet to find the point at which she's learned enough.

Appendix

How to read the research.

Research base

The Culture Partners assessment dataset contains 38,011 consenting employee response records from 45 coded organizational samples collected between January 24, 2023 and February 20, 2026.

Primary model population

The primary five-dimension model used 34,944 consenting responses with calculable scores on all five CAI dimensions and the available-item Outcome Index.

CAI measures

The CAI uses 26 items organized into five internally reliable, overlapping dimensions: Shared Direction (8), Leadership Reinforcement (4), Problem-Solving (6), Activation Energy (3), and Feedback Seeking (5). Reliability coefficients range from =.816 to .931. Feedback Seeking is the public measurement label for the five feedback-related items and is distinct from Culture Partners' broader Accountability methodology.

Outcome Index

The employee-reported Outcome Index uses seven execution-related items where available: follow-through on commitments, communication of progress, willingness to make hard decisions, planning after a solution is chosen, cross-functional work, and—in some survey versions—perceived speed to market and successful product/service launches. Outcome Index reliability is =.929.

Primary analysis

The primary analysis used an unweighted response-level ordinary least squares regression with an intercept. Exact R^2=.851603, reported as 85.2%. Sensitivity analyses included complete-case scoring (86.2%), equal-organization weighting (81.6%), within-organization centering (83.7%), and a common five-item Outcome specification (83.2%).

The findings describe associations within the analyzed sample. Conditions and execution were reported by employees in the same assessment, so shared perceptions may contribute to the strength of the relationship. Tenure and work-location comparisons are pooled cross-sectional patterns. The analysis does not establish causation or validated prediction of future business results.

About Culture Partners

Culture Partners is the leader in Change Activation, helping organizations achieve extraordinary results by creating clarity, alignment, and accountability across their purpose, strategy, and culture. Powered by 37 years of research, world-class IP, and award-winning expertise, we equip leaders with a practical framework to align people, processes, and priorities and activate a culture of ownership. Millions of individuals in thousands of organizations worldwide rely on us to unlock human potential, accelerate performance, and empower people at every level to drive business-critical results.

Learn more at CulturePartners.com.

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