

BEYOND THE REBOUND

Snap Back or Leap Forward: The Divergence Was Decided Before the Crisis Began

Why comparable organisations are splitting into two futures, four months into the disruption — and what actually separates them.

Giovanni Leonardi

July 2020



Snap Back or Leap Forward: The Divergence Was Decided Before the Crisis Began

Transformation · No. 246

Originally written July 2020 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

"The question that now divides them is not what they could do in the crisis. It is what they have decided the crisis meant."

1. Two Leaders, One Week, Opposite Tenses

Within a few days of each other last month I listened to two leaders describe the same predicament, and the whole of what separated them turned out to be a verb tense. The first spoke, warmly and capably, about the plans being laid for "when things get back to normal" — the phased return to the building, the reopening, the moment the organisation would resume its proper shape. The second had simply stopped using the word return. Not as a slogan, not as a strategy; it had just quietly fallen out of the vocabulary. Asked what normal would look like, this second leader seemed faintly puzzled by the question, as though it had been addressed to a place that no longer existed.

Same sector. Comparable size, comparable technology, comparable balance sheet, comparable shock in March. Four months on they are pulling apart — one bracing to snap back to the shape it held in February, the other already treating that shape as gone. And I have come to believe that the divergence between them was audible in those two sentences long before it will ever show up in a set of results.

2. Not Maturity, and Not Money

The comfortable explanation for the split is that some organisations were simply better prepared — more digitally mature, better capitalised, further along some transformation roadmap — and that the crisis merely rewarded the ready. It is a comfortable explanation because it is exculpatory: if you snapped back, it was because you lacked the tools, and tools can be bought later.

It is also, from where I sit, mostly wrong. I have watched organisations with thin technology and shallow reserves leap, and organisations with deep pockets and mature platforms brace to revert to precisely what they were in February. The March scramble was a great leveller: almost everyone, ready or not, did in a fortnight what their own roadmaps had scheduled for years — stood up remote working, moved a channel online, collapsed an approval chain, shipped something that mattered in days rather than quarters. Capability was not the constraint. Everyone proved, under duress, that they had

far more of it than they had ever claimed. The question that now divides them is not what they could do in the crisis. It is what they have decided the crisis meant.

3. Interruption, or Information

Here is the distinction I think actually governs the split. Some organisations are reading this period as an interruption — a parenthesis in normal time, a storm to be endured, after which the sentence of ordinary business resumes exactly where it left off. Others are reading it as information — a revelation about what was always possible, and what was always unnecessary, suddenly made legible. The same months, the same events, read in two incompatible grammars.

The stance is not new, and that is the part most people miss. The crisis did not create these two dispositions; it revealed dispositions that were already present, latent, in how each organisation had always related to its own way of working. What changed in March was only that the disposition became visible, because for the first time the old shape was forcibly removed and every organisation had to say, in what it did next, whether it wanted that shape back.

Watch how the mechanism actually plays out, because there is nothing mysterious in it. Confront an interruption-reader and a revelation-reader with the identical event — say, a layer of approval suspended in the emergency — and in April they behave the same way: both suspend it, both move faster, both are quietly astonished at the result. The whole divergence lives in the intention underneath the identical act. The interruption-reader has suspended the process temporarily, as a concession to the storm, and is already looking forward to reinstating it once the weather clears — because to that reader the process is normal and its absence is the aberration. The revelation-reader has suspended the same process and then asked a different and more dangerous question: why did this exist at all? Same action in April; opposite meaning; and by July, visibly opposite trajectories.

Confronted with the identical emergency, two organisations will act identically in April and diverge entirely by July — because the difference was never in the action. It was in whether they read the crisis as an interruption to endure or as information to keep.

Make it concrete, because a composite is worth a hundred abstractions. Take an organisation that, in March, tore out a three-tier sign-off that had governed a routine class of everyday decisions — "just for the emergency." An approval that had reliably taken eleven days began taking two, and nothing bad happened; the missing nine days turned out to have been pure sediment, accreted governance that protected no one and slowed everyone. Four months on, the interruption-readers are quietly putting the three tiers back, "now that things are stabilising," about to hand those nine days back voluntarily. The revelation-readers looked at the same two-day approval and asked why on earth they had ever tolerated eleven. Identical starting process. Identical crisis. The gap between them is nine days per decision, multiplied across every decision of that class, compounding week on week — and it opened up not because one had better technology but because one read the number as a fluke and the other read it as a fact.

4. Prudence, or the Absence of a Decision

The strongest objection to all this is not stupid, and it deserves its best form rather than a convenient caricature. It runs like this: caution is wise. The revelation-readers may simply be over-reading a temporary and abnormal situation — mistaking a shock for a lesson. An organisation is not a laboratory experiment; rewiring it around the conditions of a crisis that will pass is reckless, and the prudent move is to hold your shape, endure, and revert when it is safe. Is snapping back not, in fact, just good sense?

It would be — if reversion were a decision. But watch it closely and you find that it almost never is. The genuinely prudent case for reverting requires you to examine each emergency change and ask which ones were true hacks — unsafe shortcuts that should indeed be unwound — and which were the removal of accreted waste that the crisis merely exposed and that ought to stay gone. That examination is real work, and doing it well is the responsible thing. What I mostly see instead is not that examination at all. It is reversion by default — the old shape flowing back not because anyone judged it superior but because it is the path of least resistance, the thing that happens when nobody decides otherwise. That is not prudence. Prudence is a choice; this is the absence of one. The revelation-readers are not the reckless party here. They are simply the ones who insisted on making the decision consciously, change by change, rather than letting the organisation's own gravity make it silently on their behalf.

5. The Window, and the Photograph

If there is one thing I would press on anyone reading this from inside the fog of July, it is that the window to choose is narrower than it feels, and it is closing in the wrong direction. The reversion instinct does not weaken as the crisis recedes; it strengthens. Right now the old shape is still visibly broken and the alternative is still fresh and slightly thrilling — and that is the easiest moment there will ever be to keep a change on purpose. Every week that fear recedes, the gravity of the familiar reasserts itself, and "we'll decide once things settle down" reveals itself to be the most effective method ever devised for deciding nothing at all — because things keep not settling, and the default keeps quietly winning by forfeit.

I want to be honest about the limits of what anyone can claim from here. I do not know how long this lasts, how deep it goes, or whether the organisations now leaping will be vindicated — that verdict is nowhere near in, and anyone offering it to you in the July of this year is selling a hindsight they cannot possibly possess. It is entirely possible that some of the bracing, reverting organisations will turn out to have been right to hold their nerve, and some of the leapers wrong. What I am confident of is narrower, and I think more useful: the choice is being made now, mostly unconsciously, and mostly in language rather than in strategy documents — in whether a leadership team still finds the word return natural in its mouth, or has quietly stopped reaching for it.

*"The crisis did not create the divergence. It developed
the photograph."*

Because that, in the end, is what a crisis of this kind does. It does not change what an organisation is. It removes, all at once, the scaffolding of the normal that had let the organisation avoid ever knowing what it was — and in the sudden absence of that scaffolding, the thing stands revealed in the daylight. The question worth asking is therefore not what this period will do to your organisation. It is what your organisation was always, quietly, going to do — now that there is finally enough light to see it clearly.