Leading Through Volatility: What CHROs Need to Do Right Now



FORWARD BY DR. ANDREW SHATTÉ, PH.D.

Uncertainty is integral to the human experience.

It has always been so, and yet we still fear and loathe it. Our brains thrive on predictability, clarity, and simplicity, but today's world offers none of these. The U.S. Army War College adopted the term VUCA—Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity—to describe the post-Cold War world; and it sums up our current environment succinctly. For CHROs, this landscape presents both a challenge and a mandate: to lead with clarity amid chaos.

The last several years have tested organizations and individuals alike. From global health crises and economic instability to rapid technological disruption and workforce transformation, the collective trauma has been profound. Anxiety levels have spiked, and research from meQ shows a clear link between low change-readiness and poor mental health outcomes. Many employees—and leaders—feel overwhelmed and underprepared.

But this moment also offers an opportunity. Resilience is not just a buzzword; it's a skill. By shifting our mindset, challenging outdated beliefs, and developing "change confidence," we can redefine our relationship with uncertainty and change. This guide draws from years of psychological research to help CHROs embrace change—not just endure it.

You'll find strategies here to help you build a resilient workforce, foster adaptability, and navigate transitions with greater ease. From cultivating a growth mindset to communicating transparently and prioritizing self-care, the tools in this guide will help you and your teams meet the demands of a VUCA world head-on.

Stability may be elusive, but internal adaptability is within reach. The path forward starts with transforming how we think about—and respond to—change.

– Dr. Andrew Shatté

Co-founder and Chief Knowledge Officer, meQ





Introduction

Successful companies are constantly evolving. While this kind of necessary change puts pressure on your employees, it's different now. Change is piling up all around us, accelerating, uncertain, and coming from every direction.

Which is why successful leaders also support their people. Because the battleground for competitive advantage isn't just about strategy, technology, and innovation. It's about **people**—their ability to adapt, evolve, and lead transformation from within.

We're living through a level of disruption unlike anything we've experienced in our working lives. When regulations shift overnight, technology evolves by the minute, and customer expectations never stand still, the ability to lead through volatile and uncertain change is no longer a leadership asset. It's a leadership imperative.

CHROs sit at a critical crossroads, where human potential meets strategic necessity. An organization's capacity to survive—and thrive—through disruption rests squarely on a workforce of resilient minds capable of not just tolerating disruption, but using it as fuel for growth. As a people leader, you have the power to shape and develop an agile, change-ready workforce that can propel your organization into the future.

The Change Perception Disconnect between Leaders and Workers

There's a dangerous mismatch between leaders and workers on change readiness. This gap between the executive and workforce perceptions of change directly impacts the success of organizational initiatives. It means that those tasked with executing changes are the ones that feel least equipped to handle them.

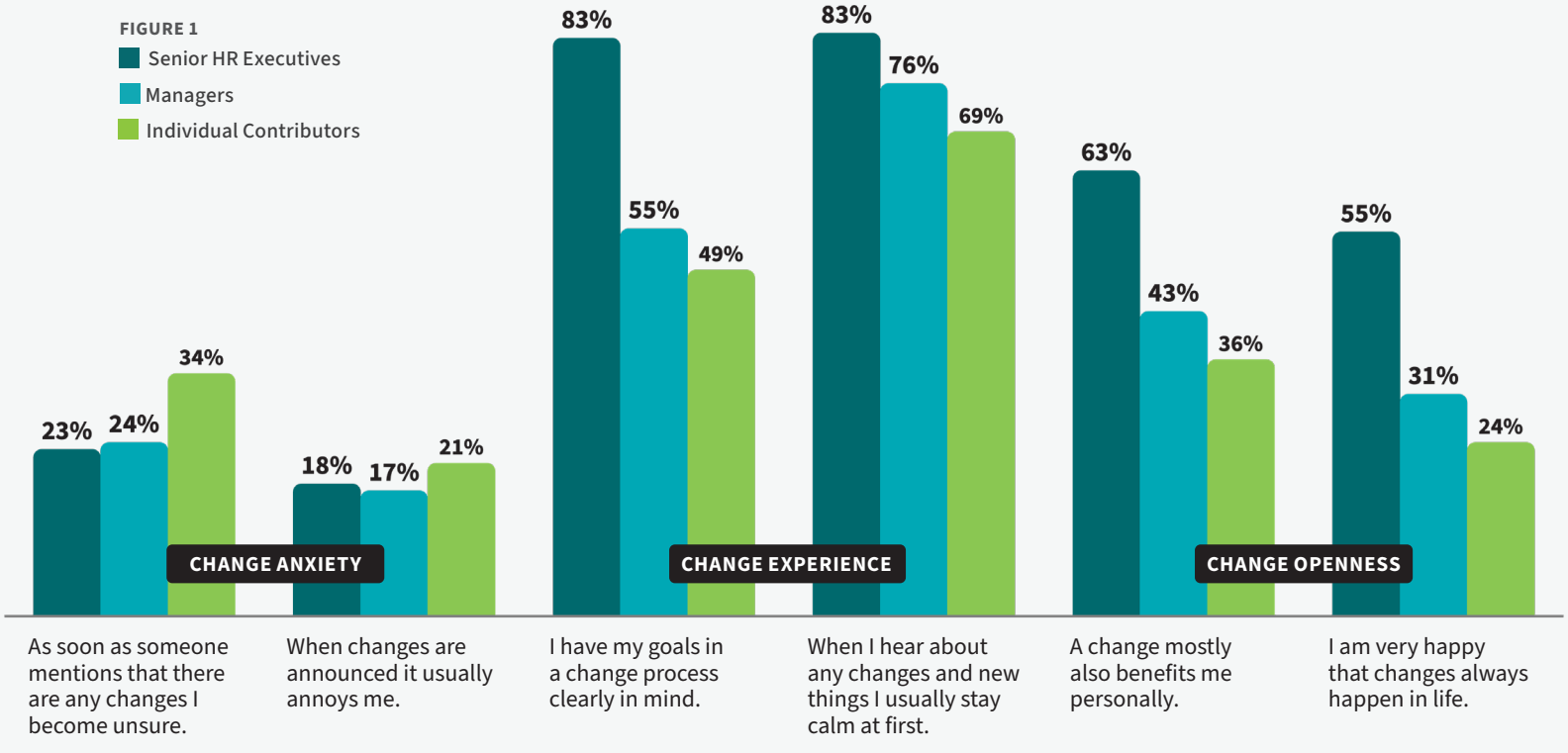
According to the meQ **State of the Workforce Report**, HR executives consistently demonstrated positive perceptions of change. They showed the highest scores in goal clarity (82.6%), emotional composure (83.3%), and perceived personal benefits from change (63.4%).

However, the majority of the workforce, particularly individual contributors and frontline managers, reported the highest levels of anxiety toward change. A striking 34% expressed uncertainty about how to proceed during changes. They also expressed the lowest openness to change; **nearly half of employees** report a high degree of stress due to uncertainty on the job.

Low change readiness correlates with significant mental health risks. At scale, this means a workforce with higher rates of depression, burnout, and anxiety, which affects productivity, absenteeism, and leave risks.

CHANGE READINESS BY ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

FIGURE 1



The **State of the Workforce Report** also reveals why executive leaders experience change differently than the workforce:

Differing Perspectives

Executives may have a more optimistic view of organizational culture, employee well-being, and the effectiveness of company initiatives, while employees on the ground face different realities.

Lack of Direct Exposure

Many executives, especially those at the highest levels, have limited direct exposure to the day-to-day challenges and stressors frontline employees face.

Outdated Assumptions

The report suggests some executives may underestimate the importance of work-life balance, mental health support, and a sense of purpose, all increasingly critical for workforce performance and well-being.

Communication Barriers

Despite efforts to gather feedback and insights, communication barriers may prevent employees' concerns and experiences from reaching executive levels effectively.

Competing Priorities

Executive leadership has to balance multiple competing priorities. While employee well-being and engagement are important, they may not always receive the attention and resources they deserve from the C-Suite.

From Resistance to Readiness

Once we understand the importance of addressing the lack of change readiness present in the general workforce, the question becomes, what do we do about it?

To thrive amid constant disruption, organizations must go beyond reacting to change. You need a human approach for the workforce, an understanding of how people process change on a cognitive level, and a way to improve it. This starts with resilience.

Change readiness is driven by specific, trainable resilience factors that organizations can systematically develop.

Five key capabilities distinguish change-ready individuals:



EMOTION CONTROL



ENGAGEMENT



POSITIVITY



STRESS MANAGEMENT



PURPOSE

The amazing reality is that these skills can be learned. Science has proven it; we can change our relationship with change. These specific, actionable areas for training and development programs can meaningfully improve change readiness across your workforce.

meQ research shows that employees who develop these skills are:

72%

MORE LIKELY TO SEE PERSONAL BENEFITS IN CHANGE

50%

MORE LIKELY TO POSITIVELY ANTICIPATE CHANGE

60%

LESS LIKELY TO FEEL ANNOYED BY CHANGE ANNOUNCEMENTS

The skills imparted through resilience training aren't just about coping with change. They fundamentally shape an employee's entire relationship with change, from emotional responses to strategic preparation and the ability to find personal opportunities in transformation.

Three Populations to Focus On

Every employee benefits from resilience training, but meQ has found that starting with these three populations drives the greatest impact.

1

Managers

Managers are at higher risk of burning out than the average employee, and at the same time, their role has never been more important. They face 40% more work demands and 59% more emotional strain than non-managers, while simultaneously carrying the heaviest responsibility for team well-being and productivity.



Employees who don't feel supported by their manager are four times more likely to leave their jobs. But on the flipside, when managers maintain psychological safety, their teams deliver 45% greater productivity. Employees with supportive managers are 49% more likely to feel a sense of purpose in their work, which leads to improved productivity and engagement, as well as less likelihood of turnover.

Mentally healthy managers are more likely to foster strong relationships with their teams, promote work/life balance, and serve as strong role models for positivity and successful stress management in the face of change. This not only enhances overall team performance but also reduces turnover rates, ensuring stability and continuity in leadership.

See More: **Build a Better Manager**

2

Frontline Workers

Frontline change readiness is ground zero for organizational success during disruptive change. Turbulence often hits frontline roles first and fast, upending schedules, responsibilities, team organization, and safety. What's more, their rates of anxiety and depression are higher than non-frontline workers. Frontline workers are also less likely to know about, and use, organizational resources for stress management and mental health support.



33%

HIGHER ANXIETY THAN NON-FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

61%

HIGHER DEPRESSION THAN NON-FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

meQ has cracked the code on building frontline resilience and change readiness. Across our book of business, frontline engagement rates with our digital resilience program are virtually indistinguishable from non-frontline populations. Moreover, frontline populations demonstrate as much as 42% greater improvement in resilience than non-frontline populations.

See More: **Maximizing Frontline Performance and Well-being with Resilience**

3

Gen Z Employees

As a population, Gen Z is more open to talking about mental health, and also has an expectation that their employer will support their mental well-being. And they do need support, because while they demonstrate a stronger ability to appreciate the upsides of change, they experience higher change anxiety and lower emotional stability during organizational transitions.

Source: **meQ State of the Workforce Report**



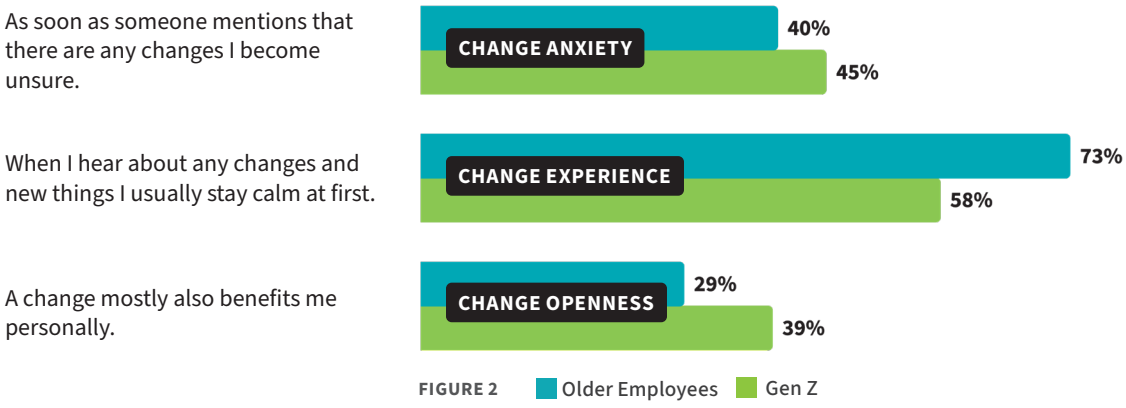


FIGURE 2

Helping Gen Z develop the skills of self awareness, self confidence, and decision making improves their overall agility, and pays off in performance improvements over time.

Watch: **How Gen Z Elevates the Mental Health Conversation**



The Future Belongs to the Resilient

The CHRO has never had more influence or more responsibility. The change gap between executives and employees won't close on its own. But you have the tools, and the moment to close it is now.

Equip your people. Elevate your managers. Empower the frontlines. Future-proof your culture. Because in a world where change is constant, resilience sets market leaders apart from those who just survive.

Lead the way. Your workforce is ready—when you are.

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