Lessons from leaders.
Twelve lessons from digital transformation leaders

We interviewed three leaders at various stages of their digital transformation journeys. We asked them about their top challenges and key advice points for others about to embark on a journey of digital transformation.

1) Define your digital priorities.

“It’s so easy to get lost in the digital landscape. People get distracted with shiny, new things like virtual reality or AI or chatbots. But those things aren’t the bread and butter of what you need to do. We worked hard to define our priorities based on what we understood of our business model and therefore our consumer journeys. These became our big bets and then they became our framework”.

Rahul Asthana, Senior Director, Baby & Childcare sector, Marketing & Innovation Asia Pacific, Kimberly-Clark

2) Build the case for change.

“The digital transformation requires organizational will and stamina, particularly if the enterprise is already successfully operating in its steady state. Building the necessary case for change, sense of urgency, and leadership alignment as a first step can be difficult and time-consuming, depending on the circumstances. But, those are steps that cannot be skipped. A lack of commitment will expose itself at some point in the journey – better that it’s exposed and resolved up-front, at the leadership level, than months/years into the journey, where it manifests itself as working-level conflict, cost overruns, missed commitments, and failed change.”

Brett Pitts, Head of Digital, Wells Fargo

3) Create a shared agenda and bring others with you.

“There’s no go it alone strategy in big companies, it doesn’t work. You can stir the pot but it doesn’t actually make change happen. You’ve got to be aligned with business units and functions and geos and you have to have a shared agenda. That takes a lot of time and persuasion and influence, but it’s really critical.”

Michelle Peluso, CMO, IBM
4) Lead from the top.

“Leadership support from the top of the enterprise is critical. Too many digital transformations start in the middle of the organization (business and/or technology) and attempt to radiate up, down, and out. To the extent that digital transformation requires end-to-end thinking and accountability across an organization, the changes are most quickly effected by leadership clearly charting a course as the starting point.”

Brett Pitts, Head of Digital, Wells Fargo

5) Don’t spend ages deliberating–get out there and do stuff!

“We decided that we needed to make a start and just go out and do stuff. That’s how we’re going to learn and that’s how we’re going to fix things instead of ideating and thinking about it and thinking about it more and then implementing it. So we’re absolutely fine with people going out, not getting it right the first time but obviously learning very quickly on what they didn’t get right and then making the changes quickly.”

Rahul Asthana, Senior Director, Baby & Childcare sector, Marketing & Innovation Asia Pacific, Kimberly-Clark

6) Embed great talent across your whole organization.

“Increasingly the whole business is becoming digital, and so it’s really quite important that you’re hiring talent across the organization. It doesn’t matter what the title is but it’s really important that you’re embedding great digital talent throughout the organization.”

Michelle Peluso, CMO, IBM

7) Empower people on the frontline.

“You really need to empower the guys on the frontlines, the leaders of the market and support them so they can make the right decisions.”

Rahul Asthana, Senior Director, Baby & Childcare sector, Marketing & Innovation Asia Pacific, Kimberly-Clark

8) Open yourself up to learning from external networks.

“I would definitely advise others to be open to external connections. Say yes to everyone and everything offered to you (within reason). 85 out of 100 times those ideas may be useless, but 15 may be great. Read a lot. Tie up with external agencies. Approach people who are doing it well and soak up the learnings.”

Rahul Asthana, Senior Director, Baby & Childcare sector, Marketing & Innovation Asia Pacific, Kimberly-Clark
9) Always start with your customers, not your back end processes.

“Mature organizations have tended to view digital as another distribution channel and have thought from the back-end forward, toward the experience. Meaning, the initial inclination has been to “digitize” back-end processes, for example to electronify a paper or to automate opportunistically. But, that leads to very incremental progress and digital experiences that manifest all of the legacy constraints of workflows and systems that were manual. Designing from the digital customer experience back is a very significant shift and monumental challenge initially (but very productive and rewarding when that shift is made).”

Brett Pitts, Head of Digital, Wells Fargo

10) Help newly hired top digital talent to really succeed.

“When hiring a new digital leader, I think you need to make a huge amount of commitment to making sure you’re helping the person understand how to make change happen within the company. It’s not fair to set them free and expect that they’re going to know how to rule the organization in an effective way. So it’s sort of two sided - you’re their sounding board, you’re helping get certain obstacles out of their way, equally you’re approaching them about the ways to be most effective.”

Michelle Peluso, CMO, IBM

11) It’s all about culture.

“The big learning for me is that people think the big deals are the technology and the strategy and really, honestly, all that is the easy stuff. I think that there are two big things that one needs to manage. One of the biggest challenges is culture change. The second thing is making sure that you’ve got the right processes and the right resources in place.”

Rahul Asthana, Senior Director, Baby & Childcare sector, Marketing & Innovation Asia Pacific, Kimberly-Clark

“Taking a digital-first approach is a journey towards a new way of doing business. It requires a mindset shift first, followed by technology and process shifts. You can’t overhaul your platforms and solutions without changing your culture and thinking. That risks replacing legacy infrastructure with modern technology, at great expense, with little impact on customer and business outcomes.”

Brett Pitts, Head of Digital, Wells Fargo

12) When it gets tough, remember why you’re doing it.

“The transformation represents an existential challenge for most industries but it is incredibly worthwhile to undertake. Successfully done, it orients the organization around customers and employees and puts the right business and technology support in-place to build competitiveness and prepare the company for the next decade.”

Brett Pitts, Head of Digital, Wells Fargo