Change is never easy. Most people don't embrace it, and many openly resist it. Yet there is a way to go about it, Heather Ridout says, that will result in people embracing it—and being glad they did.

Championing change is sometimes required because you've got a financial issue you've got to deal with, or there's been a big strategic shift in your external environment that will drive change. But at a more generic level, I think you've always got to do two things—you've got to continuously improve your performance, you've got to have systems and approaches to management and that can—that drive continuous improvement and then for the health and well-being of the organization, from time to time, you've got to have some strategic shifts—strategic innovation in the organization because that keeps renewing it, keeps it fresh. So I think organizations that don't champion both will probably decline. And I think—but you don't need to change the basic model for the sake of it, but you do need to be open to strategic innovation and drive that from time to time, as well as simultaneously, continuously lift your performance through, you know, quite rigorous processes.

So, AI Group is an organization of itself, and we have upward of 300 employees in 12 locations, so they have to act as a team. We're a national—we are one organization, we're not a federation. Even though we have state branches and regional offices, and the historic structure of AI Groups being state-based, but we aren't a state-based organization, we are one national organization. So when I took over as CEO, I nationalized a lot of functions.

I had a major internal restructuring program—we needed to do it, we needed to make it a more—a better business model, and we then put in new services managed on a national basis. We introduced a national info line, which we always had a state-based bull ring [ph], which was a series people sat around the state level answering questions. Well, we nationalized all that and we introduced a whole lot of IT structures to support that. That was a hugely heroic step and very difficult because a lot of people didn't want to change; they liked the way things were always done. They liked, you know, the fact we had an info line, you read the racing page in your spare time and waited for the calls, and now it's very different.

We've introduced a legal firm. We employ 30 lawyers, and that firm doesn't employ them, the AI Group employs them and they're seconded to the firm—when a matter arises that we would take normal—we would advise a member to go to their lawyers, so we can now do a lot of that work. And we've done a huge amount of internal restructuring and the business model of the organization is now much more robust.

Resistance to change was quite, you know, quite strong in parts of our organization. A lot of people just wanted us to be the old organization we once were, which was quite comfortable in a way, but I wanted to reinvent the concept of an employer association as a big community-based business voice that was really a very powerful advocate for business, but because it—because it in fact, it put business interest in a wider context. So I was not going to, you know, give in to resistance.

And I knew we need to improve the business model of the organization, that being a member is not something that people want to be so much these days. It was tough, but we were—our membership is growing strongly, we've got our new membership budget. In the first five months of this year, we achieved it. And it's fantastic. And we're well in excess of it now, and there're big companies that are joining us, which is extremely exciting, and then a lot of small, medium-sized companies, as well.

So, yeah, you've just got to stand up for it, but you've got to know you've set the directions well and you've got the right people there who are in the key driving seats for the change. I had terrific people supporting the process, and it's now proved itself, and those people who resisted it are now saying it was a really good thing to do. So, you know, you don't drive them out of the organization, you try to carry them with you. If they, in the end, they leave...
of their own volition, that's fine. But frankly, we didn't have too much of that. We just had people doing passive resistance, or a few guerilla tactics, but there were enough of us wanting to push it forward. And it wasn't just me, you've got to have your colleagues—the majority of them with you on it.