

BEYOND THE ORG CHART

Decision Rights Are the Hidden Architecture of Transformation

A Practitioner's Perspective on Authority, Accountability and the Speed of Change

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July 2026



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Transformation · No. 443
July 2026

"The fastest transformation is not the one with fewer decisions; it is the one in which decisions travel the shortest responsible distance."

1. Transformation Has an Invisible Structure

Transformation programmes make their visible architecture explicit. They publish organisation charts, workstreams, governance forums, design authorities, delivery plans and escalation routes. Roles are named. Meetings are scheduled. Reporting cycles begin.

Yet the structure that most determines whether transformation moves is often left implicit: who has the authority to make which decision, under what conditions, with what consequence?

This is the hidden architecture of transformation.

When decision rights are clear, teams can move across functional boundaries without repeatedly renegotiating permission. Trade-offs are made at the level where their consequences can be understood. Escalation is reserved for genuinely enterprise-level choices. Accountability follows authority.

When decision rights are unclear, formal governance multiplies while decisions slow. Forums discuss issues without resolving them. Sponsors are accountable for outcomes they cannot compel. Workstreams optimise locally because no one can enforce the whole. Senior leaders become accidental bottlenecks, not because every decision is strategic, but because the organisation has not distinguished strategic authority from operational judgement.

Transformation does not stall because organisations lack governance. It stalls because governance often specifies who attends without specifying who decides.

The usual response is to redraw the operating model or add another committee. That changes the visible structure while leaving the invisible one untouched.

2. The Difference Between a Role and a Right

A role describes responsibility. A decision right describes authority.

The distinction sounds narrow, but it is fundamental. A transformation director may be responsible for integration yet have no authority to resolve a conflict between business units. A product owner may be accountable for value while funding, architecture and workforce decisions sit elsewhere. A sponsor may own the business case but be unable to redirect operational priorities. A design authority may approve standards without owning the consequences of delay.

In each case, responsibility has been assigned more clearly than power.

This creates what might be called accountability without agency. The named owner is expected to produce an outcome but must secure consent from people whose incentives remain aligned to different goals. The resulting delay is interpreted as a leadership or stakeholder problem when it is often a governance design problem.

The reverse is equally damaging: authority without accountability. A functional executive can veto a cross-enterprise design because it affects local operations, while bearing little responsibility for the strategic outcome lost through delay. A control function can require additional evidence without owning the opportunity cost. A programme board can request recovery without identifying what should be sacrificed.

Effective transformation requires authority and accountability to meet at the point of decision.

3. Why Transformations Obscure Decision Rights

3.1 The operating hierarchy was built for continuity

Most organisations distribute authority through functions, business units and established financial controls. Transformation cuts across these arrangements. It asks leaders to trade local performance for enterprise outcomes, change processes owned by several functions and allocate scarce capability across competing priorities.

The hierarchy can manage exceptions, but transformation produces a continuous stream of cross-boundary choices. If each one must travel upward, executives become overloaded and teams learn to wait.

3.2 Governance is designed for representation

Transformation boards are often constructed to ensure that every affected interest has a voice. Representation is necessary, but it is not the same as decision authority.

A forum can include all relevant stakeholders and still lack a clear rule for resolving disagreement. Consensus becomes the default because no one wants to override a peer. Difficult choices are deferred, sent for further analysis or escalated to a more senior group with the same ambiguity.

3.3 Ambiguity preserves political flexibility

Explicit decision rights reveal who can overrule whom. They expose trade-offs that polite governance language can conceal.

Organisations may therefore prefer phrases such as “collective ownership,” “joint accountability” and “collaborative decision-making.” These sound inclusive but can dissolve responsibility when interests diverge.

Collaboration should improve the evidence considered before a decision. It should not make the decision owner unidentifiable.

3.4 Transformation authority is treated as temporary

Programme structures are often expected to coordinate change without altering permanent authority. Yet if transformation is meant to redesign how the organisation operates, temporary teams inevitably encounter decisions embedded in the enduring model.

Unless the relationship between temporary and permanent authority is explicit, transformation teams can propose but not commit, while operational leaders can delay without formally rejecting.

4. The Four Decision Classes

Not every choice needs the same governance. A practical decision architecture distinguishes at least four classes.

Decision class	Primary question	Appropriate owner
Strategic direction	What outcome and level of ambition will the organisation pursue?	Executive sponsor or enterprise leadership
Investment and priority	Where will scarce money, people and attention be committed or withdrawn?	Portfolio authority
Design integrity	Which enterprise principles, standards and cross-functional choices must hold?	Empowered design authority
Delivery and operation	How will teams execute and adapt within agreed boundaries?	Programme, product and operational leaders

The value of this distinction is not the labels. It is the separation of decisions that are routinely confused.

A design authority should not become a substitute investment committee. A programme board should not decide detailed delivery methods. An executive sponsor should not approve every operational adjustment. A delivery team should not make irreversible enterprise trade-offs simply because senior governance is slow.

Decision rights should move downward until the consequence exceeds the boundary of the role.

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5. Define the Decision, Not Only the Forum

A governance map usually lists boards and reporting lines. A decision map should list recurring choices.

For each material decision, define:

- Decision: the specific choice to be made.
- Owner: the one role authorised to make it.
- Inputs: the evidence and perspectives that must be considered.
- Boundary: what the owner may decide without further approval.
- Escalation trigger: the condition that moves the decision upward.
- Time expectation: how quickly the choice must be resolved.
- Record: where the decision and rationale will remain visible.
- Review condition: what new evidence would justify revisiting it.

This prevents several common failures.

First, it separates consultation from approval. Many people may need to contribute, but only one role owns the decision.

Second, it makes conditional delegation possible. A team can decide within cost, risk, architecture or policy boundaries without seeking permission for every adjustment.

Third, it exposes orphan decisions. If no credible role has authority, the operating model is incomplete.

Fourth, it makes delay measurable. An issue does not simply remain “under discussion”; it has exceeded an agreed decision time.

6. The Cost of Decision Latency

Transformation reporting measures delivery delay but rarely measures decision delay.

This matters because unresolved choices create queues throughout the system. Teams continue analysis, build temporary workarounds, maintain parallel options and protect resources against several possible outcomes. Dependencies remain uncertain. Suppliers wait. Operational leaders postpone preparation.

The eventual decision may take an hour. The organisational waiting around it may consume months.

A decision-latency measure should distinguish:

- time required to assemble adequate evidence;
- time waiting for the authorised owner;
- time lost because ownership was disputed;
- time spent repeating discussion across forums;
- downstream work delayed or duplicated.

This turns “governance overhead” into something observable. It also prevents the simplistic conclusion that faster always means better. Some decisions deserve careful analysis. The waste lies in ambiguity and queueing, not thought.

7. Decision Rights Must Follow the Transformation

Decision architecture cannot be fixed at mobilisation and left unchanged.

Early in a transformation, executive choices about ambition, scope and investment dominate. During design, cross-functional integrity becomes critical. During delivery, teams need greater autonomy to adapt. During transition, operational owners must control readiness, risk acceptance and sustained performance.

The authority model should therefore evolve by phase.

1. Mobilise
 - a. Clarify strategic outcome, sponsor authority and investment boundaries.
2. Design
 - a. Empower cross-enterprise choices and establish non-negotiable principles.
3. Deliver
 - a. Delegate adaptation within explicit cost, risk and architecture tolerances.
4. Transition
 - a. Transfer authority to operational owners with clear acceptance criteria.
5. Sustain
 - a. Retain accountability for outcomes and benefits after temporary structures close.

A transformation that changes its activities without changing its decision rights will either centralise unnecessarily or delegate prematurely.

8. What the Sponsor Must Do

The sponsor is not merely the senior person associated with the programme. The sponsor is the point at which strategic intent, investment authority and organisational consequence should converge.

That does not mean the sponsor makes every decision. It means the sponsor designs and protects the decision system.

An effective sponsor:

- confirms which choices remain executive;
- delegates the rest explicitly;
- prevents functions from reclaiming delegated authority informally;
- resolves enterprise trade-offs that no lower role can own;
- accepts the consequences of stopping, sequencing or deprioritising work;
- keeps the business case and intended outcomes contestable;
- intervenes when governance produces discussion without decision.

The sponsor's most important act may be refusing an escalation that belongs lower down. Sending a decision back with a clear boundary develops organisational capability. Absorbing every escalation destroys it.

9. A Practical Decision-Rights Review

A transformation can test its hidden architecture without redesigning all governance.

Select the ten decisions that have consumed the most time or caused the greatest rework during the previous quarter. For each, ask:

1. Was the decision stated clearly?
2. Was one owner identifiable?
3. Did that owner have the necessary authority?
4. Were required inputs distinguished from approvals?
5. Was the escalation trigger known?
6. Did the decision occur at the lowest responsible level?
7. Was the rationale recorded?
8. Did later forums reopen it without new evidence?

Patterns will emerge quickly. The same functional conflict may recur. A board may repeatedly discuss choices it cannot make. A sponsor may be acting as a routing point rather than a decision owner. A design authority may be protecting standards without weighing business consequence.

Repair those patterns before adding new governance.

10. Governance as Organisational Design

Decision rights are sometimes treated as procedural detail: a RACI chart, terms of reference or delegation schedule. In transformation, they are part of the operating model itself.

They determine how strategy becomes action, how enterprise interests prevail over local optimisation, how risk is accepted, how scarce resources move and how quickly the organisation can learn.

This is why structural redesign without decision redesign disappoints. Boxes move, titles change and processes are rewritten, but the old authority relationships survive

underneath. People continue seeking the same permissions from the same centres of power.

A genuine transformation asks not only who reports to whom, but:

- Who can commit the organisation?
- Who can stop work?
- Who can accept risk?
- Who can override a local preference?
- Who can change the priority?
- Who owns the consequence?

If those answers are vague, the transformation architecture is vague.

11. Conclusion: Build the Authority to Change

Transformation programmes often begin by describing the future organisation and planning the work needed to reach it. They should also design the authority required to make the journey.

Clear decision rights do not remove disagreement. They make disagreement resolvable. They do not eliminate escalation. They make escalation purposeful. They do not concentrate all power. They distribute authority with boundaries and consequence.

The result is not merely faster governance. It is more honest accountability.

Transformation succeeds when people with responsibility possess enough authority to act, people with authority remain accountable for outcomes, and decisions occur close enough to the evidence to remain intelligent.

The hidden architecture becomes visible only when the organisation asks a sharper question than “who is involved?”

The question is: who is authorised to choose—and what happens when they do?