

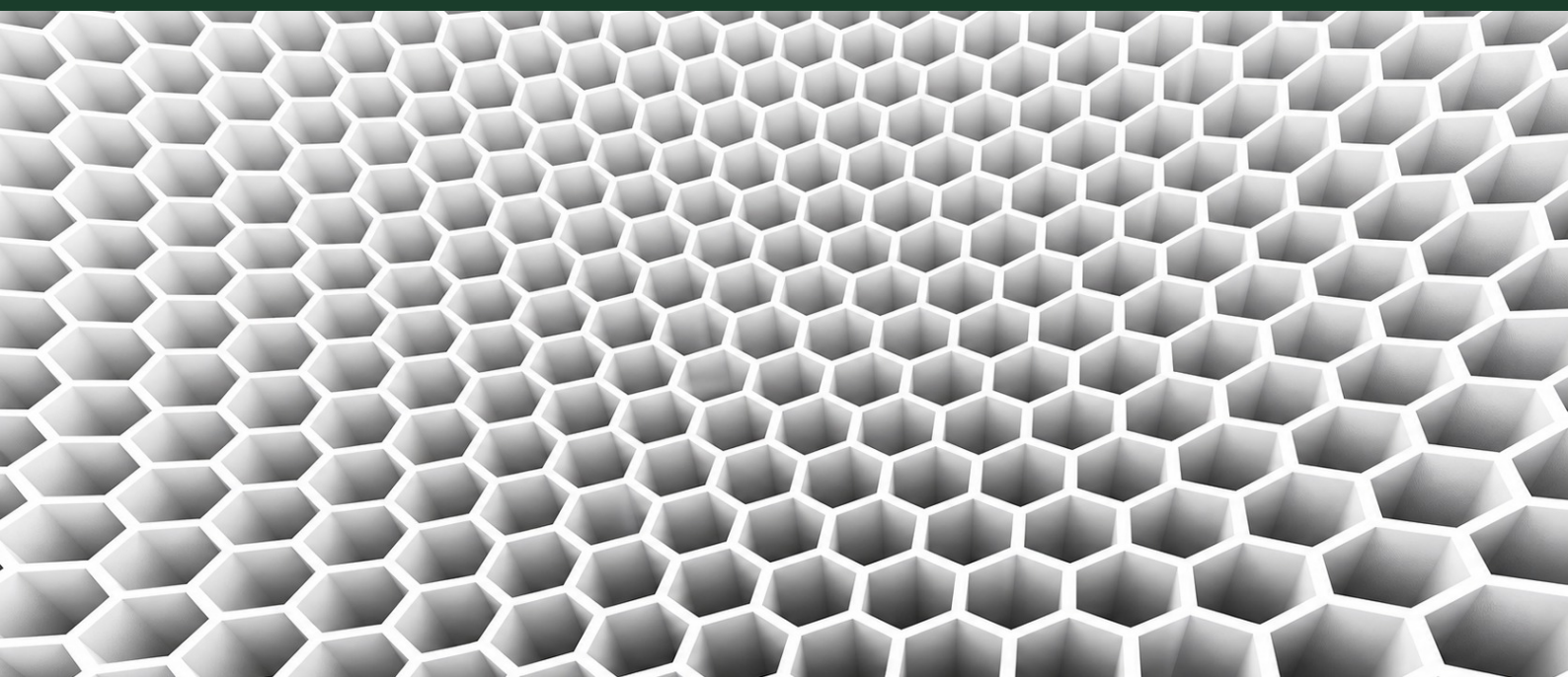
BEYOND THE RELAUNCH

Why Digital Transformation Programmes Restarted with the Same Flaws

A Practitioner's Perspective on Institutional Amnesia and the Failure to Learn

Giovanni Leonardi

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*“Institutional amnesia is not forgetting what happened
— it is remembering the outcome while forgetting why
it occurred.”*

1. Executive Summary

Across sectors, organisations are relaunching digital transformation programmes that were paused, slowed, or redirected during the pandemic. The ambition is familiar: modernise legacy systems, digitise customer journeys, build data capabilities, and create the agile operating models that the last decade of strategic presentations have promised. What is striking — and, to a practitioner who has watched this cycle before, deeply troubling — is how many of these relaunched programmes are being set up in precisely the same way as the ones that struggled or failed before the pandemic intervened.

This essay explores why institutional amnesia is such a persistent feature of transformation programmes, examines the specific patterns being repeated, and argues that the pandemic offered a rare opportunity to learn that most organisations are squandering.

2. The Amnesia Pattern

Institutional amnesia in programme management is not a new observation. Organisations have always struggled to carry lessons from one programme to the next, and the reasons are well-documented: key personnel move on, lessons-learned exercises produce documents that nobody reads, and the organisational incentive to acknowledge past failure is weak. But the current moment presents a particularly acute version of this phenomenon, because the interval between the last generation of transformation programmes and the current one is so short.

Many of the programmes now being relaunched were active as recently as early 2020. The same sponsors are in place. The same consulting firms are being engaged. In some cases, the same programme managers are being appointed. And yet the programmes are being structured as though nothing has been learned — not just from the pandemic itself, but from the pre-pandemic failures that the pandemic conveniently obscured.

This is the insidious quality of institutional amnesia: it is not a failure of memory in the usual sense. The organisation remembers that the previous programme existed. It may even remember that it did not fully deliver. But it has lost — or, more accurately, has chosen not to retain — the specific understanding of why it did not deliver. The narrative has been smoothed: the programme was on track but was disrupted by an unprecedented external event. The implication is that the approach was sound; only the circumstances were unfavourable.

This narrative is comforting but false. The evidence, in most cases, tells a different story: programmes that were already struggling with scope creep, governance dysfunction, stakeholder misalignment, and delivery fragmentation well before the pandemic provided a convenient reason to pause or reset.

3. The Patterns Being Repeated

The specific patterns I observe being repeated are remarkably consistent across organisations and sectors. They are worth enumerating not because any of them is surprising — they are not — but because the consistency of their recurrence suggests something deeper than individual organisational failure. These are systemic tendencies in how large organisations approach transformation, and they persist because the incentive structures that produce them have not changed.

3.1 The scope illusion

Transformation programmes are being relaunched with scopes that are, once again, broader than the organisation's capacity to deliver. The logic is always compelling: the components are interdependent, so they must be addressed together. The customer journey spans multiple systems, so the programme must too. The business case only works at scale, so a narrow scope cannot be justified.

This logic is not wrong in the abstract. It is wrong in practice, because it produces programmes that are too large to govern, too complex to manage, and too slow to deliver value before organisational patience expires. The pre-pandemic programmes that struggled most were almost universally those whose scope exceeded the organisation's ability to coordinate, decide, and absorb change at the required speed. The post-pandemic programmes are setting the same trap.

3.2 The governance gap

Governance in transformation programmes is treated, once again, as a reporting mechanism rather than a decision-making engine. Steering committees are being established with the same structure: monthly meetings, dense slide packs, status updates that are optimistic by design, and escalation processes that nobody uses because escalation is culturally interpreted as failure.

The purpose of governance in a transformation programme is not to monitor progress. It is to make decisions — specifically, the difficult decisions that programme teams cannot make themselves: scope trade-offs, resource allocation, dependency resolution, and the critical go/no-go judgments at stage gates. When governance bodies are configured as

audiences for progress reports rather than as decision-making forums, these decisions either go unmade or are made informally by whoever has the most organisational power, regardless of whether they have the most relevant information.

3.3 The methodology as shield

Organisations are once again adopting methodologies — Agile at scale, SAFe, hybrid waterfall-agile, or bespoke frameworks — as though the methodology itself were the solution. The same phenomenon played out before the pandemic: organisations invested heavily in methodology adoption, trained their people, restructured their teams, and then discovered that the methodology did not address the actual reasons their programmes were struggling.

Methodologies are tools. They provide structure, vocabulary, and process. What they do not provide is the organisational capability to make difficult decisions, the political skill to manage stakeholder conflict, the discipline to hold scope boundaries, or the courage to stop work that is not delivering value. These are leadership and cultural capabilities, and no methodology can substitute for them.

The most reliable predictor of whether a relaunched transformation programme will succeed is not which methodology it adopts but whether the organisation has honestly diagnosed why the previous one failed.

3.4 The integration fantasy

Programmes are being designed, once again, on the assumption that integration will be straightforward. The business case assumes that new systems will connect to existing ones through well-defined interfaces. The architecture assumes that data will flow cleanly between components. The timeline assumes that integration testing will proceed on schedule.

This assumption has been wrong in every large transformation programme I have observed, without exception. Integration is where transformation programmes go to die — not because integration is technically impossible, but because it exposes every inconsistency, every ambiguity, and every undocumented assumption in the systems being connected. It is the moment where the gap between the architecture diagram and the operational reality becomes undeniable. And yet programmes continue to plan for it as though it were a routine engineering task rather than the most complex and risk-laden phase of the entire endeavour.

3.5 The people afterthought

Change management — the work of preparing the organisation's people to operate in the transformed environment — is being treated, once again, as a workstream that runs alongside the programme rather than a fundamental dimension of it. It is staffed late, funded modestly, and governed weakly. The assumption, as before, is that if the technology works, adoption will follow.

This assumption has been consistently wrong. The programmes that deliver the most technically elegant solutions but fail to invest in the human side of change produce systems that are technically live but operationally unused – the familiar phenomenon of "successful deployment, failed adoption" that is the graveyard of transformation ambition.

4. Why the Pandemic Should Have Changed This

The pandemic was, among many other things, an involuntary experiment in organisational change at speed. Organisations that had spent years planning digital transformation found themselves executing it in weeks – not through their transformation programmes, but through the sheer necessity of operational survival. The results were instructive.

What succeeded during the pandemic was almost universally characterised by narrow scope, clear authority, rapid decision-making, and the suspension of normal governance in favour of empowered teams with permission to act. What failed was characterised by the opposite: broad scope, unclear authority, slow decision-making, and governance processes that could not adapt to the speed of events.

These are precisely the characteristics that distinguish successful transformation programmes from unsuccessful ones in normal times. The pandemic did not reveal anything new about how transformation works. It confirmed, under extreme conditions, what practitioners have known for years: that the primary determinants of programme success are organisational, not technical, and that the governance, decision-making, and change management capabilities of the sponsoring organisation matter more than the quality of the solution being implemented.

The opportunity this presents is significant. For the first time, organisations have direct, lived experience of both modes: the slow, over-governed, under-decisive mode of their pre-pandemic programmes, and the fast, empowered, narrowly-scoped mode of their pandemic response. The evidence for what works is no longer theoretical. It is experiential.

And yet, in programme after programme, the evidence is being ignored. The relaunched programmes look like the old programmes, not like the pandemic response. The governance is being restored to its pre-pandemic weight. The scope is expanding back to its pre-pandemic breadth. The decision-making is slowing back to its pre-pandemic pace. The institutional learning from the most intense period of organisational change in a generation is being set aside in favour of the familiar.

5. The Roots of Repetition

Understanding why this happens requires looking beyond individual programme decisions to the structural incentives that shape them.

Organisations do not repeat transformation failures because they are incapable of learning. They repeat them because the structures, incentives, and power dynamics that produced the original failures remain unchanged.

Programme sponsors are incentivised to set ambitious scopes because modest scopes do not attract the investment or the organisational attention they need. Consulting firms are incentivised to propose comprehensive solutions because their commercial model rewards scale. Methodology advocates are incentivised to promote framework adoption because that is their product. Governance structures are designed by people who equate rigour with volume of reporting.

None of these incentives are malicious. Each makes sense from the perspective of the actor involved. But collectively they produce programmes that are over-scoped, over-governed, methodology-heavy, and under-equipped for the organisational realities they will face. And because the incentive structures survive the failure of individual programmes, the patterns they produce survive too.

6. What Would Be Different

A programme that had genuinely learned from both the pre-pandemic failures and the pandemic experience would look materially different from what most organisations are currently launching:

- Scope would be deliberately constrained. Not because the broader ambition is wrong, but because the organisation's capacity to deliver, govern, and absorb change is finite. A programme that delivers a narrow scope well, and then expands, builds confidence and capability. A programme that attempts everything simultaneously builds neither.
- Governance would be designed for decisions, not reporting. Steering bodies would meet more frequently, receive less information, and be expected to make decisions at every meeting. Escalation would be normalised, not stigmatised. The governance framework would be as lean as the pandemic response demonstrated it could be.
- Methodology would be a means, not an end. The chosen approach would be selected for its fit with the organisation's culture and capability, not for its theoretical elegance. It would be adapted to the programme's specific needs rather than adopted wholesale. And its limitations would be acknowledged from the outset, with explicit attention to the organisational capabilities that no methodology can provide.
- Integration would be planned as the hardest problem, not the last task. Architecture decisions would be driven by integration feasibility rather than component elegance. Integration testing would begin early and run continuously, not be compressed into the final phase. The programme plan would reflect the reality that integration is where the most significant risks and delays will materialise.
- Change management would be integral, not adjacent. The investment in preparing the organisation for change would be proportionate to the investment in building the solution. It would begin before the technology decisions are made, not after. And it would be governed with the same rigour as the technical delivery.

7. The Cost of Not Learning

The cost of institutional amnesia in transformation is not abstract. It is measured in billions of pounds of investment that fails to deliver its intended value, in years of organisational effort that produces systems nobody uses, in the erosion of confidence that makes each successive programme harder to launch and harder to sustain.

But perhaps the most significant cost is the opportunity cost. Every organisation that relaunches a transformation programme with the same flaws as its predecessor is consuming time and capacity that could have been spent on a programme designed to succeed. The post-pandemic window – in which organisations have both the mandate and the lived experience to do transformation differently – is not permanent. The further we move from the urgency of 2020, the stronger the gravitational pull of familiar patterns becomes.

The organisations that will distinguish themselves in the coming years are not those with the most ambitious transformation programmes. They are those with the most honest ones – programmes built on a genuine reckoning with what went wrong before, designed around what the pandemic proved about how change actually works, and governed with the discipline to resist the organisational tendencies that turn ambition into repetition.

That reckoning requires something that most organisations find profoundly uncomfortable: admitting that the problem is not the methodology, the technology, or the market conditions, but the organisation itself. Until that admission is made, the cycle will continue.