

How Leaders Preserve What Is Worth Keeping

Knowing what to keep is one of transformation's hardest judgements. How leaders distinguish the strengths their future depends on from the familiar practices holding them back.

By Lara Blackert

There is a widely held assumption about transformation that creates a predictable and avoidable cost. The assumption is that meaningful change requires leaving behind what made the organization successful. That to modernize, scale, or compete in a different environment, an organization must be willing to discard the practices, structures, and cultural characteristics that defined it.

Experienced transformation leaders know this is not the requirement. The requirement is discernment.

Transformation does demand change: fundamental, disruptive, often uncomfortable change. That premise is not in dispute. What separates organizations that emerge from transformation stronger from those that emerge diminished is whether their leaders could distinguish between the things that needed to change and the things that, if lost, would undermine the very strategy the transformation was designed to serve. That distinction is harder to make than it appears, and the consequences of making it poorly tend to arrive quietly, after the change has already been declared complete.

The test is the strategy, not the preference

The question of what to preserve is not answered by sentiment, institutional loyalty, or the preferences of long-tenured leaders. It is answered by the organization's strategy.

Every element of an organization, whether a process, a capability, a cultural norm, or a structural arrangement, should be evaluated against a single question: does keeping this serve the organization's ability to deliver against where it is going, or does it create risk to continued success? That framing removes the debate from the personal and places it where it belongs, in the analytical.

A capability that was instrumental in building the organization may still be essential to competing in the future. Customer proximity, clinical judgement, entrepreneurial speed, deep market expertise: these qualities can survive significant structural change if leaders understand what they are made of and design accordingly. The same capability may also have evolved into something that protects a past model at the expense of the future one. The capability itself is not the answer. Its relationship to the strategy is.

What cannot be justified under any framing is preserving something that is in direct conflict with the strategy the organization is trying to execute. Doing so does not honor the past. It compromises the future while creating the illusion that leadership is being thoughtful.

The cost of holding on to the wrong things

One of the most common and expensive errors in transformation is the preservation of arrangements the organization has outgrown, defended not because they serve the strategy but because they are familiar, because changing them is difficult, or because the leaders who built them are still in the room.

Outdated processes are among the clearest examples. A process designed for a smaller, simpler, or differently structured organization may require significant manual effort to operate, create delays that the current market cannot absorb, or produce outcomes that the organization's current strategy does not actually need. Preserving it under the rationale that it has always worked, or that the people who depend on it would resist the change, is not strategic continuity. It is organizational inertia described in the language of preservation.

The same logic applies to governance structures that concentrate decisions above the level where the relevant information exists, to cultural norms that once produced accountability but now produce conformity, and to leadership models built for a period of growth that no longer match the demands of a different operating environment. Each of these can appear worth keeping. Each can quietly consume the organization's capacity to move.

When leaders protect arrangements that conflict with the strategy they are simultaneously trying to execute, they do not neutralize the tension. They embed it into the organization's operating model, where it will surface in slower decisions, inconsistent execution, and the frustration of capable people trying to deliver against requirements the system is not designed to support.

The cost of discarding the wrong things

The opposite error is equally consequential and considerably harder to recover from.

An organization that moves through transformation without identifying what it genuinely cannot afford to lose tends to discover the loss after the disruption has passed. A customer relationship that was maintained through the judgement and institutional knowledge of a specific team. A speed of response that was possible because local decision authority was intact. A capability for complex problem-solving that existed because experienced people were in proximity to one another and to the work.

None of these appear as line items in a transformation plan. They do not have owners with the authority or the incentive to protect them. They surface in financial models, if at all, as assumptions rather than as explicit design requirements. And because their value is embedded in how the organization functions rather than in what it formally owns, their loss is rarely attributed accurately. Performance declines. Customer relationships weaken. The organization works harder to accomplish less. Leadership commissions a diagnostic and discovers that something important

was disrupted eighteen months earlier, in a change that seemed at the time like a reasonable simplification.

The cost of that sequence is not only operational. It is the cost of rebuilding, under more difficult conditions, something that could have been designed to survive.

Disruption is the premise, not the problem

Transformation is disruptive. That is not a risk to be eliminated; it is the nature of the work. An organization in genuine transformation is, by definition, operating through a period in which the old model is no longer fully intact and the new one is not yet fully established. That gap creates real organizational stress: for leaders navigating competing demands, for teams operating under changed authority and accountability, and for individuals whose roles, relationships, and career paths may look different on the other side.

The goal is not to remove disruption from the equation. It is to ensure that disruption is measured, that it is proportionate to what is being built, and that it does not consume more of the organization's capacity than the strategy requires.

That distinction matters because unmeasured disruption compounds. Leaders who underestimate the carrying cost of rapid, broad change often discover that the organization's ability to absorb further change has weakened precisely when the next phase of transformation requires it. Sequencing matters. Protecting the organization's ability to perform through the change, not only its ability to complete the change, is a strategic requirement, not a concession to those who would prefer the status quo.

Executive alignment is the load-bearing requirement

None of the judgement described above produces durable results without executive alignment. This is the most frequently underestimated requirement in transformation, and its absence is the most common explanation for why change that appears to be progressing at the leadership level stalls, fragments, or reverses below it.

Leaders who are publicly committed to a transformation but privately skeptical of its scope, sequence, or necessity do not stay neutral. They communicate their reservations through the decisions they make about resources, through the questions they ask of their teams, and through the protection they extend to arrangements the transformation is designed to change. The organization reads those signals accurately and responds to them accordingly.

Executive alignment is not agreement on every detail. Leaders in transformation will have different views about pace, priority, and approach, and those differences are often productive when they are surfaced in the right forum. What alignment requires is shared commitment to the outcome, shared clarity about what is being preserved and why, and shared accountability for the decisions that will make or undermine the strategy. When that alignment is absent, the transformation plan becomes a document that describes change while the organization continues to operate the model it knows.

CHROs are positioned to identify misalignment early, through the decisions being made at the operating level, through the talent and resources flowing toward and away from transformation priorities, and through the degree to which leaders below the executive team are receiving consistent direction. That diagnosis, delivered accurately and without delay, is one of the most consequential contributions the CHRO can make to a transformation in progress.

The governance obligation

Boards and CEOs overseeing transformation should require an explicit account of what the organization has determined to preserve, and why. Not a list of cultural values or historical strengths, but a specific articulation of the capabilities, relationships, and operating characteristics that the future strategy depends on, and the design choices made to ensure they survive the change.

That requirement creates useful discipline. It forces leaders to move from the abstract to the specific, from intention to design, and from the assumption that important things will protect themselves to the recognition that preservation, like change, requires accountability.

The leaders who get this right are not the ones who protected everything or discarded everything. They are the ones who made the distinction deliberately, with the strategy as their standard, and who arrived at the other side of transformation with the capability that made the change worth doing still intact.