

Transformations don't fail. They were never adopted.

How to make change real before you make it wide.

Change can endure. We have seen it happen in some of the world's most demanding operational environments. Not because the strategy was perfect or the budget was generous. Because the people who had to carry the change were part of building it.

What follows are three examples of what that looks like in practice. And how it can become the norm in your organisation. They are deliberately granular, because that is where the real work of change actually happens.

Three Patterns We Have Seen

A global energy company struggles extracting full value from its improvement opportunities due to lack of transparency on what they are, how they are being managed and how can be replicated. Teams retreat to offline spreadsheets because the official system makes an already demanding workload heavier, and the data needed to drive the transformation disappears into workarounds. The shift comes only when the tool is rebuilt around how the work actually happens, with users and developers in the same room from day one, and for the first time the strategic goals and the daily work are pulling in the same direction. When the work and the system speak the same language, people can see what is working, share it, and build on it across the organisation.

A major offshore asset implemented a reporting tool that generates more data than its leaders can use. A multitude of shift reports arrive every 24 hours. Frontline supervisors are spending over two hours every morning manually cross-referencing logs, and searching for the signals that matter before they can get out to their crews. The shift comes when AI is pointed at the problem directly: triangulating information across operations, maintenance and engineering in real time, so that the morning detective work is reduced from hours to minutes. Technology acts as a filter, not a replacement. Leaders reclaim their time for the deck, moving from reading about risk to managing it in person.

A global shipping company has a sustainability strategy. The targets are set, the commitments are public, the language is right. What it does not have yet is a mechanism to make those commitments mean something at the level where the work actually happens. The shift comes only when the people doing the work are part of building it, not just delivering it.

None of these are failures of intent. The leaders involved were serious people, trying to do the right thing. The strategies were often genuinely good.

What failed, in each case, was the distance between where the decision was made and where the work had to land.

That distance is what this piece is about.

Why It Keeps Happening

The instinct, when a transformation stalls, is to look for what went wrong in the execution. A change in leadership, a budget cut, resistance from the organisation. These things happen, and they matter. But they are not the root cause. In our experience, the same three problems appear so consistently, across such different organisations and sectors, that they deserve to be named directly.

Strategy and operations run on different clocks.

Value is created or destroyed in hours and days. A production decision, a maintenance call, a quality check — these happen at a pace that no strategy cycle can match. Transformation, however, is designed at the speed of that strategy cycle. Quarters, workstreams, milestones, a governance structure with a clear end date.

Operational culture sits somewhere between the two. It is built through small repetitions — the daily and weekly habits that either reinforce the new way of working or quietly revert to the old one. The leader who understands which small behaviours drive value, and makes those the focus of change, moves faster than the one who tries to shift the whole organisation at once.

And yet most organisations have no mechanism to hold anyone accountable to that reality. In companies where leadership rotates every three to four years, the cycle is predictable. A new leader arrives, spends the first year making an assessment and building a case for transformation. By the second year the programme is underway. By the third, that leader is already thinking about the next role. They move on before the fourth year. Too soon to see whether anything has actually changed.

The next leader arrives and starts again.

The people who actually run the operation — the team leads, the maintenance supervisors, the frontline managers — have watched this cycle enough times to know how it ends. They were consulted late if at all. And they have learned from experience that if they wait long enough, most programmes pass.

This is not cynicism. It is a rational response to a pattern they have seen before.

Technology gets deployed before the foundations exist to use it.

There is significant pressure in every sector right now to move on digital transformation and AI. That pressure is legitimate. The technologies are genuinely capable. But capability in a tool means nothing if the organisation deploying it has not yet built the work processes, the clear accountabilities, and the human competence that make the tool useful in practice.

We have seen this directly. Across operations we have worked in, the pattern is consistent: technology arrives before anyone has defined the specific problem it is supposed to solve. The result is infrastructure that sits alongside the work rather than inside it, and people who find faster ways to get things done without it.

Adoption does not happen by instruction. People adopt what makes their work easier, their decisions clearer, or their day less frustrating. Force it and you get compliance on paper and workarounds in practice. Build it around a problem they actually have, in a way that genuinely helps them solve it, and adoption follows without anyone having to mandate it. The question is never "how do we get people to use this?" It is "why would they want to?"

Digital tools do not replace operational discipline. They amplify whatever discipline already exists. Deploy them before the foundations are in place and you get expensive infrastructure that people work around, or simply ignore.

One leader we spoke to reframed the question entirely. Rather than introducing AI as a new tool to be adopted, he used it to make a better workflow easier to follow than the old one. The change was not the technology. The change was how the work got done. AI removed the friction that would have blocked a more conventional implementation. When the workflow is at the centre, and technology exists to enable it rather than replace it, adoption stops being something you have to manage.

Programs created in the central office alone don't stand the test of real operations

Wanting the right outcome is not enough. A sustainability strategy that sets firm global targets, but stops short of showing how to work with them in practice, tends to stall before it starts. Without clarity on how those targets translate across different regulatory contexts, how they align with budget constraints, or how they connect to the realities of day-to-day operations, the organisation is left without a clear point of entry.

The questions that matter most remain unanswered: where to begin, which actions will have the greatest impact, and how ways of working need to change to realise it. In that space, uncertainty grows. Effort diffuses. And the gap between ambition and execution widens as everyone waits for direction that never quite arrives.

This is not unique to sustainability. It appears in every transformation where the ambition is clear at the centre but undefined at the point of delivery. The people closest to the work are left to interpret what the strategy means for their facility, their team, their daily decisions. Without that translation, the strategy remains exactly what it was — a document in a central office, waiting to become real.

The distance between intent and outcome is almost always filled by that absence of translation. Closing it requires not just clarity on what you want, but the discipline to work out what it looks like in each specific context, with the people who have to make it happen.

Each of these three problems is serious on its own. But they share a common thread. The strategy is set by people who aren't running the operation. The technology is specified by people who aren't using it. The standards are written by people who haven't seen the conditions they apply to. In every case, the distance between the decision and the reality is where the gap opens.

The result is a gap between what's intended and what actually changes.

That gap is not inevitable. But closing it requires a different starting point.

A Different Starting Point

Most organisations approaching transformation ask a version of the same question: how do we change everything that needs changing, as efficiently as possible?

It is the wrong question.

Not because ambition is a problem. But because broad transformation initiated from the top, moving across the whole organisation at once, is precisely the pattern that produces the gap described above. It deploys technology ahead of capability, it sets intentions too vague to be held to account, and it asks the operation to absorb more change than it can sustainably carry.

The question that actually works is narrower: where is the problem most acute, the leadership most ready, and the proof most visible? Start there. Go deep. Make it real before you make it wide. Learn to fail quickly if it's apparent that the solution doesn't work.

This is not a counsel of low ambition. It is a different theory of how change actually spreads in operational organisations. A real result in one asset, one plant, one team, is worth more than a programme update across ten. It creates something that the broader organisation can see, touch, and choose to replicate. It builds credibility at the level where credibility matters, with the people who have to decide whether this is worth their effort.

In practice, this means four things.

Work at the point where value is created or lost.

Not in the programme office, not in the steering committee, but in the operation itself, alongside the people responsible for running it. The insights that matter, and the momentum that will determine whether change sticks, are both found there.

Start small. Prove it works. Scale. In this order.

The temptation is to design the full solution and then implement it. The approach that works is to identify the highest-value problem that can be moved to solution fastest, solve it in a way that is visible and felt, and build from that proof. Early results are not just commercially useful. They shift the culture, because they give people a reason to believe that this time is different.

Co-create. Build capability. Repeat.

The case for change should not arrive fully formed from a central office. It should be built with the people who will have to carry it, from the earliest stages, so that by the time it reaches the floor it already belongs to them. Frontline teams, supervisors, and managers are not the last stop on the implementation journey. They are the people whose understanding of the problem, and whose belief in the solution, will determine whether anything changes at all.

That means involving them before the solution is designed, not after. It means building capability in the people doing the work, not just briefing the people above them. And it means measuring success not by what gets delivered, but by what gets used, owned, and sustained when the engagement ends.

Stay until the habit forms.

The hardest moment in any transformation is not the launch. It is the point, several months in, when the pressure of daily operations creates opportunities to revert. Those opportunities appear every day. What closes the door to them is not oversight or enforcement. It is a critical mass of people who believe in the new way of working strongly enough to defend it, reinforce it, and pass it on.

That critical mass does not appear by itself. It is built by involving people in the change from the beginning, so that what emerges feels like something they created rather than something that was done to them. When people have shaped the solution themselves, they have a stake in seeing it succeed. They become the reason the change survives.

What It Looks Like in Practice

The following three stories are drawn from our own work. They are accounts of what the problem actually felt like, where the resistance came from, and what it took to move through it.

A global energy company and the workaround that became the system

An energy company lacked a reliable way to manage its improvement initiatives. Work was scattered across spreadsheets and, minimally, in an official system that was such only on paper, as it was ineffective, unfriendly, and therefore unused. It did not reflect how initiatives were actually run.

A new tool replaced it, and its value was not in the technology itself. It was designed with and for the end users, it was aligned with the way work was done and easy and intuitive to use. It created a single, shared repository where initiatives were visible, progress could be followed, and teams could build on each other's work. It became both a system of record and a system of execution.

The result was immediate. Teams aligned around one source of truth, duplication reduced, cross-learning became part of day-to-day work. Adoption spread globally and organically, and the tool remains in use eight years later.

What changed was more than the system: it was ownership and use, transparency, ability to coordinate, inspire, and continuously learn at scale.

An offshore asset and the cost of information overload

A large offshore asset runs a 24/7 operation with high technical complexity and recently implemented a reporting system that generates a multitude of shift reports every day. Frontline supervisors are spending more than two hours every morning manually cross-referencing logs across operations, maintenance, engineering and drilling before they can get out to lead their teams. The morning handover has become a desk-bound exercise.

The solution does not introduce new data requirements. It works with what already exists. Natural language processing ingests the unstructured text already being produced in shift reports, and an algorithm looks across departmental logs simultaneously, surfacing correlations that stay hidden in silos and linking high-hazard activities to lessons from previous incidents. Each shift begins with a targeted summary of the risks that matter most.

The shift is felt before it is measured. The two hours of manual triage becomes minutes. Teams recognise that the tool is only as reliable as the data behind it, and a shared discipline around data quality builds the trust needed to act on what it surfaces. By the end of the engagement the AI-filtered insights are embedded into the asset's shift handover as standard. The asset team owns the process. The tool has become part of how the work gets done.

Two hours of frontline leadership reclaimed, every day, on every shift. Not replaced by technology but freed by it.

Transforming from within

A global shipping company, 5,000 employees across regional operations. Sustainability is a strategic priority. The targets exist, the commitments are made, the language is right. What isn't in place is any mechanism to make it real at the level where the work actually happens.

The decision is made not to mandate it. Instead, employees across the organisation are invited to participate. Volunteers join a structured programme that combines shared learning on sustainability fundamentals with a direct connection to their own work, their own processes, their own facilities. Teams begin identifying where and how their daily tasks could be improved, coming together around shared problems, not shared job titles.

The result is a network of people who understand sustainability not as a corporate target but as something they built. Teams identify changes that are practical and specific to their own work: reducing material waste in particular processes, minimising packaging, switching to renewable energy sources. Each change grounded in the reality of a specific country, a specific facility, a specific operation. Driven from within, not imposed from above, and far more likely to last because of it.

Three sectors, three different problems, the same underlying pattern. The change that lasted was the change that was built from the ground up, with the people who had to carry it, at the point where the gap was real.

A Different Conversation

Most leaders reading this already know when something isn't landing the way it was supposed to. The programme is running. The reporting looks reasonable. But the operation hasn't really changed, and the people closest to the work know it.

The question is rarely whether the problem exists. It is whether there is appetite to approach it differently.

In our experience, the answer almost always starts in the same place: closer to the work than feels comfortable, with a problem specific enough to move quickly, and with the people who understand it best already in the room. Most organisations have more of what they need than they realise. The constraint is rarely capability. It is focus.

We have spent a combined five decades doing this work inside some of the world's most complex energy and industrial operations, and the last several years doing it independently. The pattern of what works is consistent enough that we are confident saying: the approach matters. Being present at the point where the work happens matters. Staying until the change is self-sustaining matters.

If any of this reflects something you are navigating, we would welcome a conversation. A diagnostic discussion about where the gap is in your organisation and whether a different approach would close it.

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