

BEYOND EMERGENCY SPEED

Why Some Organisations Snap Back While Others Leap Forward

The structural choices turning emergency response into lasting transformation

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Contents

1. Executive Summary	3
2. The Monday When the Old Timetable Disappeared	4
3. Crisis Speed Was Not Magic	4
4. The Case for Snapping Back Is Stronger Than It Looks	5
5. The Organisations That Leap Will Preserve the Argument, Not the Apparatus	6
6. The Office Debate Is a Distraction From the Work Debate	7
7. Adaptability Is Being Spent Like Cash	8
8. Annual Planning Meets a World of Moving Assumptions	9
9. Memory Decays Faster Than Procedure	9
10. Divergence Will Be Quiet Before It Is Obvious	10

Why Some Organisations Snap Back While Others Leap Forward

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"The leap forward is not the preservation of emergency. It is the conversion of emergency insight into ordinary capability."

1. Executive Summary

In the spring of 2020, organisations achieved changes in days that their own plans had assigned to quarters. Remote access was expanded, approval chains shortened, service channels redirected and cash decisions brought into daily view. By late August, however, a divergence is becoming visible. Some organisations are treating those achievements as temporary emergency measures to be unwound; others are examining them as evidence that much of the old operating model was optional.

The difference is not appetite for technology, nor the energy displayed during the first weeks of lockdown. It is whether leaders can convert a crisis response into institutional learning. Emergency speed came from a rare alignment: an unambiguous threat, a single hierarchy of priorities, direct access to decision-makers, temporary tolerance for imperfect information and a suspension of routines whose value had ceased to be questioned. Those conditions cannot—and should not—be preserved intact. Exhaustion is real, controls matter and permanent command centres are a poor substitute for management.

Yet a full return to previous practice would confuse familiar process with sound governance. The organisations most likely to leap forward are separating the disciplines that protected value from the habits that merely delayed action. They are retaining shorter decision paths, clearer outcome measures and closer operational feedback while rebuilding appropriate assurance around them. The real contest is therefore not between office and home, digital and physical, or caution and boldness. It is between restoration and learning.

This essay argues that post-crisis divergence will be determined by four structural choices: what evidence an organisation accepts about its former constraints; where it places decision rights; whether it treats workforce adaptability as a reserve to be consumed or a capability to be renewed; and whether its investment process can move from annual promises to staged commitments. The crisis did not make every organisation agile. It made the cost of organisational friction briefly impossible to defend.

2. The Monday When the Old Timetable Disappeared

At 8.15 on a Monday morning, a service director joins a telephone conference expecting to approve a six-week plan for moving a customer operation away from a building that can no longer be fully occupied. By noon, the question has changed. The chief operating officer wants the first hundred people working remotely within forty-eight hours. Information security is on the call, procurement has authority to place orders, and a finance manager is recording decisions as they are made. A daily checkpoint replaces the fortnightly steering meeting.

By Friday, 420 people are handling enquiries from home. Not everything is elegant. Supervisors rely on twice-daily calls, some paper-based exceptions still require a skeleton team on site, and performance reports arrive the following morning rather than in real time. But the operation works. A change previously considered too interdependent to attempt quickly has been delivered through a mixture of existing technology, improvised procedure and unusually direct decisions.

Four months later, the same organisation is discussing whether the emergency arrangements should be “regularised.” The word sounds prudent. It can also become a way of putting every temporary exception back through the very machinery that made the original timetable impossible.

This is the hinge on which organisations are beginning to separate. One group reads the spring as an interruption: exceptional behaviour under exceptional conditions, followed by a responsible return to normal controls. The other reads it as an experiment conducted at involuntary scale. The experiment was untidy and costly, but it revealed where work had truly depended on physical presence, where governance had protected the enterprise, and where governance had merely accumulated.

The first interpretation promises relief. The second demands judgement.

3. Crisis Speed Was Not Magic

It is tempting to attribute the rapid changes of March and April to urgency alone. Urgency mattered, but it did not write software, redistribute equipment or settle disputes between functions. The mechanism was more specific: the crisis temporarily altered the organisation’s political economy.

Before the crisis, a cross-functional change might have carried several competing definitions of success. Operations wanted continuity, finance wanted a firm return, technology wanted a supportable design, risk wanted evidence, and individual executives protected commitments already made. Each concern was legitimate. Their combination often produced a sequence in which every function could delay the whole while none owned the outcome.

During the emergency, four things changed.

- Priority became singular. Continuity of service and protection of people displaced a crowded portfolio of local objectives.

- Decision rights moved towards the facts. Operational, technology, finance and risk colleagues met together, often daily, with an executive able to resolve trade-offs immediately.
- Information became provisional but usable. Leaders acted on ranges, scenarios and short feedback cycles instead of waiting for a polished forecast.
- Consequences became visible quickly. A decision taken in the morning affected service levels, staffing or cash within days, so error could be detected and corrected.

This was not the disappearance of governance. It was governance compressed around an outcome.

Consider a composite investment decision typical of the period. Before March, a request to expand secure remote access for 1,500 staff passed through nine approvals and waited an average of nine working days, chiefly because each approver saw the request separately. In April, the same categories of decision were considered in a daily thirty-minute forum attended by the budget holder, technology lead, security officer and operational owner. Approval time fell to thirty-six hours. The security standard did not change. The expenditure threshold did not vanish. What disappeared was serial interpretation: the repeated translation of one problem into nine functional languages.

When organisations say the crisis removed bureaucracy, they often miss the more useful lesson: it made the cost of serial decision-making visible.

The distinction matters because permanent transformation cannot rely on permanent emergency. If speed is explained only by adrenaline, the obvious response is to rest and restore. If it is explained by a change in decision design, then part of the speed can be retained without retaining the fear.

4. The Case for Snapping Back Is Stronger Than It Looks

The serious argument for restoration should not be dismissed as timidity. Emergency operating models carry hidden debts.

Controls performed after the event may have protected continuity while accumulating reconciliation work. Staff who compensated for weak processes through goodwill may now be tired. Managers have struggled to induct new colleagues, sustain informal learning and notice distress through a screen. Some decisions were fast because risks were genuinely accepted for a short period, not because those risks proved imaginary. Suppliers made extraordinary concessions. Capital projects paused, releasing people and attention that will not remain available indefinitely.

There is also a selection problem in the stories organisations tell themselves. Successful improvisations are highly visible; failures are often absorbed quietly. A service that remained open receives praise, while the duplicate data entry, missed audit trail or deferred maintenance appears later in another budget. To declare every emergency practice a breakthrough would be as careless as declaring every old process essential.

Restoration therefore has a rational appeal. It offers known responsibilities, established controls and a chance to repair the social fabric of work. In uncertain conditions—with demand uneven, public health restrictions liable to change and the winter still ahead—leaders may reasonably prefer resilience over another wave of disruption.

But this is not an argument for a wholesale return. It is an argument for discrimination.

The strongest restoration case fails when it treats the previous operating model as the neutral baseline. It was not neutral. It contained its own risks: long approval queues, projects whose benefits could not be traced, information prepared for meetings rather than decisions, and dependency on buildings or key individuals that continuity plans had underestimated. Reinstating those conditions in the name of control would exchange visible emergency debt for familiar structural debt.

The right question is not, “Which exceptions can we keep?” That wording assumes the old model has already won. The better question is, “What operating design would we choose now, given what we have learned?”

5. The Organisations That Leap Will Preserve the Argument, Not the Apparatus

A crisis cell is designed to narrow attention. It works because a small group receives frequent information, sets immediate priorities and can mobilise resources. Preserved too long, it becomes centralising and exhausting. Decisions crowd around senior leaders; local managers wait for the daily call; strategic questions are displaced by the urgent.

The leap-forward organisation will not keep the command centre. It will preserve the argument the command centre proved: decisions improve when authority, relevant expertise and fresh evidence meet at the same moment.

That principle leads to a different post-crisis design.

Instead of reinstating monthly committees for every material issue, leaders can distinguish among three decision cadences:

Decision class	Appropriate cadence	Evidence required	Authority
Immediate continuity	Daily or as triggered	Current service, people and cash indicators	Named operational owner within explicit limits
Adaptive improvement	Weekly or fortnightly	Short-cycle results, customer demand, control exceptions	Cross-functional owner with finance and risk present
Strategic commitment	At defined gates	Scenarios, dependencies, affordability and benefit evidence	Executive group or board according to reserved matters

The point is not to make everything faster. A major acquisition, a long-term property commitment or a material change to risk appetite still deserves deliberate scrutiny. The point is to stop giving reversible operational decisions the same ceremony as irreversible strategic ones.

This distinction is easily lost because organisations often use meeting seniority as a proxy for decision importance. During the crisis, many learned the reverse: some of the most consequential decisions were made well by operational people because the boundaries were explicit and feedback was rapid. Meanwhile, senior leaders were most valuable when they clarified priority and removed conflicts, not when they approved each transaction.

A leap forward will therefore look less dramatic than the spring. There will be fewer heroic calls and more carefully redrawn authorities. Its evidence will be mundane: a service manager able to alter capacity within a weekly envelope; a risk colleague engaged while an option is shaped rather than after the recommendation is written; a finance team measuring the realised effect of a change instead of checking only whether the project spent its budget.

6. The Office Debate Is a Distraction From the Work Debate

By August, discussion about the future of work is increasingly framed as a choice between returning to the office and continuing at home. The question matters, but in this form it is too shallow.

The spring did not prove that location is irrelevant. It proved that many assumptions about location had never been tested at scale. Transactional work, concentrated individual tasks and some forms of customer contact have continued remotely with surprising effectiveness. Other work has suffered: apprenticeship, creative disagreement, relationship-building, the informal detection of weak signals. Experience has also varied sharply by home circumstances, caring responsibilities, role and seniority.

A blanket policy in either direction substitutes ideology for operating design.

The deeper issue is how work is coordinated. Many offices were not designed around collaboration; they were places where fragmented processes happened to be co-located. When those processes moved home, organisations often discovered that presence had been masking poor information. A manager who could no longer walk across the floor needed a reliable view of demand, capacity and exceptions. A new starter who could no longer overhear colleagues needed an explicit learning path. Decisions once settled through corridor conversations needed an accessible record.

These are design problems, not property preferences.

The organisations that snap back will use attendance to repair weak management systems. The organisations that leap forward will make the systems explicit and then decide where each kind of work is best done. They will ask:

- Which activities require shared physical context, and which merely inherited it?

- Where does performance depend on tacit knowledge that must be transferred deliberately?
- What information must be visible for a team to coordinate without constant supervision?
- Which groups bear the cost when flexibility is designed around the preferences of the most senior?

The answer will rarely be a universal rule. It is more likely to be a set of team-level agreements bounded by service needs, health guidance, security and fairness. That may feel less decisive than announcing a single future-of-work policy. It is also closer to the truth revealed by the past months: work is a portfolio of activities, not a place.

7. Adaptability Is Being Spent Like Cash

One of the most dangerous readings of the crisis is that the workforce has demonstrated an unlimited capacity to absorb change.

People have accepted new shifts, new channels, unfamiliar technology, blurred responsibilities and uncertain plans. They have done so while schools and care arrangements have been disrupted, while health concerns remain close, and while many colleagues face furlough or redundancy. Output has sometimes held up because employees supplied the missing resilience personally—through longer hours, informal workarounds and a willingness to postpone the question of whether the arrangement was sustainable.

That is not a renewable operating model.

The difference between snapping back and leaping forward will partly depend on whether leaders mistake emergency contribution for spare capacity. An organisation may launch an ambitious transformation portfolio this autumn on the assumption that “we have proved we can move quickly.” Yet the same people who delivered the emergency response are asked to reconcile its controls, restore deferred work and redesign the future, all while running the present.

The mechanism of failure is predictable. Priorities multiply again, but the crisis cadence remains. Every initiative claims urgency. Key specialists attend several daily calls. Local managers translate contradictory instructions. The visible portfolio stays green because milestones are redefined, while sickness, error and regretted departures rise outside the programme report.

A more mature response treats adaptability as a form of capital. It must be allocated, renewed and protected.

1. Retire work before adding work. Every new priority should identify what stops, pauses or loses capacity.
2. Separate recovery from redesign. Reconciliation, backlog clearance and staff recovery are not evidence of resistance; they are part of completing the emergency change.

3. Make workload a governance measure. A plan that is affordable but depends on the same ten specialists across six initiatives is not viable.
4. Invest in repeatability. Documented procedures, cross-training, improved data and simpler controls turn personal effort into organisational capability.

There is a moral dimension here, but also a strategic one. Organisations cannot learn from the crisis if the people holding the lessons are too depleted to articulate them.

8. Annual Planning Meets a World of Moving Assumptions

The pandemic has exposed another structural divide: the ability to commit resources without pretending to know more than can presently be known.

Traditional annual planning provides coordination. It forces choices, establishes affordability and gives functions a common horizon. Its defenders are right that abandoning the plan can produce opportunism, with the loudest demand capturing resources. But a fixed annual settlement becomes dangerous when its assumptions about demand, workforce availability, supply and access to premises can change within weeks.

In that environment, the choice is not between planning and improvisation. It is between one large prediction and a series of governed commitments.

The leap-forward organisation will keep a strategic direction while shortening the distance between evidence and reallocation. It may fund an outcome for twelve months but release investment in stages. At each gate, leaders examine what has been learned, whether the next commitment remains reversible, and what opportunity is displaced.

A composite portfolio illustrates the difference. In January, an organisation approved £18 million across twelve change initiatives, each with a full-year budget and quarterly reporting. By May, three initiatives had become immediately valuable, four remained useful but required redesign, and five rested on demand assumptions that no longer held. A conventional response protected the original business cases, moved dates and described the variance. An adaptive response regrouped the portfolio around four outcomes, released £4 million for the next eight weeks, and held the remainder pending evidence.

The important feature was not the reallocation itself. It was the rule that made reallocation legitimate: no initiative retained money merely because it had once been approved. Equally, no executive could divert funds without showing the outcome, evidence, next decision date and work being displaced.

This is strategy under uncertainty in a practical sense. It does not celebrate perpetual change. It creates a stable method for changing commitments.

9. Memory Decays Faster Than Procedure

There is a narrow window in which the spring's lessons remain available. Already, explanations are being tidied. Improvised choices are rewritten as planned decisions;

avoidable delays are attributed to the uniqueness of the crisis; individuals who bridged broken processes return to their normal roles without the mechanism being recorded.

Organisations are good at preserving actions and poor at preserving reasoning. Minutes record what was agreed, not why an issue became decidable. Project closure reports list achievements, not which approvals were bypassed, combined or made unnecessary by better evidence. When the immediate pressure subsides, old procedures regain authority simply because they are written down.

A serious learning exercise must therefore examine decisions, not collect anecdotes.

For each material emergency change, leaders should reconstruct:

- the previous cycle time and the emergency cycle time;
- the decision rights before and during the response;
- the controls removed, combined, deferred or strengthened;
- the quality and frequency of information used;
- the operational result, including failure demand and hidden manual work;
- the human effort required to sustain it.

This produces a more honest account than a catalogue of digital successes. It may show that one accelerated process should be reversed because control failures outweighed its benefit. It may show that another can remain fast if assurance is moved earlier. It may also show that the apparent innovation depended on two individuals working every evening, which is evidence of fragility rather than transformation.

The practical output should not be a commemorative report. It should be a short set of operating-model decisions: authorities to rewrite, meetings to retire, measures to retain, capabilities to fund and emergency practices to end.

10. Divergence Will Be Quiet Before It Is Obvious

In the coming months, the organisations that snap back may initially look stronger. Their structures are familiar, responsibilities appear settled and the visible discomfort of experimentation diminishes. Those that continue to redesign may look untidy. They will be negotiating decision rights, challenging portfolio commitments and discovering that some celebrated emergency successes carried unacceptable costs.

The comparison will therefore be easy to misread.

The real test will emerge through repeated shocks and ordinary decisions. When demand changes again, does the organisation need another command centre, or can accountable teams respond within clear limits? When investment assumptions fail, does money remain trapped in a business case, or can it move through an agreed gate? When remote work reveals a weak process, is attendance used to conceal the weakness, or is the process redesigned? When staff effort becomes unsustainable, is resilience praised or capacity rebalanced?

These are not questions about whether an organisation “embraces change.” Nearly every organisation now speaks that language. They concern whether learning has altered the distribution of authority, information and resources.

The crisis has given leaders unusually strong evidence that the old pace was partly constructed. It has also given them ample reason to restore discipline. Wisdom lies in refusing the false choice between the two. The leap forward is not the preservation of emergency. It is the conversion of emergency insight into ordinary capability.

Some organisations will remember 2020 as the year they worked differently until they could go back. Others will use it as the year they finally saw how their work was governed. The divergence begins there: not in the technology installed under pressure, but in what leaders are willing to admit that the pressure revealed.