

BEYOND GREEN DASHBOARDS

Borrowed from Product, Broken for Programmes

What the Failure of Objectives and Key Results in Transformation Reveals About the Governance of Change



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“The programme is meeting its key results and failing in its purpose.”

1. The Green Dashboard That Changes Nothing

The programme review runs to schedule. Forty minutes, six objectives, eighteen key results, each colour-coded. The dashboard is predominantly green — a handful of ambers, no reds. The programme director walks through each objective with the fluency of rehearsal: adoption percentages, process milestones, capability indicators. The executive sponsor nods. The steering committee signs off.

And yet everyone in that room — if pressed privately, away from the governance table — would acknowledge that the programme is in difficulty. The technology platform is live but barely adopted. The operating model changes have been absorbed by the organisation's immune system. Three of the five business units have quietly reverted to parallel processes, running the old way alongside the new. The programme is meeting its key results and failing in its purpose.

This is not a failure of execution. It is a failure of the instrument.

Over recent years, I have watched this pattern repeat across a surprising variety of organisations and sectors, and it has sharpened a conviction that the measurement frameworks we borrow from product-oriented companies are structurally unfit for the work of transformation. The objectives-and-key-results discipline — developed originally at Intel in the late nineteen-seventies as an evolution of management by objectives, and adopted with notable effect by several high-growth technology companies — is perhaps the sharpest example. Its appeal to transformation leaders is immediate and understandable. But the appeal conceals a structural incompatibility that no amount of customisation can resolve, and the persistence of the pattern tells us something important about the deeper forces at work in how organisations attempt to govern change.

2. The Appeal of Borrowed Precision

For transformation leaders weary of vague benefits cases and imprecise progress reporting, the objectives-and-key-results discipline seems to offer what has been missing: a framework that connects strategic intent to measurable outcomes, drives alignment across teams, and forces regular reassessment of what matters. The logic is seductive. If technology product companies — the organisations we most associate with speed of execution and relentless innovation — use objectives and key results to align hundreds of people around shared outcomes, then surely we can apply the same discipline to large-scale organisational change. If a product team can set quarterly objectives and demonstrate measurable progress against them, why should a transformation programme not do the same?

It is a reasonable question. And the answer it demands reveals something important — not merely about the limitations of one measurement framework, but about the nature of transformation itself and the assumptions we carry, largely unexamined, about what it means to govern it.

3. What the Instrument Assumes

The objectives-and-key-results framework was built for a particular kind of work. In its native habitat — product development and iteration within technology companies — it operates inside several assumptions so deeply embedded that they are rarely surfaced, let alone questioned.

The unit of work is relatively bounded. A product team knows what it is building, for whom, and within what technical and market constraints. The objective may be ambitious — may even be deliberately set beyond comfortable reach — but it sits within a domain the team can see, understand, and influence directly. Outcomes are measurable in short cycles: user adoption, revenue growth, system performance, error rates — all produce data in weeks or at most months. The quarterly review cadence is not arbitrary; it reflects the feedback loops genuinely available to product teams working in known domains.

The team has meaningful autonomy over its own results. Dependencies exist, certainly, but they are navigable within the product organisation's structures and decision rights. And — the assumption most frequently overlooked — the environment is broadly stable between one review cycle and the next. Markets shift, customer preferences evolve, competitive pressures change, but the fundamental nature of the work does not transform while the team is executing against its objectives. The product team iterates within a recognisable domain. It does not metamorphose.

These are not incidental features of the framework's success. They are the conditions under which objectives and key results function as a legitimate measurement instrument — the preconditions that make the framework's promise of clarity actually deliverable. Remove them, and the framework does not merely become less effective. It begins to measure the wrong things entirely.

4. Why Transformation Breaks the Model

Transformation programmes violate every one of these assumptions — not as a temporary condition that can be managed or mitigated, but as a defining characteristic of the work itself.

The unit of work in transformation is not bounded but emergent. A programme to redesign an operating model, integrate an acquisition, or shift a regulatory compliance posture does not have fixed boundaries in the way a product initiative does. The scope evolves — sometimes dramatically — as the organisation responds to the change itself. Objectives set in one quarter may become irrelevant by the next, not because the team has failed, but because the organisation has learned something that reframes the problem entirely. What looked like a technology adoption challenge turns out to be a leadership alignment problem. What was framed as a process redesign reveals itself as a cultural negotiation. The target moves because the act of pursuing it changes the landscape.

The outcomes of transformation resist short-cycle measurement. Whether behaviours have genuinely shifted, whether the new operating model is functioning as intended,

whether the organisation's capability has changed in ways that will sustain — these manifest over months and years, not quarters. What can be measured quarterly tends to be activity and output: training sessions delivered, systems deployed, processes documented. Not outcome and impact: decisions made differently, risks managed more effectively, value created that would not otherwise have existed. The objectives-and-key-results discipline, faithfully applied, therefore gravitates toward measuring what it can count rather than what actually matters — and in doing so, it creates the illusion of progress where the reality may be stagnation or even regression.

Transformation teams have limited autonomy over their outcomes. The success of a change programme depends on the behaviour of people and parts of the organisation that the programme team does not control — business unit leaders who must change how they operate, middle managers who must relinquish established ways of working, operational staff who must adopt new tools and processes, technology partners who must deliver to shifting requirements. A product team's key results are substantially within its own gift; a transformation programme's key results depend on the cooperation, adaptation, and sustained goodwill of actors whose incentives may run directly counter to the programme's objectives.

And the environment does not hold still. Transformation, by its very nature, reshapes the domain while operating within it. The programme does not iterate within a stable context; it alters the context. Objectives set at the beginning of a quarter may be overtaken not by external market forces but by the programme's own effects — the changes it has introduced create new conditions, new resistances, new opportunities that the original objectives could not have anticipated. To measure a transformation programme against objectives that assumed a static environment is to measure it against a world that no longer exists.

When we impose objectives-and-key-results discipline onto this landscape, we do not bring clarity. We bring the appearance of clarity — which is considerably more dangerous, because it satisfies the governance need for legibility while obscuring the reality it purports to reveal.

5. The Forces That Sustain a Broken Instrument

If the objectives-and-key-results framework is so poorly suited to transformation, why does the pattern persist? Why do intelligent, experienced leaders continue to adopt it, and why do organisations that have seen it fail in one programme apply it again to the next? The answer lies not in ignorance but in a set of structural forces that make the framework politically irresistible even when it is operationally counterproductive.

The first force is executive comfort with apparent precision. Senior leaders — particularly those whose careers have been built in operations, finance, or technology product management — are trained to govern through metrics. A colour-coded dashboard of key results offers the governance surface they understand and trust, even when that surface bears little relationship to the reality beneath it. The alternative — governing through judgement, narrative, and qualitative assessment of progress — feels imprecise, subjective, and politically exposed. It requires the executive to form and defend a view, rather than to read and ratify a number.

“It is easier to ask “are we hitting our key results?” than to ask “is the organisation actually changing?” – because the first question has a definitive answer and the second requires interpretation.”

The second force is the governance theatre that large organisations reliably produce around measurement. Programme governance in most organisations is not primarily a mechanism for decision-making. It is a mechanism for accountability – which is to say, for demonstrating to those above that those below are doing what they were told to do. Objectives and key results serve this function admirably. They create a legible record of commitment and performance. They make it possible to hold individuals and teams to account against specific numbers. That the numbers may measure the wrong things is, from the perspective of governance-as-accountability, beside the point. The dashboard is green. The minutes record that it was green. The accountability chain is intact. That the programme may nevertheless be failing is a problem for a different meeting.

The third force is the management consulting industry's appetite for transferable frameworks. The premise that a discipline proven in one context can be lifted and applied to another is foundational to consulting practice – it is, in a sense, the economic model on which large-scale advisory work depends. Objectives and key results, with their appealing simplicity and their association with admired technology companies, travel exceptionally well in a pitch deck. The structural differences between product management and transformation management – which are differences not of degree but of kind – are smoothed over in the transfer. What arrives at the client is the framework, shorn of the assumptions that made it work in its original context.

The fourth, and perhaps most powerful, force is the absence of a credible alternative. Benefits management, as traditionally practised in programme environments, is slow, bureaucratic, and frequently disconnected from the rhythm of programme execution. The balanced scorecard offers strategic alignment but not the operational cadence that programme teams need for day-to-day steering. Key performance indicators proliferate without hierarchy, narrative, or connection to the programme's theory of change. In this vacuum, the objectives-and-key-results discipline appears not because it fits, but because nothing else has been convincingly offered that provides both strategic coherence and operational rhythm. It is adopted not on its merits but on the weakness of its competitors.

6. What the Gap Reveals

What the persistent failure of borrowed measurement in transformation reveals is not merely a technical problem – a matter of choosing the wrong framework and needing to choose a better one. It is a problem of epistemology: of what we believe we can know about organisational change, and when we believe we can know it.

The objectives-and-key-results discipline rests on an epistemological assumption that is entirely appropriate to product management: that we can define desired outcomes in advance, measure progress against them at regular intervals, and use those measurements to steer the work. This is a legitimate model for work that is bounded, measurable, and substantially within the team's control. It is not a legitimate model for work that is emergent, politically contested, and dependent on the behaviour of actors who have not signed up to the programme's objectives and may not share its definition of success.

Transformation is, in its essence, an intervention into a complex adaptive system. We know from systems thinking – and from the growing body of work on complexity in organisational contexts – that such interventions produce outcomes that are nonlinear, path-dependent, and frequently counter-intuitive. The relationship between action and outcome is not proportional; small changes in initial conditions can produce dramatically different results; and the system's response to intervention is shaped by its own history in ways that are rarely predictable from the outside. The idea that we can set quarterly objectives and measure progress against them with the same confidence we bring to product metrics is not merely optimistic. It misunderstands the nature of the work at a fundamental level.

This does not mean that transformation cannot be measured. It means that the measurement must match the nature of what is being measured – and that matching is harder, more uncomfortable, and more intellectually demanding than borrowing a framework from another domain. In my experience, the organisations that govern transformation most effectively are those that have abandoned the pursuit of false precision and replaced it with something more honest: a measurement regime that distinguishes clearly between leading indicators and lagging outcomes, that treats qualitative assessment as legitimate evidence rather than mere anecdote, that uses narrative alongside numbers to build a picture of progress, and that accepts irreducible uncertainty as a feature of the work rather than a failure of the team.

Such a regime is harder to build, harder to govern, and harder to defend in a steering committee. It requires executives who are willing to exercise judgement rather than read dashboards. It requires programme teams who can articulate progress in terms that are honest about what is known and what is not yet knowable – and who have the confidence to say so. It requires governance structures that reward sense-making and interpretation over the mechanical production of numbers.

We are, as a profession, some distance from this. The appeal of borrowed instruments – of frameworks that promise the clarity and comparability we crave – remains powerful, precisely because the alternative demands so much more of the people who must use it. And so the pattern persists: the quarterly review, the green dashboard, the signed-off steering committee, and the quiet knowledge in the corridor that the numbers tell one story while the organisation lives another. The gap between transformation intent and transformation reality is, in large part, a gap in measurement philosophy. We will not close it by borrowing sharper instruments from product management. We will close it only by building measurement practices designed for the actual nature of the work – practices that are as comfortable with ambiguity, emergence, and honest uncertainty as transformation itself demands.