

Practical change moves — and the trap of leading from inside

A Now I See It downloadable resource on dealing with change

Five concrete moves insiders can make to lead change; five traps to avoid; the moment to call in help

Why inside is harder than it looks

Most change-management writing starts from a position of neutrality. The consultant arrives, studies the system, announces the improvement, and leaves. The consultant has no stake in whether yesterday's way was good or bad. They can be purely clinical.

If you're an insider—a team lead, line manager, head of department, HR director, head teacher—you can't be neutral. You were part of the system that's being changed. You probably benefited from how things work now. You have relationships, history, and scars. People know you. They'll wonder if you're changing things to make yourself look good, or because you couldn't make the old way work, or because you're ambitious and this is your promotion play.

That's not an accusation. That's the ground state of inside leadership. You're trusted enough to have influence, but that same inside position means people will interpret your motives through years of accumulated experience with you. That's the trap: your intimacy with the organisation is both your greatest asset and your biggest liability.

This document names five things you can actually do, despite that trap. And five things that will wreck you if you don't watch for them.

The five moves that work from inside

1. Surface what's being said in corridors (before you propose anything)

The move: The parking-lot conversation, the lunch comment, the "I wouldn't say this in a meeting but..." thing—that's where people actually think. Your job is to make that thinking visible before you announce what you think.

Why it works: When you bring the implicit into the room, you accomplish two things. First, you show people you've been listening, not just waiting for your turn to talk. Second, you force the actual objections into the open, where you can address them. Right now they're diffuse—a vague sense of unease that people can't quite articulate in a formal setting. Name it, and you can work with it. Leave it unnamed, and it becomes a splinter in the organisation's trust in you.

The hard part from inside: This requires you to be comfortable repeating things people said to you in confidence, without attribution. Not using their words as ammunition. Bringing the theme without the blame. It also means you have to be willing to hear criticism of the current state—including criticism of decisions you made. You can't be the person who's been defending the old way and now wants to change it without acknowledging that you were part of defending it.

First step: Pick three people you trust to tell you the truth. Not your friends—people who respect you and will push back. Coffee with each one, in private. Ask: "What's working well right now? What's frustrating you? If we changed *[the thing]*, what would you be worried about losing?" Write their words down. Don't argue. Don't explain. Don't defend. Listen.

2. Do the listening tour first; the proposal second (the order matters)

The move: Before you draft the change, before you write the business case, before you know what you want to recommend—do a round of listening. Not a survey. Not a focus group. Real conversations where people know you might actually shift your thinking based on what they say.

Why it works: People can smell the difference between "I've decided and now I'm consulting" and "I don't know yet and I need to think this through with you." When you listen first, you're not asking people to validate a decision you've already made. You're actually building the thinking together. And when the proposal comes, people will see their own concerns reflected in it. They'll know they were heard.

The hard part from inside: This takes time you probably don't have. And it means you have to be willing to change your mind in front of people. If you've already decided, you can't do this move—people will feel it immediately. The more senior you are, the more people assume you've already decided and the listening is theater. You have to be credibly uncertain.

First step: After your three-person listening round, do a small group conversation (5-8 people, mixed seniority, mix of skeptics and supporters). Frame it: "We need to think through how [thing] is working. I don't have a proposal yet. I want to hear what you're actually experiencing." Spend 60 minutes. Write it down. Then go home and don't touch it for a week.

3. Name what's being lost

The move: Change always involves loss, even good change. The head of department who used to run meetings their way now doesn't. The process that took three days now takes five because it's more careful. The autonomy to decide locally becomes a consistent standard across the organisation. These are losses. If you don't name them, people feel gaslit.

Why it works: Grief is real. When you acknowledge what's being lost, you're saying "I see you, and I know this costs you something." It's not the same as deciding not to change. It's being honest

about the price. That honesty earns trust that you're not naive about what you're asking people to do.

The hard part from inside: You have to mean it. You can't name the loss and then spend the next six months explaining why it's actually not a loss. If it's a real loss, it stays a loss. That's uncomfortable. People will expect you to fix it by undoing the change. You need to be clear: "This is something we're giving up. It's worth it because [reason]. And that doesn't mean the loss isn't real."

First step: Write down three concrete things people will lose if this change happens. Not abstract things like "flexibility." Actual things: "Sarah won't be able to decide alone what goes into the quarterly planning; she'll have to consensus-build with two other departments." Then, in your proposal, name it explicitly. In a proposal section called "What we're choosing not to do" or "What changes for individuals," list those losses. Don't minimise them.

4. Pace it deliberately (too fast = revolt; too slow = drift)

The move: The change doesn't happen on your timeline. It happens on your organisation's timeline. That timeline is slower than you think and variable in ways you can't predict from your desk.

Why it works: Fast change hits people before they're ready. They haven't had time to grieve the loss (see #3). They haven't had time to develop competence in the new way. They're in denial that it's real. All of that frustration becomes "this change is stupid." Slow change gives people space to adjust. But too slow, and the energy for change evaporates. You end up with half-measures and permanent ambiguity about whether you're still trying.

The hard part from inside: You have to resist the urge to force the pace because you're tired of waiting or because your boss wants it done by Q3. You also have to resist people who think you're being slow out of indecision when actually you're being deliberately measured. And you have to have data for why you're pacing it this way—not just intuition.

First step: In that first listening round, ask: "How long do you think it would take for people to actually adjust to this change?" Listen for the unspoken answer beneath the words. If people say "a month" but they sound uncertain, the real answer is probably three. Then add 50%. That's your pacing timeline. If you need it done faster than that, you need either more resources to support the change, or you need to have a conversation about what you're actually willing to compromise.

5. Build the coalition before the announcement (the maths of who needs to be on board)

The move: There's a moment before you announce a change when you already know who's going to make or break it. That person who has credibility in the organisation but isn't in formal power. That team that touches every other process. That person who's been here fifteen years and people

actually listen to. Get them on board before you go public.

Why it works: When you announce a change and key people are already on board, it doesn't feel like something was done *to* the organisation. It feels like something the organisation decided. And when people go to their skeptical friends and ask "What do you think?" they hear "Yeah, I thought about it, and actually it makes sense." That's the difference between a change that sticks and one that gets sabotaged quietly.

The hard part from inside: This feels political. You're picking people based on influence, not formal position. You're asking people to advocate for something before it's public. And if you pick wrong—if you leave out someone who thinks they should have been consulted—you've made an enemy. Also, there's a real risk of creating an in-group (the people who knew first) and an out-group. If you're not careful, people will feel like the change was a deal done in smoke-filled rooms.

First step: Map your organisation on a piece of paper. Who decides? That's easy—it's the chain of command. But who actually influences decisions? Draw lines to the people who, when they think something's a good idea, other people listen. There should be 5-12 people in that group. That's your coalition. Before you announce, each of those people needs to have understood the reasoning—not to agree with it, but to have heard it from you, not from the grapevine.

The five traps insiders fall into

1. The "obvious" trap

You've been thinking about this for months. To you, it's self-evident. The problem is clear. The solution is clear. You can see why the old way doesn't work anymore.

To everyone else, it's invisible.

You'll present the change and see blank faces. People will ask questions you can't believe they're asking. They'll bring up concerns you think you already addressed, because you did address them in your own thinking, but you didn't say them out loud.

The trap is thinking that clarity to you equals clarity to them. It doesn't.

How to avoid it: In your proposal, explain the thing that seems most obvious to you in probably five times more detail than feels necessary. Write it out. Have someone who's not in your head read it and tell you where they got confused. Then rewrite it. Then have someone else read it.

2. The "I'm not the boss of you" trap

If you don't have formal authority—you're a peer leading a change across teams, or you're in HR

trying to shift culture—you'll feel like you don't have the right to push for this.

Here's the trap: thinking that means you should be tentative. "What if we maybe tried to consider whether possibly we could..." No. That makes people think you don't actually believe in it.

You can be non-hierarchical and still be clear. "This is what I think we should do. Here's why. I know you might not agree, and I want to hear your thinking. But I'm not hedging because I'm uncertain. I'm hedging because I respect that this affects you and your voice matters."

How to avoid it: State your position clearly. Not as "the right answer." As "my best thinking, and I'm open to being wrong about the implementation, but not about the direction." The people around you will be more willing to follow an honest, non-authoritarian leader than they will an uncertain one.

3. The "former friends" trap

You used to have lunch with the head of operations. You'd chat in the corridor. They'd tell you things.

Once you're driving a change that affects them, that stops. They stop initiating the conversation. When you bring them into the loop, they're cordial but distant.

What's happening: they think you've chosen the change over them. Or they think you're now "management" in a way you weren't before. Or they're hurt that you didn't talk to them first, and now the change is a symbol of that hurt.

How to avoid it: Acknowledge the shift directly. "I know this changes how we interact, and I want to be honest about that. I've thought about this a lot, and I still think it's the right thing to do. That doesn't mean I don't value you or what we've had. It means I think the change is bigger than my comfort in the corridor." You won't get your lunch companion back. But you'll get respect.

4. The "I have to be neutral" trap

You'll feel pressure to not take a side. To be "just presenting the change" without ownership of it.

Actually, no. You're an insider. You have a stake. People know you have a stake. Pretending you don't, while you're driving the change, reads as dishonest. It's worse than advocating openly.

The thing you need to be neutral about is: whether this is the only possible change, whether people who disagree are stupid, whether dissent is disloyalty.

But the direction itself? Own it. "I believe this is the right thing. I've thought hard about it. I could be wrong. But I'm not presenting this as neutral—I'm presenting it as my best judgment, and I'm asking for your partnership in making it work."

How to avoid it: Don't hide your position. Don't pretend to "just be facilitating." Own your view. But make it clear that owning your view doesn't mean dismissing everyone else's.

5. The fatigue trap

Leading change is the most tiring work an insider does. You carry the cognitive load of understanding the system, the emotional load of relationships you might damage, the political load of navigating who needs what kind of communication.

You'll get tired. You'll start making decisions out of fatigue instead of thinking. You'll snap at people. You'll simplify your message to something too blunt because you're too exhausted to nuance it.

And the organisation will feel that fatigue. They'll interpret it as "they don't actually care about this" or "they're burned out and we should wait them out."

How to avoid it: You have to pace yourself, not just the work. This means:

- Pick your moments to be "on." You can't be full-throttle-engaged in every conversation.
- Find someone else to be on for the things you can't. A co-sponsor. Someone who believes in this and has energy when you don't.
- Be honest with yourself about what you actually have bandwidth for. If you're running on empty, your change is running on empty.
- Take breaks. Genuinely. Not a day off where you're thinking about the change. A day off where you're not.

When to call in the outsider

There's a moment in every inside change when the inside leader runs into a credibility ceiling. You've said it three times, in three different ways, and people still don't hear it as information. They hear it as politics. It's not that you're wrong. It's that you're on the inside, and anything you say is automatically filtered through "What's in it for them?"

That's when an outside facilitator becomes worth the cost.

An outsider has no stake in how things were. They can name the same thing you've been saying, and people will hear it differently. Not because it's true-er. Because it doesn't come with the baggage of inside relationships.

The moment to bring in the outsider is: when your credibility has hit a wall, when the change is complex enough that your expertise alone isn't enough to guide it, or when the group itself has fractured and needs a neutral space to think.

It doesn't mean you step back. It means you step to the side and let someone else hold the space for a while. Then you step back in.

The simplest first move

If you only do one thing from this document, do this:

Pick one person who will tell you the truth. Someone who respects you but won't just validate you. Tell them: "I'm thinking about changing [thing]. Before I say anything public, I need to know what you actually think. Not what you think I want to hear. What you actually think. Will you do a one-hour conversation with me? And will you promise me that if you think this is a mistake, you'll tell me?"

Then, shut up and listen. Don't explain your reasoning. Don't defend the idea. Don't try to convince them. Just ask questions and listen to what they think.

That one conversation will show you, more clearly than any amount of thinking alone, whether you're on solid ground or heading into a wall.

Do that with three people.

Then, you'll know what you actually need to do.