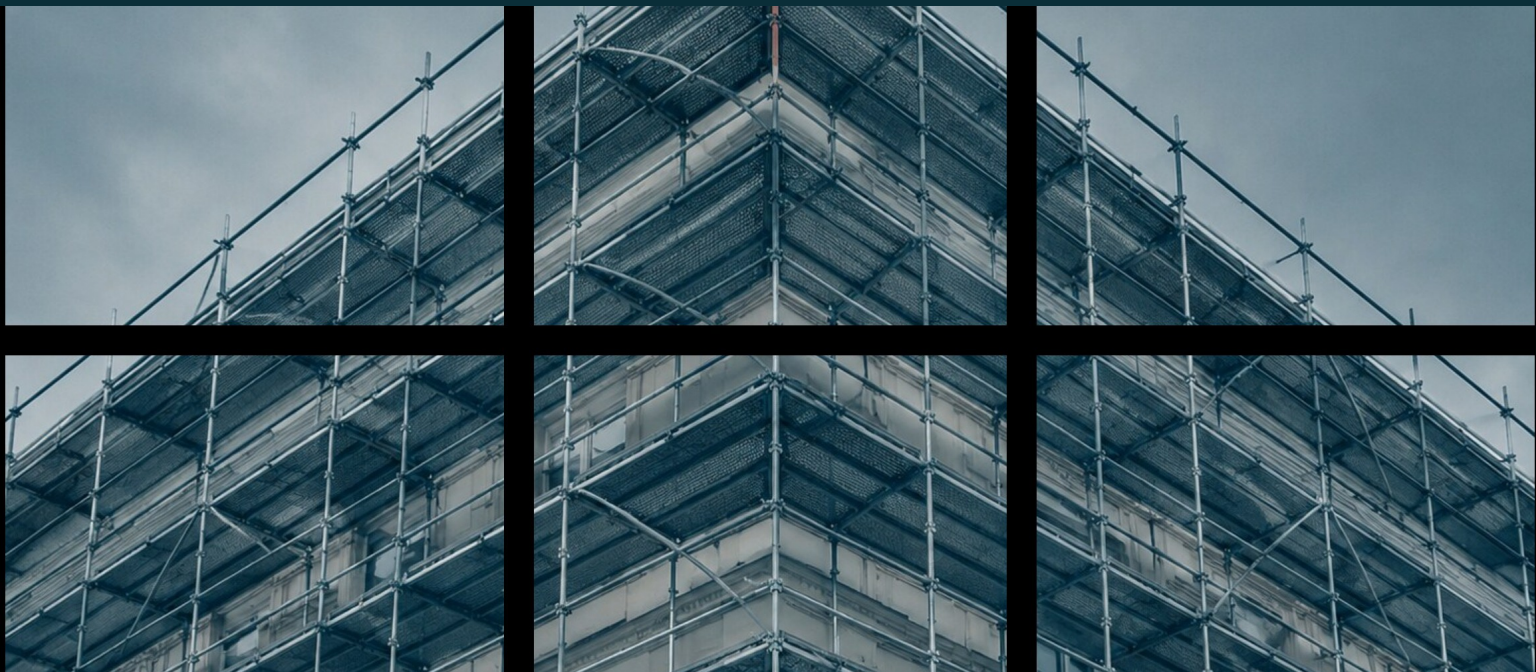


BEYOND EXECUTIVE DESIGN

Transformation Without the People Who Do the Work

Why excluding the front line turns elegant designs into expensive workarounds



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“The front line is not merely where change is implemented; it is where the organisation's unrecorded knowledge resides.”

1. At 4:47, the process meets reality

At 4:47 on the second afternoon after a new distribution process has gone live, 312 orders are waiting to be released. The design assumes that a product substitution will be exceptional—perhaps one order in a hundred—and that a supervisor can authorise it within five minutes. On this floor, forty-six substitutions have already appeared since lunch. The new screen will not accept the pack sizes used by several long-standing customers, and only one supervisor has the authority code to override it.

The dispatch clerks do what experienced people do when a formal process cannot carry the work. They create a handwritten queue, telephone the warehouse, and use the old reference sheets to match cartons to customer requirements. Orders begin moving again. To the programme office, this is resistance and non-compliance. To the people facing the loading bays, it is the only way to protect the evening departure.

Nothing in this scene is unusual. What is unusual is how often an organisation can spend months redesigning work without involving the people who understand where it breaks.

Transformation has become an increasingly executive activity. Enterprise systems, shared-service centres, outsourcing, process standardisation and post-merger integration are conceived as movements of structure, technology and cost. The work is mapped from procedures, organisation charts and management interviews. Those who perform it are consulted late, often after the important choices have acquired dates, budgets and sponsors. They are asked whether the design can be implemented, not whether it is true.

The consequence is not merely poorer engagement. It is poorer knowledge.

2. The view from the design room

There are understandable reasons why transformation rises away from the work. Senior leaders must see across functions; front-line employees usually see deeply into one part. A central team can compare sites, challenge inherited practices and pursue benefits that no individual unit would volunteer. Distance can reveal duplication that familiarity has normalised.

But distance also edits reality. By the time work reaches a design room, it has usually passed through several filters:

- Procedures describe the intended route, while experienced employees spend much of their day handling the exceptions.

- Management reports aggregate variation, turning thirty different causes of delay into one monthly service figure.
- Interviews favour formal accountability, so managers describe the process they own more readily than the workarounds on which it depends.
- Project plans reward early certainty, encouraging the team to convert assumptions into baselines before they have been tested at the point of work.

The result is a design that is coherent at the level from which it was viewed. Boxes align, responsibilities appear complete, and the business case balances. Yet the coherence has been purchased by removing the awkward details that make operations possible.

This pattern has survived successive management fashions. Work-study sought the one best way. Business-process re-engineering challenged inherited steps. Enterprise systems now promise common data and standard transactions. Each has brought real gains, but each is vulnerable to the same error: assuming that knowledge of work sits where authority over work sits.

It does not.

3. The knowledge hidden inside work

The front line is not merely where change is implemented; it is where the organisation's unrecorded knowledge resides.

That knowledge is rarely glamorous. It consists of the credit clerk who knows which apparent duplicate account is legally distinct; the call-centre adviser who recognises that a certain complaint phrase signals a billing error; the maintenance engineer who can hear when a bearing will fail; the purchasing assistant who knows which supplier lead time is fiction and which is dependable.

Much of this knowledge is absent from manuals because it has grown in response to gaps between the formal process and the world it serves. Some of it should be eliminated. Some is evidence of unnecessary complexity. Some protects poor practice. But until it is examined, no design team can know which is which.

The purpose of front-line participation is not to preserve every workaround. It is to expose the reality that the new design must either absorb, simplify or consciously reject.

Exclusion turns this knowledge into a late implementation problem. A missing exception route is discovered during testing and labelled a defect. A customer distinction omitted from the data model appears after conversion and becomes a cleansing issue. A control that doubles handling time is encountered at go-live and becomes a training concern. The programme changes the name of the problem at each stage, but the source is the same: a design assumption was never brought into contact with lived work.

Once labelled as implementation, the problem also moves down the hierarchy. The people who made the assumption remain responsible for the design; the people who exposed it become responsible for making the design succeed.

4. A business case built on invisible labour

Consider a composite service organisation consolidating order administration from eighteen local offices into one shared-service centre. The case appears compelling. Twenty-seven variations of the order process will become one. A common enterprise system will replace local spreadsheets. Forty-one posts can be removed over twelve months, while service is expected to remain at 95 per cent of orders completed within one working day.

The design team studies written procedures, interviews regional managers and samples 300 transactions. It concludes that 6 per cent of orders require manual intervention. Local administrators are invited to a series of briefings after the location decision and headcount target have been announced. Their concerns are recorded under “change readiness”.

A fuller observation of the work would have produced a different picture. Across five representative offices, 19 per cent of orders contain an exception not captured in the procedure. Nine experienced administrators resolve nearly three quarters of those exceptions through personal knowledge: handwritten customer references, agreed delivery windows, special invoice groupings and informal checks with warehouse staff. Their effort is invisible because the order is recorded as complete, not as rescued.

When the consolidated process begins, the exception volume does not disappear. It loses its interpreters. The daily backlog rises from 240 orders to 1,850 in four working days. Service falls to 62 per cent. Twenty temporary staff are engaged, local offices retain twelve people who were meant to transfer, and managers authorise overtime for six weeks. The first quarter's labour cost is £318,000 above the transition plan.

The temptation is to say that the staff failed to adopt the new process. But the mechanism is more exact. The business case counted the removal of posts while treating the knowledge contained in those posts as free. It valued visible activity and assigned no value to avoided failure.

Had the administrators been involved before the location and staffing assumptions hardened, the organisation would not necessarily have abandoned consolidation. It might still have chosen the same centre and the same system. But it could have separated four things that the original design confused:

- exceptions caused by obsolete local preference and suitable for removal;
- exceptions caused by genuine customer or product variation and requiring a formal route;
- knowledge that could be codified in master data, rules or reference material;
- judgement that required named decision rights and a period of supervised transfer.

That separation would have changed the transition sequence, the training requirement and probably the timing of the headcount reduction. It might have weakened the apparent return in the first year. It would also have made the return more likely to exist.

5. The serious case for distance

There is a powerful objection to broad participation. Transformation cannot be designed by plebiscite. People closest to the current process may defend arrangements that serve them but not the enterprise. A local administrator can explain why a variation exists without seeing that eighteen variations are collectively unaffordable. Consultation can

become an endless negotiation in which every exception is declared essential and every standard is diluted.

This objection is correct. Front-line knowledge is indispensable, but it is not sovereign. Leaders remain accountable for strategy, investment, risk and the distribution of work. Some employees will resist because a change threatens status, location or employment. Some workarounds conceal weak discipline. A programme that gives every participant a veto will preserve the present under the language of involvement.

Yet this is an argument against surrendering decision authority, not against involving those who know the work. The false choice is between executive design and employee control. The useful distinction is between authority to decide and authority to inform what is decided.

A surgeon does not surrender the decision to the instrument maker, but would be foolish to design an operation without understanding the instrument. In the same way, leaders need not ask the front line to choose the strategy. They must ask it to reveal the conditions the strategy will meet.

The discipline lies in making participation evidential rather than ceremonial. The question is not “Do you support the change?”—a question that mixes technical judgement, personal consequence and loyalty. Better questions are concrete:

1. Show us the last ten cases that did not follow the written process. What happened, who intervened and what would have failed otherwise?
2. Which information arrives too late or in the wrong form? Where is it recreated, checked or telephoned through?
3. What judgement is being exercised? Can it become a rule, or must someone retain discretion?
4. Which variation protects a real customer, legal or operational need? Which exists only because no one has challenged it?

These questions do not ask the present system for permission. They make its hidden logic available for decision.

6. Participation after the answer

Many organisations believe they have involved employees because they have held workshops, appointed representatives or created a network of change champions. The form of participation matters less than its timing and its power to alter the design.

Ceremonial consultation	Working participation
Begins after the principal decision	Begins while assumptions are still reversible
Asks for opinions on a presentation	Observes transactions, exceptions and hand-offs
Selects only managers or nominated advocates	Includes experienced operators, supervisors and recent joiners
Records concerns in a communication plan	Converts evidence into design choices, risks and business-case changes
Measures attendance and sentiment	Measures assumptions tested and decisions changed

The crucial phrase is while assumptions are still reversible. Once a contract has been signed, a site announced, a system configured or a savings target committed, consultation has little room to produce truth. Participants quickly understand that they are being asked to bless an answer. They either comply publicly and resist privately, or raise objections that the programme classifies as negativity.

This is how exclusion reproduces itself. Leaders consult late because they fear delay. Late consultation produces resistance because it cannot influence substance. That resistance is then cited as evidence that earlier involvement would have been obstructive.

The cycle is broken when a transformation names its assumptions before naming its solution. If the case assumes that 94 per cent of transactions are standard, employees can help test that figure. If the design assumes that local approval adds no customer value, the team can observe the last fifty approvals. If the transition assumes that knowledge can be transferred in four weeks, the receiving team can attempt the work under supervision before the posts disappear.

Participation becomes rigorous when it is attached to evidence, a decision and a deadline.

7. The human meaning of being excluded

There is also a moral signal beneath the method. People judge transformation partly by what it asks of them, but more deeply by what it assumes about them. When those who perform the work are treated only as recipients of communication, the organisation says that their experience has no standing until management has converted it into a report.

This is especially corrosive when the change depends on discretionary effort. A new process rarely works at first exactly as designed. It requires people to notice anomalies, share knowledge, repair gaps and protect customers while the organisation learns. Excluded employees may still comply, but compliance is a narrow resource. The programme needs judgement and care—the very qualities its design process has discounted.

It is tempting to describe this as an engagement problem and commission better messages. But no message can repair a structural insult that remains true. If the decision is complete, the invitation to “help shape the future” is not merely weak communication; it is a contradiction visible to everyone who hears it.

The remedy is not constant consultation. It is honest boundaries. Leaders should say what is fixed, what remains open, what evidence will influence the choice and who will decide. Adults can work within constraints. What they resent is the pretence of influence without its substance.

8. What durable transformation asks of us

The history of organisational change repeatedly presents the same ambition in new machinery: remove waste, integrate activity, standardise information, concentrate expertise, serve customers more consistently. These ambitions are often sound. Their failure comes not from being too bold but from being too clean—designed as though work were only the formal process and people only the capacity assigned to it.

Transformation without the people who do the work separates conception from consequence. It gives the centre the privilege of abstraction and the front line the burden of exception. When the design meets reality, the resulting workarounds are treated as evidence that employees did not change, rather than evidence that the organisation did not learn.

The answer is neither romantic localism nor management by committee. It is a more demanding partnership between altitude and depth. Leaders contribute direction, comparison and the authority to choose. The front line contributes the texture of transactions, the memory of failure and the judgement embedded in practice. Neither view is sufficient on its own.

A durable transformation therefore leaves fingerprints. Front-line evidence changes a process step, a data rule, a control, a sequence, a role or a number in the business case. If nothing material can be traced back to what employees revealed, they were not participants. They were an audience.

The deepest test is simple: before asking whether people are ready for the transformation, ask whether the transformation has been made ready for the work.