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WHITE PAPER · OCTOBER 2026

Managing Stability in an Age of *Constant Change*

Why leaders now need to decide what holds steady

Lawrence Fine
CEO and Co-Founder, AGCP Farmacêuticos

MEASURED · UNCONQUERED

OVERVIEW

Executive summary

For decades, the central leadership question about change has been how to get people to accept it. That question made sense when change came in episodes: a new system, a restructuring, a merger, followed by a period of stability. Most of the change management models leaders learn are built on that pattern.

Artificial intelligence has broken it. Tools now update in months, not years, and new capabilities arrive faster than most teams can absorb the last ones. By the time a team has accepted one change, the next is arriving. Many organizations are now permanently halfway through something, and their people are tired.

This paper argues that when change becomes constant, **stability becomes the scarce resource**, and scarce resources need to be managed deliberately. The leader's job shifts from "how do I get people to accept this change?" to "what do we hold steady, and when is stability worth more than the next improvement?"

The paper:

1. Explains why the classic change models struggle with continuous, AI-driven change.
2. Shows what instability costs, especially in service and regulated businesses where consistency is part of the product.
3. Draws lessons from industries that already manage stability on purpose, including pharmaceutical manufacturing and hospitality.
4. Offers a simple framework, **the stability decision**, built on four questions: Anchors, Capacity, Timing and Value.
5. Describes what this means for frontline staff, supervisors and senior leaders, and how to build the capability.
6. Closes with a one-page **stability check** leaders can use before their next change.

This is not an argument against AI or against change. Organizations that wait too long fall behind. It is an argument for judgment: deciding when stability matters more than the next improvement, instead of assuming the answer is always to change.

The framework is offered as a proposal, drawn from experience and from the research cited, rather than a tested method. Its value should be judged the way the paper recommends judging any change: by applying it, measuring the results, and keeping what works.

SECTION 01

Change is outpacing adoption

Every change has two clocks. One measures how often something new arrives. The other measures how long it takes people to absorb it: to learn the new tool, adjust their routines, regain confidence and return to full effectiveness. For most of modern business history, the first clock ran slower than the second. Organizations had time to adopt one change before the next arrived.

AI has reversed that. A hotel may introduce an AI guest-messaging tool in the spring, see it updated twice by summer, and add AI-assisted scheduling and revenue tools before the year is out. An accounting firm may adopt AI for document review, then for drafting, then for analysis, each changing how junior staff spend their time and what partners need to supervise. Each change on its own may be sensible. Together, they can leave people in a permanent state of adjustment.

The costs of being permanently mid-change are real, even if they rarely appear in any report:

- **Errors rise.** People working with half-learned tools make more mistakes, and the mistakes are often caught late.
- **Service becomes inconsistent.** Customers notice when staff are unsure of the system or when the same request is handled differently from one week to the next.
- **Fatigue and cynicism set in.** When every change is presented as important, people stop believing any of them are. Experienced staff learn to wait out each initiative.
- **Good people leave.** Constant relearning erodes the sense of competence that keeps people engaged, and the people with the most options are often the first to go.
- **Leaders lose credibility.** Each new change spends trust. Spend too much of it and even necessary changes meet resistance.

What the evidence shows. Several of these costs are supported by research. Gartner found that the average employee experienced 10 planned enterprise changes in 2022, up from two in 2016, while employees' willingness to support enterprise change fell from 74 percent to 43 percent over the same period (O Morain & Aykens, 2023). In a study of how employees experience change, Rafferty and Griffin (2006) found that frequent change was associated with greater uncertainty, which in turn was linked to lower job satisfaction and stronger intentions to leave. Bernerth, Walker and Harris (2011) developed a measure of change fatigue and found it was associated with exhaustion, which was in turn linked to lower commitment to the organization and stronger intentions to leave. The effects of constant change on errors and service consistency are less well

studied, and are offered here as observations from practice rather than established findings. The studies above also predate the current wave of AI adoption; whether AI-driven change affects people differently is an open question worth testing.

None of this means organizations should slow down their adoption of AI across the board. It means that the pace of change has become something leaders must actively manage, rather than a background condition they simply respond to.

SECTION 02

Why the classic models struggle

Most of what leaders learn about change comes from a small number of well-known models. Each has real value. But they share an assumption that no longer holds for many organizations.

MODEL	CORE IDEA	WHERE IT STILL HELPS
Unfreeze, change, refreeze (attributed to Kurt Lewin)	Prepare people to let go of the current state, make the change, then stabilize the new state	Reminds leaders that change needs preparation and reinforcement
Kotter's eight steps (1996)	Create urgency, build a coalition, form and communicate a vision, remove obstacles, create short-term wins, build on them, anchor the change in culture	Large, one-time transformations that need sustained leadership
ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006)	Change succeeds one person at a time through Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability and Reinforcement	Diagnosing where an individual is stuck
Transitions (Bridges, 1991)	The change itself differs from the psychological transition people go through: an ending, an uncomfortable in-between period, and a new beginning	Understanding why people resist and what they are losing

The shared assumption is that change happens in episodes, with a stable "after." The organization moves from one steady state to another, and the work of change management is to get it across the gap. Weick and Quinn (1999) drew this distinction clearly, contrasting episodic change, which follows the familiar unfreeze-and-refreeze sequence, with continuous change, which never really stops. Peter Vaill described the working environment of managers as "permanent white water" as early as 1989, and even Kotter later argued that organizations need a faster, more networked way of operating alongside their traditional hierarchy (Kotter, 2014).

It is also worth knowing that the neat three-step model attributed to Lewin may owe more to later writers than to Lewin himself. Cummings, Bridgman and Brown (2016) argue that he never developed it as it is usually taught, and that the model took shape after his death. The foundation of much change management teaching is less solid than it appears.

One more caution belongs here. Change management materials often claim that around 70 percent of change initiatives fail. Hughes (2011) traced the most prominent published sources for that figure and found no valid and reliable empirical evidence behind it. Leaders should be wary of any framework that sells itself on that statistic.

None of this makes the classic models useless. For big, deeply personal changes, such as AI altering what someone's job actually is, Bridges' attention to loss and ADKAR's focus on the individual remain valuable. The problem is narrower: **the models assume that refreezing is possible.** When it is not, leaders need a different question.

SECTION 03

Stability as a scarce resource

When change was occasional, stability was the default and change was the thing that needed managing. If change becomes constant, the scarce resource flips. Stability is what becomes rare, and therefore what needs deliberate attention.

Stability matters because it is where competence lives. People do their best work when they know their tools, trust their routines and can predict how colleagues will respond. That is when they have attention left over for customers, for judgment calls and for improving the work itself. Constant change consumes that attention.

In many businesses, stability is also part of what the customer is paying for:

- **In hospitality,** a returning guest expects the same warmth, standards and competence as last time. Consistency is much of what a brand promises.
- **In professional services,** clients and regulators rely on reliable, repeatable methods. An audit is only as trustworthy as the procedures behind it.
- **In healthcare and pharmaceuticals,** consistency protects patients. Variation is not just inefficient; it can be dangerous.

The idea that organizations need both change and stability is not new. March (1991) described the tension between exploration, searching for new possibilities, and exploitation, refining and using what already works, and warned that organizations can damage themselves by over-investing in either. Weick and Quinn (1999) noted that where change is continuous, the leader's role shifts

toward recognizing and redirecting change already under way. What is new is that AI has pushed many organizations so far toward constant exploration that stability now needs the same deliberate management that change used to receive.

Most directly, Ashley Goodall (2024) has called for "stability management" as a discipline in its own right: an always-on practice, focused on local teams, that pays attention to what is working and communicates what will stay constant, grounded in research on people's needs for predictability, agency, belonging and meaning. This paper builds on that argument in three ways. It names AI as the specific force that has made refreezing impossible for many organizations. It offers a practical decision framework that treats deferring or declining a change as legitimate outcomes. And it draws on industries, notably pharmaceutical manufacturing, where managing stability is already a formal, accountable discipline rather than an aspiration.

Practitioners have approached the same tension from other directions. Lean manufacturing has long treated standardized work as the stable base on which improvement is built: a process is stabilized, improved, and the improvement becomes the new standard. Change practitioners speak of change saturation, the point at which the total load of change exceeds what people can absorb. Both ideas inform this paper. What differs is the source of the change. Lean assumes an organization improving its own processes at its own pace. AI-driven change increasingly arrives from outside, through vendors, platforms and competitors, on a schedule the organization does not set. That is why stability now has to be managed as a leadership decision, not only as a feature of well-run processes.

This leads to a simple reframe:

> ***Freeze the core; keep the methods fluid.***

People can tolerate a great deal of change in tools and processes if certain things stay fixed: the purpose of the work, the standard of service, how people are treated, and how decisions get made. Buy-in shifts from each individual change to two more durable things: the purpose, and the way the organization changes.

The core, though, is rarely a particular method. It is the outcome customers care about, and customers do not all want the same thing. Consider hotel check-in. Some guests prefer to check themselves in and go straight to their room; for them, a self-service kiosk or app is an improvement. Others see a staffed desk as part of feeling welcome and secure, and read its absence as cost-cutting. The same change improves one experience and damages the other. What the hotel needs to hold steady is not "we always have a desk clerk" but "every guest feels welcome and safe, in the way that works for them." Defined that way, the anchor allows methods to change, sometimes by offering more than one, while protecting what each group of customers actually values. It also asks more of staff, who must read which guest wants to be left alone and which wants reassurance.

SECTION 04

Industries that already manage stability

Some industries have managed stability on purpose for years. Their practices offer a starting point for everyone else.

Pharmaceutical manufacturing: change control

In pharmaceutical manufacturing, change is not forbidden, but it is never casual. The international ICH Q10 guideline on pharmaceutical quality systems, adopted by the US Food and Drug Administration as guidance in 2009, includes a formal change management system: companies are expected to evaluate, approve and implement changes through a defined process, and to review afterward whether each change achieved its purpose without harming product quality (ICH, 2008; FDA, 2009).

The lesson is not bureaucracy. It is that every change has to justify the disruption it causes, someone has to own the decision, and the effect has to be checked afterward. Nobody in a pharmaceutical plant sees stability as resistance to change. It is part of the product.

Hospitality: brand standards and the guest promise

Good hotels and resorts define service standards in detail precisely because consistency is what guests return for. The best operators introduce new systems in the quieter months, train staff before a tool reaches guests, and protect the moments that matter most, such as arrival, problem resolution and departure, from disruption. When a new system threatens those moments, it waits.

Accounting and professional services: protecting busy season

Accounting firms have long avoided introducing major changes during their busiest periods, when the cost of errors is highest and staff capacity is lowest. The same instinct applies to AI: a new review tool may be worth adopting, but not in the middle of the season when partners have no time to supervise how it is used.

What these industries share

1. **Stability is a deliberate choice,** not the absence of a decision.
2. **Changes compete for a limited capacity,** and not every worthwhile change happens immediately.
3. **Timing matters** as much as the change itself.
4. **Results are checked afterward,** so the organization learns which changes were worth their cost.

SECTION 05

The stability decision

If stability needs managing, leaders need a way to decide, change by change, whether now is the time. The framework below is deliberately simple. It is built on four questions.

QUESTION	WHAT IT ASKS	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Anchors	What must hold steady, and does this change touch it?	Service standards, how people are treated, core roles, key customer moments, quality and safety procedures
Capacity	How much change can this team absorb right now?	Recent changes still settling, workload, turnover, new staff, signs of fatigue or cynicism
Timing	When would this change do the least harm and the most good?	Peak seasons, busy periods, staffing gaps, other changes already scheduled
Value	Is the benefit worth the disruption now, rather than later, and for whom?	Size and certainty of the benefit, which customers gain and which lose, cost of waiting, risk if it goes wrong, whether it can be reversed

The answers point to one of four decisions:

DECISION	WHEN IT FITS
Adopt now	Anchors are protected, the team has capacity, the timing is good and the value is clear
Pilot small	The value looks real but uncertain, or capacity is limited: try it with one team or one shift, measure the effect, then decide
Defer	The change is worthwhile, but capacity or timing is wrong: set a date to revisit and tell people why
Decline	The change touches an anchor without enough benefit, or the value does not justify the disruption

Two points matter in using it.

"Defer" is a legitimate answer, not a failure. Most managers are never taught to say "not yet" to a good idea, and most organizations implicitly reward adopting everything. Deferring a change, and explaining clearly why, protects the team's capacity for the changes that matter most.

Not every change needs the full treatment. A routine software update needs a five-minute heads-up. A change to what someone's job actually is, which AI increasingly brings, needs serious attention to the human side, and that is where the classic models, especially Bridges' attention to loss, still earn their place.

The framework also guards against the opposite risk. Stability can become a polite excuse for resistance, and organizations that wait too long fall behind competitors who adopt faster. The Value question exists precisely to make the cost of waiting visible.

When the change isn't yours to defer

Many leaders do not control the timing of the changes that reach their teams. AI tools update automatically, vendors retire old versions, and head office mandates new systems. A front-desk supervisor cannot postpone a software release. The framework still applies, but the decision shifts from *whether* to *how*:

- **Protect the anchors.** If a mandated change touches a key customer moment, decide in advance how that moment will be handled during the transition, even if that means a temporary manual workaround.
- **Make room in capacity.** If the change cannot move, something else can: postpone a local initiative, adjust schedules, or pair less experienced staff with confident ones for the first weeks.
- **Control the timing you can.** Training, team briefings and the first live use can often be timed around peaks even when the release date cannot.
- **Say clearly what is not changing.** When people cannot influence a change, knowing what stays the same matters even more.
- **Pass the information upward.** If mandated changes keep overwhelming a team, that is evidence the organization's senior leaders need, because it is their portfolio of change that is exceeding capacity.

SECTION 06

What it means at each level

Managing stability is not only a senior leadership task. Each level of an organization has a different part to play.

Frontline staff: adapting well

Frontline employees rarely decide which changes happen, but how they handle change determines whether it works. The most useful skills are practical habits rather than theory:

- Learning a new tool quickly, and knowing where to go when stuck
- Admitting confusion early instead of improvising
- Keeping service quality steady while still learning
- Using AI tools for the right tasks, checking their output, and knowing when a person must take over
- Raising concerns about a change constructively, with specifics

These habits can be taught and practiced, and they increasingly separate strong candidates from others.

Supervisors: protecting the team in motion

Supervisors are where change succeeds or fails, yet they are usually the least prepared for it. Their role in a world of constant change is to:

- Explain clearly what is changing, why, and **what is staying the same**
- Judge their team's capacity and push back when it is exceeded
- Sequence changes so they do not pile up in the same weeks
- Handle the difficult conversations: the experienced colleague who resists, the new hire who is overwhelmed, the employee who fears AI will replace them
- Protect the moments that matter most to customers during transitions

Senior leaders and boards: managing the portfolio

At the top, the task is to treat change as a portfolio with a limited budget of organizational capacity:

- Know how many changes are under way across the organization, and where they land
- Name the organization's anchors explicitly and protect them
- Make room for "defer" and "decline" as respectable outcomes
- Ask whether past changes delivered what they promised before approving the next ones
- Hold leaders accountable not only for adopting change, but for the stability and performance of their teams while doing so

That last point matters most. In many organizations, leaders are rewarded for launching initiatives and almost never for the consistency of the service their teams deliver along the way.

SECTION 07

Building the capability

Judgment about stability and change is not something people pick up from a slide deck. It is a skill, and skills are built through practice.

How it is usually taught, and why that falls short

Most change management education teaches the models: lectures, case studies and toolkits of stakeholder maps and communication plans. That builds knowledge, but knowing Kotter's eight steps does not prepare a supervisor for the moment a respected colleague refuses to use a new system in front of the team. Training also tends to reach change specialists and senior managers, not the frontline supervisors who carry change day to day, and it usually treats change as a single project rather than a continuous condition.

What works better

1. **Practice over lectures.** Short, realistic scenarios of the hard moments, practiced through role-play or simulation, with feedback: the resistant colleague, the overwhelmed new hire, the rollout that collides with a busy weekend.
2. **Little and often.** Brief practice spread over weeks, not a single workshop.
3. **Real changes as the classroom.** Pair training with a change actually happening at work, so it is applied immediately.
4. **The human side, named directly.** Acknowledge the loss people feel, of competence, routine or status, not just the steps of the process.
5. **Decisions, not just execution.** Include scenarios where the right answer is to defer or decline, so people learn that stability can be the correct call.

Measuring what matters

Completion certificates say little about whether people can manage change well. Better measures include:

- **Adoption:** are people actually using the new tool, and using it well?
- **Service consistency:** did customer or guest feedback hold steady during the transition?
- **Error rates:** did mistakes rise, and for how long?
- **Time to proficiency:** how long until people worked confidently again?
- **Retention:** did the change cost the team people it wanted to keep?

Tracked over time, these measures show which changes were worth their cost and which teams handle change well, and they turn stability from an intuition into something leaders can manage.

SECTION 08

The stability check

A one-page tool to use before approving any significant change. It takes ten minutes and is best done with the people who will live with the change.

The change: _____

ANCHORS

- ☐ We have named what must hold steady for this team or service.
- ☐ This change does not weaken any of those anchors, or we have a plan to protect them.
- ☐ We can tell people clearly what will stay the same.

CAPACITY

- ☐ Earlier changes for this team have settled.
- ☐ Workload, staffing and turnover leave room to learn something new.
- ☐ The team is not showing signs of change fatigue.

TIMING

- ☐ This does not fall in a peak season, busy period or critical deadline.
- ☐ It does not overlap with other changes landing on the same people.
- ☐ Supervisors have time to support people through it.

VALUE

- ☐ We can state the benefit in one sentence, and how we will know it worked.
- ☐ We know the cost of waiting, and it is real.
- ☐ We know what happens if it goes wrong, and whether it can be reversed.

Decision (circle one): Adopt now | Pilot small | Defer until _____ | Decline

Reason, in one sentence, to share with the team:

_____

Review date to check whether it worked: _____

CLOSING

Conclusion

Change management was designed for a world that changed in episodes. That world is fading. When AI brings a steady stream of new tools and new ways of working, the question "how do we get people to accept this change?" is no longer enough.

The more important question now is what to hold steady, and when. Organizations that answer it well will name their anchors, respect their people's capacity, choose their timing, and treat "not yet" as a sound decision rather than a failure of nerve. They will still change, often quickly, but around a stable core that their customers and their people can rely on.

> *The leaders who do well in the coming years may not be the ones who change fastest, but the ones who know what not to change.*

— / ABOUT

About the author

Lawrence Fine is CEO and Co-Founder of AGCP Farmacêuticos, a pharmaceutical nanotechnology company based in Lisbon, and leads Graticus, its software and simulation brand. He spent 17 years at Microsoft in a range of leadership roles, has led turnarounds and growth strategies as an independent advisor, and has served on a number of boards. He is the author of five books on leadership and holds a PhD in Engineering from Stanford University and an MBA from Emory University.

About Graticus

Graticus, part of AGCP Farmacêuticos, builds scenario-based simulations that help people develop real-world judgment, along with a development platform for early-stage pharmaceutical work. Its focus is on practical skills and measurable results.

graticus.com · hello@graticus.com

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