

BEYOND THE DELIVERABLE

The Muscle That Survives the Programme — Why Transformation Capability So Rarely Outlives the Change That Built It

A Practitioner's Perspective on Building Sustainable Capability in Transformation Programmes



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“Change is continuous; only our funding of it is episodic.”

1. Executive Summary

Organisations invest heavily in programmes to deliver change, and then watch the capability that made the change possible evaporate the moment the programme closes. This essay examines why that happens so reliably – why the muscle built during a transformation so rarely survives it – and argues that the fault lies not in weak execution but in how we conceive of programmes in the first place.

The central claim is uncomfortable: we have learned to treat capability as a means to delivery, when the durable value of most programmes is precisely the reverse. Delivery is the occasion; capability is the asset. Yet almost everything about how programmes are funded, staffed, governed, and disbanded conspires to protect the deliverable and discard the capability. The programme is temporary by design, and we have quietly allowed the capability to become temporary with it.

Drawing on the pattern as it recurs across sectors, the essay traces three structural forces that sustain the gap – temporary funding, scaffolded rather than embedded capability, and the seductions of the maturity-model movement – before turning to what capability maturity should actually mean when taken seriously, and what it asks of the leaders who commission change.

2. The Programme Ends, and the Capability Ends With It

There is a moment, familiar to anyone who has run large change, that ought to trouble us more than it does. The programme reaches its close. The benefits case has been signed off, the steering committee has held its final meeting, the team has taken its photograph and dispersed. Six months later, someone asks the organisation to do something adjacent – not identical, but recognisably of the same family – and it cannot. The people who knew how have moved on or moved back. The method has gone home in their heads. What remains is documentation no one reads and a competence that has to be rebuilt, more or less, from nothing.

I have watched this happen too many times to regard it as bad luck. The pattern is too consistent, across too many organisations and too many kinds of change, to be anything other than structural. We build extraordinary capability under the pressure of a programme – people who can navigate ambiguity, integrate across silos, make decisions under uncertainty, hold a complex design in their heads – and then, at the exact moment that capability is most proven, we dismantle the conditions that produced it and act surprised when it does not persist.

The language we use conceals the loss. We speak of a programme being "delivered" and "closed," as though closure were an achievement rather than, quite often, an act of institutional forgetting. A factory does not celebrate demolishing its production line the day the first batch ships. Yet that is close to what programme closure frequently amounts to: the disbanding of a capability at the very point it has matured.

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3. Why We Confuse Delivery With Capability

The confusion runs deep, and it begins with how we justify programmes in the first place. A programme is funded against a benefits case — a set of outcomes it will deliver. Everything downstream inherits that framing. Success is defined as delivery of those outcomes. Governance polices progress towards them. The team is assembled to achieve them and, having achieved them, has by definition finished.

Within that frame, capability is instrumental. It is the thing you need in order to deliver, not the thing you are trying to produce. And instrumental things are, rationally, discarded when their purpose is served. No one keeps the scaffolding once the building stands. The trouble is that the metaphor is wrong. In transformation, the capability is not scaffolding around the building; increasingly, in a world of continuous change, the capability is the building. The particular outcome delivered by this programme will be superseded, reorganised, or made obsolete soon enough. The ability to deliver such outcomes — repeatedly, at lower cost each time — is the enduring asset. We have inverted their relative value.

Consider how differently a programme would be designed if capability, not delivery, were the primary object. The staffing model would prioritise who is learning, not only who is producing. The governance would ask not merely "are we on track?" but "what is this organisation becoming able to do that it could not before?" Closure would be conditional not on the deliverable being shipped but on the capability being demonstrably retained. Almost none of this is how programmes are actually run. We have built an entire discipline optimised for the wrong half of the equation.

"Delivery is the occasion. Capability is the asset. We have spent a generation protecting the occasion and discarding the asset."

4. The Structural Forces That Sustain the Gap

If this were simply a matter of insufficient wisdom, a well-argued essay might fix it. It is not. The gap between transformation intent and transformation reality is held open by structures that reward exactly the behaviour that produces it. Three forces do most of the work.

4.1 Temporary Funding Produces Temporary Capability

A programme is funded as a discrete envelope with a start, an end, and a benefits case that must be closed out. This funding model is not incidental; it shapes everything. Because the money ends, the team ends. Because the team ends, the capability ends. The organisation gets exactly the temporariness it paid for.

The deeper problem is that the funding model treats the programme as an exception — a bounded intrusion into normal operations, after which the organisation returns to a steady state. But for most organisations there is no steady state to return to. Change is continuous; only our funding of it is episodic. We keep paying, at full price, to rebuild capability we already had, because our financial machinery cannot conceive of capability as a standing asset to be maintained rather than a project cost to be closed.

4.2 Scaffolded Capability, Not Embedded Capability

There is a difference between capability that sits on an organisation and capability that is built into it, and most programmes produce the former. External specialists, seconded experts, a temporary programme structure that exists alongside the line organisation rather than within it — all of these scaffold the organisation up to a height it cannot sustain on its own. When the scaffolding comes down, so does the height.

- Scaffolded capability lives in a temporary structure, staffed by people whose futures lie elsewhere, governed by arrangements that dissolve at closure.
- Embedded capability lives in the permanent organisation — in the roles, the routines, the promotion criteria, the everyday practices that persist after any given programme ends.
- The two look identical while the programme runs. They could not be more different the day after it closes.

The tragedy is that scaffolding is easier, faster, and more visible. It is what a programme naturally produces if no one insists otherwise. Embedding is slow, unglamorous, and often invisible until the moment it is tested — which is to say, until long after the people who might have been credited for it have moved on.

4.3 The Seduction of the Maturity Model

The maturity models that have become fashionable — the staged frameworks that rate an organisation's process capability from ad hoc to optimised — were meant to help, and in one respect they do: they give organisations a vocabulary for talking about capability as something that develops over time rather than appears fully formed. That is a genuine advance on the assumption that competence is simply present or absent.

But the movement has a shadow. Maturity models invite organisations to pursue the assessment rather than the capability. It is entirely possible — I have seen it — to climb the levels on paper while the underlying muscle wastes. An organisation documents its processes, defines its roles, produces its artefacts, and rates itself a level higher, all without becoming meaningfully more able to deliver the next hard thing. The model measures the presence of process, which is a proxy for capability, and proxies have a way of becoming the target. We should use these frameworks as a mirror, not a scoreboard. The question is never "what level are we?" but "what can we now do, unaided, that we could not do before?"

5. What Capability Maturity Should Actually Mean

If we take the idea seriously — maturity as genuine, retained, self-sufficient ability rather than as a certificate — it points to a quite different way of thinking about what a programme leaves behind. Real capability maturity has, to my mind, a small number of unmistakable signatures.

1. It survives the departure of individuals. Capability that lives in one heroic programme director is not organisational capability; it is a single point of failure wearing a lanyard. Mature capability is distributed enough that no single departure collapses it.
2. It is exercised, not merely possessed. Muscle that is never used atrophies. An organisation that delivers one transformation and then does nothing comparable for three years has not banked a capability; it has a memory of one, fading. Maturity requires continued exercise — which is one more argument against treating change as episodic.
3. It lowers the cost of the next change. This is the acid test. If each successive programme is as hard, as expensive, and as dependent on external rescue as the last, no capability is accumulating, whatever the maturity assessment says. The signature of genuine maturity is a falling marginal cost of change.
4. It lives in the permanent organisation. The routines, roles, and decision rights that made the programme work must have homes in the line structure that outlives it. Capability that has nowhere permanent to live will not stay.

Signature	Scaffolded (survives closure poorly)	Embedded (survives closure)
Where it lives	Temporary programme structure	Permanent roles and routines
Dependence on individuals	High — concentrated in a few	Low — distributed
Cost of the next change	Undiminished	Falling
Visible in a maturity assessment	Often flatteringly so	Sometimes understated

None of these signatures is captured by asking whether the programme delivered on time and on budget. That is the point. We have been measuring the wrong things, and measuring them well.

6. The Intent–Reality Gap, Seen Honestly

It would be easy to read all this as a story about incompetence, and it is not. The gap between transformation intent and transformation reality is not, for the most part, produced by people doing their jobs badly. It is produced by people doing their jobs well against the wrong definition of the job. This is what makes it so durable, and so worth dwelling on.

Ask the sponsors of almost any major programme whether they want to leave lasting capability behind, and they will say yes, and mean it. The intent is real. Where it dies is in the thousand small trade-offs that any programme under pressure must make. Time is short and a decision is needed: do you let the internal team work it through slowly, learning as they go, or do you have the expert who already knows simply make the call?

Budget is tight and something must be cut: do you protect the shadowing arrangement whose value will only show up next year, or the deliverable the steering committee is watching this month? Each of these trade-offs, taken alone, is resolved sensibly in favour of delivery. It is their accumulation that hollows out the capability the sponsor genuinely wanted.

This is why exhortation does not work. Telling programme leaders to care more about capability is useless when every incentive, every reporting line, and every governance ritual pulls the other way. The intent–reality gap closes only when the structures change — when capability retention is funded, governed, and measured with the same seriousness we bring to delivery. Until then, good intentions will keep being spent, one reasonable trade-off at a time, on the altar of the deliverable.

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7. The Muscle That Survives the Programme

The metaphor of muscle is worth taking literally, because it disciplines the thinking. Muscle is built through load, maintained through use, and lost through disuse. It cannot be bought fully formed and installed; it can only be grown, by the body that will carry it, through effort that body actually undertakes. Every part of that is true of organisational capability, and every part of it indicts the way we run programmes.

We try to install capability rather than grow it — bringing in those who already have the muscle to do the lifting on the organisation's behalf, which builds their muscle and not the organisation's. We build under load and then remove the load entirely, guaranteeing atrophy. And we imagine that a capability, once demonstrated, is permanently owned, when in fact it decays the moment it stops being exercised.

The implication for anyone commissioning change is not comfortable, because it asks them to hold two things at once: to deliver the outcome the programme exists to deliver, and to build the muscle that will outlast it — knowing the second is slower, less visible, and rarely what they will be thanked for in the closure review. The organisations that manage it are the ones that stop treating capability as the by-product of delivery and start treating delivery as the occasion for building capability. It is a reversal of figure and ground, and it changes what a programme is for.

There is a further implication, easily missed, that follows from taking the muscle seriously. Muscle is specific: the strength built by one kind of effort transfers only partly to another. An organisation that has learned to deliver one sort of change — a systems replacement, say — has not thereby learned to deliver every sort. This is why the promise of a single, general "change capability" tends to disappoint. What actually accumulates is a family of related competences, each grown through its own bouts of effort, held together by a smaller core of genuinely transferable strength: the ability to mobilise, to decide under uncertainty, to integrate across boundaries. The task for anyone building durable capability is to know which is which — to grow the transferable core deliberately, and to accept that the specific strengths must be earned afresh each time the organisation attempts something genuinely new. Pretending otherwise, and declaring a general capability banked on the strength of a single success, is one more way the muscle is quietly lost.

The pattern that recurs across the organisations that get this right is not that they run better programmes in the conventional sense. It is that they refuse to let the programme be the unit of capability at all. They treat each programme as one bout of training for a permanent team that persists between bouts — funded to persist, structured to persist, expected to be more capable after each one than before. The programme ends. The muscle does not. That, in the end, is the only version of a delivered transformation worth the name.