



EXECUTIVE WHITE PAPER

Working at the Wrong Depth

Why leadership development, culture change and transformation so often fail to last.

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12 MINUTE READ

Organisations spend enormous sums changing how their people think, lead and work together, and are repeatedly surprised when the change does not hold. The problem is rarely effort, intelligence or money. It is depth.

The result everyone has seen and no one quite explains

Picture a leadership programme your organisation has run. A good one. The content was strong, the facilitators capable, the participants engaged. People left energised, with language they did not have before and commitments they meant. Six months later, if you look honestly, most of them lead almost exactly as they did before.

Or picture a transformation. A real mandate, a serious budget, a clear plan, genuine will at the top. For a while there was motion. And then, somewhere past the launch and before the finish, it slowed, thickened, and quietly became the way things had always been done, wearing a new set of words.

Or picture the values on the wall. Every person in the building can recite them. Almost no one can point to a decision that changed because of them.

None of this is exotic. It is the ordinary experience of senior leaders who have spent years and considerable sums on development, culture and change. What is striking is not that these efforts fail outright. Mostly they do not fail outright. They half-work. Something shifts, and then it reverts. The improvement is real, and then it is gone. And because it half-works, the natural conclusion is that the answer is simply more: more programmes, more communication, more urgency, better content, a harder push next time.

But consider what that conclusion assumes. It assumes the effort was aimed correctly and merely fell short. It is worth asking a more uncomfortable question. What if the effort was excellent, and aimed at the wrong depth?

The pattern beneath the disappointment

Set the three scenes side by side and something they share comes into view.

In each case, capable people applied real effort to change something visible - a set of behaviours, a way of operating, a stated set of values - and the visible thing changed, briefly, and then a deeper current pulled it back. The leader who learned to delegate is doing it all again. The organisation that reorganised is behaving as it did before the reorganisation. The culture that was declared collaborative still rewards the lone hero at promotion time.

Leaders tend to explain each of these separately: this programme lacked follow-through, that transformation lacked sponsorship, this culture work lacked teeth. Each explanation is plausible. But when the same shape of disappointment recurs across very different efforts, led by different people, in different organisations, the most likely common factor is not any one of those efforts. It is something about how we are trying to create change in the first place.

That something is a single assumption, so deeply held that it is almost never examined. It sits beneath most of what organisations do to develop leaders, shift cultures and drive transformation. And it is not wrong so much as shallow. It describes the surface of change accurately and mistakes the surface for the whole.

The assumption underneath almost everything

The assumption is this: *that if you change what people know and do, you change who they are and how the organisation works.*

It is entirely reasonable, and it shapes nearly every intervention. We develop leaders by teaching them things - frameworks, models, skills, the behaviours of good leadership - and by having them practise those behaviours, on the expectation that the new behaviours will take. We change cultures by naming the behaviours we want, communicating them widely, and asking people to adopt them. We run transformations as large exercises in redesigning what people do and telling them to do it. In every case the target is the same: knowledge and behaviour. Teach the knowledge, specify the behaviour, measure the behaviour, and change will follow.

Sometimes it does. For simple, mechanical changes - a new process, a new tool, a discrete skill - installing knowledge and behaviour is often enough. But for the changes organisations most want and most struggle to get - a leader who genuinely leads differently under pressure, a culture that actually operates differently, a transformation that truly holds - it is not enough, and the reason is precise. Behaviour is not where those changes live. Behaviour is the surface. And you cannot durably change a system by rearranging its surface.

Why behaviour will not hold still

To see why, watch a single leader up close.

A senior executive knows, with complete clarity, that they need to delegate. They can explain why. They can feel the cost of not doing it - the bottleneck, the exhausted week, the capable people held back beneath them. They are neither confused nor uncommitted. They agree in the room, they resolve to change, and within days they have quietly taken the work back, relieved, telling themselves the timing was wrong.

Nothing failed in their knowledge. They knew. Nothing failed in their intention. They meant it. What defeated the change was something underneath both, something that never appeared on any competency framework: the fact that, in their own eyes, they are the person who carries it all. To delegate is not, for them, a neutral adjustment of behaviour. It is a small contradiction of who they take themselves to be, and that identity - quiet, unspoken, largely invisible even to them - will reliably win against any behaviour that opposes it. It will win against knowledge. It will win against good intentions. It will often win against the plainly visible cost of not changing.

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This is the ordinary reason that knowing is not enough, and it is worth stating plainly because so much development is built as though knowing were enough. People do not behave the way they do mainly because of what they know. They behave the way they do because of what things mean to them, what they believe, and who they understand themselves to be. Those deeper layers generate the behaviour. Change the behaviour without changing what produces it, and you have bent a branch while leaving the root untouched. The branch springs back. It is not weakness or bad faith. It is structure.

And this is why insight, on its own, changes so little - a fact anyone who has run development has seen and few have fully reckoned with. People have genuine realisations on offsites and in coaching. The realisations are real. And they fade, often within the week, because a realisation happens at the level of thought, and the pattern it hopes to change is anchored several layers down, in meaning and identity, where a single insight has almost no purchase. The clear hour is not false. It is simply shallow relative to what it is trying to move.

The same thing, one level up

Now widen the lens from the individual to the organisation, because the identical dynamic operates there, and it explains the stalled transformation and the unlived values as precisely as it explains the undelegating executive.

An organisation, too, has a surface and a depth. Its surface is what people visibly do - the processes, the behaviours, the org chart, the stated values. Its depth is what actually generates that behaviour: the shared meanings people hold about how things really work here, the identities the organisation protects, and - most powerfully - what is actually rewarded and structurally reinforced, regardless of what is announced.

Most change effort is aimed, once again, at the surface. We redraw the structure, relaunch the values, communicate the new direction, and train the new behaviours. And the depth - untouched - quietly restores the surface to what it was. If the real reward system still promotes the lone hero, no amount of collaboration training will produce a collaborative culture; capable people read what is actually rewarded far more accurately than they read the poster, and they behave accordingly. If the

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meaning that "change here never really sticks" is widely and privately held, then people will wait out the transformation rather than commit to it, and their waiting will make it fail, which will confirm the meaning. The organisation reverts for the same reason the executive reverts: the visible thing was changed while the deeper thing that generates it was left in place.

The surface lets an organisation change without anyone in it having to be changed.

There is a hard and clarifying implication here. A great deal of organisational disappointment is produced not by resistant or cynical people but by good people inside a structure that keeps generating the old result. The leaders trying to change the culture are usually sincere. The employees who seem to resist are usually rational, responding accurately to what the system actually rewards. When the outcome disappoints and no individual is to blame, the cause is almost always structural and beneath the surface - which is exactly where the change effort was not aimed.

Why we keep aiming there

If behaviour is only the surface, and if the surface reliably reverts, a fair question arises: why do intelligent, well-run organisations keep aiming there anyway? The answer is not that they have failed to notice. It is that the surface has real advantages the depth does not, and those advantages are precisely the ones organisations are built to reward.

The surface is visible. You can see behaviour, count it, put it in a framework, and report it. The meanings and identities beneath it are invisible; you cannot point to them in a dashboard. The surface is fast. A workshop, a communications campaign, a reorganisation can be run this quarter, whereas change at the level of meaning and identity moves slowly, and slowness sits badly in organisations that live in quarters. The surface is fundable and defensible. A board approves a leadership curriculum with modules and metrics far more readily than it approves patient, unquantified work on the beliefs and incentives beneath its leaders' behaviour, and the surface

obligingly produces artefacts - completion rates, satisfaction scores, engagement figures - that look like progress and can be shown to have happened.

And the surface is safer, in a way that is rarely admitted. Working at the surface keeps the change comfortably external: it is about skills, processes and systems out there. Working at the depth implicates the people leading the change - their own meanings, their own identities, the incentives they themselves maintain. The surface lets an organisation change without anyone in it having to be changed. That is a considerable, if unspoken, attraction.

So the preference for the surface is not a lapse in intelligence. It is a rational response to genuine pressures - for speed, for visibility, for measurability, for defensibility, for comfort. Which is exactly why it is so persistent and so hard to leave behind. The shallow approach is easier to fund, faster to show, simpler to measure and safer to lead, in every respect but the one that finally matters: whether the change lasts. Organisations manage what they can measure, and because depth resists measurement, it quietly falls outside the management system altogether - and what falls outside the management system does not get resourced, however much it turns out to matter. The organisations that break the pattern are the ones willing to tolerate a slower, less visible, less immediately countable kind of work, because they have finally accepted that the fast, visible, countable kind keeps not working.

A different way of seeing

Step back, and a different picture of the whole problem comes into focus. It does not require a new model so much as a shift in where you look.

The first shift is to stop treating behaviour as the thing to change and start treating it as a symptom of something deeper. People and organisations do not respond directly to reality; they respond to what reality means to them, and they act from the identities and incentives that meaning sits within. Behaviour is the visible output of that hidden system. Durable change is always, in the end, a change in meaning, identity and the structures that hold them - after which new behaviour follows on its own and, crucially, stays.

The second shift is to recognise what you are actually up against when you try to change any of this. A self, a team, a culture, an organisation - each is a system that has learned to reproduce its own current state. That is what it is for. A person's identity exists to keep them recognisably themselves; a culture exists to keep a group coherent; a structure exists to produce consistent results. This is why change is so much harder than it looks and why reversion is so reliable. You are not overcoming simple inertia, the way you would push a stationary object. You are working against something that is actively restoring itself, moment by moment, back to how it was. Most change efforts badly underestimate this.

The third shift is the hopeful one, because it names the thing that actually moves a self-restoring system. What a stability system cannot survive is being seen. A pattern that runs unnoticed cannot change, because there is nothing for anyone to take hold of. But the moment a pattern becomes visible - the moment the executive sees, not just knows, that they are protecting an identity; the moment a team names the unspoken rule everyone has been obeying; the moment an organisation recognises that a structure it treats as simply "how things are" was in fact a choice, made once, that could be made differently - in that moment the pattern becomes available to be changed. Nearly everything that produces real, lasting change begins here.

None of this is mystical, and none of it is new in its parts. That behaviour flows from deeper drivers, that systems reproduce themselves, that awareness is the precondition of change - each is well understood in its own field. What is missing in practice is not the parts but the picture: the recognition that these hold true at every level at once, from the single leader to the whole enterprise, and that the reason so much change fails is that we keep intervening at the surface of a system whose action is generated underneath. The change is not aimed too weakly. It is aimed too shallow.

What this changes

Held steadily, this way of seeing quietly rearranges most of what organisations do to develop people and change themselves. It is less a new toolkit than a different answer to the question of where to aim.

Leadership development. The dominant model teaches the behaviours of good leaders and asks people to adopt them. But the behaviours are the output; they emerge from a leader's judgement, self-awareness and sense of who they are. A leader who has genuinely developed does not perform the behaviours from memory under pressure and revert when the pressure rises; they have become someone from whom those behaviours issue naturally. The implication is not to stop developing leaders but to develop them at the level that generates leadership - awareness, judgement, identity. The difference is the difference between a leader performing a technique and a leader who has changed.

Change and transformation. Transformation is treated, in most organisations, as a problem of planning and communication - a matter of designing the new state and moving people to it. But the reason transformations stall is rarely that the plan was unclear. It is that the shared meaning and the reinforcing structures beneath the old way were never engaged, so the organisation drifted back to what its depth kept generating. A transformation is not primarily a communication exercise or a project-management exercise. It is a change in collective meaning and in what the system actually rewards - and it holds only to the extent that those change too.

Culture. Culture is the most misunderstood of all, because it is almost always addressed at the surface: named, declared, trained, posterred. But culture is not what an organisation says it values. It is what the organisation actually rewards and structurally reinforces, which is what its people read and respond to. You cannot exhort a culture into being, and you cannot train it in. You change it by changing what genuinely gets rewarded and what people can safely do - and until those change, the declared values remain words that everyone can recite and no one need obey.

Coaching. Good coaching is often misread as a superior way to deliver advice. Its real power is different and more precise: it creates the awareness and the safety in which a person can see their own pattern and re-author it from the inside. The change comes not from what the coach tells them but from what the person becomes able to see.

Learning. Corporate learning is dominated by the transfer of content, on the assumption that knowing leads to doing. But knowing is not becoming. Learning that front-loads frameworks and neglects reflection, practice, identity and the surrounding conditions produces well-informed people who do not change - the most common and least examined failure of organisational

learning. What converts knowledge into changed capability is not more content; it is the slower

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work of reflection, repeated practice, and a context that supports the new way long enough for it to hold.

Organisational development. The through-line joins them all. Any intervention that touches only the visible layer - behaviour, process, declaration - will be quietly reversed by the depth it left untouched. Durable development requires working at several levels at once: the meaning people hold, the identities the system protects, what it actually rewards, and the structures that reproduce it - and doing so with respect for how hard that system will work to restore itself.

What the efforts that last have in common

Not every change effort fails, and the exceptions are instructive - not because they were better resourced or more forcefully driven, but because, knowingly or not, they worked at a different depth. Look across the leadership shifts, culture changes and transformations that genuinely held, in your own experience as much as anywhere, and a few features tend to recur.

They engaged meaning, not only behaviour. Somewhere in the effort, people came to understand their situation differently, rather than merely being told to act differently. The new behaviour followed a real shift in how people saw, and so it had roots rather than resting on the surface.

They changed what was actually rewarded, not only what was declared. The effort reached the incentives and structures that quietly generate behaviour, so that the new way was reinforced by the system rather than fighting it. Where the system was left rewarding the old behaviour, no amount of encouragement held; where the reward genuinely changed, behaviour followed almost without persuasion.

They made the invisible visible. At some point the effort brought into the open a pattern that had been running unseen - an assumption no one had questioned, an unspoken rule everyone had been obeying, a structure treated as fixed that turned out to be a choice. Naming it was often the moment things began to move, because nothing can change while it remains unseen.

And they were slower than anyone wanted, and did not give up in the middle. This deserves

emphasis, because it defeats more change than anything else. Change at the level of meaning and

identity moves slowly, and there is a long, discouraging middle stretch in which the effort is being made and nothing yet appears to be working - where the old way still feels more real than the new, and every reasonable voice concludes it is not taking. That stretch is not failure. It is the ordinary shape of deep change: the period in which the deeper layers are quietly re-forming beneath a surface that has not yet caught up. But it is precisely where most organisations abandon the effort, record another disappointment, and retreat to the surface - very often not long before it would have begun to hold. The efforts that lasted were led by people who understood that the slow, unconvincing middle was the work itself, and who held their nerve through it.

None of this is a technique, and none of it is fast. It is simply what it looks like to work at the depth where change is generated rather than at the surface where it is displayed. It is harder to fund, harder to measure and harder to lead than a programme with a completion date. On the evidence of nearly everyone's experience, it is also the only kind that lasts.

Looking at your own organisation

It is worth turning this on your own experience, because the pattern is easier to grant in general than to see in the particular.

Bring to mind the most significant change effort your organisation has made in the last few years - the leadership programme, the transformation, the culture initiative you backed. Now ask a simple question of it: where was it aimed? With unusual honesty, the answer is almost always the same. It was aimed at the surface - at teaching, communicating, declaring, and training new behaviours. That is where the effort, the budget and the attention went.

Then ask the harder question: what was left untouched? The meanings your people actually hold about how things really work here. The identities your current structure quietly protects and rewards - the identities that would have to be given up for the change to be real. What actually earns advancement and approval, as opposed to what is stated. The structures that reliably reproduce the present. If these went unengaged, then the reversion you observed was not a failure of your people's character or your own resolve. It was the entirely predictable behaviour of a

system doing what systems do: restoring itself. Seen this way, the disappointment stops being a

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mystery, and stops being anyone's fault. It becomes information - a precise indication of where the effort did not reach.

And that is the reframe worth sitting with. The reversion was not telling you that your people cannot change, or that change is not possible here. It was telling you, quite exactly, that the change was made at a level the depth could overrule - and pointing, if you are willing to follow it, at the level where it would have had to be made instead.

The question worth carrying

There is something almost consoling in this, once the initial discomfort passes. If the reason so much serious investment produces so little lasting change were that the people were not good enough, or the effort not great enough, the situation would be genuinely bleak, because the people are often excellent and the effort is often immense. But that is not the reason. The reason is that we have been intervening, with great skill and commitment, at the wrong depth - at the surface of systems whose behaviour is generated underneath. That is not a counsel of despair. It is close to the opposite. It means the lever exists. It has simply been deeper than where most of the effort has been aimed.

None of this yields a tidy programme, and it is not meant to. It is meant to change a question. The next time a change does not hold - the next time the leaders revert, the transformation thickens, the values go unlive - the instinctive question is "why won't they change?" It is the wrong question, and it sends the next round of effort back to the same shallow depth. The more useful question, the one that begins to point at where change actually lives, is quieter and more searching:

Beneath the behaviour we tried to change, what did we never touch?

Leaders who learn to ask that question, and to follow it down to where the answer lives, tend to find that a great deal they had filed under "resistance" or "human nature" was neither - that it was

pattern, running unseen, in people and in systems, waiting only to be made visible before it could begin to change.



ANNA TAN'S BODY OF WORK

This paper draws on the Human Development Architecture, a body of work by Anna Tan that examines how human beings, and the organisations they form, actually develop - and why change so often fails, and what allows it to last. This is an introduction to a way of seeing, not a method; the fuller work is where the method begins.