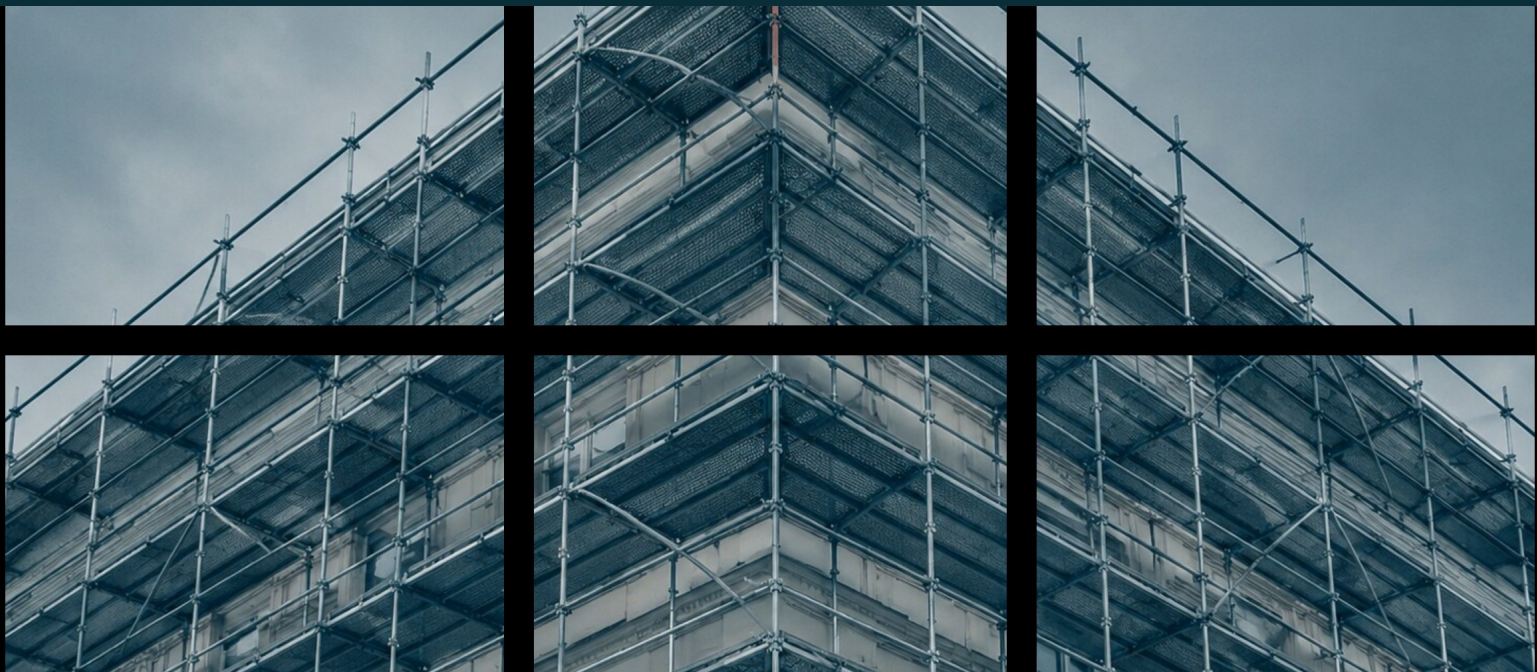


BEYOND RESISTANCE

The Immune Response We Call Change Fatigue

Why organisations that have been transformed too often learn to reject transformation — and what their resistance is actually protecting



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1. Executive Summary

Every experienced change leader has walked into a room that has already decided not to believe them. The proposal is sound, the logic is clear, the slides are honest — and still the room is closed. We reach, almost reflexively, for a vocabulary of deficit: the people are tired, resistant, change-weary, stuck. This essay takes the opposite view. What we call change fatigue is not an absence of resilience but the presence of something intelligent — an organisational immune response, built up over years of exposure to change, doing exactly what an immune system is supposed to do: remembering, discriminating, and protecting the body from what it has learned to treat as a threat.

Read this way, fatigue stops being an obstacle to be managed and becomes information to be interpreted. What follows traces how the response forms — through repeated insult, institutional memory, and promises that were made at launch and quietly never kept — and why the structures we work inside almost guarantee it. It distinguishes the two ways the response shows itself: the visible inflammation of open resistance, and the far more dangerous tolerance of people who comply without belief. It takes seriously the strongest objection — that this is a comfortable story which excuses obstruction and lets tired organisations off the hook — and answers it. And it argues that the standard response, a kind of organisational immunosuppression in which we push change through against the body's objection, treats the symptom and worsens the disease. The alternative is not to overpower the immune system but to earn its tolerance.

2. The Programme That Arrives to a Closed Door

Picture the launch. A consolidation of back-office functions into a shared-services model — finance, procurement, parts of the personnel function — announced to a workforce of several thousand with the confidence these things are always announced with. The business case is real. The duplication across the divisions is real; anyone who has ever tried to reconcile three incompatible chart-of-accounts structures knows it is real. The town-hall slides carry the familiar promises: efficiency, consistency, a platform for the future, and — said carefully, because someone always asks — no compulsory redundancies.

And the room does not move.

Not in open revolt; open revolt would almost be easier. The room simply receives the message the way a practised body receives a familiar irritant. The nods are polite and empty. The questions are procedural. Within a fortnight the programme team is reporting "engagement challenges" and commissioning a communications workstream to address them. What no slide captures is that this same workforce was consolidated once before, three years earlier, under the same banner and the same promise about redundancies — a

promise that held for eleven months. The people in that room are not failing to understand the change. They understand it far better than the people delivering it. They have met this antigen before.

I have watched this scene enough times to stop believing the official explanation of it. The problem in the room is not comprehension, and it is not, in any simple sense, attitude. It is memory.

3. The Comfort of the Wrong Diagnosis

The language we use for this is revealing. "Resistance to change" places the fault firmly in the people who resist; it casts the change itself as self-evidently good and its reception as the variable to be corrected. "Change fatigue" is gentler but no less one-sided — it grants that people are tired, but still frames the tiredness as a depletion, a tank that has run low and must be refilled with better communication, stronger sponsorship, a more compelling burning platform. Both diagnoses share an assumption so deep we rarely notice it: that the healthy organisational state is receptivity, and that anything less is a deficiency to be remedied.

This is a comfortable diagnosis, which is the first thing that should make us suspicious of it. It is comfortable because it locates the problem in the workforce rather than in the pattern of changes the workforce has been subjected to. It lets each individual initiative remain, in its own eyes, entirely reasonable — and it is precisely the reasonableness of each initiative in isolation that hides the damage they do in sequence.

We are, as a profession, fluent in the mechanics of change and strikingly illiterate in its accumulation. We know how to launch. We have models for the launch, coalitions for the launch, metrics for the launch. What we lack is any honest accounting of what a decade of launches does to the thing being launched at.

4. What an Immune System Actually Does

Consider what an immune system is for. It is not a wall; a wall is indiscriminate and keeps out nourishment along with threat. An immune system is a discriminating memory. It learns from exposure. It distinguishes self from not-self. It tolerates what it has integrated and reacts to what it has learned to treat as dangerous. And crucially, its reactions grow faster and stronger with repetition — the second exposure to an antigen provokes a response quicker and fiercer than the first, because the body now remembers.

An organisation that has lived through many changes develops exactly this faculty. It learns to recognise the signature of a change initiative — the vocabulary, the roadshow, the steering committee, the survey that asks how you are feeling about the journey. These are the antigens: not the substance of any particular change, but the markers by which the body identifies "here comes another one." And like a sensitised immune system, the organisation's response to these markers grows faster and more decisive each time. The fifth restructure does not get the benefit of the doubt the first one got. It cannot. The body remembers what the first four cost.

Fatigue is not the absence of energy for change; it is the presence of memory. An organisation that reacts quickly against a new initiative is not broken – it is sensitised, and it has been sensitised by us.

This is why the metaphor is worth more than a rhetorical flourish. It reframes the entire causal story. Under the deficit model, the organisation's poor reception of change is a starting condition – a weakness we inherit and must work around. Under the immune model, it is a learned response, and we are the ones who taught it. Every initiative that was launched with fanfare and abandoned without ceremony, every benefit claimed on a business case and never audited, every "this time is different" that turned out to be exactly the same – each was an exposure, and each left a memory behind.

5. The Arithmetic of Insult

It is tempting to keep this at the level of metaphor, but the immune response has a material cause that can be counted, and counting it is clarifying.

Take a division of around four and a half thousand people, of whom perhaps a hundred and twenty are the middle managers on whom every change actually depends – the ones who must translate intention into altered daily behaviour on the floor. In a typical year this organisation is not running one transformation. It is running fourteen: a large enterprise-systems replacement, a shared-services consolidation, a procurement rationalisation, a quality programme, a health-and-safety culture initiative, a leadership-capability drive, a customer-service overhaul, a data-quality remediation, two compliance projects, a cost-reduction target with its own governance, an office relocation, a diversity programme, and a values refresh. Every one of them was individually approved by reasonable people on the strength of a sound case.

Each of those fourteen has a steering committee, and each committee wants those same hundred and twenty managers for roughly two days a month – attending, reporting, updating the plan on a page. That is twenty-eight days of governance a month drawn against roughly twenty working days. The arithmetic does not resolve; it cannot resolve. So the managers triage, silently and without permission, and the change that gets triaged out is whichever one has the weakest immediate consequence for missing a meeting. The organisation has, in effect, commissioned fourteen changes and resourced perhaps four, and then expressed disappointment that the workforce seems disengaged from the other ten.

Signal we record	What is actually happening
"Engagement is low on the programme"	The initiative lost the silent triage for scarce managerial attention
"People are resistant to change"	People are protecting delivery of the day job the changes still depend on
"We need stronger communications"	The message was received perfectly; it is the twelfth of its kind this year
"Change fatigue is setting in"	The immune system is responding, on schedule, to a genuine overload

This is the insult that produces the response. Not any single change, but the untracked, uncoordinated, unfinished accumulation of them — a portfolio managed for its inputs and never for its total load on the human system expected to absorb it. We meter the cost of each initiative in pounds and rarely in attention, and attention is the currency that is actually scarce.

6. Inflammation and Tolerance

An immune response can fail in two directions, and organisations fail in both.

The first failure is inflammation — the response that is too loud. This is visible resistance: the openly cynical middle manager, the workaround that quietly defeats the new process, the letter from the staff representatives, the sabotaged pilot. We hate inflammation because it is uncomfortable and public, and so we pour resource into suppressing it. But inflammation, for all its discomfort, is honest. It tells you precisely where the body objects and why. An organisation with visible resistance is an organisation still in dialogue with itself.

The second failure is the dangerous one, and it is the one we celebrate. It is tolerance — or, more precisely, the exhausted non-response of a system that has stopped reacting because reacting has never once changed the outcome. This is the workforce that greets the fourteenth initiative with perfect, frictionless compliance. They attend the workshop. They complete the survey. They use the new template. And they believe none of it, invest nothing in it, and return to the prior behaviour the moment the programme team's attention moves elsewhere. We read this quiet as success — look how smoothly the change landed, no resistance at all — when it is in fact the deepest form of the immune response: the body has learned that the fastest way to make the irritant go away is to appear to absorb it.

I have come to believe that the smoothest change programmes are often the most completely rejected. Resistance at least requires the organisation to take the change seriously enough to fight it. Compliance without belief requires only that it wait. A programme that closes on time, on budget, and on a wave of polite adoption, having changed nothing that will outlast the closing meeting, is the immune system at the height of its powers — because we will record it as a win, commission the next one, and never learn.

7. The Strongest Objection

There is a serious case against everything argued here, and it deserves to be met at its strongest rather than waved away.

The objection runs like this. The immune metaphor is seductive precisely because it is flattering to the workforce and exculpatory of poor performance. It rebrands obstruction as wisdom and inertia as intelligence. Some resistance really is just resistance — the protection of comfortable habits, the defence of a fiefdom, the ordinary human preference for the familiar over the better. Some organisations really are simply badly led, and their "fatigue" is nothing more mysterious than a string of changes executed without skill. And in any case, the objection concludes, continuous change is now the permanent condition of organisational life; an organisation that cannot metabolise constant change will be overtaken by one that can, and dressing up its inability as an immune response only

excuses the failure to build the muscle.

Every part of this deserves to be conceded where it is right. Some resistance is self-interest, and the immune model must not become a blanket amnesty for it — an immune system that attacks everything, including the body's own tissue, is not wise but auto-immune, and organisations can certainly tip into a reflexive rejection of anything new that is itself a disease. Bad execution is real, and no metaphor excuses it. And the permanence of change is not in dispute; the sense that we now live in a kind of permanent white water is real enough.

But the objection proves less than it thinks. That continuous change is now permanent is an argument for taking the body's absorptive limits more seriously, not less — you do not respond to a genuinely higher load by pretending the system absorbing it has infinite capacity. And the charge of excusing failure cuts both ways: the deficit model has excused a far larger failure for far longer, by allowing us to launch initiative after initiative without ever auditing what the last one did, secure in the belief that any poor reception was a problem with the receivers. The immune model does not deny that some resistance is mere obstruction. It denies that we have earned the right to assume so — because we have almost never done the accounting that would let us tell the difference.

8. Immunosuppression Is Not a Strategy

If change fatigue is an immune response, then the standard toolkit for overcoming it is, almost exactly, immunosuppression: a set of techniques for lowering the body's defences so that the foreign object can be introduced without rejection. Stronger sponsorship, relentless communication, the burning platform designed to frighten the organisation out of its resistance — these do not resolve the immune response, they override it. And like clinical immunosuppression, they work, at a cost, for a while, and they leave the body more vulnerable to the next thing, not less.

The alternative is not a technique but an inversion of posture. If the response is intelligent, the first move is to read it rather than suppress it. A few things follow, and I offer them as directions of travel rather than a method:

- Reduce the antigen load before improving the message. The instinct when a change is rejected is to communicate harder. The immune model says the opposite: the problem is rarely the message and almost always the load. Fewer, finished changes provoke less response than many unfinished ones, however well each is announced. The most powerful thing a leadership team can do for its next initiative is to visibly close, and honour the promises of, the last three.
- Audit benefits as ruthlessly as you build business cases. Every initiative that claimed a benefit at launch and was never checked against it is a broken promise the immune system has filed away. Closing that loop — publicly, including the failures — is how the memory is, slowly, retrained.
- Treat visible resistance as diagnostic information, not as an obstacle to be cleared. The inflamed site is telling you where the change conflicts with something the organisation values or depends on. Sometimes that thing is a fiefdom worth dismantling. Often it is a real operational dependency the business case never saw. You cannot tell which without listening, and you cannot listen while you are busy suppressing.
- Distrust frictionless adoption. When a significant change lands with no resistance at all, the useful question is not "how did we do it so well?" but "what did the

organisation decide it only had to appear to absorb?" Smoothness is a signal to investigate, not a result to bank.

The deeper point is that an organisation's capacity to absorb change is not fixed and it is not free. It is a resource, depleted by every unfinished initiative and slowly rebuilt by every promise kept. We have spent it as though it were infinite, and then diagnosed its exhaustion as a character flaw in the people who ran out of it.

9. Listening to the Response

The gap between transformation intent and transformation reality is usually explained as a gap in execution — better methods, better governance, better change management would close it. I have come to think the gap is more often one of hearing. The organisation has been telling us, through every polite empty nod and every smoothly-adopted-and-quietly-abandoned programme, exactly what a decade of change has cost it. We have classified that message as fatigue and prescribed more of what caused it.

An immune response is not something to be defeated. In a body it is the thing keeping you alive; the failure modes are not the response itself but its absence, its excess, and its exhaustion. The same is true of an organisation. The one that reacts against a badly conceived, poorly sequenced, over-promised change is not weak. It is doing precisely what years of our own behaviour taught it to do. The question worth sitting with is not how to lower its defences, but what it is defending — and whether, if we were honest about our own record, we might not be defending the same thing ourselves.