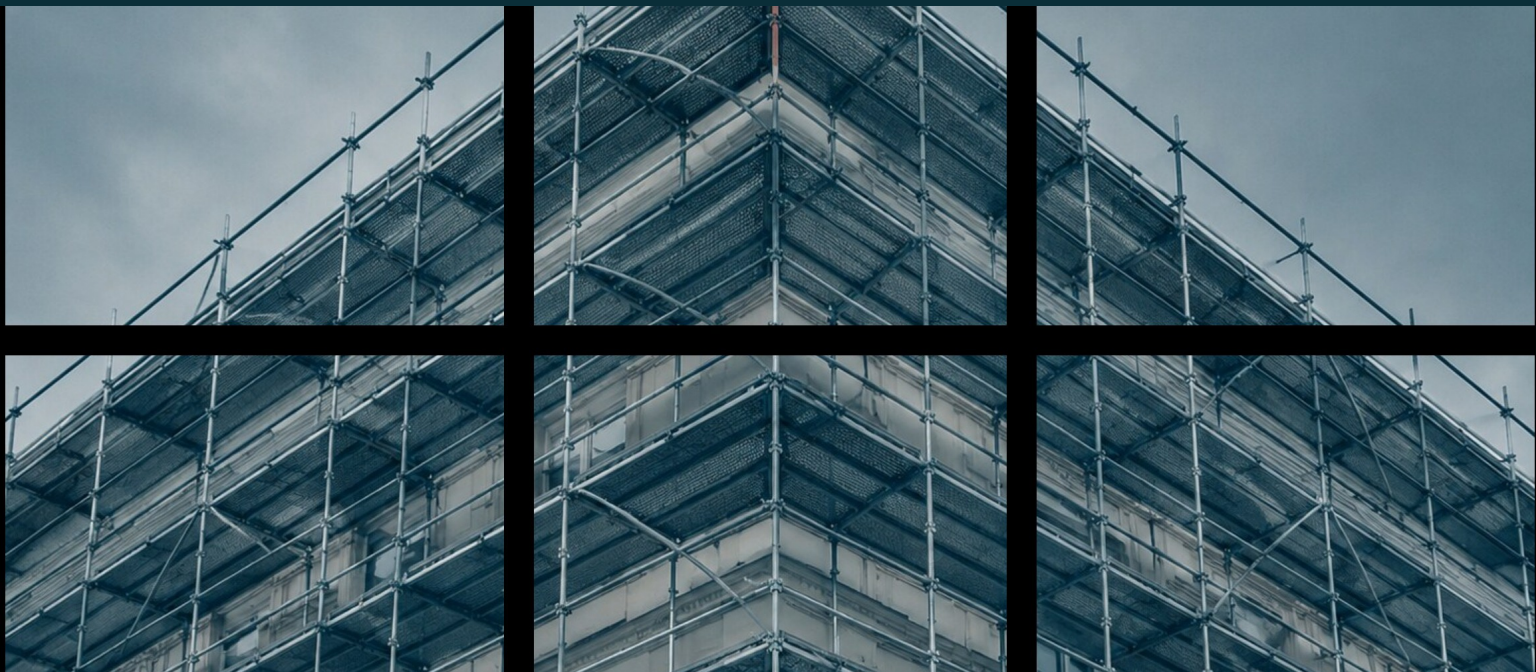


BEYOND EXPERIENCE AS INSURANCE

The Experience They Paid For — and Chose Not to Hear

Why transformation programmes buy hard-won judgement as insurance, then govern as though they never had it.



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March 2007

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The Experience They Paid For — and Chose Not to Hear

Transformation · No. 100

Originally written March 2007 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

“Hiring experience is a transaction; using it is a capability.”

1. Executive Summary

Organisations pay a premium for experience — in search fees, in senior salaries, in the day rates of grey-haired advisers brought in precisely because they have seen the thing before — and then behave, with remarkable consistency, as though they had not. The experienced hire's early warning is logged and tabled. The veteran programme director's pattern-recognition is heard as pessimism. The counsel that was expensively procured is quietly set aside in favour of the plan already made. This essay examines why that pattern persists, and argues that it is not adequately explained by foolishness or office politics. The forces that sustain it are structural: experience presents as caution in a culture that rewards optimism; it is largely tacit in organisations that trust only what is written down; it becomes most available at the moment it can least be acted upon; and it is often bought as political insurance rather than as advice anyone intends to take. There is an honest objection to all this — that experience calcifies into prejudice, and that fresh eyes sometimes see what the veteran has stopped noticing — and it deserves a real answer rather than a reflex dismissal. But the deeper point is that valuing experience and using it are two different organisational capabilities, and most organisations have built the first while neglecting the second. The distance between transformation intent and transformation reality is, in no small part, the distance between the judgement an organisation paid for and the judgement it permitted to operate.

2. The Cheque Clears; The Counsel Does Not

Somewhere around the third month of a large programme, a scene plays out that anyone who has spent a career in this work will recognise. The transformation is mobilising well. The plan is on a wall, colour-coded and confident. The sponsor is energised, the integrator is staffed, the steering committee is pleased with the pace. And into this warmth walks the person the organisation went to considerable trouble to hire — the seasoned director recruited, at no small cost, on the strength of having run three programmes of exactly this shape. She listens for a while, and then she says something quiet and unwelcome: this will not work the way you think it will, and here is the specific reason why.

What happens next is the subject of this essay. In the great majority of cases, nothing happens next. The observation is noted. It is minuted, perhaps, as a risk to be monitored. The meeting moves on with its energy intact, and fourteen months later the programme fails for precisely the reason she named in month three. The organisation paid a premium to be told this, and then arranged its affairs so that being told made no difference.

It is worth pausing on how strange this is. We are not, for the most part, describing careless organisations. The premium is real and it is deliberately paid. Search firms are

engaged and their fees settled specifically to find people who have "been there before". Senior salaries are justified in the appointment paper by reference to scars and track record. Whole categories of adviser exist, and are handsomely remunerated, on the single proposition that they have seen more failures than the client has. The market for experience is enormous, rational, and sincere. And running alongside it, in the same organisations, is a second pattern just as reliable: the systematic non-use of the very thing that was bought.

The paradox is not that organisations undervalue experience. It is that they pay for it and ignore it in the same breath — which means the explanation cannot be that they do not know what it is worth.

3. The Comfortable Explanation, and Why It Fails

The comfortable explanation is that organisations are simply foolish, or that politics overrides good sense, or that leaders are too vain to be advised. These explanations are comfortable because they let the rest of us off. They locate the fault in someone else's character, and they imply that a better-run organisation, staffed by humbler people, would not do this. That is a consoling story, and it is wrong — or at least so incomplete as to mislead.

It is wrong because the pattern is not confined to badly-run places. It appears in organisations with capable leaders, strong governance, and genuine intent. It appears in the presence of people who sincerely believe they want to be challenged and would be surprised to be told they had ignored anyone. If a phenomenon this consistent showed up only where the leadership was weak, we could file it under weak leadership and move on. That it shows up almost everywhere tells us we are looking at something built into the machinery, not into the people operating it.

There is also a more uncomfortable reason to distrust the foolishness explanation: it is exactly the kind of self-flattering diagnosis that experienced people themselves are prone to. "They didn't listen to me" is the most seductive sentence in a veteran's vocabulary, and it is not always true. Any honest account of why experience gets ignored has to hold open the possibility that some of it deserved to be. We will come to that. But first we should look squarely at the structural forces, because they are where the real explanation lives.

4. The Structural Forces

When the same outcome recurs across many different organisations, the cause is usually not in any of them but in the shape they have in common. Several forces, acting together, produce the reliable non-use of experience.

- Experience presents as caution, and the culture is tuned for optimism. The characteristic contribution of an experienced person is a warning: I have seen this pattern end badly. But a programme in its mobilising phase runs on manufactured confidence — it has to, or nobody would fund it or join it. Into that atmosphere, accurate caution arrives sounding like low energy, negativity, a failure of the team spirit. The incentive system rewards the person who says "we can do this" over the person who says "we have tried this and here is where it breaks", even when the

second person is right. We select, at the moment of mobilisation, for temperament over accuracy.

- Experience is tacit, and the organisation trusts only the explicit. Much of what a veteran knows cannot be fully written down. It lives as a feel for where the trouble will come from — watch the interface between those two teams; that number is too round to be real; the silence from that department is the loudest thing in the room. Organisations, however, are built to trust documents, business cases, and governance papers. They have elaborate receptors for the explicit and almost none for the tacit. So the most valuable part of the experience they bought is transmitted on a frequency the organisation has no instrument to receive.
- Experience becomes most available exactly when it can least be used. The counsel is often most confident and specific only once the programme is well under way and the veteran has seen enough to be sure. But by then budget is committed, reputations are staked on the current plan, and the decision the warning bears on was made months ago. Experience is most useful early, when everything is still cheap to change and nobody yet knows enough to be certain; it is most listened-to late, when certainty has arrived and it is too expensive to act. The two curves rarely cross.
- Experience complicates a story the sponsor needs to keep simple. A transformation is sold upward on a clean promise. The experienced person's function is to complicate that promise — to add the conditions, the caveats, the "only if". Every complication is a small threat to the narrative the sponsor is carrying to their own board. Organisations therefore quietly select, in a hundred small ways, for advisers who reinforce the plan over those who stress-test it, because the plan is load-bearing for someone's credibility.
- Experience is frequently procured as insurance, not as counsel. This is the least flattering force and perhaps the most powerful. A great deal of experience is bought not to change the decision but to defend it. The brand-name firm, the senior CV, the adviser with the reassuring track record — these are often engaged so that, if things go wrong, the decision can be shown to have been prudent. Experience purchased for cover has done its job the moment the contract is signed; whether its advice is taken is beside the point. The organisation wanted the badge, not the counsel, and it treats the two as interchangeable because for its purposes they were.
- Authority and experience sit in different places on the chart. The veteran often reports to a sponsor with less scar tissue and more positional power. The person with the judgement lacks the authority to act on it; the person with the authority lacks the judgement to know they should. Where those two do not sit in the same head, or trust each other completely, the gap between them is where the experience quietly drains away.

None of these forces requires anyone to be stupid or vain. Each is a rational response to a real pressure. Together they are more than sufficient to explain why the cheque clears and the counsel does not.

5. The Honest Objection

Any argument this sympathetic to experience owes a serious hearing to the case against it — and there is a real case, not a straw one.

Experience calcifies. The same accumulation of pattern that lets a veteran see trouble early also lets them see trouble that is no longer there. "We tried that and it didn't work" is

sometimes hard-won wisdom and sometimes a fossilised memory of conditions that have since changed. The person who has seen a particular approach fail three times may be exactly right, or may be fighting the last war while the ground shifts beneath them. Fresh eyes, unburdened by the scar tissue, sometimes see the thing the veteran has stopped noticing precisely because they have stopped looking at it.

There is more. War stories are self-serving in ways their tellers cannot always detect. The reconstructed lesson of a past programme is edited by memory and ego into a cleaner shape than events ever had. And seniority is not the same as judgement, though organisations routinely confuse them: a person can accumulate thirty years of the same year repeated, and present the résumé of a sage while carrying the insight of a novice. When an organisation sets aside "experienced" advice, it is not always making the mistake this essay describes. Sometimes it is correctly declining to be governed by prejudice wearing the costume of wisdom.

"Seniority is not judgement, though organisations routinely pay for one believing they have secured the other."

This objection matters because it explains why the naive remedy — "listen to your experienced people" — is not only useless but occasionally dangerous. An organisation that trusted all experience indiscriminately would be as badly served as one that trusts none. The real problem is subtler and harder: it is that most organisations have no reliable way to tell the difference between wisdom and mere prejudice, between the pattern that still holds and the one that has expired. They lack the receptor not just for tacit knowledge but for good tacit knowledge. And because they cannot tell the two apart, they default — understandably, if expensively — to trusting neither, and to falling back on the plan and the business case, which at least have the virtue of being written down.

The answer, then, is not to venerate experience. It is to build the organisational capacity to use it discriminately — which is a far more demanding thing, and almost nobody has it.

6. Where Transformation Sharpens the Pattern

This pattern is general, but transformation is where it does the most damage, for a reason worth stating plainly. Transformation is the domain in which experience matters most and is ignored most, and the collision of those two facts is a large part of why so many programmes disappoint.

Experience matters most in transformation because the failure modes are recurrent and human rather than novel and technical. The specific technology changes; the way a data migration is quietly mistaken for a technical task when it is really a question of business ownership does not. The particular reorganisation changes; the way two merged functions fail to agree who owns the reconciled numbers does not. These are exactly the patterns a veteran carries. And experience is ignored most in transformation because transformation, more than any other kind of work, runs on sponsored optimism and a load-bearing promise — the very conditions, described above, that convert accurate caution into unwelcome noise.

Let me make this concrete, in the way that only a specific case can. Consider a programme consolidating the finance operations of several business units into a single shared service — a familiar undertaking, sold on a clean saving. The experienced director hired to run it says, early and clearly, that the risk is not in the technology and not in the process design, which are competent, but in a gap nobody has named: once the numbers from five ledgers are reconciled into one, no single person in the new structure owns the reconciled figure. The old owners have been disbanded; the new owner has not been appointed. She asks, in month three, for that role to be created and filled before go-live. It is logged as a risk, rated amber, and deferred, because creating the role means an awkward conversation about headcount that the plan would rather not have.

The programme goes live on schedule, which is celebrated. Four months later the first consolidated close takes eleven days instead of the promised four, because when the reconciled numbers do not agree — as, the first time, they never do — there is no one whose job it is to adjudicate. The saving that justified the whole business case is quietly revised. The eventual fix is exactly the role the director asked for in month three, now created in a hurry and at a premium, after the credibility of the programme has been spent. The experience was in the building, on the payroll, and speaking clearly, the entire time. What was missing was not knowledge. It was any mechanism by which the knowledge could change the decision.

The knowledge was present, accurate, and early. What the organisation lacked was a channel through which being right could actually alter the plan — and that absence, not any shortage of talent, is what the gap between transformation intent and reality is made of.

7. What It Would Take

It is tempting to end with a remedy, and dishonest to offer a neat one, because the difficulty here is not that the fix is unknown but that it asks for things organisations find genuinely hard. Still, the shape of what it would take is visible, and worth setting down — not as a method, but as a description of the capability that is missing.

It would take procuring experience for counsel rather than for insurance — engaging the veteran, the adviser, the senior hire with the explicit and honestly-meant intention of changing the plan if they are right, and being willing to feel the discomfort when they are. An organisation that only wants the badge should at least know that this is what it is buying, and stop wondering why the advice goes unused.

It would take building a legitimate channel for the dissenting pattern — some way for an experienced person to say "this will fail, and here is the mechanism" that does not cost them their standing as a team player. In most organisations the accurate Cassandra pays a reputational price and the confident optimist collects a reputational reward, and until that asymmetry is deliberately corrected, people will learn, sensibly, to keep their warnings to themselves.

It would take listening early rather than late — treating the mobilising phase, when everything is still cheap to change, as the moment to invite the hard question, rather than the moment to protect the mood. The most valuable hour of a veteran's time is the one before the plan sets, and it is the hour organisations are least inclined to give them.

And it would take the hardest thing of all: the willingness to be told one is wrong by someone lower on the chart. Experience is only usable by an organisation secure enough to be contradicted, and that security is a capability in its own right — rarer, and less evenly distributed, than the ability to make an expensive hire. A confident organisation can hire a veteran and never hear a word they say. Only a secure one can be changed by them.

Experience bought as insurance	Experience used as counsel
Engaged to defend the decision	Engaged to improve the decision
Has done its job at signature	Has done its job when it alters the plan
The badge is the deliverable	The changed course is the deliverable
Dissent is a nuisance to be managed	Dissent is the thing being paid for
Listened to late, for the record	Listened to early, to change the outcome

8. The Capability Beneath the Hire

Return, at the end, to the quiet scene in month three — the warning given, noted, and set aside. It is easy to read that scene as a story about a foolish organisation and an ignored sage, and easy, on that reading, to feel superior to it. The truer reading is less comfortable and more useful. The organisation was not foolish. It knew the value of experience well enough to pay for it. What it lacked was the entirely separate capability of using what it had bought — the receptors for tacit knowledge, the channel for unwelcome dissent, the security to be contradicted, the discipline to listen while listening was still cheap. It had built the first capability and not the second, and the two are so routinely confused that the organisation did not even know the second was missing.

This is why the pattern persists, and why it will keep persisting until it is named for what it is. Hiring experience is a transaction; using it is a capability. The market makes the first easy and the second is left to each organisation to build or neglect on its own, and most, understandably, neglect it, because building it means accepting a standing source of discomfort in return for a benefit that only shows up as the absence of failures that never happened. We should not be surprised, then, that the cheque clears while the counsel does not. We should be surprised only that we keep expecting the payment and the use to be the same thing. They never were. The organisations that close the gap between what transformation promises and what it delivers will be the ones that stop treating the hire as the end of the matter, and start treating it as the easy part.