

Transformation Is a Design Problem, Not a Communication Problem

Carly Hayes · 1 August 2026 · 6 min read

Ask a leadership team why their transformation is stalling and the answer usually involves communication: the message has not landed, the story is not clear enough, people do not yet understand the why. So another town hall is scheduled, another deck is built, another video is recorded. And behaviour stays exactly where it was.

The premise underneath this response is that people resist change because they have not been persuaded of it. Our experience — and the evidence from behavioural science — says something different. People behave in ways that make sense given the system around them. When behaviour does not change, the first question is not “how do we explain it better?” but “what is the current system rewarding?”

The system is the message

Every organisation broadcasts two messages at once. The first is the stated one: strategy decks, values statements, transformation narratives. The second is the structural one: what gets measured, what gets funded, what gets promoted, what leaders visibly tolerate. When these two messages conflict, people believe the second one. They always have.

This is why transformation so often produces a strange bilingualism — people who can recite the new direction fluently while continuing to operate in the old way. They are not being difficult. They are reading the system accurately.

Designing the conditions, not the campaign

Treating transformation as a design problem changes the work. Instead of asking how to communicate the future state, we ask what conditions would make the desired behaviour the easiest behaviour available: decision rights that match the strategy, rhythms that surface friction early, signals in process and policy that reinforce rather than contradict the intent.

Communication still matters — narrative is how people make sense of change. But narrative works when it describes a system people can actually see changing around them. Words without structural evidence are just weather.

The organisations that transform well are rarely the ones with the best campaigns. They are the

ones willing to redesign the conditions their people work inside — and then let the system make the case.

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