

Change Fatigue

Moving From Exhaustion to Energy in a World of Constant Change

Today we face a mismatch between the amount of change demanded in our worlds and our capacity to absorb that change. This is leading to Change Fatigue. The answer to this isn't better Change Management but better managing our human capacity for change. This requires us and our organizations to grow and adapt in the face of uncertainty. Competitive advantage in the future lies with leaders who can build people's energy, resilience, and confidence in the face of continuous change.

The World of Change Has Changed

We've moved from managing large-scale transformations to living with an accumulation of multiple overlapping and endless change cycles.

For most of modern business history, organizations experienced distinct periods of disruption and transformation followed by periods of stability. Change Management emerged to help organizations successfully manage these episodic events.

Today, this pattern has disappeared. Technology has shifted us into a "supercycle" of change. According to Gartner, organizations experience 10 enterprise level changes per year, up from 2 a decade ago. 75% of companies change their business model every several years. 22% of companies report "reinventing" themselves every year.

Change today is fundamentally different. It's not only that there's more of it, but its very nature has changed.

More

Organizations are managing more changes, more initiatives, and more priorities than ever. Cycles of change are superseded by another cycle of change before the first is completed. It's breathless.

Faster

There's not only more change, but it moves faster. Technologies evolve monthly, planning cycles have compressed, organizations pivot continuously. We're constantly responding rather than getting ahead of change.

Layered

Changes no longer occur one at a time. Multiple transformations unfold simultaneously, with each new change stacking on top of those already underway.

Complex

Today's changes are deeply interconnected. A single initiative – such as adopting AI – can reshape strategy, operating models, org design, and culture all at once.

Existential

Change is no longer just about new strategies, processes or organizational structures. It increasingly challenges people's sense of relevance and identity by raising questions about the future of work, which skills will matter, and the role each person will play in the organization.

AI is both a driver and vivid manifestation of these trends. It continually reshapes processes, jobs, and business models. Its impacts are uncertain and in some respects unknowable. It has no defined end state. And it raises existential questions about human nature and human value.

Humans Haven't Changed

We're built for stability, not uncertainty.

While the external environment has changed dramatically, human biology has not. Our brains evolved in environments that were largely stable and predictable. They are constantly building models of the world, anticipating what comes next and scanning for threats when expectations are violated. Certainty isn't merely comforting, it's biologically efficient.

The problem isn't stress. A degree of stress is critical for our growth and development. The problem is the mismatch between what the environment demands and what we're able to absorb. Our environment of continuous change keeps our brain's threat detection mechanism on constant alert, draining us of physical and emotional energy.

The challenge of absorbing change is compounded by a lack of proper recovery time. Our brains and bodies are designed for periods of heightened demand followed by periods of recovery. Athletes understand recovery as central to performance and part of training. But today's workplace has largely removed any recovery period. Change arrives continuously. Our bodies remain in heightened vigilance, depleted of energy and unable to build back stronger.

The Result is Change Fatigue- an Invisible Capacity Crisis

The rate of environmental change has outpaced our ability to absorb it.

Our ability to absorb change is not unlimited. We all have finite cognitive and attentional resources. When incoming demands exceed available capacity, Change Fatigue emerges. Energy declines, and people find it harder to learn, adopt new behaviors, and make decisions. Execution slows. Cynicism increases. It's not that people dislike change; it's that they've reached their change threshold.

The consequences of this are real. At the exact time the organization needs employees to step up and change, people are least able to do so. Gartner reports that 73% of organizations now operate

above their change threshold. Willingness to support enterprise changes has collapsed from 74% in 2016 to 43% today.

Change Fatigue is not the same as Burn Out; it's the precursor. Burn out is a broader medically recognized condition brought on by chronic workplace stress that leads to a collapse of energy. It shows up as "I'm done." Burn out is very damaging to organizations, often requiring medical treatment and leading to high turnover and bad feelings. It's critical that we check Change Fatigue before it leads to burn out.

Change Fatigue is Real, but Often Misdiagnosed:

What looks like resistance is often exhaustion.

There's a gap between the experiences of leaders and employees in this continuous change environment. Leaders sense employees understand the need for change, but they observe low enthusiasm and emotional commitment to it. Execution may be slower than needed. Productivity may wane. This is interpreted as employees resisting the change or lacking drive to implement it.

In reality, employees accept the need for change. What they lack is the cognitive and emotional capacity to absorb another initiative. They feel tired and frustrated. They struggle to make decisions, deliver deadlines, and deliver high-quality work. They may begin resenting the constant shifts and become cynical. Trust in leadership declines.

Moving from Change Management to Change Capacity

The answer to Change Fatigue isn't in better change management but increasing levels of change capacity.

Traditional change management focuses on building a change plan, setting priorities, establishing governance, creating and tracking metrics, communicating and training. These management tools are important to manage transformations but are not sufficient to combat Change Fatigue. Organizations need to deliberately cultivate the capacity to absorb and grow in the face of increased volumes of change.

Fortunately, this is possible. Our capacity to absorb change is not fixed. People can evolve their mindset, develop skills, and build psychological flexibility to adjust to greater change and uncertainty. We can't make change effortless, but we can become better equipped to handle change without being depleted by it.

Moving forward

Building greater Change Capacity requires an honest diagnosis of the Fatigue problem and a human-centered approach to reframing the experience caused by the changes.

Overcoming Change Fatigue and building Change Capacity requires changing our relationship to its underlying triggers, and this requires a human-centered vs a process-centered approach.

The starting point is an honest diagnosis. Before identifying solutions, leaders need a clear picture of the scope, impact, and underlying causes of Change Fatigue. Five actions drive the diagnosis:

1

Map the Fatigue Fatigue rarely affects everyone equally. It varies with the nature of the team's work and their proximity to the change and its impact. Creating a team level "heat map" can visually reveal how broadly and deeply Change Fatigue is being experienced across the organization, and where to begin an intervention.

2

Identify the Behavioral Signs Change Fatigue manifests in different behaviors, and these can evolve over time as the change progresses. Early signs might include overt resistance and push back. As fatigue deepens, resistance might give way to resignation, disengagement, and compliance without commitment. Recognizing these behaviors is critical for understanding how Fatigue is affecting people and where they are in the cycle of Change Fatigue.

3

Understand the Business Impact Change Fatigue has consequences beyond how people feel. It drives specific business impacts. It can slow decision making, lower productivity, increase executional errors, or drive unwanted turnover. Identifying the specific business impacts helps leaders build a case for change and focus their efforts where it will make the greatest impact.

4

Diagnose the Drivers Understanding root cause is the most fundamental and highest leverage part of the diagnosis since the wrong diagnosis can lead to the wrong solutions. Leaders often assume employees lack understanding and need more information and then respond by increasing communications. But the real issue might be fear, loss of control, competing demands, or depletion of physical and emotional energy. Understanding root cause is essential to addressing the problem rather than its symptoms.

5

Learn from What We've Done Leaders have often taken some actions to address Change Fatigue without seeing hoped for improvement. Understanding what you've done and if/how it's worked helps identify if you've got an accurate understanding of the underlying issue.

The diagnosis then leads to action. There is no universal prescription for Change Fatigue as solutions have to reflect each organization's particular circumstances. But the most effective responses tend to draw on three levers:

1

Practical Action - Reduce the Felt Load

We can't stop the change, but we can reduce the felt load we ask people to carry. Eliminating unnecessary work and competing priorities is a "no regret" action but rarely is a sustaining solution. More impactful is to "shrink the change" by breaking large changes into smaller, manageable chunks, then making progress against those highly visible with regular feedback to help people see their efforts making a difference.

2

Emotional Action - Restore Control

People are better able to handle change when they have a sense agency over it. In addition to giving teams meaningful influence over how change is implemented, leaders can encourage people to acknowledge what's not changing in their world. Stress elements of company purpose, strategy, and culture that are not changing. And, have individuals explore their own values and other elements of their lives that remain stable.

3

Growth Action - Build Capacity

Reducing the Load and Restoring Control help people recover their ability to adapt. Building Capacity goes further – it's about reframing our relationship to the core driver of uncertainty. Uncertainty is uncomfortable, but it's also the state in which we learn and grow. Change opens possibilities. Leaders can help people to see uncertainty not only as a threat, but as an opportunity for experimentation and growth. We may not make change effortless, but we can enable people to absorb change without being depleted by it.

A New Leadership Imperative

From managing change to building the capacity for change.

For decades, leaders have focused on leading individual change initiatives—developing the right strategy, communicating the vision, and executing transformation effectively. Those capabilities remain essential. But in an era of continuous change, they are no longer sufficient.

The new leadership challenge is not simply to deliver the next transformation. It is to build an organization that can absorb continuous change without depleting the people expected to deliver it.

This requires a fundamental shift in leadership. Rather than viewing change as a series of projects to manage, leaders must view it as an ongoing human capability to cultivate. Expanding an organization's capacity for change means paying as much attention to people's energy, resilience, confidence, and sense of purpose as to timelines, milestones, and implementation plans. Change is no longer just an operational challenge; it is a human one.

The central leadership question therefore shifts from **"How do we manage this change?"** to **"How do we increase our organization's capacity for change?"** Organizations that answer that question won't simply execute more initiatives. They will build healthier cultures, more adaptable people, and a sustainable ability to thrive in an environment where change is no longer an event, but the defining condition of work.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Contact Doug Milliken at doug@creamerandmilliken.com

Creamer & Milliken is a consultancy focused on strengthening organizational culture to turn ambition into performance. We help senior leaders strengthen and evolve their cultures so their organizations can move forward with greater clarity, energy, and measurable performance.