

BEYOND THE PERMISSION STRUCTURE

# The Pandemic Proved That Transformation Was Always Possible — We Just Chose Not To

A Practitioner's Perspective on Permission Structures and Organisational Inertia

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# The Pandemic Proved That Transformation Was Always Possible — We Just Chose Not To

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## 1. The Evidence Is Now Undeniable

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In twelve weeks, organisations across every sector delivered changes that had been stuck in planning cycles for years. Banks launched digital onboarding in days. Retailers built home delivery infrastructure in a fortnight. Healthcare providers deployed remote consultation platforms that had been "in assessment" since 2017. Government departments digitised services that had been awaiting business cases since the last spending review.

None of this required new technology. None of it required new budgets. None of it required the consultancies, the steering committees, the architecture review boards, or the stage-gate governance that had previously been deemed essential before any significant change could proceed. The technology existed. The people existed. The capability existed. What changed was permission.

This is not an observation about agility or resilience or any of the other words that will shortly be pressed into service to explain what happened. It is a far more uncomfortable truth: the barriers to transformation that organisations have cited for the past decade — complexity, legacy systems, budget constraints, risk appetite, regulatory caution — were, in most cases, not barriers at all. They were choices. Choices made by leaders and governance structures that preferred the safety of inaction to the exposure of action.

The pandemic removed the option of inaction. And in doing so, it proved that transformation was always possible. We just chose not to.

## 2. The Anatomy of the Permission Structure

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Every large organisation has a permission structure — the unwritten set of rules that determines who can authorise change, how much justification is required, and how many

layers of approval must be navigated before anything actually happens. In normal times, this structure is invisible. It is simply "how things work." It takes the form of business case templates, investment committees, architecture review boards, risk assessments, procurement processes, and the accumulated weight of organisational precedent.

The permission structure serves a legitimate purpose: it prevents reckless spending, ensures alignment, and manages risk. But over time, in every organisation I have observed, it calcifies. The original intent — to enable good decisions — is gradually replaced by a different function: to distribute accountability so widely that no individual bears the consequence of saying yes. The business case exists not to test whether an investment is sound but to provide documentary evidence that the decision-maker followed the process. The architecture review exists not to ensure technical coherence but to give the CTO a mechanism to slow things down without saying no explicitly.

The result is an organisation that is structurally incapable of moving quickly — not because the people are incapable, not because the technology is inadequate, but because the permission structure has made speed impossible. Every significant change requires months of preparation, not because the change is complex but because the approval process is complex.

*The roadmaps were never the problem. The committees were never the problem. The problem was that we had built organisations where saying no was free and saying yes carried career risk.*

### 3. What the Pandemic Actually Changed

The pandemic did not make organisations more capable. It did not unlock hidden talent or reveal secret reservoirs of funding. What it did was far simpler and far more revealing: it made inaction more dangerous than action.

When the alternative to launching a digital service in two weeks was losing all customer contact, the business case became unnecessary. When the alternative to remote working was no working, the security review was compressed from six months to six hours. When the alternative to a rapid procurement was operational collapse, the procurement process was bypassed entirely.

In every case, the same people who had previously said "we cannot do this without a full business case" or "the architecture review board meets quarterly" or "procurement requires a minimum of twelve weeks" found ways to do exactly what they had said was impossible. They did not do it recklessly. The systems launched. The services worked. The security was adequate. The procurement delivered. The outcomes were, by any reasonable measure, as good as or better than what the normal process would have produced — and they were delivered in a fraction of the time.

This is the fact that should keep every transformation leader awake at night: the process that was deemed essential was, in practice, optional. And when it was removed, things did not fall apart. They got better.

## 4. The Uncomfortable Implication

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If the permission structures were optional — if the governance overhead could be removed without the catastrophic consequences that justified its existence — then what, exactly, has every transformation programme been doing for the past decade?

The honest answer is uncomfortable. A significant portion of what passes for transformation management is not the management of change but the management of the organisation's anxiety about change. The business cases, the pilots, the proofs of concept, the phased rollouts, the change readiness assessments — these are not, in most cases, responses to genuine complexity. They are mechanisms for managing the political risk of doing something new.

Consider the standard transformation timeline. An idea is proposed. A business case is requested. The business case takes three months to prepare because it requires input from seven departments, alignment with the strategic plan, a benefits model that satisfies the finance team, and a risk assessment that satisfies the audit committee. The business case is approved, with conditions. A programme is established. A programme board is constituted. A supplier is procured. The procurement takes four months because the framework agreement does not cover this type of work and a new competitive process is required. The supplier is onboarded. Discovery begins. Discovery takes three months and produces recommendations that largely confirm what everyone already knew. Implementation planning begins.

By this point, eighteen months have passed. The original idea is still fundamentally sound, but the organisation is now so deeply invested in the process that the process has become the point. The transformation has become the transformation programme, and the programme has its own momentum, its own governance, its own stakeholders, and its own reasons for existing that are increasingly disconnected from the problem it was meant to solve.

The pandemic compressed this entire cycle to days. And the results were comparable. The implication is not that governance is unnecessary — it is that the volume of governance most organisations apply to change is wildly disproportionate to the actual risk.

## 5. The Three Lies We Tell Ourselves

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The transformation profession — and I include myself in this — has sustained itself on three propositions that the past twelve weeks have exposed as, at best, partial truths.

"Transformation is complex." Some transformation is genuinely complex. Replacing a core banking platform is complex. Merging two hospital trusts is complex. But the vast majority of what organisations label as transformation is not complex — it is merely unfamiliar. Launching a digital channel is not complex; it is well-understood technology applied to a well-understood need. What makes it appear complex is the organisational overhead required to get permission to do it.

"You cannot rush culture change." Culture did not change in twelve weeks. What happened was that culture was temporarily overridden by necessity. People who had resisted remote working for years adapted in days — not because their beliefs changed but because the alternative disappeared. This reveals something important: culture is not the immovable force that transformation programmes treat it as. Culture is the aggregate of what an organisation permits. Change what is permitted, and culture follows.

"Legacy systems prevent rapid change." Legacy systems are real constraints. But the pandemic demonstrated that most organisations have far more flexibility around their legacy estate than they acknowledge. The constraint is rarely the system itself; it is the risk appetite of the people responsible for the system. When the risk of not changing exceeded the risk of changing, legacy systems proved remarkably accommodating.

## 6. What Must Change Now

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This manifesto is not an argument for recklessness. It is not a call to abolish governance or to treat every initiative as a crisis. It is a demand for honesty.

The pandemic has given every organisation empirical evidence of what it is actually capable of. The speed at which change can be delivered. The volume of governance that can be removed without consequence. The flexibility that exists within supposedly rigid systems. The adaptability of people who were previously written off as resistant to change.

This evidence cannot be unseen. The question now is whether organisations will use it or whether they will quietly return to the permission structures that the crisis rendered unnecessary.

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*"The organisations that emerge strongest from this crisis will not be the ones that delivered the fastest in the emergency. They will be the ones that refuse to pretend, afterwards, that the old speed was ever acceptable."*

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The transformation profession has a choice. We can treat the past twelve weeks as an aberration — an extraordinary response to extraordinary circumstances that tells us nothing about normal operations. Or we can treat it as evidence — proof that the barriers we have spent careers navigating were, in many cases, barriers we helped to build.

I believe the evidence is clear. Transformation was always possible. The technology was ready. The people were capable. The budgets were sufficient. What was missing was not capability but courage — the willingness of leaders to make decisions quickly, to accept imperfection, to trust their people, and to act without the safety net of twelve months of governance.

The pandemic provided that courage by removing every alternative. The question for every organisation, and for every transformation practitioner, is whether we can sustain it without the crisis.

If we cannot — if we return to the five-year roadmaps, the quarterly review boards, the eighteen-month procurement cycles, and the business cases that exist to distribute blame rather than to test ideas — then we will have learned nothing. And the next crisis will find us exactly where this one did: capable of extraordinary speed, but only when we have no other choice.