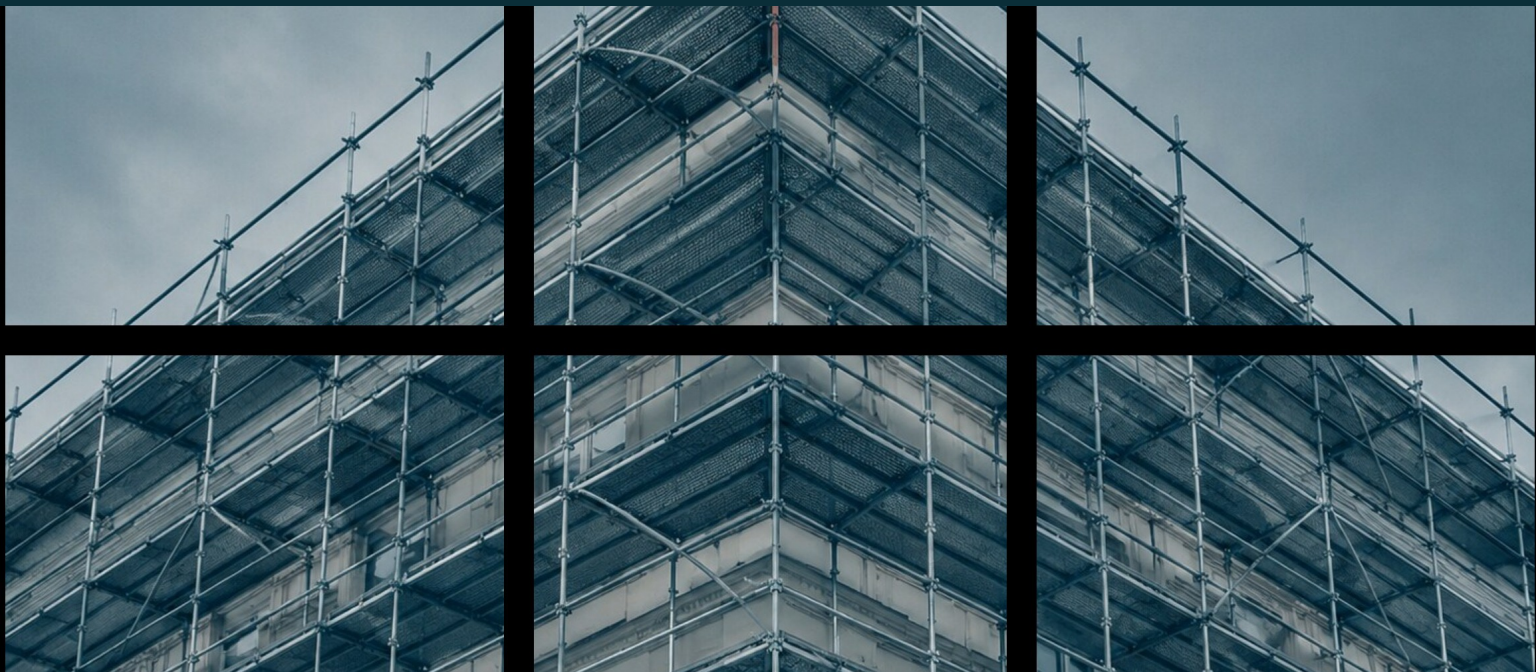


BEYOND OUTSOURCING

Buying Transformation Without Buying Dependency

A Practitioner's Perspective on Strategic Sourcing in Complex Change Programmes



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1. The Problem with How We Buy Change

There is a pattern that recurs with depressing regularity across large organisations embarking on transformation. The board commits to a programme of significant change. A procurement exercise follows. External partners are appointed – consultancies, systems integrators, specialist firms – and within months, sometimes weeks, the organisation discovers that it has not so much bought transformation as rented it. The external partner holds the methodology, the relationships, the institutional memory of what was decided and why. The organisation's own people become administrators of someone else's programme.

This is not a failure of procurement in the narrow sense. The contracts are often well-constructed. Service levels are defined. Governance is in place. The failure is more fundamental: it is a failure of commissioning. And the distinction between procurement and commissioning is one that most organisations have not yet learned to make.

2. Procurement Is Not Commissioning

Procurement asks: what do we need to buy, from whom, and at what price? It is a transactional discipline, and a necessary one. But it operates downstream of the decisions that actually determine whether a transformation programme will build capability or merely consume budget.

Commissioning asks a harder set of questions: what is the problem we are trying to solve? What capability do we need – and what capability do we need to own? Where does external expertise genuinely add value, and where does it substitute for capacity we should be building ourselves?

The distinction matters because transformation is not a product. It cannot be specified in the way one specifies an IT system or a construction project. The requirements evolve. The organisation learns – or should learn – as the programme progresses. A commissioning model that treats transformation as a fixed deliverable will inevitably create dependency, because every adaptation, every course correction, every moment of genuine learning will require the external partner's involvement to interpret, to re-scope, to re-plan.

The organisation that commissions well does not need to understand every technical detail – but it must understand its own problem deeply enough to know when it is being sold a solution to someone else's.

3. Why Dependency Takes Root

The pattern is not malicious. Few external partners set out to create dependency deliberately – though the commercial incentives certainly do not discourage it. Dependency takes root for structural reasons that are rarely discussed openly.

The knowledge asymmetry is real. The external partner, particularly one that has delivered similar programmes elsewhere, genuinely does know more about the mechanics of delivery than the client's team. This is, after all, why they were hired. But this legitimate expertise becomes a trap when the organisation conflates knowing how to deliver with knowing what to deliver. The partner's experience of other organisations' transformations is valuable context, but it is not a substitute for the client's own understanding of its culture, its politics, its operational realities.

The specification gap is exploited unconsciously. Because transformation cannot be fully specified in advance, there is always a gap between what the contract describes and what the programme actually requires. This gap is where dependency lives. Every time the organisation turns to its external partner to interpret that gap – to decide what the next phase should look like, to define the business case for the next tranche of work, to assess whether the programme is on track – it cedes a little more control.

Internal capability is hollowed out by design. The most pernicious form of dependency is the one that looks like efficiency. When the external partner's team is delivering at pace, there is enormous pressure to let them get on with it rather than slow things down by involving internal staff who are less experienced, less available, or less willing. Each such decision is individually rational and collectively catastrophic. By the time the programme reaches its later stages, the organisation's own people have been spectators for so long that they could not take ownership even if the contract required it.

4. What a Genuine Commissioning Model Looks Like

A commissioning model worthy of the name starts from a different set of assumptions. It assumes that the organisation will need external help, but it treats that help as a temporary input into a permanent capability. It is built around three principles that are easy to state and remarkably difficult to sustain under the pressures of programme delivery.

4.1 Own the Problem Definition

The single most important act of commissioning is defining the problem in the organisation's own terms, before any external partner is involved. This does not mean producing a detailed specification – that would fall into the procurement trap described above. It means articulating, clearly and honestly, what the organisation is trying to achieve, why it has not achieved it so far, and what it believes is preventing progress.

In my experience, this step is almost always rushed or delegated. Boards approve transformation programmes on the basis of high-level business cases that describe benefits in financial terms but leave the actual problem poorly defined. The external partner is then asked to help define the problem — which means, in practice, that the partner defines the problem in terms that their methodology is designed to solve.

4.2 Separate Capability from Capacity

The commissioning decision should distinguish sharply between capability the organisation does not have and capacity the organisation does not have enough of. These require fundamentally different commercial relationships.

Where the organisation lacks capability — genuine expertise it has never held and cannot readily develop — the right model is a time-limited knowledge transfer arrangement. The external partner brings the expertise, but the contract is structured around the transfer of that expertise to internal staff, with clear milestones and a defined exit point.

Where the organisation lacks capacity — it knows what to do but does not have enough people to do it at the required pace — the right model is a managed service with strong internal oversight. The external partner provides additional hands, but the direction, the decision-making, and the institutional learning remain internal.

The failure to make this distinction is the root cause of most transformation dependency. Organisations buy capability when they need capacity, or — more commonly — they buy a blended service that conflates both, making it impossible to know which they are getting at any given moment.

4.3 Design the Exit Before the Entry

The commissioning model must include, from the outset, a credible plan for ending the external engagement. Not a contractual notice period — that is a procurement mechanism — but a genuine transition plan that describes how internal teams will assume ownership, what knowledge and capability they will need to have acquired, and how readiness will be assessed.

The test of a good commissioning decision is not whether the programme delivers — it is whether the organisation is more capable of delivering the next programme on its own.

This is where commissioning becomes uncomfortable, because it requires the organisation to invest in its own people at the same time as it is paying external partners to deliver. The temptation to defer that investment — to focus the budget on delivery now and worry about capability later — is overwhelming. And it is precisely this temptation that the commissioning model must be designed to resist.

5. The Governance That Commissioning Requires

A commissioning model is only as strong as the governance that surrounds it. And the governance that most organisations apply to their external partnerships is fundamentally unsuited to the task.

Conventional programme governance asks whether the programme is on time and on budget. It reviews progress against plan. It escalates risks and issues. All of this is

necessary, but none of it addresses the commissioning question: is this engagement building our capability or eroding it?

Commissioning governance requires a different set of measures. It asks: how many of the key roles in this programme are held by internal staff, and is that number increasing or decreasing? What knowledge has been transferred this quarter, and how has that transfer been verified? If this external partner left tomorrow, what would we be unable to do — and is that list shorter than it was six months ago?

These are not comfortable questions. They often reveal that the answer is worse than anyone expected. But the organisation that does not ask them will discover, when the programme ends or the contract expires, that it has spent millions on transformation and owns nothing but a set of documents it cannot interpret without the people who wrote them.

6. The Practitioner's Honest Assessment

I do not pretend that commissioning well is easy. It requires the organisation to hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously: that it needs external help, and that the measure of success is needing less of it over time. It requires programme leaders to slow down delivery in the short term to build capability for the long term — a trade-off that few boards have the patience to accept.

But the alternative is the cycle we see repeated across sector after sector: organisations that spend years and fortunes on transformation programmes that deliver change but not capability, that end with the organisation no more able to transform itself than it was at the start. The commissioning model is not a panacea. But it is a discipline — a way of thinking about external partnerships that starts from what the organisation needs to become, not just what it needs to get done.

The organisations that will navigate the next decade of change most effectively will not be those that buy the best consultants. They will be the ones that learn to commission well — to buy what they need without surrendering what they must own.