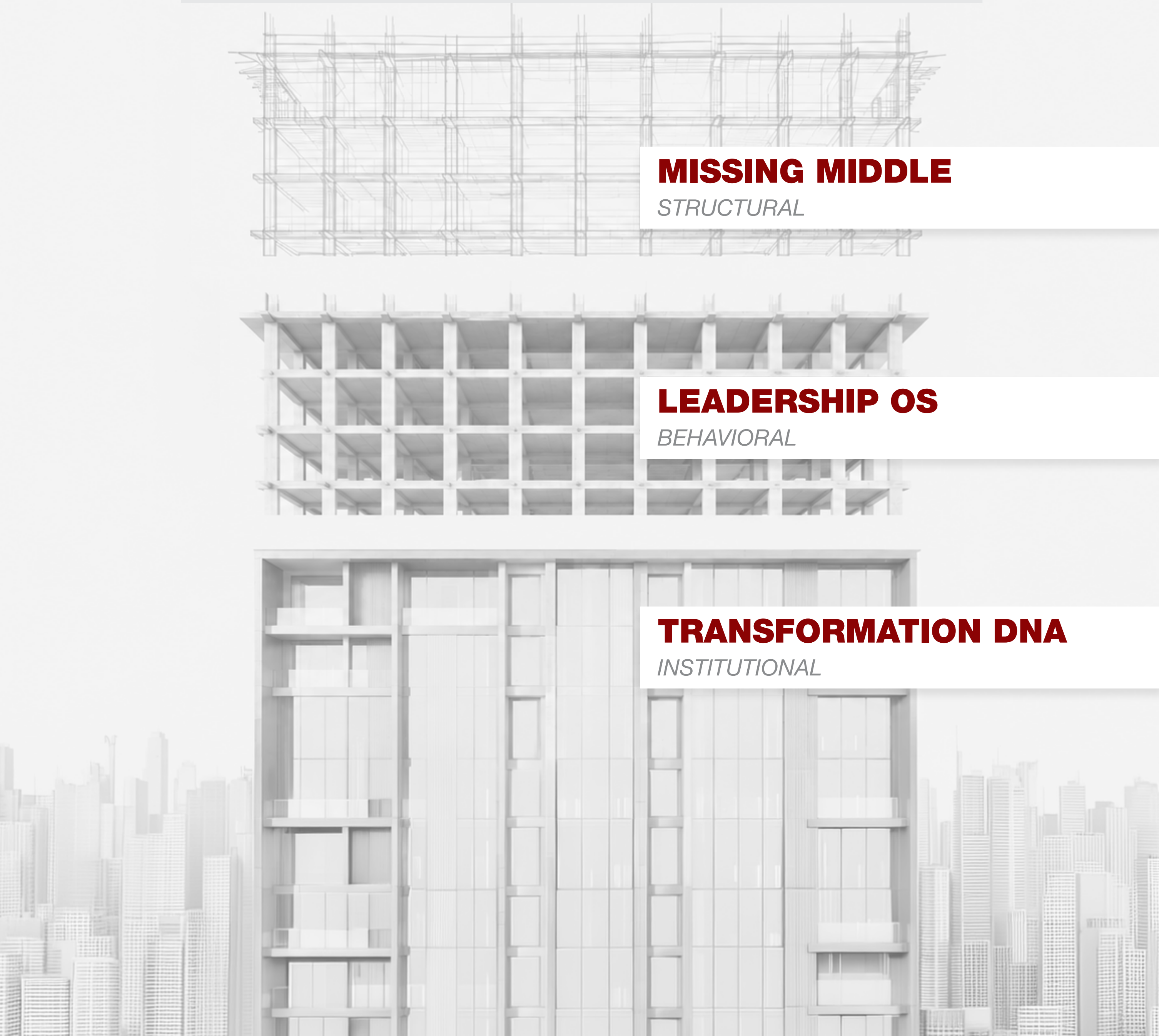
From strategy to reality:

why the space between intent and execution is where transformations are won or lost

Integration

Together, for the change you need

Most organizations can
design a transformation.
Few can sustain one.
The difference comes down to
three overlooked disciplines.



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Introduction

Many leadership teams leave a strategy day feeling aligned, only to watch momentum fade within months. If you've ever led or sponsored a major transformation, you'll recognize the pattern.

The strategy itself is rarely the issue. Most teams know where they want to go – the slides are polished, the North Star is clear, the business case is sound. What's missing is the discipline to keep turning intent into reality, not just once but continuously.

Across our work, the same three gaps appear again and again:

- **Structural:** the bridge between strategy and operations which translates strategy into day-to-day action simply isn't designed.
- **Behavioral:** even when the structure exists, leadership hasn't given it the authority to function, so decisions are overturned and sponsorship blurs.
- **Institutional:** organizations build structural and behavioral layers for the life of a program, then dismantle them and start from scratch next time.

These are connected problems. Structure without authority has no mandate. Authority without structure has no traction. And without durability, both must be rebuilt every time.

The real question for any leadership team isn't whether transformation is needed, but where in this sequence their current approach breaks down.

In this eBook, we explore each of these layers in turn, showing how they interact, where they typically fail and what it takes to make them hold.

The transformation framework

	Missing middle *STRUCTURAL*	**Leadership OS** *BEHAVIORAL*	**Transformation DNA** *INSTITUTIONAL*
Why it matters	Without a designed translation layer, strategies get reinterpreted at every level, decisions sit in limbo and people are left to improvise alongside their day jobs.	Leadership behaviors form an invisible operating system built over years. When a transformation doesn't fit its logic, the system rejects it – not out of malice, but because that's what established systems do.	When transformation is treated as a project, the capability walks out the door with the program team. Learnings are lost. The next transformation starts from scratch.
Common pitfalls	▪ Under-resourcing: staffing with whoever is available ▪ Governance bloat: more meetings instead of fixing structure ▪ No defined decision-making scope at each level ▪ No local project management capability	▪ Decision instability: overturned within 48 hours ▪ Unstated objectives – cost-cutting framed as "employee experience" ▪ Half-committed resourcing that exhausts willingness to try again ▪ No shared framework for cross-functional tensions	▪ Infrastructure dismantled after delivery; next program starts from zero ▪ Excellence functions without real authority – playbooks regions aren't obliged to follow ▪ Past success mistaken for future resilience ▪ Change fatigue from sustained high-intensity delivery
Key success factors	▪ Dedicated TMO with real mandate and investment ▪ Translation capability: people who make trade-off decisions on behalf of global and local ▪ Governance redesigned to enable decisions at the right altitude ▪ The ten-people test: if answers diverge on what's being delivered, the issue is structural	▪ Aligned leadership incentives and shared ownership ▪ Decision architecture: named owners, mapped decisions, clear finality ▪ Honest clarity on real vs stated objectives ▪ Leaders who remove blockers rather than add pressure	▪ Codified methodology: every program upgrades the playbook ▪ Local capability with skill and authority to sustain change ▪ Standing TMO with real authority – not just advisory ▪ Sustainable pace; rotate leaders to build a change-ready bench

1. Fixing your missing middle

Without structure, strategy is reinterpreted at every level

The first transformation layer is structural, and it sits in the space most organizations leave undesigned: **the space between strategy and operations.**

When a global organization announces a new operating model, the integration of two divisions or a shift to centralized business planning, the logic is usually clear. What is almost never clear is how that logic actually lands.

- Who makes the call when two divisions need the same factory capacity?
- Whose budget takes the hit when priorities clash?
- How does a market protect its change windows from being overwritten by a global program it had no say in during a system implementation?

These considerations are part of the day-to-day reality of running a global transformation, and most programs are not designed to handle them.

We've seen this in a multinational that decided to integrate business planning across four divisions. The logic was sound: the same retailers now carried products from multiple divisions, and integration promised better leverage and service levels. Everyone agreed in principle. But when two divisions wanted to run promotional events at the same time – and the factory could only support one – there was no clear way to decide who had priority. The same was true for allocating limited budget. Capabilities, data and resourcing varied across countries and divisions, and the operating model simply hadn't been designed to support the strategy.

In a B2B ingredients company, we saw a similar dynamic. Leadership had separated commodity and specialty lines into separate business units – a sound move for protecting margins – but the organization quickly began to fracture. Teams that once collaborated were now in different divisions, R&D was being duplicated, and people on the ground no longer knew who owned which parts of the portfolio, who to approach for approvals or how to present a unified offer to customers. As one leader noted, the strategic direction was right, but the practical implications for the operating model hadn't been worked through.

> **We encounter this pattern repeatedly: a strategy is announced, the next level of the organization is expected to translate it and there is a collective "how does this actually work?" that goes unanswered.**

How the middle breaks down

The breakdown typically begins with resourcing.

An organization that wants to drive significant change but staffs the program with whoever is available has already downgraded what's possible.

If the expected return on a transformation is substantial, the machine that delivers it needs to be built properly. That means dedicated teams, a real budget and the willingness to accept that year one may not deliver a return.

When this investment is missing, the people in the middle, who already have full-time roles and a transformation dropped on top, are left to figure it out alone. Strategy gets reinterpreted at every level. Decisions sit in limbo. Thirty conversations happen simultaneously and never quite connect.

As these symptoms emerge, the typical response is to add governance: more meetings, more people in the room, more updates for the sake of updates. Expanding governance in this way is almost always a palliative rather than a solution. It signals that the underlying structure is not working. The purpose of governance is to move information to the right level and enable decisions to be made, not to fill calendars, cover political exposure or feign alignment.

Try this simple diagnostic to find out if your transformation is built to last:

Ask ten people across the program what is being delivered, by when and how. If the answers diverge significantly, the issue is not communication, it's structural.

1. Fixing your missing middle

Building a functioning translation layer

In almost every case we come across, a solid translation layer is missing: the people, structures and decision-making authority that sit between global intent and local reality and make the connection work in practice.

Rather than a program management office with a dashboard, we mean people with enough credibility and authority to filter what comes down, surface what needs to go up and make trade-off decisions on behalf of both.

This is underpinned by three elements:

Straightforward governance – Each layer of the program structure has a defined decision-making scope: what can be decided at market level, at regional level and at global level. Problems are solved within workstreams, with only points that need cross-workstream discussion or escalation moving up.

A steady Transformation Office – Much of the work is repetitive: a daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly rhythm of tracking milestones, managing interdependencies, connecting people and reinforcing the message consistently. In good times and bad it runs equally effectively. As one of our consultants described it, the TMO is characterized by discipline and repetition, and it is precisely this rigor, this deliberate over-communication and over-alignment, that separates plans that move from those that don't.

Senior sponsorship – Someone at C-level or one below needs to be personally accountable for the result, while a head of transformation needs to own the day-to-day progress and movement. These are joint yet distinct roles: accountability and responsibility. With both in place, the middle layer avoids drift.

Putting the translation layer into practice

We stepped into a global transformation that had entirely derailed eight weeks before go-live to play this translation role.

The problem: Global workstreams had stopped speaking directly to local teams who had full-time day jobs and were overwhelmed.

Our response: We filtered communication both ways, absorbing what the global program needed, mapping it against local reality (concurrent projects, regulatory timelines, system constraints) and making trade-offs explicit.

The result: For the first time, there was a single picture of what was required and what was feasible.

This didn't require structural innovation, it required an investment in local project management capability in the middle: people who understood both the program and the market, who could manage the translation in both directions.

Local realities are routinely underestimated. In one program spanning Europe and Asia-Pacific, works council requirements in France and Italy demanded a three-month consultation process that could only happen once a year. In Australia, the same type of change could be completed in four weeks.

Such details cannot simply be managed through reporting. They require someone who understands both the global logic and the local constraint and has the authority to make the call. When this layer exists, fragmentation reduces.

Closing the gaps between strategy and execution takes a human-first approach. Structured working sessions, genuine listening and regular alignment checks between organizations and their leaders, are the activities that keep translation architecture functioning.

Why it matters

Without a designed translation layer, strategies get reinterpreted at every level, decisions sit in limbo and people are left to improvise alongside their day jobs.

Common pitfalls

- Under-resourcing: staffing with whoever is available
- Governance bloat: more meetings instead of fixing structure
- No defined decision-making scope at each level
- No local project management capability

Key success factors

- Dedicated TMO with real mandate and investment
- Translation capability: people who make trade-off decisions on behalf of global and local
- Governance redesigned to enable decisions at the right altitude
- The ten-people test: if answers diverge on what's being delivered, the issue is structural

2. Reshaping the leadership operating system

Without authority, even well-designed structures operate without mandate

The translation layer described in the previous section does not hold on its own. It depends entirely on the leadership above it: on whether that leadership is genuinely positioned to sponsor a transformation, or whether its own patterns of behavior will quietly undermine it. In our experience, this is where a well-designed program is often prone to stall.

In many organizations, once a strategy is agreed, leadership settles into a false sense of calm: "the direction is set, now it's an execution problem." It is a sentiment we encounter across sectors and geographies. The reality is that leadership does not simply step back from a transformation once it is launched. It remains the primary variable throughout: decision-making norms, what's tolerated, what gets escalated, what's quietly avoided and how alignment is achieved.

This is, in a sense, the operating system the company runs on. It has been built up over years and is rarely written down anywhere. When a transformation arrives that does not fit its logic, the system tends to reject it: not out of ill intent, but because that is what established systems do. The operating system needs to be transformation-ready, and when it isn't, even well-designed programs get stuck.

By its nature, this second layer is harder to address than the first. While structural gaps can be diagnosed and remediated with relative directness, behavioral ones require a leadership team that is willing to examine its own operating patterns, which may be uncomfortable.

> **The direction is set,** now it's an execution problem.

How the OS breaks down

The most visible symptom of a leadership OS needing an update is decision instability. In one global FMCG organization undergoing a major transformation, the absence of clear sponsorship and decision-making authority meant that a decision taken on a Monday was routinely overturned or reinterpreted by Tuesday morning. Functions, regions and country heads who owned the P&L each pulled in a different direction, and no individual or body had sufficient authority to enforce consistency.

Each reversal eroded credibility with the people the transformation depended on – including works councils and employee groups who had been carefully brought into alignment only to find that the terms had changed again. This was not a governance failure in the technical sense: the governance structures existed. It was an OS failure, in that the underlying behavioral norms made durable decision-making structurally impossible.

This dynamic manifests differently at different scales. In a smaller organization, open conflict between founding partners, visible to the whole company, made it impossible for any proposed change to be taken seriously. When leadership is divided, the organization follows: people stop believing that anything will actually change, and initiatives are met with skepticism before they begin. The translation layer, however well-designed, has no stable ground to operate on.

Perhaps the most consequential form of OS failure is the one that looks, from the outside, like strategic delay. An iconic consumer brand with decades of market leadership acknowledged a burning platform in principle while tolerating it in practice: there was always a reason to wait, to refine, to move cautiously.

The OS was calibrated for an era of market stability, and it kept producing behaviors consistent with that era even as the context changed. By the time urgency was acted on, the competitive position had deteriorated beyond recovery. The strategy was not the problem, nor the translation layer. It was the leadership's ability to override its own established patterns when the situation demanded it.

2. Reshaping the leadership operating system

What transformation-ready OS looks like

Diagnosing the OS requires making visible what is normally invisible. Three areas are worth examining, each a signal on its own.

The first is how decisions actually get made, as distinct from how the governance chart says they should. Decision-making patterns reveal whether authority is real or nominal: whether the sponsor can actually hold a call, or whether every decision circulates until consensus exhausts it.

A transformation-ready leadership team makes decision-making principles explicit enough that cross-functional tensions can be negotiated rather than personalized. Finance wanting speed, HR prioritizing due process, supply seeking efficiency and marketing seeking quality: this tension is by design and is healthy. What makes it unmanageable is the absence of a shared frame of reference. When principles are clear, the conversation becomes a structured negotiation about trade-offs. When they are not, decisions migrate into side channels.

The second is how the leadership team responds when something goes wrong. Leaders who respond to setbacks with blame create cultures where problems are hidden until they become crizes. Leaders who respond by removing blockers and enabling their teams create cultures where problems surface early enough to be solved. In transformation, additional pressure is rarely what is needed, since everyone involved already knows when something is failing. What makes the difference is leadership that alleviates that pressure and focuses the organization on solutions.

The third is whether the transformation is genuinely resourced, or quietly expected to absorb itself into existing capacity. An organization that sets transformational ambitions while staffing the program with whoever was available has already made a decision, even if it hasn't acknowledged it. In our experience, a half-committed transformation is often worse than none at all: it consumes resources and, more importantly, exhausts the organization's willingness to try again.

Beyond these three signals, there is a quality of honesty that a transformation-ready OS requires: substantive clarity about what the transformation actually is. One of the most consistent sources of dysfunction we encounter is the gap between the stated objective and the real one. Many transformations are primarily about cost reduction yet are communicated as "improving employee experience" or "becoming tech-first". When the stated objective does not match the real one, every subsequent decision becomes confusing: people propose ideas aligned with the stated goals and are rejected for reasons no one will articulate. Engagement erodes, and the translation layer, however competent, is left mediating a contradiction it cannot resolve.

When leadership is the bottleneck

When the evidence points to leadership as the primary obstacle, the conversation has to happen, but it must be handled with care. In our experience, it is almost always the conversation that unblocks the program, and almost always the one that has been avoided the longest.

The way it is raised matters. Presenting the issue in a full steering committee rarely works. The more productive approach is to go directly to the right sponsor, with specific examples of what particular behaviors are costing the program and a constructive view of what needs to change: whether that means restructuring a role, altering how decisions are reached, or finally surfacing a conflict that has been driving misalignment beneath the surface.

Good sponsors are often already aware. They can be relieved to find that someone else sees it clearly too. The trust required to have this conversation is built incrementally, and having it well tends to deepen that trust further. What it requires, more than anything, is that the conversation be grounded in the business rather than in individuals, and that it arrives with something constructive rather than just a diagnosis.

Why it matters

Leadership behaviors form an invisible operating system built over years. When a transformation doesn't fit its logic, the system rejects it – not out of malice, but because that's what established systems do.

Common pitfalls

- Decision instability: overturned within 48 hours
- Unstated objectives – cost-cutting framed as 'employee experience'
- Half-committed resourcing that exhausts willingness to try again
- No shared framework for cross-functional tensions

Key success factors

- Aligned leadership incentives and shared ownership
- Decision architecture: named owners, mapped decisions, clear finality
- Honest clarity on real vs stated objectives
- Leaders who remove blockers rather than add pressure

3. Sustaining transformation capabilities

Without durability, both will need rebuilding every time

The structural and behavioral layers described in the previous two sections are necessary, but in most organizations they are temporary. They exist for the life of the program. When it concludes, the team is disbanded, the capability walks out the door with the people who carried it and the organization returns to steady state. The next transformation begins from scratch.

This is expensive. It is also, increasingly, untenable. The cost of standing still has always been high, and the rate at which that cost is rising is itself accelerating: driven by technological disruption, competitive pressure and a geopolitical environment that is not settling down. The organizations that will lead in five years are not the ones with the best individual transformation. They are the ones that have built the capacity to keep transforming.

Few organizations have fully made this shift. When we ask experienced transformation practitioners whether they've seen a company genuinely become a "transforming organization", the honest answer is usually: not entirely. Most companies run a high volume of projects, yet these tend to be disconnected: individual teams in different pockets, without a coordinated approach. What we do see, across our work, are organizations moving in this direction, and recognizable patterns in what distinguishes them from those that don't.

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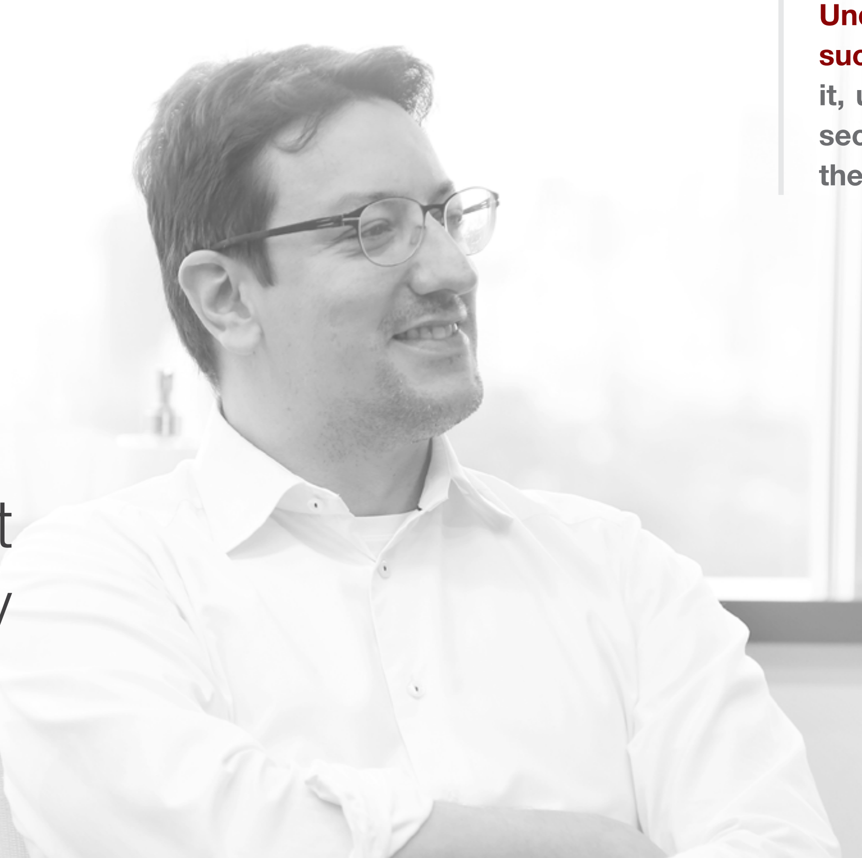

How institutional capability breaks down

The standard transformation narrative follows a familiar arc: design the program, stand up a team, run change and communications, declare victory and hand over. Our experience tells a different story. Once the program team disbands (and it nearly always does) organizations lose the vast majority of their institutional learning. The people who built the capability leave, often to lead the next transformation at another company. Twelve months later, drift sets in. What was declared a success begins to unravel, because no one locally has the skill and authority to sustain it.

At one global services organization, for example, significant investment went into moving dozens of countries' operations into centralized hubs. The transformation team delivered, then stepped down. The people who understood why certain design decisions were made, who had built relationships with local stakeholders and who knew where the risks were, moved on. The function continued, but the knowledge that built it did not.

Other organizations take a different approach, designing global excellence functions to maintain transformation capability on a permanent basis. The intent is sound. But without sufficient authority, these functions tend to produce frameworks and templates that aren't widely adopted. They can suggest and influence, but they aren't able to ensure consistency across divisions and regions. The capability exists on paper but not in practice.

Underpinning both failure modes is a deeper pattern: organizations that confuse past success with future resilience. They continue doing what worked, extending it, optimizing it, until the market moves and they are left behind. The OS described in the previous section was calibrated for a context that no longer applies, and the organization lacks the institutional readiness to recalibrate.

3. Sustaining transformation capabilities

What sustained transformation capability looks like

Organizations that avoid these traps tend to do four things differently, each building on the structural and behavioral foundations described in the previous sections.

They codify methodology, not just outcomes. Rather than treating each transformation as a one-off, they extract the repeatable method and make it available to the next program. Most organizations lose their learnings when the project team moves on, whereas those that institutionalize change treat every program as an opportunity to upgrade their transformation playbook. The method itself becomes an organizational asset. Governance structures, escalation frameworks and scope definition disciplines are standardized well enough that each new program does not start from zero.

They build local capability rather than central dependency. This is where many transformations quietly lose momentum even when they appear to succeed. A central team drives the change, achieves the metrics and moves on. Unless there are people locally, with skill and authority, to sustain what's been built, the change is a temporary imposition rather than a lasting transformation. The translation layer described in Section I cannot rely indefinitely on external resources. We've seen this concretely: one organization initially tried to run a global transformation with no project managers at market level, expecting local functional leaders to absorb the work alongside their day jobs. When they later invested in dedicated local project management, pairing internal capability with external support, the same transformation began to work.

They create standing infrastructure, not temporary program teams. A Transformation Office, or its equivalent, needs real authority: not just the ability to produce playbooks that regions are not obliged to follow, but the ongoing mandate to monitor implementation, sequence initiatives and drive continuous improvement. Professional project management capability, people who specialize in planning, risk management, scenario simulation and governance, needs to be built and maintained internally rather than improvised each time a new program begins. As one practitioner observed, it is notable how many organizations that describe themselves as "project-driven" still lack a properly resourced internal project management function. Investing in this capability as a standing function can make a meaningful difference.

They standardize the "how" while leaving the "what" flexible. Institutionalizing transformation does not mean institutionalizing rigidity. The most effective organizations we've worked with standardize frameworks, cadences and decision-making processes while leaving the content adaptable to different contexts, markets and functions. The method stays consistent while the application changes with context.

When sustainability is at risk

Even when these four disciplines are in place, there are two ways the institutional layer can erode.

The first is cultural. Becoming a transforming organization calls for what one of our colleagues described as the absence of arrogance: the willingness to accept that whatever is working today may not be the right answer tomorrow. This quality does not emerge by accident. Organizations that foster it tend to do something specific: they rotate leaders across regions, functions and markets, accepting that there will be a performance dip in the first months of each move. In doing so, they build a bench of people who are genuinely comfortable with ambiguity, who have seen the organization from multiple angles and who know how to move things rather than just maintain them. When the people on the second and third tier have genuinely varied backgrounds, different geographies, different functions, different types of challenge, that is usually a good sign. It suggests the organization values the ability to navigate change over the ability to execute a known playbook.

The second is pace. The reality of change fatigue is well documented, and it compounds: when people are asked to sustain high-intensity delivery over extended periods, their capacity to absorb further change diminishes. The rhythm matters as much as the direction. A pharmaceutical business operating under tight regulatory controls will transform at a different pace and in a different way than an FMCG business running fast innovation cycles. The question is not which approach is right, but whether the pace being set is sustainable, and whether the organization is honest about that with itself.

Why it matters

When transformation is treated as a project, the capability walks out the door with the program team. Learnings are lost. The next transformation starts from scratch.

Common pitfalls

- Infrastructure dismantled after delivery; next program starts from zero
- Excellence functions without real authority – playbooks regions aren't obliged to follow
- Past success mistaken for future resilience
- Change fatigue from sustained high-intensity delivery

Key success factors

- Codified methodology: every program upgrades the playbook
- Local capability with skill and authority to sustain change
- Standing TMO with real authority – not just advisory
- Sustainable pace; rotate leaders to build a change-ready bench

A way forward

These three layers are not distinct issues. They interact, and the consequences of getting them right or wrong compound over time.

An organization that builds the translation layer but lacks leadership alignment behind it has structure without mandate: governance that exists on paper but produces no durable decisions. An organization with strong leadership but no structural layer beneath it produces vision without traction: clear intent that never reaches the people expected to deliver. And an organization that gets both right for the life of a program but treats them as temporary will find itself rebuilding both from scratch the next time, having lost the capability and the institutional memory along the way.

The compounding effect works in both directions. When these layers are absent or misaligned, each program erodes the organization's confidence and capacity a little further. Change fatigue sets in, good people leave and the next transformation faces a more skeptical, more exhausted organization than the last. When they are in place, the opposite happens. A successful transformation becomes the proof point that makes the next one easier to start. People see that change does not have to mean only disruption. Capability accumulates rather than dissipates. The organization's relationship with transformation itself begins to shift.

When a transformation stalls, it is worth asking where in this sequence the current approach breaks down. Is the translation layer between strategy and operations actually designed, or is it being improvised? If it exists, does the leadership operating system above it provide genuine authority, honest objectives and consistent decision-making, or is the structure operating without mandate? And if both are in place, are they built to last beyond the current program, or will the capability walk out the door when the team disbands?

Most organizations do not need to address all three at once. What they do need is honesty about which layer is most exposed, and the willingness to address it deliberately rather than work around it. That honesty is usually the hardest part, and it is much better to arrive now than six months into a program that is already drifting.

The question is not whether an organization needs to transform, **but whether it is built to keep doing so.**

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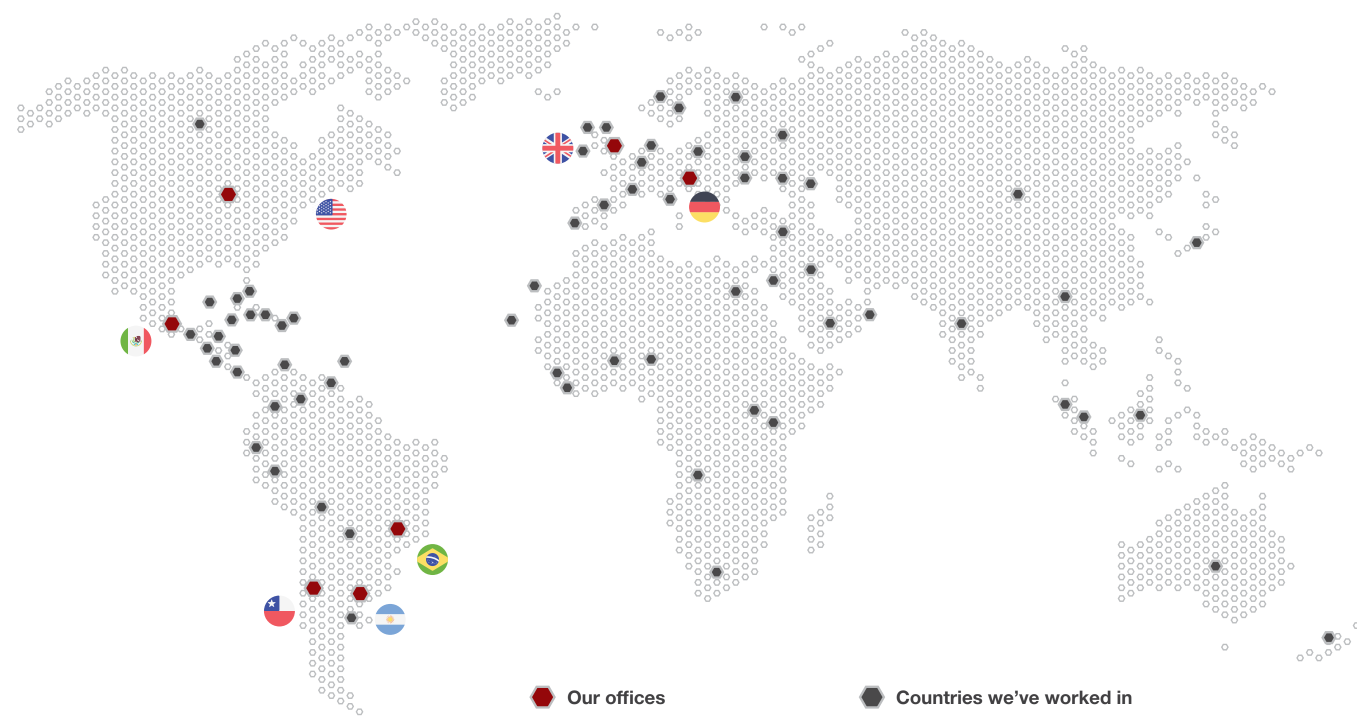

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