

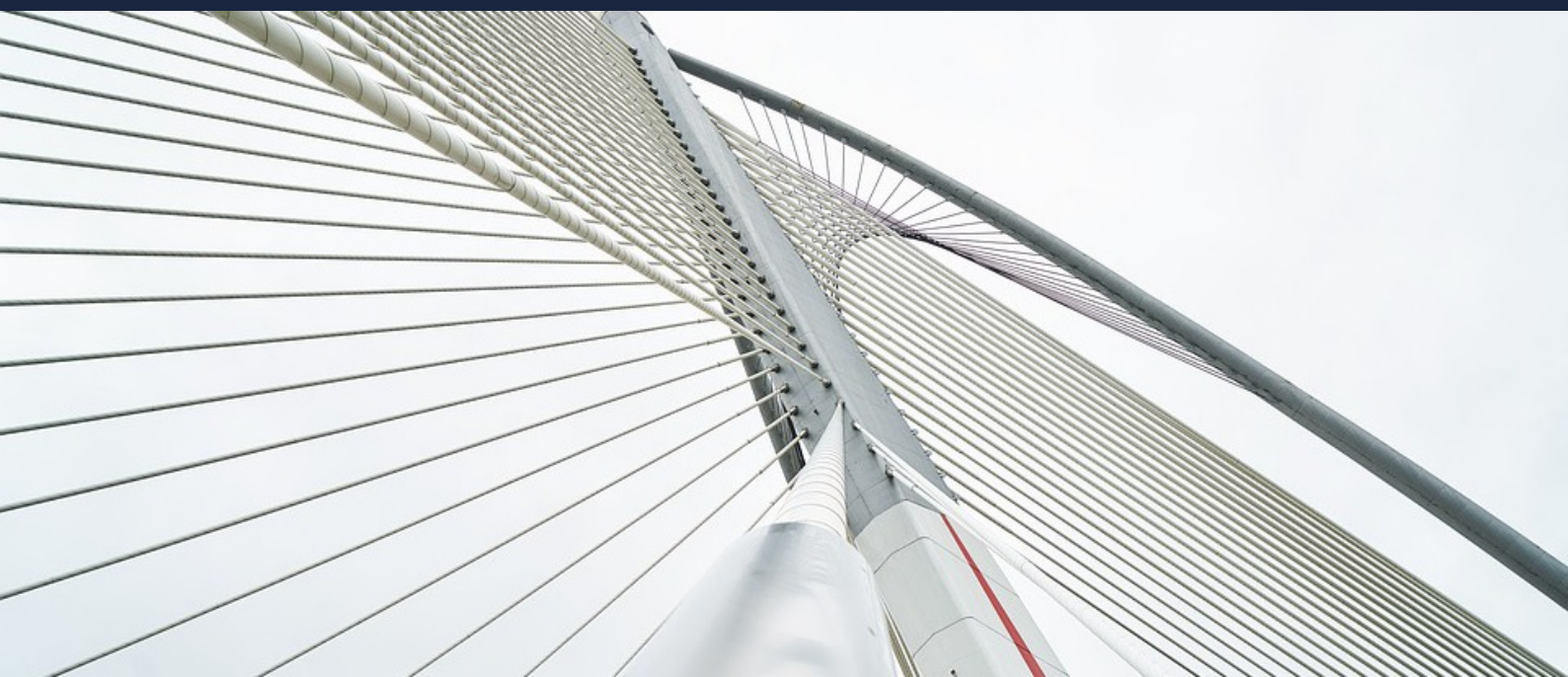
BEYOND EMERGENCY PERMISSION

Twelve Weeks That Exposed Twelve Years of Chosen Delay

What the pandemic response revealed about permission, risk and the machinery of organisational change

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1. Executive Summary

In the first months of the pandemic, organisations achieved in weeks changes that had remained trapped in business cases, steering groups and dependency plans for years. Contact centres moved into spare rooms. Paper approvals became electronic. Board meetings went virtual. Capacity that had supposedly required a multi-year technology programme appeared before the next reporting cycle.

The easy conclusion is that crisis makes transformation possible. The more uncomfortable conclusion is that much transformation had already been possible. What was missing was not capability but permission: permission to decide with incomplete information, to accept reversible risk, to cross functional boundaries, to retire ceremonial controls and to put one outcome ahead of the rest.

That does not make emergency delivery a model to copy wholesale. The spring response consumed reserves of effort, concealed control debt and transferred cost into homes and families. Some shortcuts were intelligent; others were merely invisible. The serious lesson is therefore not that organisations should operate permanently in crisis mode. It is that they should stop rebuilding the permission structures that made crisis necessary.

The longer view begins with a distinction. Urgency was the catalyst, but clarity of outcome, compressed decision rights and practical tolerance for learning were the mechanisms. Those mechanisms can be designed without fear, exhaustion or command-and-control theatre. The leadership task now is to preserve the useful permissions while retiring the emergency conditions that briefly made them available.

2. The Week the Impossible Became Tuesday's Task

At the beginning of March, a composite service operation had 640 advisers working from two large offices. Fewer than 40 could work remotely. The accepted plan to increase that number to 180 had an eighteen-month horizon, a capital request, seven workstreams and a dependency on the next network refresh.

By the end of the month, 583 advisers were handling enquiries from home.

The sequence was not elegant. On the first Friday, the operations director, technology lead, risk manager and workforce planner met twice by video. They agreed three service priorities, suspended two lower-value controls and gave one person authority to settle conflicts. Laptops were reallocated from training rooms. Secure remote access was expanded in daily increments. Supervisors used a simple morning call to identify capacity, absences and failed connections. A privacy script was introduced for advisers working in shared accommodation. Quality sampling increased from 2 per cent to 8 per cent because managers could no longer rely on what they saw across an office floor.

There were failures. At the end of week one, 96 advisers still could not connect reliably. Average waiting time more than doubled. One approval that normally required nine signatures was reduced to two, and the missing audit trail had to be reconstructed later. Yet by day thirteen, service capacity had recovered to 81 per cent. By day twenty-six it was above the previous winter peak.

Nothing in that account required an invention from the future. The network, devices, security tools and operational knowledge already existed. The eighteen-month plan had not been a measure of technical difficulty. It had been a map of the organisation's permission system.

That is the part of the pandemic response we are in danger of forgetting. We remember the heroic effort because it is visible. We forget the vanished meetings, the shortened chains of consent and the suddenly negotiable rules because their absence leaves no artefact.

3. Capability Was Not Created; Constraints Were Reclassified

Before the pandemic, delayed transformation was usually explained in the language of scarcity. There was not enough investment, not enough capacity, not enough certainty, not enough sponsorship. Those explanations were sometimes true. But the spring revealed another category: constraints that appeared fixed only because nobody with sufficient authority had declared them movable.

Five changes recurred across very different operations.

- The outcome became singular. Maintaining essential service displaced a crowded portfolio of worthy ambitions. Teams no longer had to optimise simultaneously for cost, growth, control, employee preference and architectural purity.
- Decision rights moved toward the work. People close enough to understand the problem were temporarily allowed to settle it. Escalation remained available, but it stopped being the default route for avoiding ownership.
- Evidence thresholds changed. A plausible test over forty-eight hours became more valuable than a polished forecast over six weeks. Decisions were made on the best available information, with explicit dates for review.
- Functional boundaries became permeable. Risk, technology, operations, property and human resources worked on one operational problem rather than representing

separate institutional interests.

- Reversibility was recognised. Leaders distinguished between decisions that could be undone and those that could not. The former moved quickly; the latter still received scrutiny.

These were not merely symptoms of urgency. They were mechanisms of delivery. Urgency mattered because it made the mechanisms politically available.

The pandemic did not abolish organisational constraints. It exposed which constraints were physical, which were prudent, and which survived mainly because challenging them had been more costly than obeying them.

This distinction matters because the phrase "burning platform" is already returning to management conversation. It is tempting to conclude that change needs fear. Fear can certainly suppress resistance, but it also suppresses dissent, narrows attention and rewards visible action over sound judgement. If we attribute spring's pace to fear alone, we will try to recreate the emotion and miss the design.

4. The Strongest Objection Is Also a Warning

There is a serious argument against drawing lessons from emergency delivery. A crisis suspends ordinary trade-offs. People work unreasonable hours. Customers accept degraded service. Regulators and auditors may exercise temporary discretion. Investment is released without the usual contest. Decisions that look fast are often funded by exhaustion, deferred maintenance and risks that have not yet matured.

This objection should not be brushed aside as conservatism. It is substantially correct.

A programme that moved 600 people home in three weeks may have depended on managers working until midnight, family members surrendering rooms and employees paying for heat, desks and broadband. An electronic approval introduced overnight may have preserved cash flow while weakening segregation of duties. A hastily expanded remote-access service may carry fragilities that become apparent only under sustained load. Emergency speed can borrow from the future, and the interest is often paid by people with the least voice in the original decision.

Nor should every pre-pandemic delay now be treated as bureaucratic failure. Some changes genuinely require consultation, testing, procurement, training or legal care. Safety-critical decisions do not become reversible because leaders are impatient. A crisis concentrates attention on immediate continuity; ordinary strategy must also protect resilience, fairness and long-term value.

But the objection does not restore the old case. It establishes a boundary.

We should not copy the hours, the anxiety or the suspension of care. We should examine why ordinary governance so often bundled those harms together with useful speed. The choice is not between an eighteen-month procession of approvals and a permanently exhausted command centre. That binary serves the guardians of the old machinery

because it makes any challenge sound reckless.

The more demanding question is which emergency permissions can survive when the emergency does not.

5. The Price of Speed Was Unevenly Recorded

Most organisations know what they spent on devices, licences and network capacity. Far fewer can state what the response consumed in human reserves.

During the first phase, discretionary effort filled the gaps between policy and reality. Supervisors rang isolated colleagues after working hours. Technology teams carried weekend rotas that had never been designed. Parents divided the day into fragments around care and schooling. New joiners entered organisations they had never physically visited. Employees with quiet rooms and reliable connections experienced remote work differently from those sharing a kitchen table.

Because much of this cost did not appear in a programme ledger, it could be mistaken for free capacity. It was not.

The distinction between temporary effort and repeatable capability is therefore essential. If a process works only because experienced people know whom to telephone privately, it has not been transformed. If a control operates only because one risk manager reviews every exception at midnight, it has been displaced, not redesigned. If productivity is maintained by eliminating travel but extending the working day, the organisation has changed the location of the burden rather than the system.

The pattern I have observed is that organisations count the visible recovery first and discover the invisible debt later. By September, the first questions are already changing. Can this rota continue through winter? Which emergency access rights remain open? Who owns the temporary process? What happens when the small group who carried the response takes leave?

These are not reasons to romanticise the past. They are reasons to make the new capability honest.

6. What the Business Case Had Been Hiding

The traditional business case presents delay as disciplined evaluation. It asks for confidence about cost, benefit, scope, dependency and risk before permission is granted. In principle, that protects scarce resources. In practice, the demand for confidence often increases precisely where learning is most necessary.

Consider what changed when continuity became the overriding concern.

Ordinary explanation	What the crisis exposed	Leadership question
The strategy is not settled	A clear immediate outcome can guide action before the whole strategy is complete	What is the smallest outcome clear enough to act on?
The risk is too high	Risk was being discussed as one undifferentiated category	Which risks are irreversible, and which can be contained by a short test?
There are too many dependencies	Many dependencies were conventions about sequence or ownership	Which dependency is physical, legal or technical, and which is merely preferred?
People will resist the change	People often resisted uncertainty, poor support or loss of agency rather than change itself	What permission and practical help would make adoption rational?
The technology is not ready	Existing tools were frequently underused because policy and operating models lagged	What can current capability safely support now?
The benefits are uncertain	Long forecasts created an appearance of precision without improving learning	What evidence could the next fortnight produce?

The table does not prove that every withheld investment should have proceeded. It shows that many business cases answered the wrong question. They asked, "Can we predict the whole journey well enough to authorise it?" The emergency asked, "What must be true next week, and what must we learn before the week after?"

That change in question compressed time because it converted transformation from a promise into a sequence of evidence. A team did not need to demonstrate the final productivity gain of remote service before trying it. It needed to show that advisers could connect securely, customers could be served and failure could be detected. Once those conditions were visible, the next decision became easier.

The business case had often been compensating for low trust between layers of the organisation. Senior leaders requested more detail because they did not trust local judgement; teams produced more detail because honest uncertainty was punished. The resulting documents grew while decision quality remained static. In the spring, uncertainty could no longer be hidden, so the theatre briefly stopped.

7. Twelve Weeks Did Not Erase Twelve Years

The phrase "we did in twelve weeks what had taken twelve years" is powerful, but it can mislead. The twelve weeks rested on investments, arguments and experiments accumulated over the preceding years.

Remote access worked because infrastructure had been renewed. Digital channels absorbed demand because teams had already built them. Managers improvised effectively

because they possessed deep knowledge of customers and operations. Policies could be amended quickly because someone had spent years understanding why they existed. The visible acceleration was enabled by patient, often uncelebrated preparation.

This complicates the claim that transformation was always possible. The possibility was not lying fully formed behind a single locked door. It was assembled from prior capability, then held below its useful level by habits of permission.

That nuance matters. If leaders interpret the pandemic as proof that preparation is unnecessary, they will produce brittle organisations. If they interpret it only as the reward for prior investment, they will excuse the permission structures that kept the investment dormant. Both preparation and release were necessary. The pandemic supplied the release at a terrible price.

We should also be careful with the word transformation. Moving an office process onto video calls is not necessarily transformation. Digitising the same nine approvals is not a new operating model. In many cases, the first response was substitution: the same service, delivered elsewhere through improvised means. Transformation begins when the organisation asks what should remain changed, what should be redesigned and what should be restored.

Spring was not the completion of transformation. It was an unusually revealing first draft.

8. The Old Machinery Is Already Reassembling

As immediate continuity stabilises, familiar phrases are returning: normal governance, full business case, permanent solution, strategic alignment, complete requirements. Each has a legitimate meaning. Together, they can rebuild the waiting room in which change previously stalled.

The reversion is rarely announced. A daily decision meeting becomes weekly, then monthly. The person who had authority to settle cross-functional conflicts is asked to return decisions to the programme board. Temporary risk tolerances expire, but the redesigned controls are not ready. Teams are told to document what they did, then required to repeat the pre-crisis approval process to make it permanent. A successful practice enters a backlog because it now competes with the projects it had temporarily displaced.

This is how organisational memory edits itself. The emergency becomes an exceptional story about exceptional people. The system that prevented ordinary action escapes examination.

There is emotional comfort in that edit. Leaders can celebrate resilience without admitting that previous governance had confused scrutiny with delay. Functions can reclaim their boundaries without confronting the value created when those boundaries softened. Programme structures can resume because they are familiar, measurable and legible to committees.

The loss will not be immediate. Services will continue. Video calls will remain. Some property costs may fall. The deeper loss will be the return of learned helplessness: people

once again discovering that they may identify a solvable problem, possess the means to address it and still lack permission to act.

9. Preserve Permission, Retire Emergency

The practical legacy should not be a slogan about moving faster. Speed has no moral value on its own. The aim is to make the pace proportionate to the decision.

That begins by preserving a few disciplines that became visible under pressure.

1. Name one outcome before naming the programme. The spring response moved because continuity was unmistakable. Ordinary transformation needs the same clarity, even when the outcome is less dramatic. A team should be able to say what will be observably different for a customer, employee or operation within a bounded period.
2. Put decision rights beside consequences. Authority should sit with the smallest group that has the knowledge to decide and the responsibility to live with the result. Escalation should resolve conflicts or irreversible risk, not certify every act of judgement.
3. Separate reversible from irreversible decisions. A two-week process trial is not equivalent to a long-term contractual commitment. Applying the same governance to both does not reduce risk; it hides the organisation's inability to distinguish among risks.
4. Replace forecasts with evidence where learning is possible. A short test with explicit safeguards can reveal more than another month of modelling. The test must have a question, a measure, an owner and a date when continuation is decided.
5. Account for human subsidy. Any new operating model should state what work has moved into homes, evenings or informal relationships. Capability that depends on chronic discretionary effort is not sustainable capability.
6. Give temporary decisions an expiry and an owner. Emergency arrangements should not drift into permanence. At the expiry point, the choice is to stop, redesign or legitimise them with proportionate controls.

This is not a methodology for every transformation. It is a way of refusing the false return to a system in which every decision travels at the speed of the most consequential one.

The strongest leaders in this moment will resist two temptations at once. They will not canonise crisis behaviour as a permanent operating model, and they will not allow concern for sustainability to restore ceremonial delay. Holding both truths is harder than choosing a side, but it is the work.

10. The Longer View

We are writing in September 2020 without knowing how the coming winter will unfold, how long restrictions will remain or which changes in work and service will endure. That

uncertainty should make us modest about predictions. It should not make us uncertain about what we have observed.

Organisations were capable of faster, more joined-up action than their normal systems permitted. The capability was uneven, and the price was too often hidden. Yet the gap between what had been declared impossible and what became operational in weeks is too large to explain away as exceptional effort.

The lasting question is not whether people can move quickly in an emergency. They have answered that. It is whether leaders can create clarity without catastrophe, discretion without neglect, and pace without exhaustion.

If we fail, the pandemic response will be remembered as a heroic interruption. The old portfolio will refill, the old approval chains will lengthen and every future transformation will again be described as difficult because the organisation is complex.

If we learn, the legacy will be quieter. Fewer decisions will wait for theatre. More risks will be named precisely. Teams will be trusted to produce evidence rather than promises. Preparation will continue, but permission will arrive before fear forces it.

The pandemic did not prove that transformation is easy. It proved that much of what we called difficulty was a choice about who was allowed to decide, what evidence counted and which institutional comfort mattered most. We may not have chosen those arrangements consciously. What happens next will show whether we choose to restore them.