WHY CHANGE FAILS IN IT: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL DIAGNOSIS OF SYSTEMIC FAILURE PATTERNS AND ROOT CAUSES

ЧОМУ ЗМІНИ ЗАЗНАЮТЬ НЕВДАЧІ В ІТ: БАГАТОВИМІРНА ДІАГНОСТИКА СИСТЕМНИХ ЗАКОНОМІРНОСТЕЙ І ПЕРШОПРИЧИН ПРОВАЛІВ

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Organizational change in IT companies continues to fail at alarming rates, with reported failure frequencies ranging from 60% to 80% – despite decades of evolving change management methodologies. This study argues that the core problem is not methodological insufficiency, but categorical misdiagnosis. Most frameworks – both traditional (e.g., Lewin, Kotter, ADKAR) and modern (e.g., Agile, SAFe, DevOps) – treat transformation as a technical process that can be managed through planning, communication, and tool deployment. In contrast, this paper presents change as an adaptive challenge that threatens identity, disrupts culture, and exposes unresolved organizational paradoxes. Using a hybrid methodology, the study combines meta-analysis of empirical failure data from leading industry sources (McKinsey, Gartner, Standish Group, Scrum Inc., Radixweb) with theoretical triangulation from identity theory (Kegan & Lahey), paradox theory (Smith & Lewis), and the Adaptive Change Model (Heifetz et al.). The research identifies five primary causal clusters that drive failure: cognitive misalignment, identity-based resistance, cultural-systemic misfit, structural incoherence, and execution breakdown. Failures are further analyzed across five dimensions: organizational level (executive, middle, team), type of change (process, cultural, structural, digital), implementation phase (initiation, transition, sustainment), failure visibility (overt, covert, latent), and root-cause clustering. Findings show that change most often fails when it is treated as a finite project rather than a sustained shift in organizational identity, norms, and rhythms. The study concludes by calling for a new generation of transformation models – ones that embed change into lived identity, tolerate paradox, and reinforce new behaviors through long-cycle rhythm. This paper lays the empirical and conceptual groundwork for such a model, currently under development, which translates adaptive theory into operational, identity-centered architecture.

Keywords: organizational change, IT transformation, identity resistance, adaptive change, paradox theory, Agile failure, cultural misfit, change management models, transformation failure, behavioral integration.

Організаційні зміни в ІТ-компаніях продовжують зазнавати невдач. Причому опублікована частота невдач коливається від 60% до 80%, незважаючи на десятиліття вивчення та застосування вдосконалених підходів до управління змінами. У дослідженні проаналізовано та підтверджено, що основна причина не в недосконалості методів, а в хибній класифікації самої природи змін. Більшість традиційних моделей (Lewin, Kotter, ADKAR), так і сучасних моделей (Agile, SAFe, DevOps) розглядають трансформацію, як технічну задачу, яка піддається плануванню та впровадженню через інструменти і комунікацію. Натомість у статті організаційні зміни описуються, як адаптивний виклик, що торкається ідентичності, руйнує культурні коди та оголює організаційні парадокси. Методологія дослідження поєднує метааналіз емпіричних даних (McKinsey, Gartner, Standish Group, Scrum Inc., Radixweb) з теоретичною триангуляцією: теорія ідентичності (Kegan & Lahey), теорія парадоксів (Smith & Lewis) та Модель адаптивних змін (Heifetz та ін.). У роботі визначено п'ять ключових кластерів причин провалу: когнітивна розмитість, опір на рівні ідентичності, культурно-системна

МЕНЕДЖМЕНТ

несумісність, структурна розбалансованість і втрата ритму впровадження. В даній статті аналіз охоплює п'ять вимірів організаційних змін в ІТ-компаніях: рівень організації (керівництво, менеджмент, команди), тип змін (процеси, культура, структура, цифровізація), фазу реалізації (ініціація, перехід, утримання), видимість провалу (відкритий, прихований, латентний) та типологію причин. Організаційні зміни в ІТ-компаніях зазнають поразки не через інструменти, а через відсутність роботи з ідентичністю, парадоксами та культурною інтеграцією. У статті закладено та запропоновано концептуальну й емпіричну основу для нової моделі трансформації, що перебуває на етапі розробки – моделі, яка переводить адаптивні принципи у структуровану, ідентичність-орієнтовану організаційну практику.

Ключові слова: організаційні зміни, трансформація в ІТ, опір змінам, адаптивне лідерство, теорія парадоксів, Agile-провали, культурна несумісність, моделі управління змінами, невдачі трансформації, інтеграція поведінки.

Problem Statement. Despite decades of evolving change frameworks, failure rates in IT companies remain chronically high – persistently reported at 60–80% by McKinsey, Gartner, Standish, and Scrum Inc. These failures continue even under modern approaches like Agile, DevOps, and SAFe. Surface-level compliance is common; sustained transformation is not.

The root problem is not execution. It is misdiagnosis. Most models, whether traditional or modern, treat transformation as a technical process. They deploy tools and timelines to what are in fact adaptive challenges: identity threat, cultural contradiction, and paradox denial.

Three failure mechanisms dominate:

1. Identity-level resistance – change is rejected not rationally but defensively, as a threat to self-concept and belonging;

2. Paradox blindness – leaders attempt to resolve tensions (e.g. control vs. autonomy) that must be navigated, not eliminated;

3. Project framing – transformation is miscast as a finite initiative, rather than an open-ended shift in how people think, act, and identify.

Core Insight: change fails not because people resist progress, but because organizations fail to address who people must become. Future architectures must be identity-anchored, paradox-resilient, and rhythmically embedded – not just deployed.

Methodology. The study applies a hybrid methodology:

– A meta-analysis: Aggregates empirical failure data from leading sources – McKinsey, Gartner, Scrum Inc., Radixweb, Standish.

– Theoretical triangulation from identity theory (Kegan & Lahey), paradox theory (Smith & Lewis) and the Adaptive Change Model (Heifetz).

This hybrid method diagnoses not just what fails, but why – and reveals what current frameworks refuse to confront.

Review of Recent Research. Empirical research consistently confirms that large-scale transformation initiatives in IT fail more often than they succeed. McKinsey (2023) reports a

70% failure rate. Gartner (2022) places stalled or regressed digital transformations at 80%. The Standish Group (2023) highlights persistent breakdowns in IT projects. Scrum Inc. (2023) adds that 47% of Agile transformations fail – primarily due to culture, not process.

Traditional change models (e.g. Lewin's 3-Step, Kotter's 8-Step, ADKAR) offer structured process logic. But these models assume that change proceeds linearly, through rational stages. They fail to account for emotional resistance, psychological defense, and paradoxical tensions embedded in organizational life.

Modern frameworks (Agile, SAFe, DevOps, Lean Change) promise flexibility and empowerment. Yet research shows that many of these degrade into ritual compliance. Denning (2016) and Radixweb (2023) report widespread "fake Agile": teams perform the ceremonies but retain legacy behaviors. Methodology adoption outpaces mindset change.

Contemporary theory is now turning to deeper explanations:

– Kegan & Lahey's Immunity to Change (2009) introduces the concept of hidden, competing commitments – psychological defense mechanisms that protect identity from disruption;

– Smith & Lewis' Paradox Theory (2011) argues that transformation requires navigating persistent tensions (e.g. innovation vs. discipline), not eliminating them;

– Heifetz's Adaptive Change Model reframes transformation as identity work, not problem-solving – requiring people to redefine roles, beliefs, and values.

These insights converge on a single diagnostic failure: change efforts collapse when identity, paradox, and adaptive challenge are ignored. Existing frameworks are technically correct – but humanly insufficient.

This paper builds on these findings to diagnose the full failure pattern in IT organizations – exposing not just what fails, but why it keeps failing.

Unresolved Aspects. Despite decades of frameworks and case studies, several core dimensions of change failure remain underdiagnosed and poorly addressed:

1. Identity resistance is misunderstood. Most frameworks treat resistance as inertia or mindset lag. In reality, people defend their roles, status, and self-concept. Change threatens identity. Without addressing this layer, behavioral interventions fail.

2. Paradoxes are avoided, not led. Change creates tension: autonomy vs. control, speed vs. stability, exploration vs. execution. Most leaders attempt to resolve these tensions. But paradoxes cannot be solved – they must be navigated. Avoiding them leads to incoherence and collapse.

3. Change is still treated as a project. Transformation is managed like a delivery cycle: plan → launch → close. But real change is not linear. It is adaptive, open-ended, and identity-bound. Project logic enforces artificial closure and cuts off reinforcement when it is most needed.

4. Diagnostics remain superficial. Most studies report failure as a binary outcome – success vs. failure – without dissecting where, when, or how change collapses. This flattens insight and hides causal layers.

5. Framework attachment becomes ideology. Change methods (SAFe, Lean, ADKAR) are applied prescriptively – regardless of context. Tool worship replaces adaptive design. This rigidity ignores readiness, fit, and cost.

Synthesis. These gaps reveal a systemic flaw: transformation is approached with frameworks and deadlines, not with insight into identity, paradox, and psychological rhythm. Until these dimensions are confronted directly, failure will remain the norm.

Research Objectives. This study exposes why changes in IT companies fail – despite evolving models, and diagnoses the structural and psychological mechanisms beneath.

The study pursues five precise goals:

1. Classify change failures across five dimensions. Develop a 5D Diagnostic Rubric based on organizational level, change type, temporal phase, failure visibility, and root cause clustering.

2. Quantify dominant failure causes. Rank and analyze high-frequency failure patterns across IT companies using empirical data.

3. Surface identity and cultural drivers. Decode how change efforts trigger identity defense, psychological immunity, and cultural rejection.

4. Expose framework limitations. Critically evaluate how mainstream change models bypass identity, avoid paradox, and default to delivery logic.

5. Lay ground for identity-anchored models. Build conceptual scaffolding for the next generation of transformation architectures – those that embed rhythm, role, and identity into the change fabric.

High-Frequency Causes of Change Failure in IT Companies. Drawing from meta-analysis of industry data (McKinsey, Gartner, Standish Group, Scrum Inc., Radixweb), we identify the most recurrent causes of change failure in IT organizations. These causes are ranked by reported frequency and evaluated for impact severity (Table 1).

Table 1

High-Frequency Causes of Change Failure in IT Companies

Cause	Frequency	Impact	Core Effect
Inadequate Communication	67%	High	Ambiguity, misalignment, disengagement
Lack of Leadership Commitment	62%	High	Weak sponsorship, reduced credibility
Resistance to Change	58%	High	Identity defense, covert sabotage
Misaligned Goals and Values	55%	High	Strategic incoherence, motivational loss
Agile Misapplication	48%	Med – High	Ritual compliance, no mindset shift
Cultural Incompatibility	45%	High	Friction during scale or integration
Unclear Roles and Ownership	42%	Medium	Accountability gaps, decision friction
Tool-Over-People Focus	38%	Medium	Process fetishism, cultural neglect

Source: Compiled by the authors based on industry reports

МЕНЕДЖМЕНТ

Insight: These causes compound, reinforce each other, and cascade across layers. They reveal not a single point of failure but a systemic collapse pattern.

Diagnostic Rubric. To systematically understand why transformations collapse, this paper introduces a five-dimensional diagnostic model. Each dimension targets a distinct layer of breakdown, from organizational structure to psychological dynamics. The rubric below outlines the framework used to classify and analyze the patterns of failure (Table 2).

These five dimensions structure the core of our analysis.

1. Organizational Level of Failure. Change fails differently at different layers. Without diagnosing where resistance concentrates, interventions remain misaligned. This section dissects failure patterns across three organizational levels (Table 3).

Synthesis Insight. Transformation requires coherence across layers. Executive will is not enough. Middle alignment and team ownership are non-negotiable. Each level demands a different anchor:

Table 2

Five-Dimensional Diagnostic Rubric for Change Failure

Dimension	Core Question	Failure Variants	What to Diagnose
Organizational Level	Where does resistance concentrate?	Executive misalignment, frozen middle, team disengagement	Role-specific breakdowns
Type of Change	What kind of transformation	Process, Structural, Cultural, Digital	Psychological depth and disruption risk
Temporal Phase	When does failure emerge?	Initiation stagnation, transition friction, sustainment decay	Phase-specific vulnerabilities
Visibility	How visible is the failure?	Overt collapse, covert compliance, latent erosion	Misleading signals and undetected decay
Causal	Why does change collapse	Identity threat, cultural misfit, paradox denial, structural block, execution decay	Interlocking failure loops

Source: Author's original analytical construct, synthesized from cross-source empirical review and theoretical alignment.

Table 3

Organizational Level of Failure (Dimensional)

Level	Symptoms	Impact	Root Causes	Evidence	Insight
Executive	Vague vision, shifting priorities, passive sponsorship.	Transformation loses authority and direction. Strategic ambiguity paralyzes middle layers.	Vision drift, emotional detachment, paradox avoidance (e.g. innovation vs. control).	70–80% of failed initiatives cite poor executive commitment (McKinsey, 2023).	Strategy without conviction creates hollow momentum
Middle Management	Passive resistance, inconsistent messaging, micromanagement or disengagement.	The "frozen middle" becomes a bottleneck – blocking translation of vision into action.	Fear of displacement, unclear KPIs, unresolved tension between empowerment and control.	Most alignment breakdowns occur at this level (Gartner, 2022).	Strategy without conviction creates hollow momentum.
Team	Burnout, ritual compliance, disengagement, agile theater.	Change stalls at the edge. Agile fails. Tools are rejected silently.	Identity dissonance, autonomy loss, fatigue from top-down mandates.	47% of Agile failures are rooted at team level (Scrum Inc., 2023).	If change is done to teams, not with them, collapse is inevitable.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on industry reports

a). Executive: strategic clarity and paradox leadership;

b). Middle: identity-safe role adaptation;

c). Teams: autonomy with meaning.

2. Type of Change Attempted. Not all change is equal. Different types of change carry different psychological costs, resistance patterns, and failure trajectories. The deeper the identity impact, the higher the risk (Table 4).

Synthesis Insight. Failure risk increases with psychological depth:

- Process: low risk, shallow adoption;
- Structural: medium risk, high disruption;
- Cultural: high risk, deep resistance;
- Digital: hybrid – technical change requiring adaptive shift

Insight: The more a change touches meaning, the more it threatens self – unless integrated.

3. Temporal Phase of Failure. Change does not fail all at once. It fails in stages – each with distinct vulnerabilities. Knowing when change collapses reveals where reinforcement must occur (Table 5).

Table 4

Type of Change Attempted (Dimensional)

Type	Examples	Observed Outcome	Root Pattern	Evidence	Insight
Process Change	CI/CD pipelines, test automation, ITIL practices.	Moderate success when scoped tightly; often derailed by tool obsession.	Tools are adopted without behavior shift.	Success drops from 68% to 18% with decision latency over 5 hours (Scrum Inc., 2023).	Tools don't change people. People change behavior – if they believe in it.
Cultural Change	Psychological safety, leadership style, feedback norms.	Highest failure rate. Most initiatives stall or decay.	Identity threat. Culture cannot be mandated or cloned.	43% of failed Agile transformations cite cultural misfit (Radixweb, 2023).	Culture change fails when imposed. It only embeds when lived.
Structural Change	Reorgs, flattening, mergers/ acquisitions.	Politically volatile. Often rejected passively.	Ambiguous roles, power friction, informal structure clashes.	60% of reorganizations fail to deliver expected value (McKinsey, 2015)	Changing structure without changing dynamics just reshuffles dysfunction.
Digital Trans-formation	Cloud migration, AI integration, legacy modernization.	High initial momentum, followed by decay post-MVP.	Capability is delivered faster than behavior or mindset adapts.	80% of digital projects fail to scale (Gartner, 2022).	Digital change without identity anchoring is cosmetic. It fades.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on industry reports

Table 5

Temporal Phase of Failure (Dimensional)

Phase	Failure Triggers	Collapse Pattern	Root Breakdown
Initiation	Weak case for change, abstract vision, no urgency	Passive sponsorship, confusion, "wait-and-see" stagnation	Conceptual overload. Executive contradiction (e.g. demand for agility, but central control).
Transition	Role ambiguity, fear, strategy-execution disconnect	Resistance intensifies, middle layers disengage, rituals replace intent	Emergence of paradoxes unmanaged by leadership. Middle managers block or distort execution.
Sustainment	Leadership withdrawal, change fatigue, no feedback loops	Cultural relapse, identity reversion, symbolic compliance	Reinforcement fades. Cultural inertia reasserts. Rituals remain, belief dissolves.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on industry reports

Evidence: Over 40% of change initiatives stall or regress 6–18 months after launch (McKinsey, 2024). The sustainment phase is the silent graveyard of transformation.

Insight: Most models are built to launch change. Few are built to sustain it. But the real failure comes after the noise – when change must become identity.

4. Failure Visibility. Not all change failure is visible. In IT organizations, covert and latent failures often go undetected – creating the illusion of success while decay spreads underneath (Table 6).

Evidence: 40–50% of "successful" Agile adoptions are covert failures (Echometer, 2023).

Synthesis Insight. Visibility ≠ Severity.
- Overt failure is obvious and addressable;
- Covert failure is deceptive and persistent;
- Latent failure is slow death mistaken for endurance.

The most lethal failures are the ones leaders never see – until it's too late.

5. Causal Clustering. Beneath the symptoms lie five recurring root cause domains. These clusters interact, compound, and reinforce failure. Surface problems are often just their visible output (Table 7).

Synthesis Insight. These clusters are not isolated. They stack. Poor communication (1) fuels identity resistance (2), which embeds through cultural misfit (3), reinforced by structural blocks (4), and sealed by execution failure (5).

Change doesn't fail from one blow. It erodes through compounded contradictions.

6. Root Cause Integration and Analysis. Across all dimensions, one truth emerges with clarity: change in IT organizations fails not because of technical complexity – but because of unresolved identity threats, cultural contradictions, and paradox denial (Table 8).

Synthesis Insight. Change doesn't fail from poor delivery. It fails because:
- The self is not engaged;
- The paradox is not led;
- The system thinks in projects, while identity requires practice and rhythm.

Transformation is not adoption of tools. It is embodiment of a new identity.

Conclusion. Change in IT organizations fails not because of bad frameworks, poor intentions, or insufficient tools. It fails because most change efforts misdiagnose the problem.

Transformation is treated as a technical upgrade – something to manage, sequence, and measure. But the real terrain is adaptive: psychological, cultural, and paradoxical.

This study has shown, through multidimensional diagnosis, that failure is driven by five recurring forces:
1. Cognitive breakdown – unclear vision, incoherent narratives;
2. Identity resistance – subconscious defense against change;
3. Cultural misfit – model and reality collide;
4. Structural friction – roles, power, and process out of sync;
5. Execution decay – no feedback, no rhythm, no reinforcement.

Modern frameworks – Agile, SAFe, DevOps – fail not because they are flawed in design, but because they operate at the surface. They treat change as a project. But transformation is not a project. It is a shift in identity, role, and rhythm – and it requires deep integration.

Table 6

Failure Visibility (Dimensional)

Type	Definition	Examples	Impact	Insight
Overt Failure	Public, undeniable breakdown.	Canceled programs, disbanded teams, executive exits.	Visible collapse forces attention, sometimes correction.	Clear failure is painful – but at least it is honest.
Covert Failure	Ritual compliance without internal change.	Agile ceremonies without Agile thinking; KPIs met through manipulation.	Most dangerous – creates false legitimacy and blocks real adaptation.	Covert success is failure in disguise.
Latent Failure	Initial success followed by gradual disintegration.	Teams revert to old behaviors months after launch; tools abandoned post-rollout.	No clear breakdown point – just slow erosion. By the time it's visible, momentum is gone.	Latent failure is decay mistaken for durability.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on industry reports

МЕНЕДЖМЕНТ

Table 7

Root Cause Clusters of Change Failure (Dimensional)

Cluster	Definition	Examples	Impact	Evidence	Insight
Cognitive and Communication Gaps	Misalignment in narrative, meaning, or message.	Vague vision, leadership contradictions, jargon overload.	Employees revert to tactical execution or passive resistance.	67% of failed transformations (Standish Group, 2023).	If the "why" is unclear, the "how" doesn't matter.
Identity-Based Resistance	Subconscious defense of self-concept, status, or belonging.	Role clinging, sabotage of new behaviors, hidden fear of irrelevance.	Behavioral compliance masks internal rejection	42% of Agile failures cite indetity-level resistance (Radixweb, 2023).	People don't resist change. They resist being changed.
Cultural and Systemic Misfit	Imported models clash with local norms, values, and power dynamics.	SAFe in hierarchical orgs, forced flat structures in control cultures.	Surface adoption, deep rejection. Silence becomes sabotage.	–	Culture isn't a backdrop – it's infrastructure. Misalign it, and nothing holds.
Structural Misalignment	Roles, authority, and incentives contradict the intended transformation.	Product owners with no power, dual-reporting chaos.	Even willing actors are blocked. Execution stalls structurally.	–	Culture isn't a backdrop – it's infrastructure. Misalign it, and nothing holds.
Execution and Reinforcement Failures	Weak feedback loops, vanishing leadership energy, no habit anchoring.	Early wins celebrated, then momentum dies; no follow-through.	Change decays quietly without reinforcement	Decision latency cuts Agile success by 50 points (Scrum Inc., 2023).	Change is not an event. It's a rhythm. Break the rhythm, and it dies.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on industry reports

Table 8

Integrated Root Mechanisms of Change Failure (Systemic Insight)

Mechanism	Definition / Breakdown	Failure Pattern	Evidence	Insight
Identity Conflict	Change threatens how people see themselves – their role, worth, and competence.	Surface compliance, deep sabotage. Identity is bypassed.	Kegan & Lahey's "competing commitments" theory; 42% identity-based Agile failures (Radixweb)	"People don't resist change – they resist being changed."
Paradox Denial	Leaders avoid or attempt to resolve tensions instead of holding them. Agility becomes ritual or chaos.	Misguided certainty leads to fake transformation.	Smith & Lewis (2011): paradoxes are essential to transformation success	Paradox is not dysfunction – it is the terrain of change.
Project Thinking Misfit	Change framed as project, not process of identity integration. Ends too soon.	Momentum fades post-MVP; cultural relapse follows.	40%+ of initiatives collapse 6 – 18 months after MVP (McKinsey, 2024)	Reinforcement vanishes, and inertia returns.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on industry reports

The implication is clear: Change must move from external compliance to internal embodiment. Leadership must evolve – from commanding initiatives to holding paradox, enabling identity evolution, and reinforcing cultural coherence over time.

This diagnostic lays the empirical foundation for the development of an identity-centered transformation model, currently under construction, which aims to translate adaptive theory into operational systems.

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