PERSPECTIVE · COMMITMENT NEGOTIATION

Every Transformation Establishes a New Human Order

The question to ask before you commit more capital, credibility and organizational energy.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

01 A company cannot benefit. Only people can.

02 Every transformation establishes a new human order.

03 Resistance may be a rational response, not a communication failure.

04 The CEO is part of the incentive system, not outside it.

05 Those who benefit from the program may not depend on its success.

06 Why should every indispensable person want the transformation to succeed?

People may resist a transformation not because they misunderstand it, but because they understand what it will do to them.

Resistance Is Not Only Fear Of Change.

Transformation is usually presented as a shared ambition.

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The company must become more digital, more customer-centric, more efficient, more innovative, or more resilient. The board approves the direction. The executive team expresses its support. A transformation office is established. Employees are invited to participate in building the future.

Then the resistance begins.

Leaders are told that people fear change. That the organization needs a stronger narrative. That managers must create more engagement and the CEO must communicate with greater frequency.

But this explanation may be too convenient.

The Abstraction That Hides The Politics.

We often say that a transformation is "good for the company." But a company cannot experience a benefit. It is a legal and institutional arrangement through which people cooperate, compete, exercise power, and make claims on value.

Only people benefit.

> A company cannot benefit. Only people can.

Shareholders may receive higher returns. Customers may receive better products. Executives may gain authority or compensation. Some employees may gain opportunities, while others lose roles, status, autonomy, or security.

When leaders describe a transformation as beneficial to the company, they fold these very different consequences into a single abstraction. That abstraction is useful. It is also dangerous, because it allows leaders to discuss aggregate value without confronting who captures it. It turns political choices into managerial necessities. And it makes resistance look like confusion rather than calculation.

The more revealing question is not whether the transformation is good for the company. It is: which people will be better off if it succeeds, and which will not?

Transformation Establishes A New Order.

Machiavelli understood something about change that remains uncomfortable today: introducing a new order creates determined opponents and uncertain supporters.

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Those who benefit from the existing order know what they may lose. Those who could benefit from the new order cannot yet be certain that its promises will materialize.

This asymmetry is present in almost every corporate transformation.

A business-unit leader may publicly support enterprise-wide integration while losing control over customers and resources. A manager may endorse automation while seeing their specialist knowledge become less valuable. An executive may advocate transparency until common data makes performance comparisons unavoidable.

Future beneficiaries are often dispersed, cautious, or absent. Present-day losers are identifiable, influential, and already organized.

Resistance under these circumstances is not a communication failure. It is a rational response to an expected redistribution of power, value, risk, or opportunity.

Formal Authority Is Not Enough.

A CEO can approve a transformation, allocate resources, replace leaders, and establish consequences. But formal authority should not be confused with the ability to produce coherent action.

The CEO depends on people who control operational knowledge, customer and supplier relationships, the interpretation of strategic decisions, and the attention and behavior of employees. These same people control what information reaches senior leadership, and the difference between genuine adoption and minimal compliance.

Transformation exposes these dependencies. It shows where the organization's real power resides.

This helps explain a familiar pattern: the transformation remains strategically endorsed while being operationally neutralized. Nobody openly opposes it. Milestones continue to be reported. Yet consequential decisions are delayed, scope is softened, exceptions multiply, and the old order quietly survives inside the new terminology.

The program continues. The transformation does not.

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The CEO Is Not Outside The System.

It is tempting to imagine that the CEO represents the company's objective interest while everyone else brings narrower personal concerns. But the CEO is also a person operating within a system of incentives and dependencies.

A successful transformation may strengthen a CEO's mandate, reputation, compensation, or legacy. It may also create years of disruption, expose previous mistakes, damage near-term performance, weaken trusted allies, and deliver its benefits only after the CEO has departed.

The board faces similar tensions. Directors may support long-term value creation while remaining sensitive to short-term earnings, reputational exposure, market expectations, and the consequences of admitting that the existing model has become inadequate.

The relevant question is therefore not simply whether the CEO and board support transformation.

It is: under what conditions is it personally and institutionally rational for them to pursue its real consequences?

If those conditions are missing, transformation theater becomes the rational choice. Visible activity signals leadership without requiring the full redistribution of authority and resources that meaningful change demands. Transformation theater, the appearance of movement without its substance, is not simply a failure of commitment. It is often the predictable outcome of an incentive structure no one has examined.

The Program Has Beneficiaries Too.

Another distinction deserves attention: the people who benefit from the transformation are not necessarily the same people who benefit from the transformation program.

Consultants earn fees. Technology vendors sell platforms. Transformation leaders gain budgets and visibility. Executives use the program to centralize authority, remove rivals, or explain performance problems. Internal teams build careers around managing the change.

These actors may all contribute genuine value. But their incentives are connected partly to the existence, scale, and duration of the program, not exclusively to its eventual outcome.

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This creates a simple but neglected governance question: who benefits if the transformation continues, even when the underlying organization does not materially change?

A CEO who cannot answer this may be governing a program rather than a transformation.

Resistance Is Evidence.

Leaders are frequently advised to overcome resistance. A more useful approach is to investigate it.

Resistance can reveal losses that have not been acknowledged, promises that people do not find credible, and legitimate doubts about whether the proposed future is viable. It can also expose conflicts between formal objectives and actual incentives, and identify groups with a clear interest in preserving the status quo.

Not every interest can be accommodated. Leadership sometimes requires imposing costs, removing people, or acting despite opposition. But there is a substantial difference between knowingly choosing a conflict and encountering one that leadership refused to see.

Political realism is not cynicism. It is the discipline of examining behavior, interests, and consequences rather than relying exclusively on declared intentions.

Five Questions Before Proceeding.

Before you proceed, ask who specifically gains if it succeeds: not the business, but identifiable groups of people. Ask who loses money, status, authority, autonomy, security or relevance. Ask whose cooperation is indispensable, what you actually offer them, and whether that offer is credible to them. And ask who benefits from the program without depending on its outcome.

The answers do not produce automatic consensus. They produce something more valuable: a realistic basis for decision.

The CEO can then decide whether to proceed, redesign the transformation, negotiate a different distribution of consequences, change the people responsible, or stop before committing further resources and credibility.

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The Question Beneath The Transformation.

Transformation is often treated as a journey from a current operating model to a future one. But beneath the structures, systems, and processes lies a more consequential transition.

Every transformation attempts to replace one human order with another.

It changes who decides, who knows, who earns, who belongs, who depends on whom, and whose contribution matters. The existing order will not disappear simply because the future one appears superior in a presentation.

The defining leadership question is therefore not: how do we get the organization to support the transformation?

It is: why should every person essential to this transformation want it to succeed?

> Why should every person essential to this transformation want it to succeed?

If there is no credible answer, the problem is probably not resistance, communication, or engagement.

The transformation has not yet been designed as a viable human proposition.

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ABOUT MANREAU

A transformation program is not yet a transformation.

MANREAU, The Strategic Mobilization Advisory, works with CEOs and leadership teams on the conditions a transformation depends on: the priorities, commitments, resources and decision rights that decide whether the business case reaches the books.

What Do You Need Now?

Start with a confidential conversation with Waheeda Görlitz about the decision ahead of you. You'll leave with a clearer view of what that decision depends on, and which engagement fits, if any.

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