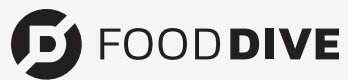


Thriving Under Pressure:

How Food & Beverage Leaders Can Master Continuous Change



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In the last five years, the food and beverage (F&B) industry has undergone significant changes. F&B businesses must respond to a pressure-cooker environment dominated by new technologies and regulations, heightened sustainability focus, supply chain disruptions, labor challenges, shifting consumer expectations, and the accelerated pace of change.

And they have responded. F&B companies have invested heavily in technologies and processes to be safer, more agile, and more efficient.

Still, change is hard. Even when companies are committed to advancing, they struggle to make effective long-term progress. Why? Leaders may see change management as a short-term project rather than an ever-present mindset necessary for business resilience and success. Often, the leaders initiating the change are unprepared for resistance, and employees continue relying on legacy technologies and approaches.¹ As a result, many business initiatives fail. In fact, recent research found only about 12% of companies succeed in their transformations.²

¹ TraceGains. (2024, September 10). New Study Reveals 48% of Food and Beverage Suppliers Still Relying on Manual Spreadsheets; 65% Cite Regulatory Change as Driver for Modernization. PR Newswire. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-study-reveals-48-of-food-and-beverage-suppliers-still-relying-on-manual-spreadsheets-65-cite-regulatory-change-as-driver-for-modernization-302242326.html>

² 88% of business transformations fail to achieve their original ambitions; those that succeed avoid overloading top talent. (n.d.). Bain. <https://www.bain.com/about/media-center/press-releases/2024/88-of-business-transformations-fail-to-achieve-their-original-ambitions-those-that-succeed-avoid-overloading-top-talent/>





When it comes to change management, companies are often reactive, addressing problems after they've gone south. However, by taking a proactive approach, businesses can develop a new mindset. By understanding that change—and therefore change management—is constant, F&B companies can develop strategies to continuously recognize, prepare for, and successfully implement transformation.

What is change management? The discipline of helping people move from where they are today to where the organization needs them to be tomorrow.

Paul Owen, Catena Solutions

The new operating reality

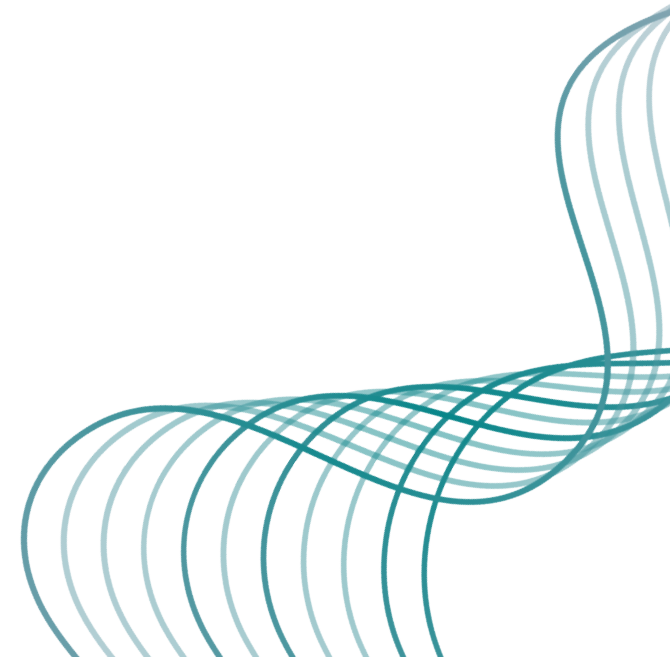
All industries face challenges and opportunities that require them to evolve. But F&B, long known for slower incremental change, now faces multiple pressures that demand rapid shifts.

Changing consumer expectations. Evan Piekara, Enterprise Transformation and Change Leader, said consumer expectations continue to transform quickly. GLP-1 medicines and the Make America Healthy Again initiative increase the focus on wellness trends. “Adapting your products, promotions, packaging, and channels are major things companies need to effectively pivot and evolve to win in the marketplace.”

Supply chain resilience through technology. AI is becoming essential for helping food and beverage companies navigate climate volatility, geopolitical disruption, changing consumer preferences, and rising cost pressures. “The ability to forecast, scenario plan, and respond in real time is now a competitive necessity,” Piekara said. “AI will increasingly power demand and scenario planning and innovation, giving companies the insight and agility they need to stay ahead.”

Workforce challenges. Paul Owen, Human Capital Practice Director at Catena Solutions, a business strategy consulting firm, said the new reality is all about productivity, and that labor shortages, retention issues, and high turnover can stand in the way. “Companies want to know ‘how do we help employees be successful and feel successful at their jobs? And how do we keep them here, working, and developing with us?’”

The F&B industry also contends with emerging regulatory demands, mergers and acquisitions, divestitures, and the management of multi-site operations. These factors make it essential to be agile and adapt; in other words, a F&B company’s success is a direct correlation to its ability to handle change.





From reaction to readiness

“Although F&B companies recognize the need to change, many are slow to adopt change management as a practice,” explained Stacy Tipton, Organizational Change Management Leader.

Piekara agreed that many businesses are just starting to create change programs in pockets of their organizations. Some leaders have gone through change and have done it effectively, as have some divisions. But these are rare, he said. “By and large, I’m seeing that a lot of companies haven’t built it as a strategic capability yet.”

While F&B companies have and do change, it’s often a reaction to challenges and not in anticipation of them.



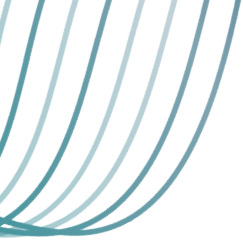


Symptoms of reactive change

When organizations fail to change at the pace the business demands, the consequences compound quickly. “Slow or ineffective change doesn’t just delay progress—it erodes competitiveness,” Piekara said. “Underinvesting in the time, resources, and expertise required leads to stalled ROI, mounting frustration, and a narrative that transformation is something to endure rather than an opportunity to accelerate performance and unlock growth.”

Piekara added that slow decision-making, inability to meet deadlines, misinterpretation of data, confusion, and becoming overwhelmed are key signs that a business is on the defensive in response to change.

One way to take a more proactive approach is to identify the situations that typically require changes in processes, people, or technology, Tipton said. “In the food industry especially, you usually get an early signal that change is coming when it shows up in a project plan. In those early conversations, you can spot impacts and make smarter decisions before things get locked in regarding who to include, which stakeholders may be most influential, and even the timeline and the direction for the change itself.”



Piekara said that developing a five-year operational strategy helps businesses be more prepared. “You’re looking ahead at what’s coming within the industry, benchmarking and anticipating needed changes, and you’re tying your strategy and your transformation together. In doing so, you’re able to forecast what might be coming down the road and what major changes or transformations are coming from that. Then you can work backwards from there to begin prioritizing, priming the organization, and planning and allocating resources needed to transform.” Piekara added that as part of resourcing, a force multiplier is for businesses to build their leaders’ change management skills so that they can develop an agile and resilient ‘always on’ change culture.

Businesses often recognize the need for change as they experience a mix of growth and complexity requiring the business to move faster than their current environment allows, Tipton added. “A lot of change in food manufacturing has been driven by inconsistencies across plants or maybe workarounds popping up and systems that just aren’t built for where the company is headed.”



A practical framework for change

Not every business shift requires a full-blown change management process, but most will require adjustments as the environment changes. Experts Owen, Piekara, and Tipton provided ten tips for navigating a redirection, big or small.

- 1. Start early.** Once change is on the horizon, begin preparing two times earlier than you anticipate, and expect the shift to take twice as long as scheduled. Additionally, it's recommended that most companies double or triple their change management budget before launching a project. Securing that investment from the get-go can make the difference between value growth and declining profitability.
- 2. Begin with the discovery.** This may be called stakeholder analysis or change readiness assessment, but the intention is to understand the current environment, business climate, and how people work.
- 3. Identify leaders.** Start by identifying the leaders who will spearhead the movement. Ensure those leaders are aligned and have the right competencies and skill sets to understand the change; they can be the multipliers who guide their teams through the process.
- 4. Focus on who will be affected.** Understand what these differences will mean to those affected and anticipate how they might react. This step is often missed and doesn't get addressed until the impact is felt, Owen said.
- 5. Build a cohesive strategy.** Ensure it encompasses change, communication, and capability building, and then integrate the strategy with overall projects.
- 6. Communicate and clarify the plan.** Prepare your people by creating messaging explaining what's happening and why, what to expect during the process, and what the expected outcome may be.
- 7. Get feedback at multiple stages.** This will reduce uncertainty and resistance.





8. **Be willing to modify the plan.** Even though you want to ensure the process moves forward, be open to adjusting the plan as you uncover more information, especially if a disconnect appears between the initial perceived problem and the actual one. A company may assume a productivity problem stems from legacy technology and solve it by purchasing a new system. However, if the root of the problem is human behavior, the new system won't deliver the expected value.
9. **Assess the effectiveness of training.** Make sure people are trained and understand how the new people, processes, or technologies will improve the organization. Along with that, codify the process to capture lessons learned and to teach people who are going through the process what the expectations for change are and what "good" looks like.
10. **Plan for sustained change.** Reinforcement is the last step of the process, Tipton said. Strong leadership alignment, monitoring, and maintaining metrics make sure changes stick. "Most changes are not a one-time event. They're something you must continue to skill and embed in an organization." Tipton suggested that businesses begin planning to sustain change from the beginning of the process, not just at the end.

Embedding change in the business

While businesses acknowledge the need for change and are increasingly willing to do it, Owen said one aspect still hinders progress: “True change capability is probably where most organizations are behind.”

Although there’s no one model for change management, successful implementation requires skills from three parts, Owen explained. First is the functional leader, the person whose team stands to benefit from the change. This person must be bought into their role in supporting and driving the change. Second is the project leader, who keeps everyone on schedule, moves them through timelines, and helps teams get through the actual implementation. The third part is the change leader. “This is the person who understands and thinks about change from the perspective of the employee and how their jobs will be different in the future state,” Owen said.

True change capability is probably where most organizations are behind.

Paul Owen, Catena Solutions





Change management works best when the functional leader, project leader, and change leader roles are occupied by three different people. However, the change leader is sometimes most effective as an external resource. Although change can be led by the functional or project leader, that person must also be an expert in change management, creating the process, and teaching it to others while also juggling their additional work responsibilities. “When these processes are internally led, I don’t always see that rigor being put into place where artifacts are being collected and stored and then shared broadly across the enterprise to formalize standards, codify lessons learned, and build institutional knowledge,” Piekara said. He added that consultants bring external perspectives, practices, and lessons learned across industries and projects and leave behind artifacts and practices that can grow change knowledge and capabilities.

When organizations build real change capability, they stop treating transformation as a disruption and start treating it as a core competency. “Change isn’t a temporary state—it’s the operating environment,” Piekara said. “The scale and pace may shift, but the need never goes away. When change management is embedded as a skillset and mindset, leaders can quickly pinpoint what truly moves the needle, focus resources where they matter most, and drive meaningful impact even under tight constraints.”



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