

BEYOND THE SNAP-BACK

Snap Back or Leap Forward: Why One Shock Split Organisations Into Two Kinds

A reflection, from the tail of the first wave, on what the last five months revealed about the true constraint on transformation

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1. Executive Summary

The same shock did not produce the same response. Struck by the closures of the spring, organisations that looked alike in February had, by late summer, split into two visibly different kinds: those that recreated their old operating model over video and are now waiting for the world to return, and those that used the constraint to make, in a matter of weeks, a change they had carried on a roadmap for years. The comfortable explanations for the divergence — sector luck, digital maturity, heroic leadership — each carry some truth and none is sufficient; same-sector, similarly mature organisations diverged all the same. The real fault line ran through permission rather than capability, and through the slack an organisation had left in itself rather than the efficiency it had wrung out. The deepest lesson is the most uncomfortable: the change that supposedly could not happen happened the moment the alternative was extinction, which means the true constraint was never mainly what we could do but what we allowed ourselves to do. Whether that lesson survives contact with recovery is the open question — and it is the only part of this still in our hands.

2. Two organisations, one storm

Take two organisations in the same sector, of similar size, with similar balance sheets, both sent home in the same week of March. Five months on, they no longer look like the same species.

The first spent those months trying, with real diligence, to rebuild its old self at a distance. The meetings that used to fill a room now fill a screen, in the same number and the same sequence. The approval chains still have the same links. The operating model has been faithfully reproduced over video, and the organisation is holding its breath, waiting for the moment it can put everything back where it was.

The second did something else. A capability it had first put on a roadmap three years earlier — costed twice, deferred twice, always sensible, never urgent — went live in twelve

weeks. A digital channel that had been described internally as a five-year journey carried the bulk of the organisation's customers within five months. Decisions that used to travel up three layers and back down again were simply made, close to the work, by the people doing it.

Same sector. Same storm. Two organisations that a year ago would have benchmarked as near-identical and now operate on entirely different principles. Multiply that divergence across an economy and you have the central management story of 2020: not that a shock arrived, but that the same shock split organisations into two kinds.

3. The comfortable explanations

Three explanations are offered, and each is comfortable in its own way.

The first is sector luck. Some organisations happened to be in grocery, logistics, home entertainment or software, and were carried upward; others were in aviation, hospitality or physical retail, and were pushed off a cliff. This is plainly true, and plainly incomplete. Sector set the difficulty of the exam; it did not write the answers. Within the hardest-hit sectors, some organisations found ways to move that their neighbours did not, and within the luckiest, plenty froze.

The second is digital maturity. The organisations that had already digitised, the story goes, simply had a shorter distance to travel. There is truth here too. But maturity is not destiny. I have watched organisations with enviable technology estates seize up completely, unable to decide anything without the building, and organisations with modest tooling improvise brilliantly. The kit helped those who were already disposed to move; it did not create the disposition.

The third explanation is heroic leadership — the decisive chief executive who saw it early and drove the response. It flatters the people at the top and it misreads where the leap actually happened. Again and again the decisive moves were made not in the executive suite but three levels down: by a team lead who reallocated her people on a Tuesday, by a manager who quietly stopped asking for a permission he knew would arrive too late. Leadership mattered — but often it mattered most by getting out of the way.

Each explanation describes the weather. None explains why two ships in the same weather sailed so differently.

4. The real fault line: permission, not capability

What actually separated the leapers from the snappers was not whether they could act but whether their people were allowed to.

The organisations that leapt had, mostly without noticing, already loosened the coupling between a decision and the two things that used to gate it: a location and a hierarchy. When the building closed, their decisions kept being made, because those decisions had never truly depended on the corridor conversation or the six-signature sign-off. Remove the office from such an organisation and you remove a place; you do not remove its ability

to act.

The organisations that snapped back discovered the opposite about themselves. Their operating model turned out to be load-bearing on proximity and permission. Take away the steering committee that met in Room 4, the escalation that worked because you could catch someone by the coffee machine, the sign-off that depended on physically finding six people – and the machine seized. It was not short of talent or technology. It was short of any way to decide without the scaffolding it had always taken for granted.

Here is the detail that stays with me. In more than one organisation, an approval that had always required six signatures was, under duress, made by a single accountable person over a video call – and nothing bad happened. The decision was fine. Which raised a question nobody had wanted to ask in calmer times: if one competent owner could make that call safely in a crisis, what exactly were the other five signatures ever for?

“The pandemic did not hand organisations new capabilities. It stripped away their reasons for pretending they lacked them.”

5. Slack, brittleness, and the cost of a very efficient machine

Permission explains who could decide. A second structural force explains who could absorb the blow: the slack an organisation had left in itself.

The years before this had rewarded the removal of slack. Lean everything, just-in-time everything, single-source the cheapest supplier, run the estate hot, keep the balance sheet tight. In calm conditions this looks like excellence, and it is – right up until the moment a shock arrives and there is no give anywhere in the system. The organisations that had ruthlessly optimised were efficient and brittle. When one supplier failed, there was no second. When demand lurched, there was no headroom. When people were needed elsewhere, no one had been cross-trained to go.

The organisations that fared better had, often by accident or old-fashioned prudence, kept a little redundancy: more than one supplier, people who could do more than one job, a bit of cash, some technical headroom that had been criticised in every budget round as waste. That waste turned out to be the capacity to bend instead of break. Efficiency is invisible strength in calm weather and invisible fragility in a storm, and 2020 has been an expensive lesson in telling the two apart.

6. In defence of snapping back

It would be easy to turn this into a morality tale in which the leapers are visionaries and the snappers are dinosaurs. That would be dishonest, and it would miss the strongest

counter-argument, which deserves to be put at full strength.

A great deal of what has been celebrated as leaping forward was panic dressed up as vision. Speed created technology debt that will have to be serviced for years; decisions were taken without governance that will need to be unpicked; people were driven to a pace that is not survivable for long. And some of the organisations that snapped back did so not from timidity but from judgement. They declined to make permanent changes under temporary conditions. They refused to bet the balance sheet on a shock whose duration no one could name. They preserved their optionality on purpose, reasoning that it is easier to leap later from a stable base than to un-leap from a reckless one.

From where we stand at the end of August — a second wave openly feared for the autumn, a vaccine hoped for but unproven, the shape of next year genuinely unknown — the prudent conservatism of the deliberate snap-back may yet prove wiser than some of the leaps now being applauded. The honest position is to hold the tension rather than resolve it: the leap is not automatically virtue and the snap-back is not automatically failure. What matters is whether the response was chosen or merely defaulted into. An organisation that snapped back after weighing the case has done something respectable. An organisation that snapped back because it could not conceive of anything else has learned nothing, and will meet the next shock exactly as unready.

7. The excuse the crisis removed

Underneath the divergence sits the lesson that should trouble every leadership team, and it concerns the long-standing gap between transformation intent and transformation reality.

For years the standard account of why a given change had not happened went like this: the capability is not there yet, the budget is committed elsewhere, the risk is too high, the business is not ready. It was a serviceable account, and it was mostly an alibi. The last five months detonated it. The change that could not happen in three years happened in three weeks when the alternative was extinction. The roadmap item that had been deferred as insufficiently urgent turned out to be entirely deliverable the moment not doing it stopped being an option.

That is uncomfortable precisely because it is clarifying. It means the binding constraint on transformation was never mainly capability. It was permission, will, and the absence of a burning platform. Our organisations were, all along, far more capable of rapid, coordinated change than their own governance permitted them to be. We did not lack the muscle. We lacked — and in calm times actively maintained — the reasons not to use it.

And this is why the pattern persists across every era and not only this one. The moment existential pressure lifts, the old permission structures quietly reassemble. The six signatures come back. The steering committee reconvenes in Room 4. The capability the organisation has just demonstrated, in full view of itself, is disowned as a one-off born of emergency — and the next time someone proposes moving at that speed, they are told, with a straight face, that it cannot be done.

8. Whether the window stays open

So the divergence is not settled. It is about to be tested, because the pull back toward the familiar is already being felt — as the summer's cautious reopening proceeds and the sheer exhaustion of improvisation sets in.

The risk for the leapers is reversion: that the shelved roadmap, having finally been delivered, gets re-shelved as an emergency measure once the emergency recedes, and the organisation talks itself back into the slowness it just proved it did not need. The risk for the snappers is subtler and worse: that they read mere survival as vindication, conclude that holding still was wisdom, and draw from the hardest year in memory the single lesson that nothing needed to change.

Which kind of organisation each becomes will not be decided by the shock. The shock has done its work and is, in this sense, already spent. It will be decided by what each organisation chooses to keep now that it has seen, beyond argument, what it is capable of. I have watched enough good change efforts die on the words not now to be wary of the months ahead: the hard part was never going to be changing under pressure — we have just proved, at scale, that we can. The hard part will be refusing to un-change once the pressure comes off. Whether we are honest with ourselves about that is, in the end, the only part of this whole episode still in our hands.