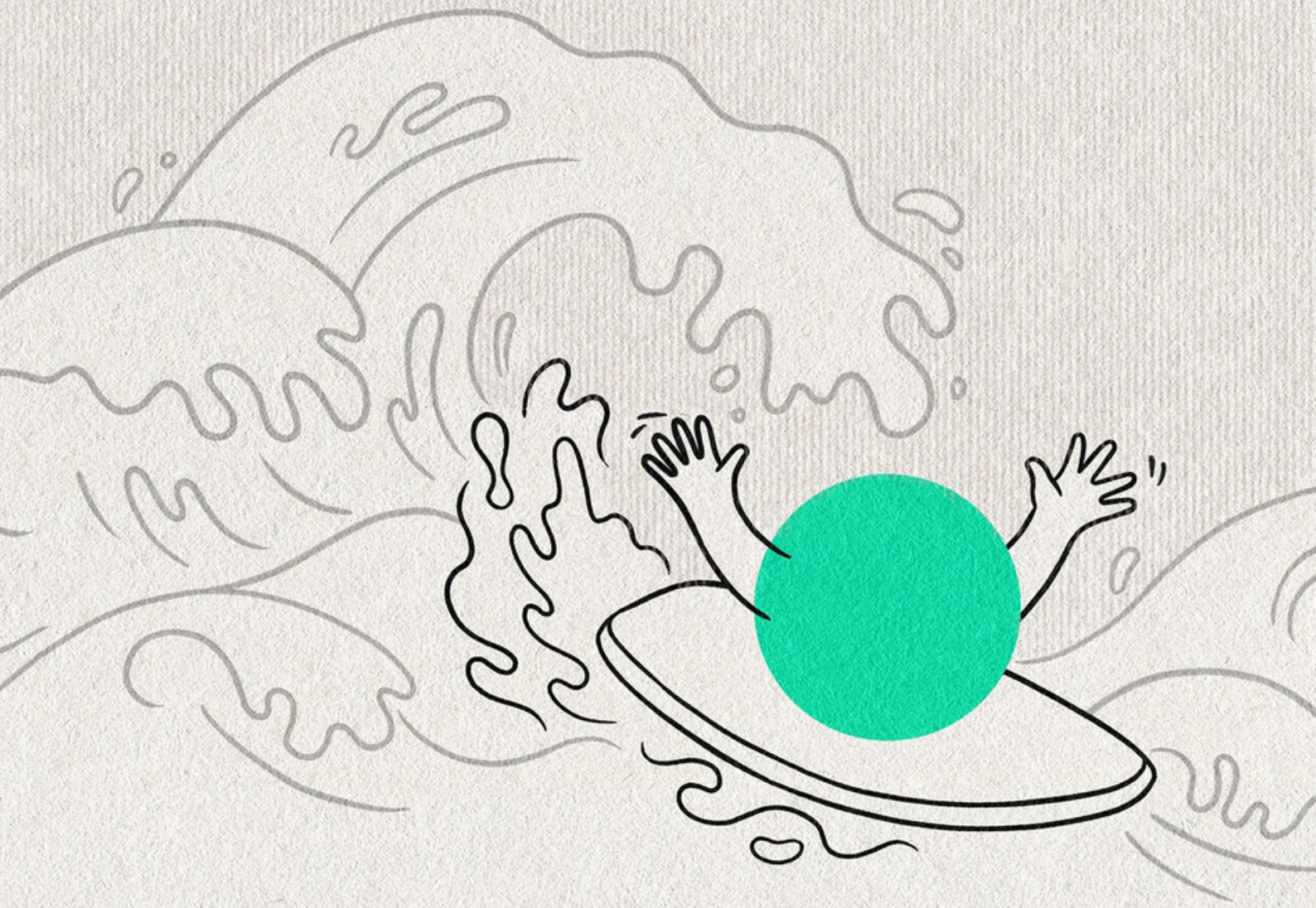
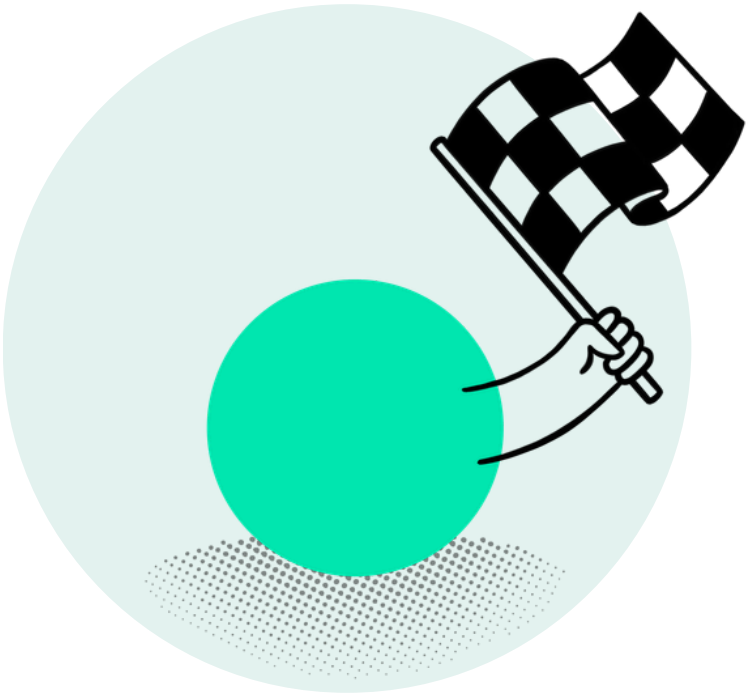
Kindred

DOING TRANSFORMATION BETTER

Why change feels harder than it should





INTRODUCTION

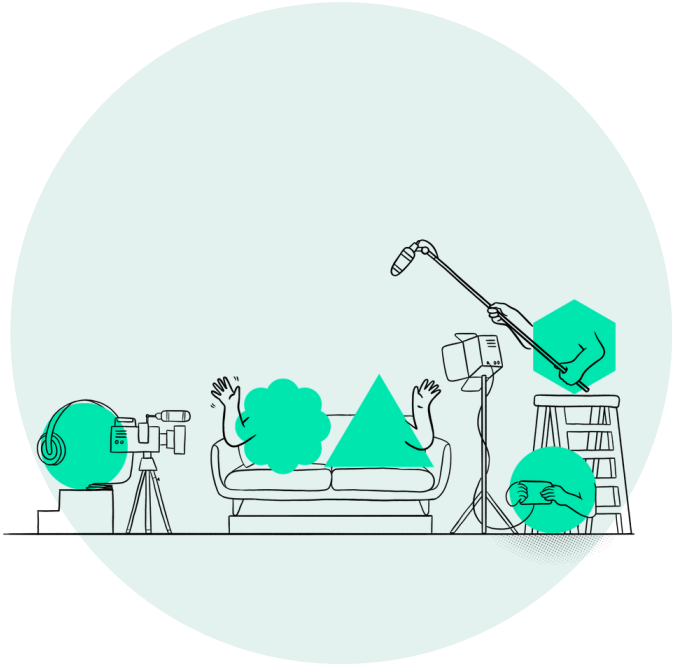
Over the last few years, transformation has become a constant feature of organisational life. Digital, operational, cultural and strategic change no longer arrives as discrete initiatives with clear beginnings and ends. They overlap, extend and run alongside one another, shaping the context in which work happens day-to-day.

In our work with organisations, Kindred consistently encounters leaders taking transformation seriously. Investment is sustained. Programmes are thoughtfully designed. Leadership attention is high. Yet many people describe a growing sense that change is becoming harder to absorb and sustain. Initiatives that make strategic sense struggle to embed. Momentum fades more quickly than expected. The effort required to keep change moving feels disproportionately high.

We explored this topic further. The core finding of our research is simple: change has become continuous, but many of the models for it have not caught up. The result is an environment in which change rarely settles, and new initiatives arrive before the last has landed.

This report draws on qualitative interviews to surface recurring patterns in how transformation is being experienced, and explore what lies beneath.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH



This research draws on 23 in-depth interviews with individuals leading or implementing transformation inside organisations.

We spoke with senior executives, transformation and change leads, functional leaders, and specialist practitioners across media, energy, telecommunications, retail, financial services, and not-for-profit organisations. Participants came from organisations of different sizes and at different stages of maturity – from those at the start of significant change programmes to those navigating multiple cycles of transformation over many years.

Interviews were semi-structured and explored how change was being experienced over time: what helped it take hold, where it faltered, and how initiatives were understood alongside ongoing work.

Across sectors and roles, a consistent theme emerged: Despite experience and intent, transformation was described as harder to absorb and sustain than in the past. New initiatives demanded increasing effort for diminishing durability.

This prompted deeper questions. Rather than examining individual programmes in isolation, we sought to understand whether the broader conditions surrounding transformation had shifted, and what this might mean for organisations.

All interviews were anonymised to support candid reflection. Quotes included in this report illuminate broader themes; the emphasis throughout is on recurring patterns rather than individual perspectives.

This report does not introduce a new framework or set of prescriptions. Its contribution is diagnostic, reframing familiar symptoms as responses to a structural mismatch. It invites closer attention to the conditions organisations are creating through how change is prioritised, sequenced and sustained.

THE GREAT ACCUMULATION

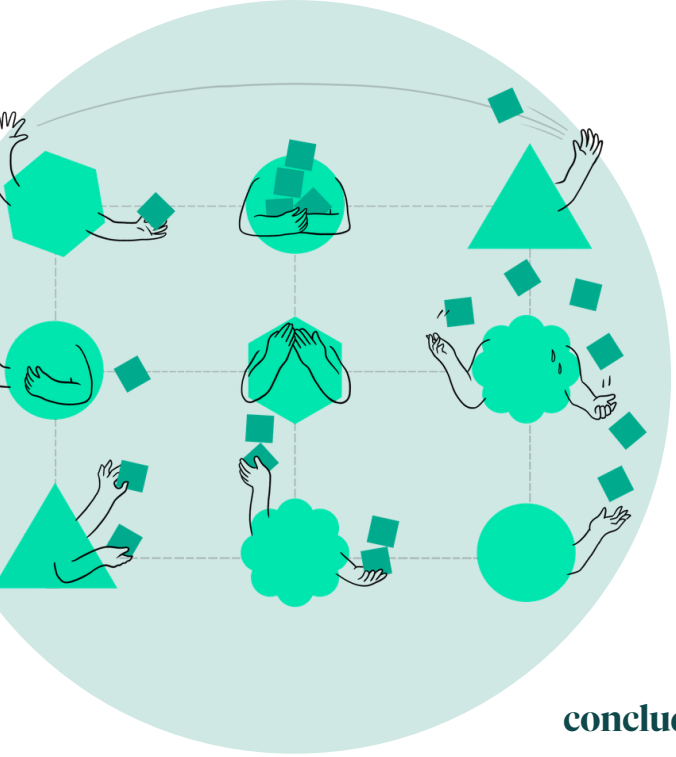
Over the last two decades, organisations have experienced successive waves of change: digital transformation, data initiatives, agile adoption, product shifts, modernisation, automation. Each was launched with serious intent and a clear strategic rationale.

Our research suggests that each change has not arrived, settled, and given way to the next. In many cases, they never fully ended, but extended and overlapped. New ways of working were introduced before previous ones had stabilised. Roles evolved without old expectations being removed. Technologies changed faster than operating models could absorb. Each initiative, taken on its own, was often reasonable and well intentioned.

What was less often examined was how these changes interacted over time. In this context, transformation has accumulated.

“Transformation isn’t something that happens anymore. It’s just the backdrop now. One thing starts before the last thing finishes.”

The challenge organisations face today is not simply the volume of change, but limited space to consolidate and recalibrate between initiatives. Transformation has become part of the backdrop – sustained by successive decisions to add new demands without equivalent decisions to pause, remove, or consolidate.



A PERMANENT STATE OF FLUX

As transformation accumulates rather than concludes, it becomes increasingly difficult to manage

In our research, participants described multiple initiatives running simultaneously across technology platforms, ways of working, cost programmes, capability shifts and structural redesign. Each had its own logic and sponsorship, but few were explicitly connected or sequenced in a way that reflected how work happens.

Change no longer appeared as a series of contained programmes. It became part of the operating environment. Teams navigated evolving priorities alongside legacy processes. New expectations were introduced without older ones being clearly retired. Governance multiplied, while clarity about what had definitively changed often lagged behind.

Several participants noted that it became increasingly difficult to point to a stable baseline:

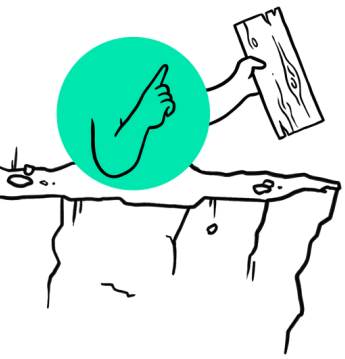
“You can’t really say ‘this is how we work now’. There’s always something half-in and half-out.”

The result was constant adjustment. Energy was spent reconciling competing demands, translating between old and new systems, and maintaining performance across both. The cognitive load increased, even where visible workloads had not dramatically changed.

EVERYTHING AND THEREFORE NOTHING

Once transformation is ever-present, there is a gradual erosion in the meaning of the word itself.

Participants described environments in which multiple initiatives were framed as critical, strategic, or transformational – often simultaneously. Over time, people struggled to distinguish what truly mattered from what simply carried the label.



"I'd rather not use the word transformation anymore – it's become so loaded and overused. It's like wallpaper now."

The effect of this overuse was cumulative. Expectations adjusted, and announcements arrived already discounted. Big claims were met with quiet scepticism.

This shift reflected a growing gap between how change was described and how it was experienced in practice. When initiatives labelled as transformational resulted in limited visible change to day-to-day work, belief thinned.

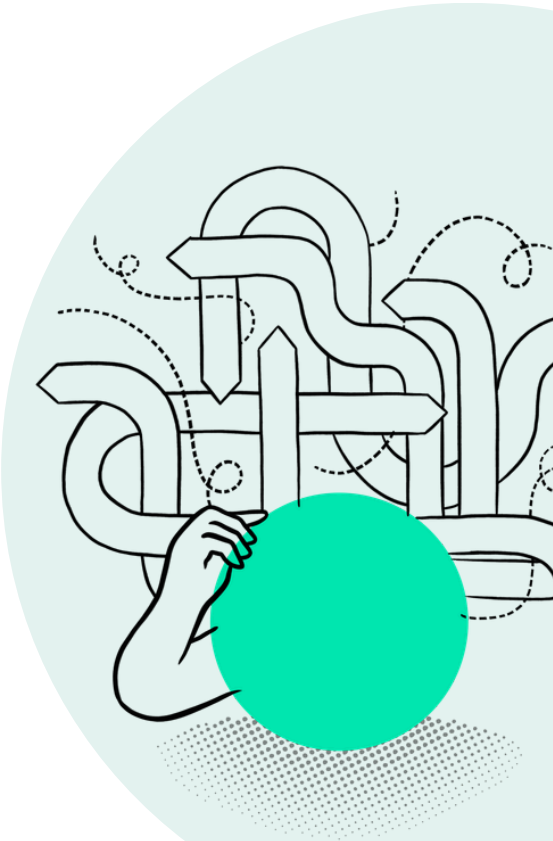
It amounted to signal saturation. Without clear differentiation and hierarchy, transformation language lost its force – and people were left to infer priorities for themselves. Transformation gradually lost credibility. By asking people to suspend disbelief too many times, even well-designed change struggled to generate the attention and commitment it required to take hold.

NOWHERE TO LAND

The challenge is often not resistance to change, but the absence of space for it.

Across our research, participants described environments where new initiatives were layered onto existing work with little being explicitly removed. Transformation generated additional demands – new ways of working, new governance, new reporting, new expectations – but rarely displaced existing responsibilities. Over time, change was experienced not as something that replaced old ways of working, but as something added on top of them.

“Transformation projects generate additional work but rarely remove existing responsibilities. It just becomes built into everyone’s day job, without resourcing or payoff.”



Several participants reflected that explicit decisions about what would stop or be deprioritised were rarely made. Instead, priorities accumulated. In that context, people were left to make their own trade-offs – often in ways that prioritised immediate delivery over longer-term adaptation.

This helps explain why narratives about resilience, mindset, or personal prioritisation repeatedly fell short, burdening system-level capacity issues onto individuals rather than addressing how work was being designed, sequenced, and retired.

“Everyone wants transformation, but no one wants to give up their budget or people to deliver it.”

Capacity is a design choice, reflecting decisions – often tacit – about what the organisation prioritises.

AN ENERGY CRISIS

Over time, transformation accumulation impacts how people engage with their part in it

Across the research, participants described an evolution in how they engaged with change. Over time, many learned to moderate their investment – conserving energy rather than committing fully to each new initiative.

Several spoke about operating in a state of constant readiness: always adapting, rarely consolidating. Without confidence that change would endure, effort became more cautious and more conditional.

“People just don’t have the capacity anymore. Everyone is so full that their resilience for change is really low. It’s not that they don’t care – it’s that they’re knackered.”

In this context, energy became something to manage carefully. Rather than investing fully in each new initiative, people described holding back. Engagement became conditional. Effort was directed towards what felt required in the immediate, while longer-term change was approached more cautiously.

Several leaders noted that this often showed up as emotional withdrawal long before any visible behavioural disengagement. People continued to deliver. They attended the meetings. They complied with new processes. But belief thinned, and discretionary effort was conserved.

“You can feel it when people are still doing the work, but they’re not really in it anymore.”

These responses were not signs of apathy or fragility. They were rational adjustments to an environment where repeated change demanded ongoing effort without providing clarity, recovery time, or confidence that investment would pay off.

A SENSE OF PERSONAL RISK

Transformation carries an immediate personal question for many people: what does this mean for me?

In a context of ongoing cost pressure, restructuring, automation and role change, transformation was often interpreted as a signal of loss not gain. Even when leaders intended progress or improvement, people within their organisations looked for clues about whether their role would still exist, whether their skills would remain relevant, and whether there was a place for them on the other side of the change.

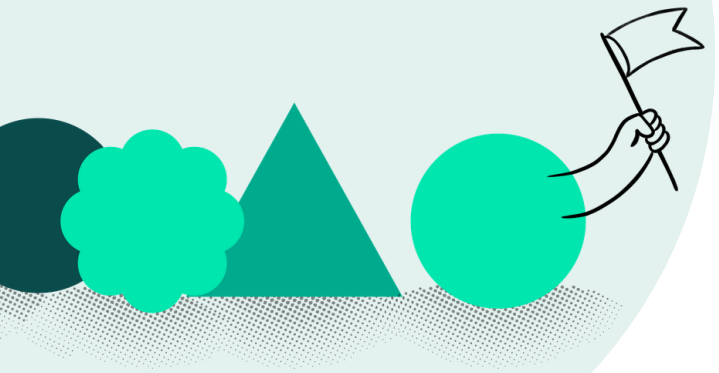
> **"People have been burned by past transformations. They hear the word now and immediately think about what they might lose."**

This uncertainty shaped behaviour in predictable ways. People became more cautious about speaking up early, less inclined to experiment, and more focused on protecting what they had already built. Energy was directed towards maintaining relevance rather than contributing openly to shaping the change.

Several leaders reflected that this response was often misread as disengagement or lack of motivation. In reality it was a logical response to unclear personal stakes. Where people could not see how decisions would be made, or what was likely to endure, committing fully to new ways of working felt risky.

> **"You can't make people excited about a future vision if they're scared for their jobs."**

Credibility was critical. People sought honesty about what was changing, what was not, and how choices would be made as the organisation evolved. Where that clarity was present, people were more willing to stay engaged, even through difficult transitions. Where it was absent, self-protection took hold.



SPONSORSHIP BUT NOT CONTINUITY

Where transformation is continuous, leadership continuity takes on higher stakes

Across the research, participants described environments where transformation efforts were frequently reshaped as leadership roles changed. New executives arrived with different mandates - sponsorship shifted, priorities changed. In some cases, programmes were formally paused or redesigned; in others, they were quietly deprioritised without being explicitly closed.

Leadership change is inevitable, and strategic reorientation is often necessary. Issues emerged when these resets happened faster than new ways of working could stabilise

> **"Transformations are too tied to individual leaders. Every time someone new comes in, priorities shift – and everyone learns not to get too invested."**

What mattered was not the strength of any single leader's commitment, but whether direction endured beyond individual tenures. People paid close attention to what persisted when leaders moved on – which initiatives survived, which were reframed, and which disappeared.

From this, they learned how seriously to take what they were being asked to do. Where direction repeatedly reset, people became cautious about committing fully. They learned to wait, hedge, and see what would last before investing deeply.

Where continuity was stronger – with priorities held steady and reinforced across leadership transitions – people described greater confidence that effort would endure. This shaped how much energy they would commit, and for how long.

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Across the research, the challenges people described were often cited as separate issues – unwieldiness, credibility erosion, capacity problems, change fatigue, cautious engagement, leadership churn. Seen individually, these issues can appear disconnected – each calling for its own explanation or intervention. Seen together, a different pattern emerges.

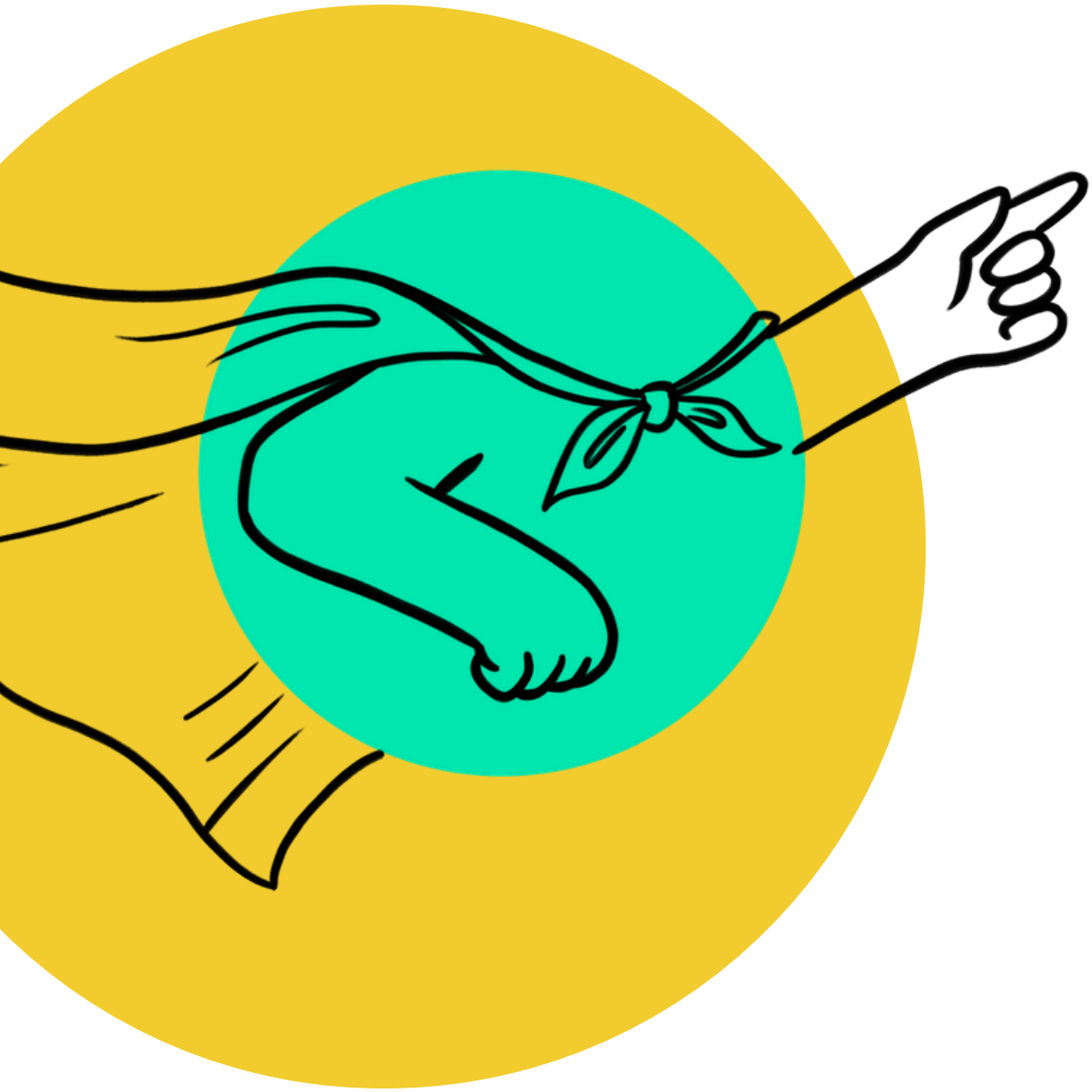
What links these experiences is a single underlying mismatch:

Transformation has become continuous, overlapping, and open-ended but the models used to design, resource, and lead it still assume change is temporary – something that can be launched, delivered, and then stabilised.

For a long time, transformation was treated as episodic. That model shaped how programmes were designed, how resources were allocated, and how leadership attention was mobilised. The research suggests this logic no longer reflects reality.

Recovery time, consolidation, and a return to stability have quietly broken down. Attention is expected to stretch indefinitely. Direction evolves faster than practice can stabilise.

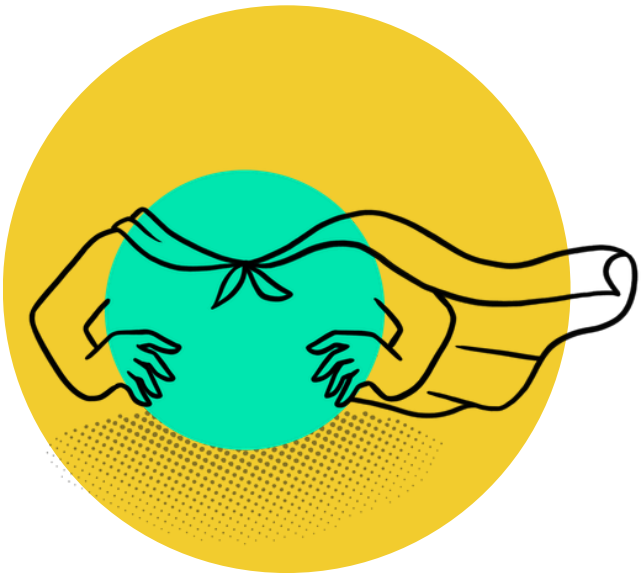
As a result, approaches that once worked start to fail in predictable ways. Programmes complete, but capability does not accumulate. Sponsorship is visible, but belief does not endure. Delivery continues, but change does not fully take hold.



A different way of thinking:

CHANGE AS A CAPABILITY

CHANGE AS A CAPABILITY



When transformation is continuous, success cannot be judged programme by programme.

Rather than asking how to deliver a specific transformation successfully, leaders are increasingly confronted with a different challenge: how well is the organisation equipped to absorb ongoing change over time?

This distinction matters. Programme-based approaches are designed to deliver defined outcomes within bounded periods. They mobilise resources temporarily, concentrate attention, and assume a point at which change can be considered complete. In a context of continuous change, those assumptions become harder to sustain.

Participants described the limits of transformation initiatives – individual changes could be delivered but would typically leave the organisation no more able to cope with the next wave than before. Each programme drew on the same finite capacity, attention, and goodwill, without necessarily strengthening the conditions needed for change to endure.

Several leaders reflected on this tension directly:

> **“We’re very good at setting up programmes. We’re much less good at leaving the organisation more capable once they finish.”**

Seen through this lens, the issue is not whether programmes should exist – they will always have a role. It is whether they are sufficient on their own in an environment where change does not stop. The research points to a growing gap between delivering change and building the organisational capability to absorb it.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS

Across the research, there were clear differences between environments where change struggled to take hold and those in which it was more likely to endure.

These differences were not about ambition, pace, or intent. In many cases, organisations where change held up better were operating under similar levels of pressure, complexity, and uncertainty. The volume of change was not lower.

Participants did not describe these environments as calmer or easier. Pressure remained. Trade-offs were still difficult. The difference was in the extent to which change was seen as something that to be absorbed over time, not just delivered.

In these contexts, transformation was less brittle. It did not rely solely on momentum at launch or sustained individual effort. Instead, people described conditions that made it more possible for change to be worked through, adapted, and reinforced as part of ongoing work.

Three conditions appeared consistently in these examples. They did not guarantee success, and they did not remove difficulty. But where they were present, people were more willing to invest energy, adjust their work, and stay engaged beyond the initial phase.

The following pages explore each of these conditions in turn, drawing directly on what participants observed about instances where change was able to stick.

1.

EXPLICIT TRADE-OFFS

Where transformation held up better, leaders were clearer about what would stop or slow down to make space for it.

Pressure was still present - workloads remained demanding, and priorities still competed. Importantly though, capacity was treated as finite, and trade-offs were made visible rather than left implicit.

Participants described how this clarity altered their experience of change. When leaders acknowledged that something had to give, priorities felt intentional rather than endlessly additive. People could see that change was being taken seriously enough to warrant real decisions, not just additional effort.

“You have to be really clear not just about where you’re going, but what needs to stop.”

Trade-offs were revisited as conditions shifted, and difficult choices remained contested. What mattered was the acknowledgement that the organisation could not do everything at once – and that leaders were prepared to own those decisions.

In contrast, where trade-offs were not made explicit, people described change as something layered on top of existing work. In those environments, individuals were left to resolve conflicts privately, often by protecting short-term delivery and deferring the deeper work of embedding change.

2. OWNERSHIP CLOSE TO THE WORK

Transformation was less brittle where ownership did not sit solely with central programmes or specialist teams.

In these environments, people closer to the work had room to shape how change landed in their context. Direction was still clear – what needed to change and why was well understood – but teams were trusted to determine how those changes were applied day to day.

"Where change is shaped by the people doing the work, it sticks. Where it's designed elsewhere and imposed, it just doesn't."

This proximity mattered. People surfaced problems earlier, adjusted practices more quickly, and were more willing to invest effort in making change workable. Change was experienced less as something being imposed on the organisation and more as something being worked through within it.

Tension and disagreement were still present. Local shaping involved negotiation, trade-offs, and iteration. But because ownership sat closer to where work actually happened, those tensions were addressed in context rather than escalated or worked around.

Where ownership remained tightly held at the centre, participants described a different pattern. Change travelled through layers of translation. Local realities were overlooked. Workarounds emerged quietly. Over time, engagement thinned – not because people opposed the change, but because it did not fully account for how their work was organised.

3. MEASURING THE RIGHT THINGS

In environments where change held up better, progress was not judged solely by whether initiatives had been launched or milestones met.

Instead, leaders paid closer attention to what was changing in practice. They asked different questions: where were new behaviours taking hold, where were old ways of working reasserting themselves, and where were teams quietly adapting change to fit local realities?

"We stopped reporting only on what had been delivered and started talking about what people were actually doing differently."

When progress was defined by completion alone, teams felt pressure to perform– to demonstrate momentum even when change had not yet embedded. Learning was often framed as failure, and issues surfaced late, if at all.

Where progress was judged by what endured, a different dynamic emerged. Problems were surfaced earlier because attention was on practice, not plans. Adjustments were made without relaunching or rebranding the work. Learning became a sign of progress rather than slippage.

This did not make transformation faster or easier but did make it more honest. By reinforcing what was sticking - and paying attention to what was not - leaders helped change stabilise over time, rather than repeatedly resetting it through the next initiative.

About Kindred

Kindred is a specialist organisation design consultancy that helps leaders turn strategic ambition into real-world delivery by designing organisations that work.

Founded in 2020, we work with organisations facing complex decisions about structure, roles and ways of working - the challenges that sit between strategy and execution. Our work focuses on helping leadership teams design organisations that can deliver their strategy and make change work in practice.

About the author

Michael Docherty is a co-founder of Kindred and works with organisations navigating complex change. Before founding Kindred he held senior leadership roles in commercial and not-for-profit organisations, where he was responsible for leading digital and organisational change.

He worked at Yahoo! during the early years of the commercial internet, close to the platforms and practices that would go on to shape modern digital organisations.

Much of his career since has focused on helping established institutions adapt to those new ways of operating. Having worked through multiple waves of transformation along the way, he brings a perspective shaped by seeing how those ideas play out inside large organisations over time.

Visit wearekindred.co.uk for more information