

BEYOND PERMISSION

The Excuse Died in a Single Week

A Practitioner's Perspective on Permission as the Real Barrier to Transformation

Giovanni Leonardi

June 2020



The Excuse Died in a Single Week

Transformation · No. 294

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

"It was a permission problem wearing the costume of a capability problem."

The excuse died in a single week

For as long as I have worked in transformation, the same sentence has been used to bury ambition: we can't do that here — not yet, not that fast, not without more time, more certainty, more preparation. It was said with the authority of experience, and I believed it too. Then, this spring, in the space of a single week, organisations that had spent years insisting change of this magnitude was impossible did exactly that. Entire workforces went remote. Services that existed only over a counter went digital. Roadmaps that had been solemnly costed as five-year journeys were delivered, functioning, in the time it takes to onboard a contractor.

I want to be precise about what this proves, because the wrong lesson is already being drawn. It does not prove that everything can be done in a week. It proves something narrower and far more damning: that the thing standing between us and change was never what we said it was.

We did not discover in the spring that we could move faster. We discovered that we had always been able to, and had chosen not to.

What we always told ourselves

The orthodoxy of transformation rests on a set of reasons that have gone unquestioned for a generation. The reasons sound like prudence, and that is what makes them so effective:

- The technology isn't ready. We need another platform, another integration, another year of foundation before the business can change.
- The risk is too high. We cannot move at pace without the full apparatus of assurance, or we will break something that matters.
- The organisation isn't ready. People need to be brought along slowly; culture cannot be rushed; change fatigue must be managed.
- The business case isn't proven. Until the numbers are certain, we cannot justify the disruption.

Each of these was treated not as a variable to be challenged but as a law of nature. Together they formed a permission structure — an elaborate machine whose real output was not safety but delay. And for years it worked, because nothing ever forced the question.

What actually happened

Then something did force the question, and every one of those reasons failed at once.

The technology turned out to be ready — or ready enough — because when there was no alternative, ready enough was suddenly an acceptable standard, and it always had been. The risk did not vanish; we simply accepted it, made decisions in hours that normally took quarters, and discovered that most of the assurance we thought protected us had been protecting the process instead. The organisation, told it had to change or stop functioning, changed — the same people we had described as resistant adapted in days. And nobody asked for the business case. When survival was the case, the spreadsheet was not required.

Every barrier we had described as structural turned out to be a decision we had been making, over and over, without noticing we were making it.

Strip it down and the conclusion is unavoidable. The technology was rarely the true blocker. The risk was rarely the true blocker. The people were rarely the true blocker. What blocked transformation, almost every time, was permission — the collective, unexamined agreement that going slowly was the responsible thing to do.

The barrier was never technical

This is the sentence the profession has spent years avoiding, so let me state it plainly: our transformation problem was never a capability problem. It was a permission problem wearing the costume of a capability problem.

We built governance that optimised for the avoidance of blame rather than the delivery of change. We mistook the length of a programme for the seriousness of it. We rewarded the careful management of a five-year plan over the actual arrival of the outcome. We let not yet masquerade as wisdom for so long that we forgot it was a choice at all. The spring did not give us new powers. It removed, for a few months, the permission structure that had been suppressing the powers we already had — and the moment it was gone, we moved.

The danger is not the crisis — it is the snap-back

Here is what worries me now, writing in the middle of it. The reflex of every organisation under stress is to return to normal the instant the stress lifts. The permission structure is

not dead; it is waiting. The committees will reconvene. The assurance gates will be re-erected, and this time they will be defended more fiercely, because the people who ran them have just watched their necessity be publicly disproved. Within a year, I expect to hear the old sentence again — we can't do that here, not that fast — offered by the very same people who just did exactly that.

That would be the real failure of this period: not the disruption itself, but learning nothing from it. To have proven, beyond argument, that the barriers were choices, and then to quietly re-erect them and call it a return to discipline.

The new terms

So this is the challenge I would put to anyone who leads change, while the evidence is still fresh enough to be undeniable:

1. Stop accepting not yet as an answer without a stated reason that would survive a crisis. If a barrier would dissolve the moment survival demanded it, it was never a real barrier — it was a preference for delay.
2. Redesign governance to ask what is the cost of moving too slowly with the same rigour it currently applies to the cost of moving too fast. We have spent a generation measuring only one of those risks.
3. Keep the pace that necessity taught you, deliberately, after necessity recedes — because the capability was always yours, and the only thing that ever throttled it was your own permission.

We were handed, at considerable cost, a piece of knowledge most professions never get: proof of what we are actually capable of when the excuses are stripped away. The question is not whether we can transform at pace. That question is now closed. The only question left is whether we have the honesty to admit that we always could — and the nerve to refuse the comfortable lie when someone offers it back to us.