

BEYOND EXECUTIVE ALIGNMENT

Why Senior Leaders Resist the Transformation They Commissioned

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Paradox of Executive Sponsorship in Large-Scale Change

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1. The Paradox Nobody Names

There is a moment in the life of most large transformation programmes when something shifts in the executive suite. The leaders who championed the change — who approved the business case, allocated the budget, stood before the organisation and declared that transformation was imperative — begin to resist it. Not openly. Rarely in any way that could be formally documented or challenged. But in the accumulated weight of delayed decisions, diverted resources, watered-down scope, and the quiet withdrawal of political support that once seemed assured.

This is not hypocrisy, though it is often experienced as such by the programme teams who must navigate it. It is something more structurally interesting: the collision between the abstract appeal of transformation and its concrete personal consequences. Understanding this paradox is essential to navigating it, and navigating it is essential to delivering large-scale change in any complex organisation.

2. The Abstract and the Concrete

When a senior leader commissions a transformation, they are responding to a set of pressures that are typically strategic and impersonal: market shifts, competitive threats, regulatory requirements, operational inefficiencies that have become untenable. The decision to transform is made at a level of abstraction where the organisation is a system to be optimised rather than a collection of human beings with established territories, relationships, and interests.

The transformation business case is written in this abstract language. It describes capabilities to be built, processes to be redesigned, operating models to be restructured. It does not describe which specific leaders will lose headcount, which budgets will be redistributed, which reporting lines will be dissolved, or which comfortable assumptions

about how the organisation works will be declared obsolete. These consequences are implicit in the plan, but they are not named, and the leaders who approve the plan may not have fully reckoned with them.

The shift from abstract to concrete happens gradually, and it is different for each leader depending on when the transformation's implications reach their own domain. A chief operating officer who enthusiastically sponsored a digital transformation may become notably less enthusiastic when the programme's recommendations include automating processes that their team currently owns. A divisional head who championed a portfolio rationalisation may resist when their own projects appear on the list for consolidation.

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This is not a failure of imagination at the point of approval. It is a feature of how human beings process change. We are remarkably good at endorsing change in the abstract and remarkably resistant to it when it arrives at our own door. Senior leaders are no exception to this pattern; they are simply better positioned to act on their resistance without being held accountable for it.

3. The Mechanisms of Executive Resistance

What makes executive resistance to transformation so difficult to address is that it rarely presents as opposition. These are sophisticated organisational operators who understand that openly opposing a programme they themselves commissioned would be politically untenable. Instead, resistance takes forms that are individually defensible and only collectively visible as a pattern.

Strategic reframing is perhaps the most common mechanism. The leader does not oppose the transformation; they argue for a different interpretation of its objectives that happens to protect their own interests. The digital transformation becomes a technology upgrade rather than an operating model change. The portfolio rationalisation becomes a reporting restructure rather than a genuine consolidation. The scope narrows until the transformation is no longer transformative, and each narrowing is justified in language that sounds strategically rigorous.

Resource diversion is equally effective and harder to challenge. The leader does not refuse to provide resources to the programme; they simply make their best people unavailable, citing operational pressures that are always plausible and often genuine. The programme receives bodies but not capability, and the quality of its output degrades in ways that can later be attributed to the programme's own failings rather than to the under-resourcing that caused them.

Decision deferral is the weapon of choice for leaders who prefer to avoid confrontation. Every decision that would make the transformation's consequences concrete is deferred — pending further analysis, awaiting the next board cycle, requiring broader consultation. No individual deferral is unreasonable. Collectively, they create a paralysis that slowly

drains the programme of momentum and credibility.

Proxy opposition is the most sophisticated variant. The leader does not resist the transformation themselves; they allow or encourage others in their organisation to raise objections, concerns, and alternative proposals that serve the same purpose. The resistance is genuine at the proxy level — the people raising concerns often have legitimate operational worries — but it is enabled and sustained by a senior leader who could resolve it but chooses not to.

4. Why It Persists

The persistence of this pattern across organisations, sectors, and decades reflects several reinforcing dynamics.

The first is that transformation governance is designed to assume executive alignment. Programme governance frameworks place the executive sponsor at the apex and assume that the most senior leaders in the organisation are committed to the programme's success. There is no mechanism for detecting or addressing the situation where those same leaders are the source of resistance. The governance framework becomes, in effect, a shield behind which executive resistance can operate unchallenged.

The second is that programme teams are structurally subordinate. The programme manager who suspects that a board member is undermining the transformation faces an impossible escalation. They cannot raise the issue with the sponsor without evidence that would be difficult to gather and career-threatening to present. They cannot raise it with the resisting leader directly. They cannot raise it at board level without the sponsor's support. The structural power asymmetry means that executive resistance, once established, is almost impossible to challenge from within the programme.

"The most effective resistance to transformation comes not from those who oppose it, but from those who support it in principle while ensuring that its consequences never quite arrive."

The third dynamic is collective collusion. In most executive teams, the leaders who are resisting the transformation are aware that their colleagues are doing the same. A tacit understanding develops: I will not challenge your resistance if you do not challenge mine. The transformation continues to receive rhetorical support at board level while being systematically undermined in practice, and the executive team maintains the fiction of alignment because exposing the reality would require a degree of honesty that few leadership teams can sustain.

5. What Can Be Done

Addressing executive resistance to transformation requires acknowledging that it is a predictable feature of large-scale change, not an aberration. This acknowledgement itself is difficult, because it means naming a dynamic that senior leaders would prefer to leave unnamed.

Make the personal consequences explicit early. The most effective intervention is the one that most organisations avoid: a frank assessment, before the programme begins in earnest, of what the transformation will mean for each member of the senior leadership team personally. Not in general terms – in specific terms. Whose budget shrinks. Whose team is restructured. Whose authority is redistributed. Leaders who understand the personal implications at the outset are less likely to be surprised and destabilised when they arrive, and they have the opportunity to raise concerns at a point where they can be addressed constructively.

Design governance for misalignment, not just alignment. Programme governance needs mechanisms that can detect and address executive resistance without requiring the programme team to make career-threatening escalations. Portfolio governance boards, independent programme assurance functions, and structured peer reviews of executive engagement all provide routes for making the problem visible without placing the burden on those least able to bear it.

Build coalitions that survive individual resistance. A transformation that depends on the continued support of every member of the executive team is fragile by design. More resilient approaches build coalitions that can sustain the programme even when individual leaders waver. This means identifying and cultivating supporters at multiple levels, creating shared ownership of key deliverables, and ensuring that the transformation's benefits are distributed widely enough that resistance by one leader does not threaten the whole.

Accept that some resistance is legitimate. Not all executive pushback is self-serving. Sometimes the transformation plan is genuinely flawed, and the leader who raises concerns is providing a service that the programme team should welcome. The challenge is distinguishing between legitimate challenge and self-interested resistance, and this requires a degree of self-awareness and honest assessment that is difficult to maintain under the pressures of large-scale change.

6. The Honest Conversation

The organisations that navigate this paradox most successfully are those that find a way to have an honest conversation about it – not in the language of blame, but in the language of predictable human dynamics. When a leadership team can acknowledge that resistance to the change they commissioned is normal, expected, and not a sign of bad faith, they create the space to manage it constructively rather than pretending it does not exist.

This is harder than it sounds. It requires a level of psychological safety within the executive team that many organisations have not built. It requires a programme sponsor who is willing to facilitate difficult conversations with their peers. And it requires a recognition that the success of a transformation depends not just on the quality of the

plan but on the willingness of the people who approved it to live with its consequences.

The pattern I have observed is that this willingness is not a fixed quantity. It can be built, sustained, and recovered — but only if it is treated as something that requires active work rather than something that can be assumed. The executive who commissioned the transformation and the executive who resists it are, more often than not, the same person at different points in the same journey. Understanding that journey is the first step towards navigating it.