



Inside change: perspectives on transformation in pharma

What experienced leaders
in change are saying about
transformation, culture and
the road ahead in 2026

Dialogue

Dialogue is a specialist internal
communication, engagement and change
management consultancy offering a unique
blend of strategic thinking, delivery
and measurement

Introduction

“

Change has always been part of the pharma story – but never at this pace, and rarely under this kind of pressure.

All those we spoke to as part of this research are being asked to do more, faster and better, but with less time, fewer people and shrinking budgets.

It appears that the investment in how organisations manage change is not keeping pace. As the need for capability in this discipline increases, it seems that the resources to effectively deliver it are being stripped back.

It's this paradox that lies at the heart of our latest research.



Andrea Levy
Co-founder & Director



Paul Roberts
Co-founder & Director

Some argue that we don't need to 'manage' change at all. Humans are hard-wired to adapt: to improvise and problem-solve. However, the forces driving change in the pharma industry require structural, systemic and time-critical solutions on a global scale. Things that instinct and past experience alone can't deliver.

Capability drives culture

In a highly regulated industry, organisations can't afford for people to interpret change in different ways. Success depends on the ability to evolve, and that requires a coordinated approach to change management. When done well, it creates a shared understanding and direction across geographies, with everyone understanding they have a role to play.

The leadership contract

However, when this isn't the case, then trust and connection weaken. Employees still want to do the right thing, but shifting priorities and

initiatives that over-promise have made many more cautious. The result is not resistance, but self-protection.

Real change capability requires trust and belief: in leaders, direction and one another.

Keep it human

What stood out most from this research is the importance of visible, 'human' leadership. Leaders at all levels who are accessible, honest and willing to acknowledge uncertainty earn greater credibility than those who communicate from a distance. The best communicators lead by listening first.

If our 2024 report focused on the experience of change, this one reveals how leaders are trying to make it happen. It highlights what transformation demands: clarity, connection, capability – and confidence to lead change well.

This report builds on our 2024 study [The State of Engagement in the Pharma Sector](#). Our research included a series of in-depth interviews with experienced professionals within global pharma organisations including Bayer, BeOne, Merck, Novartis, Novo Nordisk, Roche and Teva. Interviews were structured around a discussion guide and took place over the course of 2025.

The world of pharma – what's driving change?

Any report seeking to credibly reflect perspectives on internal change and transformation must first reflect the external context driving that change. Here we summarise the views of those we spoke to by highlighting the **key global forces** driving the need for new ways of operating.

Geopolitical and economic pressures

Global pharma companies must now confront the strategic implications of a shifting geopolitical landscape. Trade tensions, security concerns and tariff risks are reshaping decisions about manufacturing, product launches, pricing and supply chains.

Some are pulling back from volatile markets, while many are focusing on key markets such as the US, or other predictable 'safe harbour' regions. These pressures ripple into strategic planning, risk assessment and the mobilisation of change and communication programmes needed to navigate this new environment.

"Europe spends a substantially lower share of GDP on innovative medicines than the US and... is falling behind in attracting R&D and manufacturing investments, putting its ability to protect the health of its own people at risk."

Pascal Soriot,
CEO, AstraZeneca

"Our legacy portfolio will continue to see loss of exclusivity exposure... we will be very mindful about expenses."

Chris Boerner,
CEO, Bristol Myers Squib

Market expectations

The legacy of 'guaranteed' long-term revenues is weakening as therapeutic areas diversify and reliance on blockbuster drugs declines. In parallel, investors, regulators and markets demand faster performance, and clearer justification for scientific spend.

This pressure fuels constant transformation – restructuring, divestment, acquisitions and efficiency drives – leaving little space for reflection or lasting change. The tension is clear: organisations must move fast while still building durable capability, a priority echoed by life-sciences leaders in 2025.

The world of pharma – what's driving change?

Any report seeking to credibly reflect perspectives on internal change and transformation must first reflect the external context driving that change. Here we summarise the views of those we spoke to by highlighting the **key global forces** driving the need for new ways of operating.

Technological advancements and AI

Digitisation is now pivotal to the pharma operating model. It brings urgent and frequent programmes shaping everything from research and development to communication and collaboration – each seeking to make organisations faster, smarter and more connected.

From AI-driven discovery and protocol design to digital trials and real-time analytics, pharma is rethinking both what it does and how it does it. Industry reports suggest that by 2026, generative AI and data platforms will move into scalable, enterprise-wide deployment.

“AI is an important driver of innovation – but it cannot replace human intuition and judgment.”

Thomas Schinecker,
CEO, Roche

“Collaboration and digitalization have played fundamental roles in bringing COVID vaccines and therapies to market at an unprecedented rate, saving an estimated 750,000 lives in the United States and Europe alone. As an industry, we must bring the same speed and sense of urgency to all our efforts.”

Paul Hudson,
CEO, Sanofi

‘Black Swan’ events

While these external forces are driving tangible change, pharma, like all other industry sectors has to be ready to respond to the unpredictable. COVID-19 accelerated major shifts across the product lifecycle, making agility, resilience and remote delivery baseline expectations. Hybrid trials, remote monitoring and digital patient engagement are now mainstream.

Yet embedding these ways of working remains a challenge: many organisations adopted new models out of necessity, but fewer have made them routine. What began as a crisis response must now become a strategic capability.

What we found

Our findings tell a story with four main chapters. Click on the arrow in each box to find out more.



Change may be a constant, but the foundations to sustain it may be lacking

Most organisations recognise change as a constant, but none appear to invest in the skills and structures to manage it well. Our research tells us that alignment of functions, tools and measures that make change sustainable is missing. In theory change is everyone's job, but in practice it's nobody's specialism.



Leaders may have clear intent, but meaning fragments as it cascades

Senior leaders may promote transformation and innovation, but what this means on the ground is often lost in translation. Middle managers lack the space to seek clarity and struggle to turn strategy into action. Employees understand the need for change but not its implications, and limited dialogue fuels confusion.



In the rush to communicate, the messages that matter most get lost

Pharma's communication ecosystems are often noisy and can be ineffective, with employees inundated with information yet starved of meaning. In an environment of constant change the 'what's in it for me' and wider business benefits are lacking. Ultimately, the challenge is building quality over quantity.



Effective local deployment ultimately determines whether change takes hold

Success or failure ultimately comes down to how change impacts day-to-day roles. Trust and empathy determine whether people engage with transformation or endure it. Sustained success comes from consistency and humanity – where people feel informed, listened to, supported and genuinely valued.



Change may be a constant, but the foundations to sustain it may be lacking



Most organisations recognise change as a constant, but few appear to invest in the skills and structures to manage it well. Our feedback tells us that alignment of functions, tools and measures that make change sustainable is missing. In theory change is everyone's job, but in practice it's nobody's specialism.

Our research revealed a clear consensus: transformation programmes far outnumber the people trained to lead them, and the capability and infrastructure needed to sustain change rarely keeps pace.

Many organisations treat change management as project management. Teams form for specific initiatives and then disband, taking knowledge and momentum with them. Functions that should collaborate such as Communications, HR, Learning and Change often operate in silos with different tools and measures, leading to duplication, fatigue and limited learning. Change leaders see this as an execution gap rather than a lack of intent.

Beyond a plethora of playbooks and digital tools, little is invested in developing human capability,

especially at mid and local levels where change succeeds or fails. Face-to-face development has often been replaced by online learning, weakening community and shared experience.

Real capability depends on people, not processes: leaders and managers who can connect vision to strategy and strategy to execution. Without the human infrastructure and the 'glue' roles that link disciplines and keep meaning alive, even the best-designed change quickly loses its impact.

Change may be a constant, but the foundations to sustain it may be lacking



Everyone says change is part of their job – but almost no one has the skills to manage it properly.

We keep outsourcing to the Big Four because we don't have internal capability. We end up buying the same PowerPoint decks again and again.

True capability isn't a new framework; it's the confidence and consistency of line managers who understand both the science and the people side of change.

Communication, HR and Change work in different corners. Without a single owner, nothing aligns.

Integration is the future – bringing people, process and purpose under one roof.

“ Our view

Change isn't created by programmes; it's created by people. Most organisations know what needs to change but underestimate the investment in structure and capability needed to deliver it consistently and well.

✓ Spot the gaps

Identify where real change capability exists – and where it doesn't. Develop confidence and consistency, not more frameworks.

✓ Rebuild communities

Re-introduce peer learning, cross-functional sessions and shared reflection to make change leadership collective. Managers learn most from each other.

✓ Strengthen internal ownership

Shift the balance toward in-house capability and memory. Consultants speed things up, but only internal teams truly embed change.

✓ Join it all up

Work towards aligning Communications, HR, L&D and Change, so that every change programme is managed consistently.

In the rush to communicate, the messages that matter most get lost



Pharma's communication ecosystems are often noisy and can be ineffective, with employees inundated with information yet starved of meaning. In an environment of constant change the 'what's in it for me' and wider business benefits are lacking. Ultimately, the issue is building quality over quantity.

Change leaders repeatedly cite an imbalance between the volume of internal communication and its value.

The communications intent is there with global announcements, email cascades, inspirational video and big set-piece meetings dominating the internal landscape. But local adaptation and genuine two-way dialogue remain more challenging. Many feel that professional communicators are forced to prioritise 'business as usual' executive messaging, pushing engagement around change to the periphery.

Others note that communication capability has been diluted through restructuring, with experienced specialists redeployed or removed, and responsibility for 'doing comms'

handed to those with little time or training. As a result, communications can appear polished on the surface yet lack authenticity, relevance or the human connection people need to make sense of change.

When communication does work, it's usually because leaders speak candidly about challenges, remove complexity and create meaningful opportunities for interaction. Our research also stresses that over-communication can be as damaging as silence; employees quickly tune out when overwhelmed by competing messages and shifting priorities.

In the rush to communicate, the messages that matter most get lost



Professional communicators were cut, so now project managers write updates. It's well-intentioned but unstrategic.

Most of what we send is about success stories and launches. The practical 'what this means for you' never makes it out.

Leaders think they're communicating because they're talking a lot. But what people need is clarity, not noise.

There's a tsunami of communication – but very little real connection. People are drowning in emails.

Employees don't need more messages – they need consistent, honest ones they can act on.

“ Our view

While everyone's talking, few are listening. Pharma's internal channels are overflowing, but attention is finite. The goal now is to make sense, and not simply broadcast.

✓ Quality over quantity

Audit what's being sent and why. If a message doesn't help someone act or feel informed, ask whether it needs to be sent at all.

✓ Bring storytelling back

Use real life employee and patient experiences to connect the purpose with action and outcomes. While facts inform, stories engage.

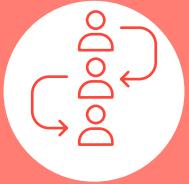
✓ Engage, don't inform

Rather than relying on top-down updates, find opportunity for structured discussion. Engagement results from human interaction, not inbox traffic.

✓ Champion the fundamentals

Equip leaders and managers with the basics: thinking about what you want your audiences to think, feel and do.

Leaders may have clear intent, but meaning fragments as it cascades



Senior leaders may promote transformation and innovation, but what this means on the ground is often lost in translation. Middle managers lack the space to seek clarity and struggle to turn strategy into action. Employees understand the need for change but not its implications, and limited dialogue fuels confusion.

Across companies and functions, change leaders describe a recurring breakdown in the cascade from strategy to action.

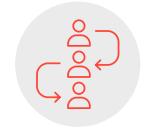
At the top, a CEO or executive sponsor may articulate a clear rationale – but as this moves through the organisation, the meaning dilutes and can eventually erode.

That's because those best placed to make change meaningful – mid-level and local managers – are under the greatest pressure. They invariably face competing expectations and operational demands leaving many over-stretched and under-equipped, lacking the time or capability to translate ambition into practical guidance.

As a result, employees often experience two extremes: silence, where nothing is contextualised, or overload, where too many unfiltered messages obscure what matters.

The issue is not the absence of communication but the absence of translation: the work of turning strategy into relevance. Doing this well requires a commitment to dialogue: consistent messaging, space for questions, and emotional honesty about what change really means for people's roles and priorities.

Leaders may have clear intent, but meaning fragments as it cascades



At the top, the 'why' is clear. The problem is that by the time it reaches the middle, people no longer know what to do with it.

We have excellent playbooks and cascades – but clarity depends on the courage to tell people exactly what the change means for them.

Our CEO communicates brilliantly, but the message gets lost in translation. Each layer edits it until it barely resembles the original intent.

People know the destination, but not the route. They can recite the slogan but don't know how it applies to them.

Honesty travels further than optimism. People can handle tough messages if they trust the messenger.

“ Our view

In every large organisation there's a 'translation gap' – where vision stops and the real work begins. Scale and matrixed structures can widen that gap. And bridging it is one of the most powerful things leaders, managers and communicators can do.

✓ Design the cascade

Equip leaders and managers with the resources and examples to make messages meaningful. A town hall isn't a cascade!

✓ Back the middle

Mid-level managers are your translators. Brief them, give them room to ask questions and support them throughout. Treat communication as a core organisational competency.

✓ Simplify the story

Every strategy needs a core narrative supported with consistent, human messages that survive rebrands and reorganisation.

✓ Create space for dialogue

Build in time for discussion, questions and feedback so managers can test understanding and widen ownership. 'Translation' can't happen in broadcast mode.

Effective local deployment ultimately determines whether change takes hold



The success or failure of change is ultimately cultural. Trust, empathy and continuity determine whether people engage with transformation or endure it. Sustained success comes from consistency and humanity in leadership - where people feel informed, listened to, supported and genuinely valued.

Our research tells us that the pharma industry is struggling with a cultural dichotomy.

This reflects a shift in the psychological contract between organisations and employees. The traditional relationship of stability and loyalty has given way to a more transactional dynamic shaped by restructures and cost-cutting.

People are not unwilling to change, but they need clear answers to why it's happening and what it means for them. High turnover in senior leadership, and the shifting strategies that come with it, leaves a cautious, often sceptical workforce that now values honesty over optimism and wellbeing over rhetoric.

Change fatigue and a lack of belief that initiatives will last only reinforce this scepticism.

Some leaders highlight the need for more tailored engagement strategies to meet different generational expectations. Yet what unites all perspectives is the call for a more human approach: leaders at all levels who show empathy, acknowledge challenges and communicate with consistency are seen as catalysts for success. Culture change relies less on slogans and more on role modelling and aligned behaviours.

Effective local deployment ultimately determines whether change takes hold



Pharma once offered lifetime careers; now it offers constant restructuring. We can't rebuild trust without rebuilding honesty.

Fatigue doesn't come from too much change – it comes from poor execution and lack of empathy.

Employees fear change more than they resist it. Fear that they'll lose their job, their team, their relevance.

You can't preach collaboration if the culture rewards competition. Culture is what people feel every day, not what's written on a slide.

In younger companies, change still feels exciting. People believe they're building something new – that belief makes all the difference.

“ Our view

Pharma's culture of rigour, compliance and caution is a strength, but it can minimise empathy and speed. Sustainable change starts with rebuilding trust and human connection.

✓ Lead with honesty

Admit what's hard and explain what's changing. Employees don't expect certainty, but they do want candour.

✓ Reward consistency

Recognise those who sustain progress, not just those who launch the next initiative. Culture strengthens when leaders model the behaviours they expect.

✓ Support the human side

Equip managers to handle the emotional impact of change. Listening and empathy matter as much as plans and milestones.

✓ Re-set the contract

Acknowledge that the employee-employer relationship has shifted. Psychological safety and transparency can rebuild trust where loyalty has eroded.



Our methodology: The State of Engagement

At Dialogue, we use the **State of Engagement™** to understand how people respond to change through two dimensions:

Clarity reflects how well someone understands the message and their role, while **Connection** assesses the extent to which they support the change and want to be part of it.

Our work shows that strong engagement fuels advocacy, commitment and discretionary effort – assets any organisation values.

What we heard in 2025

Applying these dimensions to this year's findings reveals a clear pattern: both Clarity and Connection need strengthening.

Clarity remains a challenge

Senior leaders are good at articulating the 'why', but translation breaks down as messages move through the organisation.

Connection is under strain

Years of transformation have created scepticism rather than resistance and trust has eroded through repeated restructures.

Why it matters

You can't build commitment without building confidence. Pharma must match its disciplined precision with emotional intelligence – pairing explanation with empathy.

Those who succeed will be able to:

- Maintain clarity of purpose even as priorities shift
- Rebuild connection through honesty, consistency and presence
- Treat engagement as a dialogue, not a broadcast

When organisations strengthen both dimensions in parallel, change stops feeling imposed 'by edict' and starts feeling like something created with people – through involvement, trust and genuine engagement.



What will it take to win?

As we look ahead, one message is clear: the organisations that win will be where capability, clarity, communication and culture move from an adjunct to the centre of organisational performance.

The four shifts that will define success

- 1 Change will become everyone's capability**
Change is shifting from a specialist role to a core leadership competency. Every leader will need fluency in clarity, empathy and storytelling. Communities of practice will become essential, helping share insight and strengthening collective capability.
- 2 Trust will become the new performance metric**
After years of disruption, trust is now the currency of engagement. Employees follow leaders who are visible, honest and consistent, where they feel valued and listened to. The most admired organisations will be those whose leaders are trusted to lead change well.
- 3 Fewer, better initiatives will define momentum**
Effective transformation requires HR, Communications, Learning and Change to operate as one collaborative network. Doing fewer things, better. When they do, change becomes a business rhythm owned by everyone, not imposed from above.
- 4 AI will reshape how we learn and connect**
AI will accelerate decisions, but its real impact will be freeing people to think, coach and lead. The opportunity (and challenge) is to humanise the technology. Use AI to personalise communication, spot pressure points and encourage dialogue, not replace empathy.

We'd love to continue the dialogue with you!

With experience drawn from the worlds of internal communication, change management, PR, HR and marketing, we bring the expertise, creativity and pragmatism required to solve your communication challenges.

Everything we do is geared towards building clarity,

forging connection, shaping conversations and ultimately driving change in your organisation. Our approach is always fresh and original with no two projects ever the same.

We think of the work we do in terms of Strategy, Delivery and Measurement – but in reality, many projects will incorporate elements of each.



hello@startdialogue.co.uk



[Dialogue Internal Communication and Engagement](#)



startdialogue.co.uk