ESSAY · STRATEGIC MOBILIZATION

# Strategy Is Decided At The Top. Transformation Is Decided Everywhere Else.

Transformation stalls when every consequential judgment has to travel to the top. It moves when managers at every level can form judgment within their scope and connect it into coherent action.

**Waheeda Görlitz** · Senior Strategic Mobilization Adviser · 21 September 2026

**THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF**

01 Participation can spread while judgment remains concentrated.

02 Managers should not need to borrow the senior team's judgment.

03 The same discipline must operate at different decision altitudes.

04 Distributed judgment must not become fragmented judgment.

05 Capacity is proven when the organization can act without exceptional intervention.

## Transformation Needs Judgment Now, Not Leaders Later.

Leadership development is commonly described as a pipeline. Identify people with potential. Give them exposure, stretch assignments and access to senior leaders. Prepare them for larger roles.

That work matters. It does not by itself create the capacity to transform.

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A pipeline is organized around future position: who may become ready to exercise greater responsibility later. Transformation must also answer a present operating question: who can form sound judgment now, wherever consequential decisions are already being made?

## Where The Judgment Is Needed.

A plant manager deciding how production will absorb a new operating model, a regional leader reconciling customer commitments with enterprise standards and a frontline supervisor judging when an AI-supported recommendation should be challenged are not junior substitutes for the executive team. Each is exercising transformation leadership at a different altitude.

The organization becomes capable when that judgment can occur at every relevant level and stay connected strongly enough to produce coherent action.

## The Participation Illusion.

Transformation leaders increasingly understand that change cannot be owned by a small central group. They create networks, involve cross-functional teams, mobilize managers and invite employees to shape implementation.

This broadens participation and can improve information, commitment and local adoption. But participation and judgment are not the same thing.

People may contribute observations without being able to determine what those observations mean. They may help implement decisions without being able to reshape them when operating evidence changes. They may be accountable for outcomes while authority, resources and interpretation remain elsewhere.

The transformation then appears distributed because activity is widespread. In reality, the organization remains dependent on a small group to make sense of what is happening, resolve contradictions and authorize movement.

That dependency becomes visible when conditions diverge from the plan. Local leaders wait. Escalations accumulate. The transformation office becomes the interpreter of every exception. Senior leaders are drawn into decisions the operating organization should be able to make, while material evidence loses force as it travels upward through reporting lines.

More names on the transformation map do not necessarily mean more capacity to transform.

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## Judgment Belongs Wherever Consequential Decisions Are Made.

Collective judgment is not a privilege senior leadership extends downward as a development opportunity. It is a discipline every management level must exercise on the decisions within its legitimate scope.

Managers closest to the work see realities that no executive dashboard fully captures. They see where a process moves cost rather than removing it, where a customer consequence contradicts the value case, where an incentive makes the new behavior irrational and where fatigue has reduced the practical capacity to absorb another demand.

These observations do not become useful merely because they are reported. People at that level must be able to interpret them with others, distinguish signal from local preference, understand the wider consequences and form a judgment capable of guiding action.

They should not need to borrow the senior team's judgment or wait to be invited into its room. The senior team remains accountable for enterprise direction and for decisions that exceed local authority. But it should not become the only place where transformation reality can be interpreted legitimately.

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## One Discipline, Different Scopes.

Judgment at every level does not mean every level decides the same questions. Authority, accountability and consequence differ.

A frontline supervisor may determine how work is adapted safely within an agreed operating design. A plant manager may reconcile capacity, quality and investment consequences. A regional leader may negotiate market variation against enterprise standards. The executive team may decide whether the accumulated evidence requires a change in scope, capital or strategic direction.

What connects these decisions is not identical content. It is a common discipline: see what is happening, make sense of it with others, commit to a decision and act on it while watching what follows.

That discipline includes telling will from can. A missed commitment may reflect opposition, but it may also reflect missing authority, resources, time, energy or experience. Treating every inability as unwillingness damages trust and aims the response at motivation when the conditions themselves make action impossible.

## Connection Is The Condition.

Every management level sees only part of the whole. A locally rational decision can move cost to another function, protect a target at the expense of enterprise value or solve an immediate problem by weakening the transformation's longer mandate. Specialist perspectives are necessary; none is sufficient alone.

Connection therefore matters as much as distribution. Managers need to know which evidence and consequences belong within their scope, which dependencies require another perspective and when a contradiction must move across or upward because no local decision can resolve it legitimately.

This is not a demand for constant consensus. Coherence does not require every level to reach the same interpretation. It requires material differences to stay visible, meet one another and produce decisions whose relationship to the wider transformation can be defended.

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A regular rhythm is where that connection becomes practical. Evidence returns. Judgments meet. Commitments are tested against what actually happened. Decisions that no longer fit reality can be revised without dissolving the transformation's mandate.

## The Evidence Of Capacity.

The measure is not how many people attended, how many champions were appointed or how widely senior decisions were communicated.

Capacity is visible when consequential judgment no longer depends on one room.

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Managers at different levels can describe the reality they see, the interpretation guiding their action, the authority they hold, the commitment they have made and the evidence that would make them revise it. They act without unnecessary escalation and recognize when a decision exceeds their scope. Their commitments survive operational pressure because consequences, resources and dependencies were confronted before agreement was treated as action.

The organization also becomes less dependent on exceptional intervention. The transformation office no longer needs to translate every decision. External advisers do not need to supply the judgment the organization will later be expected to sustain. Senior leaders stay engaged, but their attention moves to genuinely enterprise-level choices.

Results and capacity must be read separately. A short-term result can be produced through concentrated expert effort while leaving the organization dependent. Stronger judgment may show before its financial effect reaches the books. A serious account of transformation leadership looks at both: what value moved, and what capacity now exists to move value again.

## From Leadership Development To Leadership Transfer.

Leadership development usually aims at a larger pool of people ready for future roles. Transformation needs something more immediate: the capacity to govern transformation, built into the management system that must carry it now.

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That transfer is not complete when leaders understand a method or speak confidently about it. It shows when management levels repeatedly form and connect judgment through live transformation work, with less and less dependence on a central team or outside support.

Your transformation cannot wait for your leadership pipeline. For you as CEO, this changes the question. It is not only who is ready for the next role. It is where consequential decisions are being made in your organization today, and whether the people making them can form judgment, connect it and act on it without waiting for one room.

Your senior team stays accountable for direction and for the decisions that exceed local authority. But your organization becomes capable of transforming when judgment no longer depends on that room, and when every transformation it carries through leaves it stronger for the next.

WHERE THIS LEADS

## Strategic Mobilization

The conditions your transformation depends on, improved by your leaders, the value followed into the books, and the capacity built to transform again.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Senior Strategic Mobilization Adviser and founder of MANREAU. She has worked on transformation for more than twenty years: advising from the outside as a management advisor, accountable for it from the inside as a director, and with full ownership of the result as an entrepreneur.

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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