Synechron

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Building Trust in Your Digital Transformation Journey

Four rules to successfully achieve digital transformation at scale.

David Keane

Co-founder & Head of Enterprise Agility,
Synechron | ServiceNow

"When organisations undertake a large-scale transformation, research shows that their efforts fail about 70 percent of the time."

McKinsey 'Common Pitfalls
in Transformations. 2022

Planning for Digital Transformation Success

Digital transformation continues to dominate strategic agendas across global enterprises, with anticipated investments set to reach nearly $4 trillion by 2027 (IDC).

However, despite these substantial financial commitments, the success rate of digital transformations remains dismally low. McKinsey reports that a striking 70% of these initiatives will fail to meet their objectives, often due to four critical shortcomings:

1. **the absence of fact-based high aspirations**
2. **a failure to clearly communicate the purpose of the transformation**
3. **a focus on activities rather than outcomes during execution**
4. **an inability to sustain efforts post-transformation.**

This guide examines this four-rule framework from McKinsey in more detail and adds in Synechron's own practical experience in delivering successful digital transformation initiatives. Combined, this will help you navigate the complexities of digital transformation at scale, ensuring a much higher likelihood of success and a lasting impact to your organisation.

"Digital transformation continues to dominate strategic agendas across global enterprises."

Rule 1: Set High Aspirations

A cornerstone of successful digital transformation is establishing ambitious, yet achievable goals based on concrete data. Many transformation efforts falter due to reliance on superficial metrics that create an illusion of progress. Tracking metrics like the number of employees certified in Agile methodologies or the adoption rate of new tools might seem to be a reasonable measure of progress but are often an illusory mirage. To capture a true of measure progress, metrics involving real business outcomes are required.

High aspiration targets are often avoided by managers if those targets are then linked to their reviews and remuneration. When managers are reluctant to agree to stretch targets, and look to avoid aspirational ones, they then manoeuvre to be measured on simple 'tick-box' measures that they feel more comfortable with and can control.

Ideally, meaningful Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) need to be assigned by IT senior leaders and the connection between aspirational targets and performance reviews needs to be managed sensitively. Instead of setting modest targets, adopting ambitious ones - such as doubling release frequency and halving incident rates - challenges teams to address fundamental and often difficult issues that exist across the organisation. It isn't expected that teams will achieve 100% of their OKRs, but it is clear to everyone what success looks like.

OKRs employing outcome-based metrics such as the 4 x DORA metrics are a great start point. Measuring release to production and incident rates establishes a reliable baseline for assessing progress. And as confidence in data accuracy grows, additional metrics like Mean Time to Restore (MTTR) and Change Failure Rate can also be integrated.

Tackled together, these measures foster a culture of high aspirations and help identify systemic blockers that impede progress. Transparency in metrics allows all members of the organisation to track their contributions, as well as reinforcing a collective sense of purpose and achievement.

> ***"A culture of high aspirations helps identify systemic blockers that impede progress."***

And by anchoring goals in fact-based data and aiming high, organisations can drive meaningful, transformative change. This creates a clear path forward and builds a robust foundation for measuring real progress, ensuring that all efforts contribute towards significant business outcomes.

Rule 2: Explain the 'Why'

Clear communication of the transformation's purpose is essential for gaining organisational buy-in and sustaining momentum for change. Early transformation efforts often suffer from vague and uninspiring goals, such as becoming the "most agile team on the planet." Additionally, undisclosed motives such as reducing headcount, can significantly undermine trust and motivation in the entire transformation project.

"Prioritising the improvement of the engineering experience can often prove to be the linchpin for long-term success."

A more effective strategy involves setting transparent and relatable goals. For example, focusing on reducing costs, increasing the speed of software delivery, and improving the engineering experience, provides the opportunity for clear and measurable objectives. While initial emphasis may be on cost reduction and speed, prioritising the improvement of the engineering experience can often prove to be the linchpin for long-term success.

Placing engineers at the centre of the transformation process ensures that changes directly benefit those responsible for implementing them. This approach requires organisations to systematically address central blockers that hinder productivity. As engineers experience tangible improvements in their daily work, their belief in and enthusiasm for the transformation process grows. This bottom-up engagement is vital for cultivating a positive, ambitious, and innovative culture across the organisation and its importance can't be overstated.

By ensuring that the workforce understands the 'why' behind the transformation, organisations lay the foundation for trust and commitment. Clear, honest communication about goals and benefits is essential for building a cohesive and motivated workforce. This will aid the smooth execution of the transformation and ensure that employees are aligned with the broader strategic business vision.

Rule 3: Focus on Outcomes

A common mistake in digital transformations, is prioritising activities over outcomes. We've already highlighted this can lead to tracking vanity metrics such as the number of staff earning new certifications, rather than measuring their effectiveness in using their new training to deliver in their day to day work. While metrics such as the number of certifications indicate activity and do play a part in success, on their own, they do not reflect real progress towards the desired outcomes.

To avoid this pitfall, organisations must focus on outcome metrics that directly correlate with their business objectives. By incentivising teams to achieve improvements in these areas, we find organisations create a positive competitive environment that fosters excellence and best practices.

"…a focus on outcomes rather than activities creates a culture of continuous improvement…"

We've mentioned central blockers previously - these are systemic issues that significantly impede progress and Change Management is one of the more common ones. These impediments to progress should be addressed strategically, ideally prioritising solutions for the most mature teams first. This accelerates progress for these teams and also sets a clear example for the other teams to follow.

The emphasis on using outcome metrics goes further; it also drives accountability and transparency. Teams that succeed in improving delivery frequency and reducing incidents demonstrate tangible progress, motivating other teams to follow suit. This quickly creates a culture of continuous improvement, where success is measured by the achievement of significant, business-aligned goals.

Finally, a focus on outcomes helps identify and eliminate inefficiencies within the organisation. By continually measuring and improving key metrics, organisations can streamline processes and enhance overall productivity against clear benchmarks. This results-oriented approach ensures that transformation efforts translate into real, measurable benefits for the business.

Rule 4: Sustain Momentum

The challenges in sustaining momentum post-transformation are often greater than the initial implementation. Digital transformation is not a one-time event but a mind-set focused on the continuous ongoing journey. Many initiatives falter once the initial management focus and enthusiasm wanes, leading to regression or stagnation.

Employees who have worked for a number of years in the same company, may well have seen a number of change initiatives and fads come and go on a regular basis. In such an environment, it isn't too surprising that the next 'continuous change' initiative is treated by them with a little cynicism.

"…it is crucial to embed the principles of continuous improvement into the organisational culture."

To sustain transformation efforts, it is crucial to embed the principles of continuous improvement into the organisational culture and routine. Establishing new governance forums can help maintain focus on incremental enhancements for engineers and other stakeholders. The continuation of ambitious OKRs, such as doubling release frequency and halving incident rates, ensures that the drive for improvement remains a constant central organisational tenet.

Embedding transformation principles into the organisational DNA requires more than just maintaining metrics and goals. It involves fostering a mindset where continuous improvement is considered the norm. This cultural shift ensures that even systems previously considered unsuitable for modern ways of working are continuously reassessed and improved. It's not easy; sustained transformation efforts rely on a combination of ongoing governance, persistent ambition, and critically, a culture driven from the top that values and rewards continuous improvement.

By institutionalising these principles, organisations can ensure that the benefits of digital transformation are not only maintained but also built upon. An enduring commitment to improvement helps organisations remain agile and competitive in the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Sustaining post-transformation efforts requires regular reassessment and refresh of goals and strategies. As the business environment and technological landscape continues to evolve, so too must the transformation objectives. This adaptive approach ensures that the organisation remains responsive to new challenges and opportunities, continuously driving growth and innovation.

Real-World Delivery Success

At Synechron, our digital transformation playbook transcends theoretical musings; it is a robust methodology that has demonstrated its efficacy at scale within some of the largest entities operating in today's global financial markets.

A notable case in point is a global bank that had made several prior attempts to adopt agile methodologies and modern Ways of Working (WoW), with its engineering teams, yet met with only limited success. It was only upon embracing the framework discussed in this guide—centred on engineer-centricity, enhanced transparency, and a resolute focus on outcomes—that the bank achieved genuine, organisation-wide success.

At the heart of their transformation lay a bold, outcome-focused objective for the engineering teams. The mantra and OKR, "Double and Half," encapsulated the goal: to double release frequency and halve the number of incidents every single year! This ambitious target necessitated that engineering teams tackled significant issues within their domains and addressed cross-functional institutional processes, previously considered too difficult, or out-of-scope, which had previously hindered progress.

Did the teams meet this audacious OKR? Not entirely but that didn't really matter. Because following an initial hesitant start, they came commendably close. This strategic framework drove notable improvements, including a 40% annual increase in software release frequency and a 20% annual reduction in incidents. Beyond operational efficiencies, over a few years, these advancements yielded substantial cost savings, contributing tens of millions in direct savings and positively impacting the bottom line.

1. Set high aspirations
2. Explain the 'why'
3. Focus on outcomes
4. Sustain momentum

Conclusion

The success of a digital transformation hinges on building trust through reliable metrics and tangible outcomes. By setting fact-based high aspirations, clearly explaining the purpose of the transformation, focusing on outcome-based execution, and sustaining efforts post-transformation, organisations can navigate the complexities of digital transformation effectively.

Aristotle's principle of blending Logos (logic), Ethos (ethics), and Pathos (emotion) is evident in this approach. The logical need for modernisation and the ethical imperative to improve operational efficiency are normally clear. However, the emotional engagement of the workforce, driven by real improvements in their work experience, tends to be the critical factor that transforms initiatives into lasting success.

Ultimately, this framework of setting fact-based high aspirations, explaining the 'why,' focusing on outcomes, and sustaining efforts provides a robust and practical guide for any organisation seeking to achieve success in their digital transformation journey, not as a one-off project but as a new way of encouraging and managing continuous evolution.

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PREMIER
Partner
Consulting & Implementation

David Keane

Co-founder and Head of Enterprise Agility, Synechron | ServiceNow

A leader in IT transformation and enterprise-level change at scale, David Keane is a fervent advocate for DevOps, DevSecOps, Agile methodologies, and modern ways of working and has shared his insight and experience at industry forums internationally.

Contact us:

Synechron Limited, 95 Gresham Street,
London - EC2V 7NA, United Kingdom

servicenow@synechron.com