

Before You Announce the Change Decide What Would Make You Reverse It



The pilot hasn't met its quality target. Managers are spending more time correcting errors than expected. Employees have raised the same problem in three meetings, but the rollout date is approaching and the executive sponsor has already promised delivery.

At that point, the organization faces more than an implementation problem. It has made continuing the project easier than reconsidering it. The schedule has an owner, the launch has a communication plan and the concerns have a place in the minutes. Nobody has clearly established who can stop the expansion or what evidence would require that decision.

HR should help establish those conditions before the announcement. A change programme needs a defined way to respond when its assumptions fail, including the authority to narrow the scope, pause deployment or abandon an approach. Without that mechanism, employee feedback can become an exercise in documenting problems while the organization continues creating them.

The aim is to make reconsideration a normal management decision, supported by evidence and clear responsibilities. Leaders can remain committed to a business objective while changing the method used to achieve it.

Define what would disprove the business case

An investment proposal usually explains how the change should improve performance. It may say less about which assumptions must hold for that improvement to occur.

A centralized service model might depend on routine requests being resolved without local knowledge. A new technology might depend on employees checking outputs within a few minutes. A restructuring might assume that decision-making authority can move without slowing approvals.

Write those assumptions down. Then identify what evidence would show that they aren't holding. If a high proportion of requests still require local intervention, the centralized model may need redesign. If checking takes longer than performing the

original task, the technology may not deliver the expected capacity benefit.

HR brings information that a project budget may miss. The assumptions often depend on employee competence, managerial capacity, role clarity and the ability to transfer knowledge. These should become explicit implementation conditions rather than remain informal expectations.

Establish decision authority before pressure builds

A concern can be widely recognized and still remain unresolved if nobody knows who has authority to act. Employees may report to supervisors, supervisors may escalate to the project team and the project team may wait for the sponsor. Meanwhile, the rollout continues by default.

Name the person who can approve the next deployment stage. Specify who can suspend a particular activity, who must be consulted and how an urgent concern reaches the decision-maker. Where existing safety, security or incident procedures apply, integrate with them rather than creating a competing process.

HR shouldn't assume technical authority it doesn't hold. A safety professional may need to assess a hazardous condition, a security leader may need to contain an exposure and legal counsel may need to advise on obligations. HR can ensure that people know how to reach those owners and that workforce consequences inform the decision.

Document a route beyond the immediate sponsor for material unresolved concerns. The sponsor may be well placed to fix the problem but also have a strong interest in preserving the timetable. Independent review can help the organization assess evidence without relying entirely on the person responsible for the original proposal.

Use different responses for different failures

Not every missed target requires a shutdown. Some problems can be corrected while the pilot continues. Others make further expansion inappropriate until the cause is understood. Serious threats may require immediate containment under established procedures.

Distinguish those responses in advance. An adjustment might involve additional training or a revised approval rule. A pause might stop new sites from joining while existing users operate under an approved temporary process. A stop might end the approach and move work to a tested alternative.

Be specific about what is being paused. Stopping a launch announcement, stopping expansion and stopping an operating process have very different consequences. Employees need to know which work continues, which method is authorized and who handles exceptions.

Avoid suggesting that every change can simply be reversed. A former supplier may no longer be available. Employees may have left. Data may have changed format, or customer commitments may have been made. Where rollback is impractical, the plan

needs a feasible contingency that stabilizes the work and limits further exposure.

Set thresholds that fit the consequence

Thresholds should reflect the actual work. A document drafting pilot and a process that affects physical safety can't share one universal definition of acceptable error.

Choose measures that connect to the business objective and the relevant risks. These might include turnaround time, material errors, repeated rework, supervision hours or the ability to perform essential tasks. Define the population and measurement period so the result can be interpreted.

For example, an employer might require review if supervisor support exceeds the planned allowance for two consecutive weeks. That could trigger an assessment of workload or design. It wouldn't prove that the project must stop. A serious safety concern, by contrast, should follow the applicable immediate response process without waiting for a two-week trend.

Use ranges or review triggers when precision isn't justified. A pilot may have too few cases to establish a reliable error rate. An absence of reported incidents doesn't prove that a control works, particularly where the underlying event is uncommon.

Agree who can change a threshold and on what basis. Quietly lowering the quality requirement after poor results undermines the purpose of setting it. A legitimate revision should identify the new evidence, the rationale and the person accepting the consequence.

Assess the cost of continuing from today

Suppose a hypothetical Canadian business has already spent \$180,000 implementing a workflow. The pilot now requires 300 additional hours of employee checking each month, valued at an assumed loaded cost of \$50 an hour. Temporary external support adds \$12,000 a month.

Continuing unchanged for another three months would therefore consume \$45,000 of additional employee capacity and \$36,000 in external fees. Together those items total \$81,000, before any other effects. These are illustrative Canadian-dollar planning assumptions, not a reported case.

An alternative is a controlled four-week pause in expansion. Assume the corrective work costs \$25,000 and temporary operating arrangements cost \$8,000. Delaying a benefit that finance estimates at \$10,000 creates a further economic cost. Under those assumptions, the pause has a \$43,000 economic cost.

The comparison doesn't establish an automatic \$38,000 cash saving. The employee time in the continuation option is a capacity value, the external fees are expenditure and the delayed benefit depends on its own evidence. The alternatives also need a consistent time horizon, realistic post-pause costs and an assessment of whether the correction will work.

The \$180,000 already spent is relevant to accountability and learning, but it won't be recovered merely by continuing. The decision should compare future costs, benefits and risks from the point at which leadership is deciding. Contractual exit charges or

recoverable amounts would still belong in the forward-looking comparison.

Finance and HR should present those distinctions clearly. A controlled pause may be justified, or continuing with a different mitigation may be better. Either conclusion should follow the feasible alternatives and their assumptions, rather than the discomfort of changing an announced plan.

Make employee concerns usable without demanding a complete solution

Employees are often the first to encounter a mismatch between the design and the work. They may know that a process repeatedly fails without knowing how to fix the underlying system.

Ask them to describe the case, the consequence and what they needed to do next. Provide a simple reporting route and help turn observations into evidence the project team can investigate. Requiring every concern to arrive with a fully developed solution can silence the people closest to the problem.

The UK's Health and Safety Executive advises consulting staff before, during and after organizational change and being prepared to challenge plans through independent review. Its guidance arises in a safety context and isn't Canadian law. It nevertheless supports a practical governance principle: consultation needs to reach the people assessing the change, including when their findings are inconvenient. [1]

Tell employees what response to expect. Acknowledgement isn't resolution. A useful response explains whether the concern was verified, what action was taken or why the current approach will continue. Protect personal information and confidential business details in the process.

Some reports will concern misconduct, harassment, safety or other protected matters. Route them through the applicable procedures and obligations. A project feedback channel shouldn't become a substitute for required reporting or investigation.

Protect disagreement from performance shorthand

A change programme can become less informed when employees believe that questioning it will affect their performance assessment. Terms such as negative attitude, resistance and lack of adaptability can conceal a disagreement about evidence.

HR should ask managers to distinguish conduct from the substance of the concern. An employee can be expected to communicate respectfully and perform authorized work while also identifying a significant flaw. A technically weak objection still deserves a fair response explaining the evidence.

Avoid offering blanket immunity for anything described as feedback. Deliberate misconduct and serious violations need appropriate treatment. The commitment should be that good-faith concerns will be assessed through a fair process and that managers won't treat substantiated criticism as a failure of loyalty.

Review performance feedback during major implementation periods for vague judgments unsupported by examples. If a manager says an employee isn't embracing change, ask

what the employee did, which expectation was communicated and whether the concern they raised was investigated. That helps keep accountability grounded in observable behaviour.

Test the contingency before the launch

A fallback plan can look reassuring on paper and fail when the organization needs it. The old system may no longer accept current data. Employees may lack access. A supplier may require more notice than the plan allows.

Run a proportionate rehearsal. Choose a realistic failure and trace how work would continue. Who makes the decision? How are employees informed? Which records are authoritative? What happens to work already in progress?

For a service change, test whether the contingency preserves essential customer commitments and gives employees a clear approved method. For a technology deployment, involve the appropriate technical owners in testing access, data reconciliation and recovery. HR should verify staffing, training, communication and role clarity without claiming to validate technical controls.

Include the period after a pause. Teams may need to retrain, reconcile records or correct messages sent to customers. Reversing a decision creates work of its own, and the plan should resource it.

Where no safe fallback exists, leadership needs to understand that limitation before expanding the change. It may justify smaller deployment stages, stronger validation or postponement until a feasible contingency is available.

Separate temporary disruption from persistent failure

Early implementation often involves learning. Employees may initially take longer, ask more questions and make correctable mistakes. Those effects don't automatically invalidate the approach.

Before launch, define the expected learning period and the evidence of improvement. A credible plan might anticipate declining support hours and better task accuracy as employees gain supervised experience. Measure those changes rather than simply extending the stabilization period whenever a target is missed.

Persistent rework, unchanged error patterns or a growing dependency on specialists may indicate that the problem concerns design rather than familiarity. Review representative cases with the people doing the work. Ask whether employees have the necessary information, authority and tools, and whether the process handles the exceptions it regularly encounters.

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety identifies clear expectations and workload management among relevant psychosocial factors. [2] For HR, those considerations belong in the implementation review. If the change works only through sustained additional effort, the business needs to assess that demand rather than assume employees will eventually become accustomed to it.

Be careful with causal claims. Overtime and absence can change for reasons unrelated to the project. Use the baseline, operational context and employee explanations to

assess whether the implementation is contributing and what response is warranted.

Make each deployment stage a real decision

A stage review should allow the organization to choose among feasible actions. If every meeting ends with approval regardless of the evidence, the review adds administration without providing control.

Provide decision-makers with a short account of results against the agreed conditions, unresolved concerns, costs and the recommendation. Include material contrary evidence and explain how it was assessed. Where a risk is accepted, identify the accountable person, the conditions of acceptance and the next review.

Don't treat silence as approval. The person authorized to approve expansion should make and record the decision. If essential evidence is missing, state that limitation plainly and determine whether proceeding is appropriate under the organization's governance and applicable requirements.

After a pause or revision, communicate the operational instruction first. Explain what employees should do now, who can answer questions and what will be reviewed next. Leadership can then explain the reasoning without blaming those who surfaced the problem or pretending the original plan never changed.

Establish the rules while reconsideration is still easy

HR can introduce this approach at the next project approval. Ask the sponsor to identify the workforce assumptions, the evidence required before expansion, the conditions that trigger review and the feasible response if the plan fails.

Work with finance and the operational owner to test the economics of those responses. Confirm the decision authority and rehearse one realistic contingency. The process can be brief for a limited, reversible change and more substantial where consequences are serious.

The organization will still face uncertainty. What changes is its ability to respond. Employees know where consequential evidence goes, managers know which decisions they can make and executives have a basis for reconsidering the method without abandoning the objective. That capability should be established before the launch date makes changing direction harder.