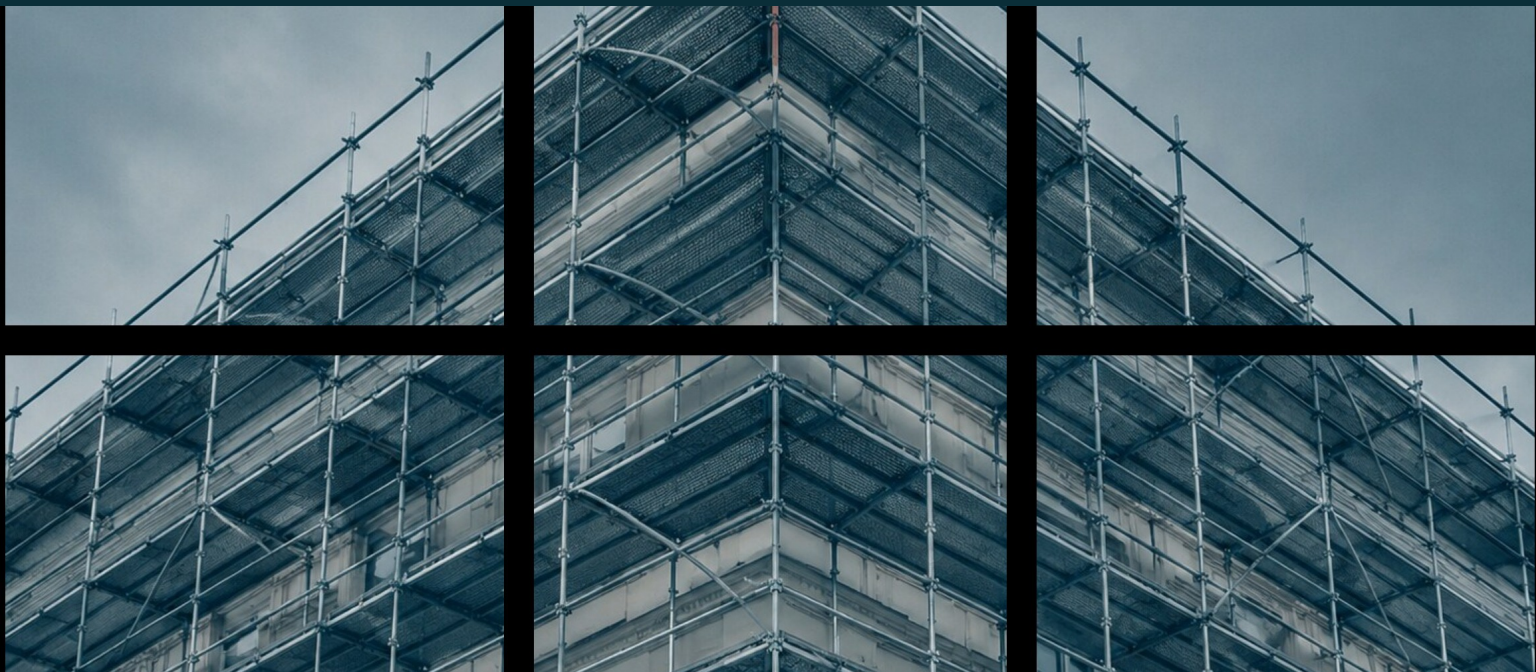


BEYOND DEPLETION

Change Fatigue Is an Immune Response, Not a Fuel Gauge

Why organisations that resist the next initiative are often remembering the last one — and what that means for anyone trying to lead change



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1. The Silence That Gets Misread

The fourth reorganisation in five years is announced in the same room as the first. The slides are better now — the operating-model diagram has been through more revisions, the benefits case is tighter, the sponsor sits a level higher than last time. And the room is quiet. Not hostile: quiet. A handful of polite questions about timing and reporting lines, then nothing. The programme director leaves encouraged. Much smoother than the last one, she tells her team. People are finally coming with us.

They are not coming with her. They have learned that questions cost effort and change nothing, and they have stopped spending the effort. The stillness that reads as consent is closer to its opposite. It is the sound of an organisation that has developed antibodies.

We have a phrase for what that room is going through — change fatigue — and it is one of the few pieces of practitioner vocabulary that everyone reaches for and almost everyone misreads. The reaching is understandable; the misreading is expensive. Because the way we name a thing decides how we treat it, and we have been treating change fatigue as if it were tiredness. It is not tiredness. It is memory.

2. The Fuel-Gauge Model, and Why It Runs Out of Road

The received account of change fatigue is a depletion story. People have a finite reserve of adaptive energy; each initiative draws it down; run enough of them close enough together and the tank empties. On this reading the symptoms — disengagement, cynicism, slower uptake, the meeting that generates no questions — are what an empty tank looks like. The prescriptions follow directly and sound eminently sensible: pace the initiatives, sequence them, leave recovery time between waves, invest more in communication so the next drawdown feels justified. Change readiness, in this telling, is a matter of managing the reserve.

I want to be fair to this view, because it is not foolish and it is not entirely wrong. Sequencing genuinely matters; a portfolio that launches six overlapping programmes into the same population of middle managers will fail on logistics alone, before belief enters the question. And communication that treats people as adults does earn more goodwill than communication that treats them as a distribution list. If your organisation is drowning purely in volume, throttling the volume will help.

But the fuel-gauge model makes one prediction that the evidence in front of us keeps refusing to honour. If change fatigue were depletion, then rest would restore appetite. Slow the pace, let the reserve refill, and the next initiative should meet something like the

openness the first one met. That is not what happens. The organisation that has been through four reorganisations does not greet the fifth with restored enthusiasm merely because you gave it a quiet year first. It greets the fifth with faster, better-organised scepticism than it brought to the fourth. The response is not weaker after rest. It is stronger. A fuel gauge does not behave that way. An immune system does.

3. What the Response Actually Is

Consider what an immune system does, because the analogy is doing real work here rather than decorating the argument. On first exposure to something the body treats as a threat, the response is slow and modest — the system has not seen this before and is building its reaction from scratch. What matters is what happens next. The body keeps memory of the encounter, and on the second and third exposure to the same antigen the response is faster, larger, and more precise. The system has learned the pattern. It no longer needs to deliberate.

That is an almost exact description of how organisations meet repeated change. The pattern that recurs, across sectors and across the size range, is this: the first transformation in a given population lands into something like a blank slate, and people extend it the benefit of the doubt. What they learn from that first encounter is not the content of the change but its fate — whether it was finished, whether the effort they invested early was honoured, whether the world they were asked to believe in actually arrived. And a great deal of change does not arrive. It is de-scoped, quietly abandoned, superseded by the next idea before it delivers, or declared a success in a steering committee while the people doing the work watch it dissolve.

So the organisation learns. Not consciously, and not through any single decision, but the way a system learns: it lays down antibodies. The specific, observable behaviours we file under change fatigue are those antibodies at work.

- Withheld investment. People who committed early to a previous initiative and were burned by its reversal learn to commit late to the next one, or not at all. The team lead who once reorganised her team's routines the week a mandate landed now waits two reporting cycles before touching anything, because — in her words — half of them evaporate.
- Compliance theatre. The initiative is not resisted openly, because open resistance is costly and pointless. It is absorbed at the surface. The status tracker turns green, the mandatory training is completed, the new template is adopted, and underneath, the old way of working continues untouched. Everyone knows this is happening. The reporting line pretends not to.
- Pre-emptive cynicism. By the fourth wave, the scepticism arrives before the content does. People know how this ends before they have heard what this is, and they are usually right, which is the part that makes it so hard to argue with.

Put numbers on it, because the numbers are where the immune reading earns its keep. Take a composite operations division — invented, but true to a hundred real ones — that over five years has been through a shared-services centralisation later reversed, a customer-first restructure, a process-excellence programme, and an enterprise-system consolidation. Of those last several major initiatives, count honestly how many reached the benefits they promised. In the cases I have watched closely, the honest tally is brutal: perhaps two in six deliver what they said; one is formally cancelled; the remaining three are quietly folded into whatever replaced them and never mentioned again. Now look at

the town halls. The first reorganisation's launch drew something like forty questions from the floor. The fourth drew four. On the fuel-gauge model, that fall is disengagement — the tank emptying. On the immune model, it is the opposite of disengagement. It is a population that has processed the pattern so thoroughly it no longer needs to ask.

The organisation that stops asking questions has not stopped paying attention. It has finished paying attention, and drawn a conclusion. Silence is not the absence of a response. It is a response that has become efficient.

4. The Objection Worth Taking Seriously

There is a strong version of the counter-argument, and it deserves to be met rather than waved past. It runs like this: the immune metaphor is a flattering costume for ordinary resistance to change. Human beings dislike disruption; they always have; dressing their inertia up as an adaptive, quasi-biological response simply launders it — it lets employees off the hook for foot-dragging and hands them a vocabulary of self-justification, while conveniently relocating all the blame onto leadership. And besides, the objection continues, sometimes change fatigue really is just too much change too fast, and the answer really is pacing and better communication, exactly as the standard account says.

This is the objection I would raise if I were arguing the other side, so let me answer it properly rather than cheaply.

First, the immune framing is not exculpatory; it is diagnostic. To say a response is adaptive is not to say it is desirable. An immune system that attacks harmless things has a name — it is autoimmune — and it is a serious problem, not a virtue. The point of the framing is not to tell the organisation it is right to reject all change. It is to explain why it rejects change so efficiently, so that we stop applying the wrong remedy. You do not cure an over-active immune response by telling the body to try harder, and you do not cure an organisation's learned scepticism by communicating the next initiative more enthusiastically. The enthusiasm is precisely the antigen it has learned to recognise.

Second, the "just too much, too fast" account and the immune account make different predictions, and you can tell them apart. If the problem is volume, reducing volume fixes it, and the organisation's response to a single, well-paced change returns to baseline. If the problem is learned response, a single well-paced change still meets the amplified scepticism, because the scepticism is informational rather than energetic — it is about what past change did, not how much of it there was. Most organisations that plateau on change are living in the second world, not the first. The tell is simple: they have slowed down and it has not helped.

*“You do not cure a learned response by repeating, more loudly,
the stimulus that taught it.”*

5. Reading the Response, and Changing It

If change fatigue is an immune response, then the leadership task is not to suppress the response but to change what the organisation has learned. That reframing has consequences, and they are not the ones the readiness literature usually reaches for.

The first is that completion is the real currency, and we have been spending it recklessly. Every initiative that is launched and not finished does not simply fail on its own terms; it raises the immune cost of the next one, because it adds another data point to the pattern the organisation is learning. On the fuel-gauge model, an abandoned programme is a sunk cost — regrettable, written off, over. On the immune model it is worse than sunk: it is an active liability that keeps charging interest against every future change. This inverts a common instinct. Leaders under pressure tend to launch more, to signal momentum. The immune reading says that launching more of what you will not finish is the single most reliable way to manufacture the fatigue you are trying to overcome. Fewer changes, actually completed, rebuild tolerance faster than any communications campaign.

The second consequence is that we have to distinguish the immune response we want from the autoimmune one we do not. A healthy organisational immune system rejecting genuinely bad change — the reorganisation with no thesis, the tool nobody needed, the restructure that serves an executive's ambition rather than the work — is not a problem to be solved. It is judgement, and it is worth more than compliance. The failure mode is not that organisations reject change; it is that they lose the ability to tell the difference, and reject all of it with equal, undifferentiated speed. The goal is not a compliant organisation. It is one whose scepticism is calibrated — sharp about bad change, still open to good — and scepticism only stays calibrated when leadership has earned the right to be believed by finishing what it starts.

Which points at the uncomfortable centre of the whole thing. The organisation's memory is accurate. The antibodies are not irrational; they are evidence-based. If the last four changes mostly failed, then meeting the fifth with scepticism is not a defect in the workforce — it is the correct reading of the available data. That is the part the fuel-gauge model cannot see, because it treats the people as the problem to be managed rather than as a measurement instrument that is working perfectly well. When an organisation is tired of change, it is usually telling the truth about the change, not confessing a weakness in itself.

6. What the Textbooks Leave Out

Open almost any change-management text and you will find the organisation modelled as a blank slate — a population to be moved, this time, from a current state to a future state, with the right coalition and the right burning platform and the right cascade of messages. Each change is treated as if it were the first change. The reserve of goodwill is assumed to reset between programmes, like a scoreboard at the start of a new game.

The organisation does not reset. It remembers. Every initiative is read in the light of every initiative that came before it, and the reading is done not by individuals who can be persuaded one at a time but by a system that has learned a pattern and will apply it faster each time it recurs. This is what the textbooks leave out, and it is not a footnote — it changes the whole task. The work of leading change is not primarily the work of overcoming resistance to the change in front of you. It is the work of being the kind of organisation whose changes are worth believing, so that its immune system stays a source of judgement rather than a wall.

We are fluent, as a profession, in the mechanics of launching change. We are far less fluent in the discipline of finishing it, and it is finishing — visibly, repeatedly, honestly — that determines what the organisation learns to do when the next initiative walks into the room. The tired organisation is not the one that has run out of energy. It is, very often, the one that has been paying the closest attention. The uncomfortable question for anyone about to announce the next transformation is not how do we overcome their fatigue. It is what did we teach them last time — and whether we are about to teach them the same thing again.