

MANREAU PERSPECTIVE

Transformations Are Decided. Commitments Are Negotiated.

By Waheeda Görlitz | 14 October 2026

An approved transformation can still depend on commitments that nobody has actually made.

The board approves the investment. The organization must make it work.

Between the boardroom and the floor lie years of decisions, competing priorities and changing people. Some of those who made the original commitment will leave. Others will inherit obligations they never helped shape.

Approval cannot settle that distance. Leadership has to work through it.

That means negotiating who contributes what, under which conditions, and what happens when those conditions change.

The distance from the boardroom to the floor

An owner funds a transformation. The plan sets out early improvements and the full value expected over four years. The board approves the investment, the budget is released and the transformation office begins its work.

Now a business unit must release experienced people. A country organization must adopt standards it did not design. A function must give up authority. Someone must absorb the transition cost while still meeting this year's targets.

The plan connects these contributions on paper. The people responsible must make them work together.

Over four years, those conditions will change. A sponsor leaves. A market weakens. A new leader inherits a commitment made by a predecessor. A resource promised to the transformation becomes essential elsewhere.

Responsibility for delivery can be clearly assigned while responsibility for resolving these competing commitments remains unclear.

That is the distance leadership must own: not merely tracking whether work is progressing, but keeping the contributions on which it depends workable.

Negotiation is already happening

Much of the negotiation happens without being called negotiation.

A central function introduces a standard. A country organization requests an exception. A business unit endorses an enterprise priority but keeps its strongest people on local targets. A decision moves from one steering committee to the next.

Each action changes the practical terms of the transformation: what will be contributed, when and at whose expense.

Some exceptions expose genuine constraints. Others protect existing interests at the expense of the wider outcome. Leadership must distinguish between them. Treating every objection as resistance is no more useful than accepting every exception.

As *How to Test Whether Leadership Alignment Will Hold* explores, leaders can endorse the same direction while protecting incompatible priorities.

And these exchanges concern more than resources. As *Every Transformation Establishes a New Human Order* argues, transformation changes authority, status and whose judgment counts. People can understand the direction perfectly and still question what it requires them to give up.

Leaving the trade-offs unspoken does not remove them. It leaves others to decide them.

From support to a workable commitment

Consider a hypothetical transformation introducing a common operating model across several countries.

A country leader agrees to adopt it by September. But the people needed for the transition are already responsible for local operations, the migration budget is unclear and the leader's targets assume no disruption.

The agreement is incomplete.

A workable commitment goes further. Headquarters funds the transition. The country releases two experienced managers, and their existing responsibilities are reassigned. Leadership agrees how temporary disruption will be reflected in performance expectations. Both sides know which local exceptions are permitted and who decides when they disagree.

The ambition has not changed. The conditions for delivering it have become explicit.

The discussion could also reveal that September is not credible. Leadership must then choose: add resources, reduce scope, change the date or knowingly accept the risk.

Keeping the date while leaving people to manage incompatible expectations is not a firmer commitment.

A commitment without the means to fulfil it is an expectation, not an agreement.

What the evidence supports

Research on transformation, strategy execution and negotiation illuminates different parts of this problem.

McKinsey's 2021 transformation survey, published as "Losing from day one: Why even successful transformations fall short," found that 55 percent of reported value loss occurred during implementation and afterwards. The challenge extends well beyond setting the direction.

In "Why Strategy Execution Unravels—and What to Do About It" (Harvard Business Review, March 2015), Donald Sull, Rebecca Homkes and Charles Sull examine how unreliable commitments across units undermine strategy execution. Cascading goals down the hierarchy does not, by itself, secure cooperation across it.

Danny Ertel makes a complementary argument in "Getting Past Yes: Negotiating as if Implementation Mattered" (Harvard Business Review, November 2004): an agreement must be designed for implementation, not merely for acceptance at the negotiating table.

These studies do not isolate negotiation as the cause of transformation losses. Together, they expose the delivery problem this perspective addresses:

A business case can assume cooperation that the organization has not yet made possible.

Negotiation does not mean diluting the ambition

Negotiation does not give everyone a veto. Nor does it require every interest to be accommodated.

Leadership must decide what is fixed, where discretion exists and which costs the organization will accept. Sometimes it must proceed despite opposition.

But a firm decision and an executable commitment are not the same thing.

A negotiated transformation mandate makes five things explicit:

- Outcomes and boundaries: What must be achieved, and what is outside the scope?
- Non-negotiables and exceptions: What is fixed, where is discretion allowed and who can authorize an exception?
- Contributions and conditions: Who provides people, funding and decisions? What must they stop, give up or receive to fulfil that commitment?

- Authority and accountability: Who resolves conflicts, and what happens when a commitment cannot be met?
- Review: Which changes in evidence or circumstances require the agreement to be revisited?

This work can confirm the ambition. It can also expose an assumption leadership needs to change.

Its purpose is not to make everyone comfortable. It is to make the choices explicit before their consequences appear in delivery.

Stable commitments, explicit changes

A transformation needs commitments people can rely on. It also needs a way to revise them when their underlying conditions no longer hold.

Without that discipline, the mandate changes informally. Resources disappear, exceptions accumulate and local priorities take precedence. The plan remains unchanged while the organization operates on different terms.

The alternative is not continuous renegotiation.

Commitments remain in force unless explicitly changed.

An agreed review rhythm allows leaders to examine whether contributions are being delivered and whether their conditions still hold. A quarterly review can provide that rhythm. A material change in funding, leadership or a critical dependency requires earlier attention.

Review does not automatically mean revision. It can confirm the existing commitment. Where change is necessary, its effect on value, cost, timing and other commitments must be explicit.

The executive sponsor remains accountable for resolving these questions. The leaders involved own their contributions. The transformation office makes dependencies, conflicts and departures from agreement visible.

Before committing further resources

- Who has committed to what beyond the boardroom?
- What does the value case assume about cooperation that nobody has actually negotiated?
- Where have the practical terms changed without an explicit leadership decision?

If the answers differ depending on whom you ask, the issue is not simply alignment. The commitments themselves need attention.

Leaving this work undone does not preserve the original decision. It allows the transformation to change without one.

Begin with one commitment

MANREAU works with leaders on these conditions: what must be achieved, what each party contributes, where authority sits and what happens when commitments conflict.

Where one consequential commitment needs attention, a Focused Executive Review examines what the available evidence supports, where that commitment may be vulnerable and what needs resolving before further resources are committed.

About MANREAU

A transformation program is not yet a transformation.

Your strategy can be sound, delivery disciplined and change carefully planned. Yet your transformation can still fail.

Managing the initiatives is one job. Managing the system that must transform the business is another. Most organizations manage the first explicitly. The second goes unmanaged. That system is the Transformation Operating System.

MANREAU works with leaders on their Strategic Mobilization to improve the conditions for successful transformation by making the Transformation Operating System visible and manageable. Strategic intent turns into coherent action, booked and sustained value, and the capacity to transform again.

About the author

Waheeda Görlitz is the founder of MANREAU. She works with leadership teams on the organizational, political and human system through which transformation becomes executable and enduring.

Read the founder conversation

Bring Us the Situation.

Discuss what your organization is facing and where transformation is losing momentum.

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