



# IMPACT STORY

The Wharton School



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### *How leading faculty are closing the “knowing-doing gap”*

#### Where change efforts fail: navigating common pitfalls

“Change is hard,” says Wharton management professor Nancy Rothbard. “Research tells us that most organizations’ efforts fail. In part, that failure is due to the effort change takes. It’s a lengthy process, and it can get derailed at a number of key points. Knowing where they are can help leaders keep things on track.”

Rothbard recently told a group of executives in Wharton’s **High-Potential Leaders: Accelerating Your Impact** program that the time to start watching for warning signs is before the change initiative even begins. “It might sound obvious, but many people don’t fully understand what they’re trying to change. They know there’s a problem, and they want to jump right in and start working on it. The people around them might share their impatience. But you need to take time to locate and understand the real problem. Often, people think they know what the problem is, but they are really identifying a symptom rather than the root cause.”

She explains by using a medical analogy. “You might go to see a doctor and be experiencing various symptoms. The diagnosis could be one of many different diseases. If the doctor treats a symptom of the problem rather than the underlying real one, that symptom might go away for a while but it will reappear. Organizational issues can be very complex, and your first thought about the solution might not go deep enough.”

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**Nancy Rothbard**  
Professor of Management, The Wharton School

A second juncture at which organizational changes can become derailed is during what Rothbard calls the “Black Hole of Change.” Although most leaders think they’re talking constantly about the change and getting buy-in, research finds that leaders tend to under-communicate and under-motivate by a factor of 8 to 10. “This is a general leadership issue,” says Rothbard, “but it is particularly problematic around change, when it is critical that you get people on board.”

For participants in [High-Potential Leaders](#), understanding how to avoid these banes of change initiatives comes at many levels. They learn the model, read the research and discuss their own challenges around change. But learning to better lead these initiatives requires more. “Because we try to avoid change, we don’t engage with it a lot, so most of us are not particularly good at it. That avoidance intensifies what Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton call the ‘knowing-doing gap.’ Just understanding what we should do doesn’t mean we will do it successfully. There are a lot of surprises along the way, and we don’t think through how our actions will influence the change process for better or worse.”

To close the “knowing-doing gap,” high-potential leaders use the [ExperienceChange](#) simulation by [ExperiencePoint](#). Acting as consultants to a company going through a change effort, participants work in teams to get buy-in from those in the organization. Along the way, explains Rothbard, they make plenty of mistakes. “Mistakes teach us a tremendous amount, and we tend to remember them. The simulation lets you make mistakes without any real cost. And if you make them here in the program, you are less likely to make them on the job.”

But to get the most from mistakes, you need feedback. “It is a key component of the simulation,” says Rothbard. “Often in organizations we don’t get good feedback. It might be delayed or not come at all. You can’t learn much from a mistake if you don’t know what went wrong. In the program, you get both quantitative and qualitative feedback. It’s not important that you achieve the simulation goal. What we want is for you to learn so you can go back to work and be successful.”

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## Nancy Rothbard

David Pottruck Professor of Management, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania

Nancy Rothbard is an award-winning expert in work motivation, teamwork, work-life balance and leadership. Dr. Rothbard was previously on the faculty of the Kellogg Graduate School of Management, Northwestern University, and holds degrees from Brown University and the University of Michigan. She has been published in top academic research journals and her work has been discussed in The Wall Street Journal, Business Week, Forbes, The Washington Post and on ABC News, CNN, NPR and US News & World Report.

Dr. Rothbard has helped some of the world's premier companies change their approaches to teamwork, leadership, and work motivation. Among other projects, she has worked with a Fortune 100 company to understand the factors that improve call center performance and customer service, a leading hotel chain to transform sales and hiring and financial service organizations to optimize their leadership and approach to sales.

## About the Wharton School

Founded in 1881 as the first collegiate business school, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania is recognized globally for intellectual leadership and ongoing innovation across every major discipline of business education. With a broad global community and one of the most published business school faculties, Wharton creates economic and social value around the world. The School has 5,000 undergraduate, MBA, executive MBA, and doctoral students; more than 9,000 annual participants in executive education programs; and a powerful alumni network of 94,000 graduates.

## About ExperienceChange

ExperienceChange is an expert-guided experience that teaches a best-practice model for managing change. Backed by over 20 years of change research and industry insights, the experience enables leaders and managers to practice leading change and engage with the behaviors, tools and skills sets that make change happen.

ExperienceChange is the trusted tool for Fortune 500's and the world's leading business schools. It's the cornerstone of change initiatives that transform, leadership programs that enable, and learning events that inspire.

## About ExperiencePoint

At ExperiencePoint, we're passionate about how people work together to get stuff done. We're an award winning training company that develops business simulations for leadership development in the areas of change and innovation. We're known for realistic simulation experiences that challenge people to roll up their sleeves and learn the Whats, Whys and Hows of leading change and innovation.