



Opinion: The Transformation Treadmill

# Why your transformation is doomed before it starts

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# Welcome to the Treadmill

*“It is time to transform how we do business here. We are certain that the eleven workstreams introduced in yesterday’s town hall will truly make us fit for purpose. This may mean considerable changes to your current ways of working, after which we can be sure of sturdy, stable operations.”*

## BE HONEST

What would be your reaction to hearing such a statement at your work?

A

**Yes! Let’s do this!**

B

**Ah \*\*\*\*, here we go again.**

Much is said about “change fatigue”, but too often the blame for this is placed on the impacted workforce instead of the transformations driving it. This perspective may sell well to those in the higher levels of a company that are largely shielded from its effects, but it achieves very little beyond that, alienates the workforce, wastes resources, and ultimately reduces the ability to bring about positive change to zero.

Constant activity without clear justification, little to show for it, and a high probability that the process will be repeated next year, if not sooner. And all this

widely accepted as simply the way things are, with more than a hint of resignation.

In our experience, “change fatigue” is not the real problem. Instead, a “transformation treadmill” would be a more appropriate term for describing what many companies impose upon their own people.

**How do so many get onto this treadmill?  
And how do you get off?**

## RECOGNISE THE WARNING SIGNS

### Reform without a cause

A fundamental failure that we have seen in transformation work is that many rush to a transformation as a solution while failing to a) identify accurately the problem that the transformation is meant to solve, or b) define the requirements for success. Taking action looks good, while taking the time to determine the right course of action comes a distant second. Without a clear problem to solve, it becomes impossible to say when the work can stop, justifying even more action, any action, and ensuring that nobody can get off the treadmill.

For example, in recent work for a large biotech company, we were engaged to manage the changes launched as part of their company-wide transformation, where we quickly identified various friction points in its execution. Following a detailed examination, we

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could confirm that the limitations to our ability to execute the desired changes were due to misalignment at many levels in terms of what the changes should be. The root cause of this was a lack of any clearly defined strategy for the overall organisation, without which it is impossible to say how any change contributes to achieving that strategy. Given this, it was possible for us to identify the changes that truly mattered to the overall objectives of a transformation and plot a coherent path forward.

## Mind the gap

Taking one step back from failing to identify the right course of action brings us to the next major fault that we see in transformation work: no clear understanding of the as-is situation and/or no verified analysis of the gap between where you are and where you want to be. The best way to resolve this is simple: talk with people, know your processes and operating model, and understand how the future state is meant to work. All stakeholders that may be impacted by a transformation must be considered; not just vaguely remembering that they exist but actively getting their perspectives on both the current situation and the potential consequences of any planned changes. One group of key stakeholders that is often ignored here are enabler groups, particularly those involving the technology required or impacted by such changes.



If work prior to starting a transformation does not involve both an extensive stakeholder and process analysis with an understanding of critical dependencies, this is perhaps the clearest indicator that a lot of people are about to be placed on the treadmill. Similarly, if such an examination is only done at the beginning and not frequently reviewed as circumstances change around you, do not be surprised to find the treadmill suddenly under your feet.

## Successful transformation outcomes

✓ **Clear direction and focused effort**

✓ **Root causes addressed, not just symptoms**

✓ **Measurable progress and business impact**

✓ **Engaged stakeholders and aligned execution**

✓ **Sustainable change that lasts**

We have found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that this particular problem is far more prevalent and damaging in large organisations. The classical example that we regularly see is the lack of understanding and alignment between global and local parts of major companies, giving both sides plenty of opportunities to get it wrong. In one direction, global transformations are initiated without understanding the situation on the ground, overlooking valid regional differences. Even worse, this can undo well thought-out local work that is already in progress to tackle clearly defined problems. In the other direction, locally initiated efforts can fail to consider their consequences for others, causing havoc along the value chain and making standardisation impossible. No matter where the mistakes were made, we have also seen that the most popular corrective action is yet more changes, again without a thorough diagnosis, increasing the chances that everyone remains on the treadmill.

## Don't believe the vibe

In some areas, we have seen it considered almost unfashionable to perform any necessary analysis or situational diagnosis. Instead, many simply point to the volatile and ever-changing world in which we live and leave it at that. Upon such a basis, another transformation can always be justified and so remaining on the treadmill is assured. That companies are faced with uncertainty and ambiguity is beyond question, but we have seen that this is an idea that is severely over-used, bordering on little more than a lazy reflex. If the overall vibe of your current situation is constantly invoked while specific issues are not explicitly named, this is a clear sign that nobody is leaving the treadmill any time soon.

We see parallels here with the common misuse of Agile concepts, particularly where any notion of planning is incorrectly scorned as outdated rigidity. Those in the Agile world who know how to get the best out of its incredibly useful ideas will be the first to tell you in which situations an Agile approach should not be taken. The same applies to transformations. There is a clear difference between a) the fundamentals that require predictability, maintenance, and linear improvement; and b) the truly variable where the outcome is uncertain and the forces in play are not all known. To tell the difference requires analysis, insight, and careful consideration. In short: it needs work. This work is often done poorly or not at all, leading to adverse consequences, one of which is being stuck on the treadmill.

***“When defined and executed correctly, a transformation truly can live up to your expectations.”***

Conversely, if the work is done correctly at the very beginning in determining the few matters that truly require the extensive and disruptive efforts of a transformation, then the chances of sustainable success are considerably higher. A transformation should not be the default solution to everything but instead should be considered as precious and deliberate as cavalry charges on the ancient battlefield: few in number but clear in purpose and with well-marshalled resources to create maximum impact.

## Organisational Change Management: navigator or nuisance?

For any transformation to work and for its planned changes to be successfully adopted, its impact on the workforce must be properly considered in its planning and during its execution. This is achieved through effective use of organisational change management (OCM) throughout the definition and execution of a transformation. In reality, this is not done anywhere near as well as it should be. Instead, we often see it kept separate from any planning work, either under-utilised or completely misused.



The most obvious warning sign here that a transformation is in trouble is when OCM experts are only brought in once execution is already well underway. Here, OCM typically acts as a form of internal public relations for the transformation, stripped of any ability to influence the work. OCM is there to help with identifying and steering the right course; not to stand next to the treadmill, reminding you of the importance of lifting your knees.

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## Are we there yet?

Transformations, like any project, are meant to finish. Some transformations have a different opinion on this matter. When a transformation should have finished years ago but still shows no sign of stopping, here are four main reasons to look for, building on the factors already discussed:

1. The leadership present at the start of the work has long since gone, and those now responsible do not agree with the work but have either not come up with an adequate exit plan or are unwilling to execute. They cannot find the off switch for the treadmill, or they fear using it.
2. Poor original estimates of the work required to get the job done are eventually replaced with even worse estimates simply to prevent things from crashing down. The worst culprits here are, in our experience, technological transformations, especially those at the enterprise level. Eventually, the sunk cost fallacy becomes all-consuming, demanding more people, more resources, more money, and even more time. You cannot outrun the treadmill.
3. Leaders misappropriate a transformation that is almost near its successful conclusion, adding increasingly unrelated activities and keeping it running for longer than intended. The main motives for this that we have seen are usually some combination of a) taking advantage of the positive momentum that is already in place, and b) dodging the due diligence for justifying new activities on their own merits. The treadmill is no place for a victory lap.
4. The transformation runs into so much resistance that progress degenerates to a crawl, but never enough to come a complete stop. When faced with this, typical responses are either ignoring the problem and grinding it out or making so many compromises that dilute beyond recognition the original intent of the work. This is a classical blunder in strategy definition: failing to identify both the potential obstacles and red lines before setting a course of action. Treadmills are even harder to use when there is sand in the gears.

The root cause of all these situations is poor leadership. Every steering committee that avoids making decisions in favour of box-ticking and self-congratulation. Every town hall meeting where it is clear to the audience that the leaders on stage don't believe their own words (bonus tip for spotting this: watch recordings with the sound turned off). Every delayed go-live that is followed by a plan that looks very similar to what was released after the last delay. Every initiative that has an unclear success definition and no kill criteria. Once you know where to look, it is impossible to miss it.



## BREAKING THE ILLUSION OF TRANSFORMATION PROGRESS

Many organisations set out with clear intent to transform yet find themselves caught in a cycle of continuous activity with little real progress. When alignment breaks down, communication falters, and assumptions go unchallenged, transformation begins to feel less like forward movement, and you are soon feverishly going nowhere. Understanding where this disconnect occurs is the first step to regaining control, making change meaningful again, and stepping off the treadmill.

### Lack of alignment across the business

A common problem that we see, not only with transformation work but with many large-scale programmes, is a lack of alignment between the declared intent of a change and the actual work being done. The reasons for this may vary, but the two most common are top-down and bottom-up.

### Poor communication a root-cause of being stuck

The top-down mismatch occurs when the actions in a transformation are defined but are then either poorly or falsely communicated. In the case of poor communication, those impacted have no idea what the impending changes are, what they are for, and when it will be over, all leading directly to more time on the treadmill.

### Silence that sabotages success

A more extreme version of this mismatch is when the intent of such a change is kept secret. The most common version of this is when the so-called transformation is nothing but a euphemism for layoffs, without addressing the circumstances that made such a cut necessary. After this, the announcement of any future transformation leads to a near-Pavlovian response of mistrust and dread in what workforce remains, significantly reducing any chance of effecting positive change as they stagger back onto the treadmill, hoping not to be the one pulled into the machinery this time.

### Lazy leadership exposed

The other common mismatch, bottom-up, comes from again skipping the hard thinking at the front-end and instead collecting all current activities to force them into a single package after the fact. This course of action (if you want to call it that) is based on the clearly unverified and usually false hypothesis that what you are already doing anyway will achieve the desired outcome.

People throughout the organisation do notice this lazy leadership and so the transformation is felt as never-ending and passively designed: sleep-walking on the treadmill. The only way to remedy this is to verify whether ongoing activities are still going to provide the benefits required to achieve your intended aim, and to make the uncomfortable but necessary corrective measures.

### When transformation loses meaning

In our experience across the industry, we have seen that the word “transformation” has sometimes been so overused as to render it without any meaning at all. The term is often used to describe little more than corrections that nobody wants to recognise as such, often corrections to their previous transformation.

Perhaps most commonly, the word is used to describe changes that may be positive but are not on a scale to warrant the transformation label. A transformation sounds big, bold, and masterful, while those that are impacted have long since checked out, fed up with such heroics.

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## TREADMILL OR TRIUMPH? IT'S UP TO YOU

The picture presented here of a transformation may seem very bleak and cynical. This is exactly how those impacted experience one when done poorly; this is what avoidable “change fatigue” truly feels like.

The key word here is “avoidable”. And here’s where you come in.

Every horror story described in this article contains the seeds of its own resolution: awareness and leadership. If you are leading or managing any aspect of a transformation at any level, or if you have not yet started, here is what you can do:

### Follow these 8 steps for transformation success



Have a thorough diagnosis of your initial and current situation



Know where you want to go, why, and what is in your way



Be very specific with the problem you are attempting to solve and know why this is the right problem



Get clarity on how exactly this transformation is the solution to your problem



Know when a transformation is not the right approach



Communicate truthfully all of the above clearly to anyone who could be impacted



Understand how all stakeholders and processes are impacted and adjust your approach whenever needed from start to finish



Know when to end things, being very clear on the definition of success and the criteria for pulling the plug



Industry reality



Diagnosis of current situation

**PARTIALLY DONE**

Diagnosis is often too high-level, biased, or rushed



Identification & prioritisation of problems

**MOSTLY SKIPPED**

Everything is treated as equally important, diluted effort



Definition of target state

**PARTIALLY DONE**

Vision is too abstract, not measurable



Understanding why the problem isn't solved yet

**MOSTLY SKIPPED**

No root cause. Investigation of previously failed efforts



Course of action (execution plan)

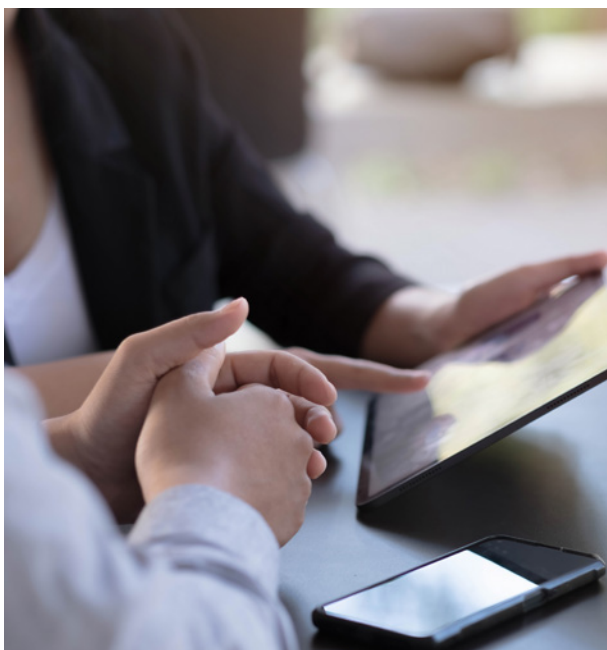
**WELL PERFORMED**

Execution planning not grounded in earlier steps



**THE GAP**

Critical thinking steps 2 and 4 are mostly skipped. This is why high effort doesn't create progress.



This may all seem rather simple. But, like all good leadership and in all good applications of strategy, the solutions that work are usually very simple, even though they are rarely easy.

When defined and executed correctly, a transformation truly can live up to your expectations. Once-immovable obstacles can be swept away, crippling and infuriating problems can be replaced with far more engaging and valuable problems, and people actually will give answer A to the question presented in the introduction. We have seen it happen. We have made it happen. So can you.

If you can spot the warning signs described here, identify the understandable but destructive default patterns that many follow or drift into, and be prepared to make the tough decisions to do what is right instead of what is expedient, then you are best equipped to get off the treadmill.

**Or, even better, not get on in the first place.**

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Leading Arcondis' global Strategy Excellence organisation, Simon is a sought-after advisor in strategy development and execution, business resilience, and process simplification. With over 20 years of experience in the life science industry and a PhD in engineering, he combines business idealism with pragmatism to demystify all areas of strategy to make them accessible, understandable, and useful.

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