

Condor Group

How To Sabotage a Transformation Programme

5 Proven Ways To Waste Time, Antagonise Stakeholders and Make Sure Nothing Actually Changes

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Introduction

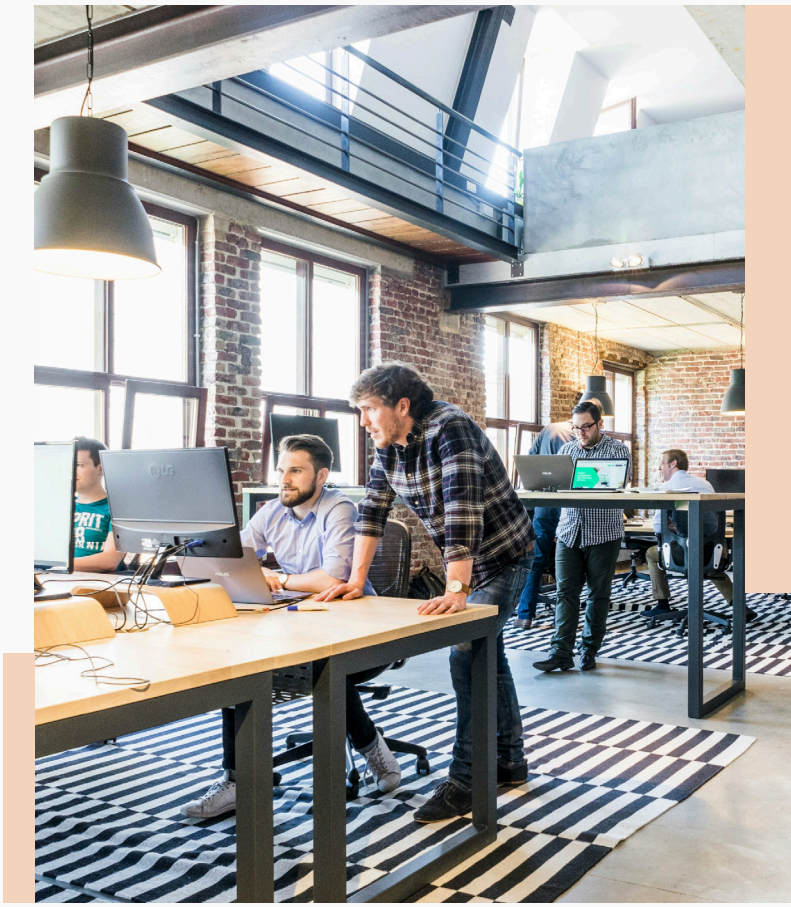
In 1944, the Office for Strategic Services (the US' Wartime Intelligence Agency that preceded the CIA) published a *Field Manual for Simple Sabotage*.

It contained a variety of tactics that 'citizen saboteurs' in German-occupied Europe could use to subvert public institutions. For instance, it recommended that saboteurs "ensure all decisions are made by committees of no less than 5 people".

That document was declassified in 2008 and is the inspiration for this guide.

The question we've been pondering: if you really wanted to sabotage an enterprise's transformation programme, where would you start?

The funny thing, in our experience, is just how easy it would be.



How To Judge the Performance of a Transformation

There are many ways to judge the performance of a transformation initiative.

You can look at how much is actually getting done; whether you're checking boxes off your list of activities. You can measure the discrete parts of the program against specific KPIs to see how each is performing.

But the most underrated method of judging success is: 'can you feel it?'

- Is the organisation actually changing?
- Are some of the dynamics you've grown so used to actually starting to shift into something better?
- Are people enjoying their jobs more than they used to? Are you honestly optimistic about what's happening here?

Even though this measure is the most subjective, it is in many ways the most telling. Because all too often, organisations spend millions on transformation initiatives that go...nowhere.

Instead of changing the way the business works, they further entrench it in the same politics, bad habits and dysfunction they were meant to save it from.

This guide contains true stories (gleefully anonymised) about real transformation initiatives that we've witnessed across various stages of our collective careers. Some of these are horror stories, others are merely dramas.

What they all have in common is a sincere attempt on our part to understand why organisations do – and don't – absorb the changes they spend so much time and money trying to make.

- What stalls transformation
- Why it's so painfully easy to stay in non-productive patterns
- What it takes to actually make change stick

Out of respect for your time and ours, we have chosen not to pull any punches.

Out of respect for the guilty, we haven't used any identifying names or details.

Let's begin.

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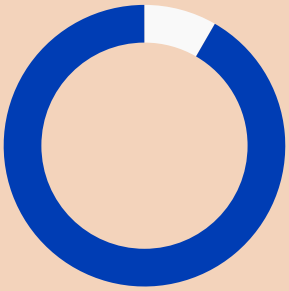
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Distract the Executives

Transformation initiatives fail when there isn't any clarity or continuity in terms of what the programme is trying to achieve.

The good news for any would-be saboteur, is that this is usually the case. That's because there is no shortage of ways to distract executives from what actually matters.



*Only **1 in 12** top-down, target-driven transformation programmes succeeded in delivering sustained performance improvement — meaning roughly 92% failed by that definition.*[1]



[1] Harvard Business Review, 2024, Sample: 350 businesses

Key Methods To Distract the Executives

Method #1: Get the Executive Table Excited by an Outcome

One of the most effective ways to distract executives is by getting them to participate in strategic planning with an expensive consultancy. The more expensive the better.

These engagements focus the executives' attention on the most exciting part of transformation: the outcomes. Shiny, bright and full of promise, these imagined outcomes are the only real deliverable in such exercises.

The complexities and contradictions of the actual work are tomorrow's problem.

Case Study

Groundhog Day

Take the case of one large multinational company. Even though they were dominant in their market and earning billions in annual sales, the enterprise decided to invest in digital transformation so that its size would no longer impede its agility.

So a group of executives hired a famous consultancy to help them plan and stand up a transformation management office in 2020.

The potential outcomes discussed in this exercise were so exciting, so utterly dazzling, that in 2021… they re-hired the exact same consultancy…for the exact same task.

Once again, the outcomes discussed were so enthralling, the firm decided to conduct the same exercise yet again in 2022. The only difference was that, this time, they hired a different consultancy.

The new consultancy, bemused by the detailed plans submitted as reference material, referred the executives back to those same plans from the previous two years.

Guess what they did in 2023.

Key Lesson:
Everyone Underestimates the Work

When people don't know where to start, they never do. Some start in the wrong place and most just give up. They're hesitant to move forward because they might be wrong. And so they default to doing what's comfortable.

Most of the time that's yet another strategy project.

Key Methods To Distract the Executives

Method #2: Give Two Executive Overlapping Priorities

Another time-tested method for perpetual distraction is to ensure executives squabble over trivial details in the most petulant manner possible. The easiest way to make this happen is by assigning the same responsibilities to two different leaders.



Case Study

Worthy Stewards?

For instance, in one large enterprise we supported, two different executives were given control of the firm's technology resources.

When the two leaders inevitably devised different plans with different priorities for all those teams and investments, their fight naturally cascaded down the org chart and made it impossible for anyone to know what exactly leadership was aiming for.

The rational solution was obviously to divide responsibilities between the two executives. But it stood no chance against the emotional problem of two people trying to prove they're the worthy steward of the same set of resources.

Key Methods To Distract the Executives

Method #3: Give Two Executives Competing Priorities

A close cousin of the previous method is the classic lack of alignment between different stakeholders.

One such case was when a firm's COO and CIO had very different ideas of what the firm most needed from its technology investments.

One believed the operational priority was to make sure the things it had already invested in actually worked. The other believed the existential priority was to invest in new things.

Notice: Both had valid points. This is essential if you want the fight to last a long time.

Needless to say, as long as the two executives passive-aggressively duked it out in front of anyone who would listen, neither priorities were actually met.

It's not just who you fight or how you fight them. It's also who else's time you can waste while you do it.

Key Lesson

Petty Squabbling

The key lesson from this is that if you can keep the rest of the executive table occupied and engaged with this kind of petty squabbling, very little can ever get done.

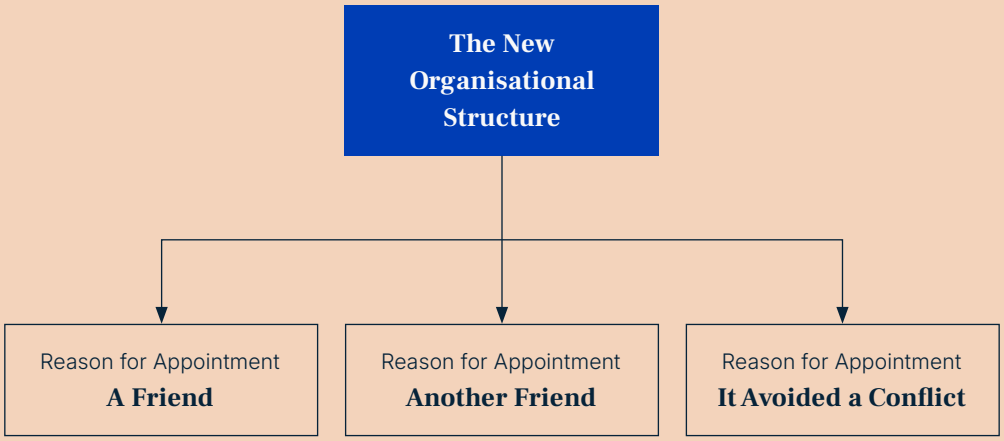


Put the Wrong People in the Right Roles

One of the most common forms of dysfunction in a transformation initiative is when a consultancy is hired to define a clever, new structure for the organisation and then the roles in said structure are promptly filled by exactly the wrong people for them.

For the aspiring saboteur, this is relatively easy to organise, especially when everyone is terrified (more on this in a second), because everyone inherently wants to show they have a vital role in the shiny, new org chart. Even if they have no idea how to perform that role.

Crucially, if you want to guarantee the wrong people do the maximum damage, make sure these roles are assigned exclusively based on who you're friends with and which conflicts you most want to avoid.



Case Study

“The Call Is Coming From Inside the House…”

Many years ago, a large company we will not name set up a programme to identify new processes for its sales organisation. The idea was to modernise based on new tools and practices…or something.

To guide the transformation programme, the organisation set up an RFP process to identify consultancies, technology vendors and implementation partners that might be able to help.

As the internal programme team evaluated these potential partners, it soon became apparent that some of the candidates being considered just so happened to be very good friends with the CEO.

And not just that, but as the evaluations were being conducted, the CEO was then whispering recommendations to those friends about what they should and shouldn’t say in order to win the RFPs.

When the CEO inevitably appointed their friend’s company as the implementation partner, it became immediately clear that in spite of what they had claimed during the RFP process, they didn’t actually know how to implement the selected technology.

That fact was soon corroborated by the technology partner (also an old pal of the CEO) and so in effect, this group of buddies had effectively spent the entirety of the budget building the wrong architecture.

All that was left to do at the end of this lengthy and expensive trainwreck was to assign all the blame for the misdelivery…on the internal programme team.

Key Lesson:
The Very Best Way to De-Rail a Transformation Is From the Inside

From the elaborate song and dance of an objective process for selecting partners all the way through to the deliberate blaming of well-meaning employees, this kind of flawless sabotage is only possible when you have the kind of access and leverage reserved for senior leadership.

If you really want to waste time and money, go top-down.



Key Methods To Put the Wrong People in the Right Roles

Method #1: Shake Up the Structure

Organisational re-design is a wonderful thing. Much like re-arranging the furniture in your living room, it gives everyone that wonderful sense that change is going to come and it's going to solve all our problems.

But if you didn't like the way that table looked when it was near the window, you aren't magically going to start loving it when you stick it near the door.

The same is true for problematic executives. The smart and reasonable thing to do with a prominent leader that won't play nicely with others or do the hard work of setting a coherent vision is to remove or replace them.

But we're not looking for the smart and reasonable thing to do, are we? We're looking for ways to bring this programme down to its knees.

So your best bet is to re-jig the roles and responsibilities for the whole organisation so you can paper over the cracks forming between your leadership team.

Choose the comfort of avoided conflict over the strength of a new recruit and you can make sure someone else inherits the problem.

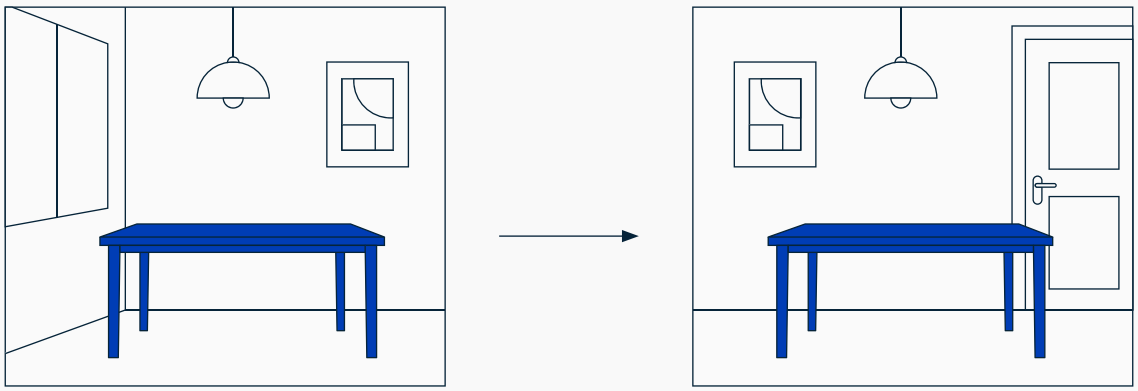


Table in the Wrong Spot
Doesn't feel right

Same Table in the New Spot
Still doesn't feel right

Key Methods To Put the Wrong People in the Right Roles

Method #2: Hire for Potential, Not Proven Expertise

Depending on where the organisation is on its maturity curve, you need different things from leaders. When you're establishing a new way of working to set the organisation up for a period of growth and improvement, you need to make sure the right processes and operating procedures are being deeply ingrained into the organisation.

The best way to do that is by hiring people who have demonstrable experience. These are often expensive recruits. But they have a deep understanding of what happens when processes meet reality and they know how to help teams adopt new ways of working.

Hire for Proven Experience

- Relevant experience
- Knows what happens in practice
- Can implement new ways of working

✓ **Supports the Transformation**

Hire for Potential

- Limited relevant experience
- Hired because they seemed like a good fit
- Based on what they might become

✗ **Increases the Risk of Failure**

As saboteurs, we must ensure these people come nowhere near the transformation programme.

Instead, we want to make sure we populate these critical positions with people who've had vague, tangential experience that's only loosely related to the intended goals of the organisation. We want to pick leaders on the basis of who they might become, ignoring entirely who they already are.

Case Study

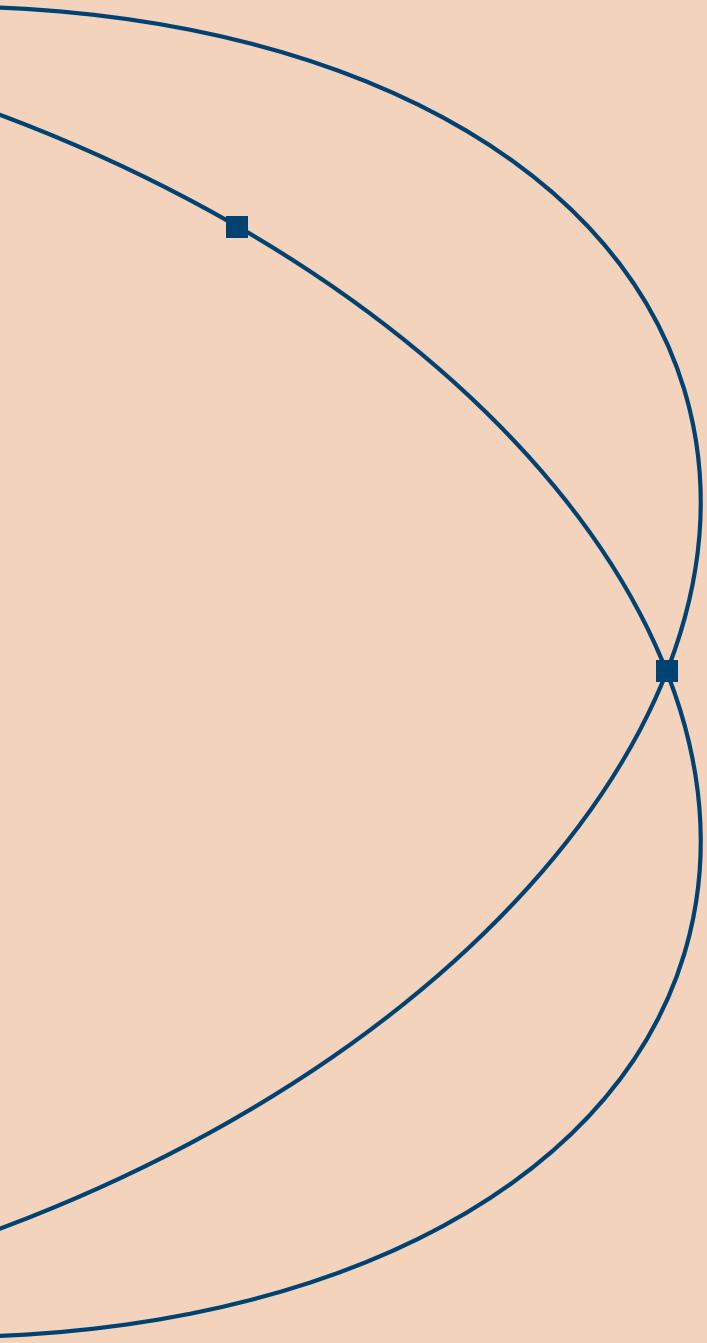
The Vicious Cycle of Bad Recruitment

The great thing about putting the wrong people in key roles is that hiring has a recursive effect on organisations. When the wrong people are in charge, they push the best people down and eventually out of the organisation.

More important, they can then hire more wrong people to the team.

So not only will you sabotage the initiative today, you'll also be sabotaging the organisation long-term.

Terrify Everyone



One effective way to ensure transformation is resisted at every step of the way is to loudly announce that the point of the transformation is to reduce headcount.

For the would-be saboteur, an even better way to guarantee resistance is to be as vague as possible about the reasons for the transformation programme. This makes it so that instead of leadership having to announce anything, everyone in the organisation starts imagining the worst possible outcomes themselves.

When you threaten the livelihood and reputation of every executive and employee at every level of the organisation, you guarantee they won't be honest or cooperative as the transformation programme is conducted.

As a bonus, most of the smart ones will disappear on long-term sick leave due to stress.

Case Study

“No Fighting in the War Room!”

Many years ago, some of us were part of an internal transformation and programme management (what is the difference?) team at one of the oldest and largest multinational behemoths in the world.

The team was made up of 25-30 year olds who were all empowered to go in and ruthlessly identify any possible opportunity to save the organisation time and money. Over a 12 month period, this team brought about changes that effectively saved the organisation more than £500 million annually.

By any objective criteria, the transformation programme was a rousing success. But how was the team received internally?

“You’re the worst part of this organisation and you’re going to ruin everything!”

They were reviled, yelled at and fought at every step of the way. The only thing that kept this group of young people going was that they were more worried about letting their own bosses down than they were of all the executives yelling at them.



Key Lesson:
The Status Quo Is What It Is for a Reason

Even when transformation programmes are set up in pursuit of worthy and defensible goals like investing in the organisation’s future, they will be resisted.

When you ask the question ‘how can we be better?’ you are necessarily implying that something about the way things work right now isn’t good enough.

This makes people defensive. And it’s why organisations resist change.

Great Leaders Reveal, Saboteurs Conceal

The best way to lead transformation is to openly articulate what you're aiming for and why you believe it matters.

To share the internal and external factors that make transformation necessary. To detail what is required from the organisation for it to thrive. To be honest about whether or not those requirements entail a reduction in headcount, and if so, to proactively set up support so people can learn new skills, adapt to changing roles or find new ones.

This kind of forthright and upfront leadership makes you vulnerable to criticism. But when you welcome that dialogue, most people are willing to follow your lead.

And the people who aren't willing to follow your lead at least have an open forum in which to identify themselves as dissidents.

Of course, if you want to sabotage the initiative just skip all that and issue a mandate.

Ideally, issue your mandate when the overarching context for the transformation is that you're in the middle of a merger.

That really freaks everyone out.

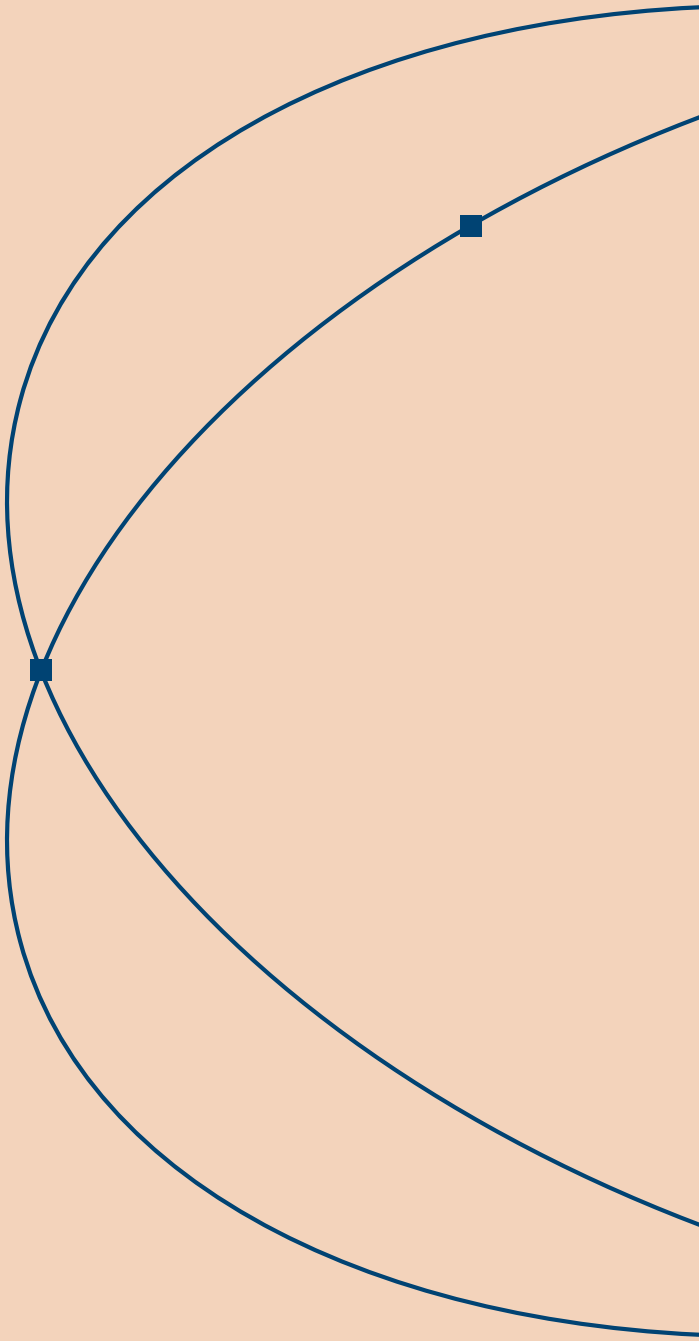


Set Vague and Contradictory Requirements

The best way to doom a transformation project right from the start is to initiate the whole thing based on half-baked assumptions and incorrect information.

Objective data and a clear-eyed view of the way the organisation really works are the enemy of the aspiring saboteur. We're looking for prejudiced opinions and vague assertions that only drive the programme deeper into the organisation's established politics.

To that end, it's especially useful to establish the programme's foundational requirements in a way that guarantees teams will be so confused they feel threatened by the greater good.



Case Study

One for All and All for None

The funny thing about standardisation is that though it's an essential element of operational excellence, its benefits are mainly felt by the organisation as a whole rather than by individual teams.

In fact, in the short term, some individual teams might even suffer when they first adopt new standards for operating procedures.

Take the case of this one firm we worked with that tried to standardise the way it generates quotes. Different lines of business had different processes that generated roughly the same outputs (prices, contracts, that sort of thing).

The teams driving all these disparate processes felt strongly that they were right to do things their own way. After all, they were pricing different products for different buyers in different markets. Why should they have to take the time and effort needed to learn and follow some new-fangled process?

That's the kind of question a good leader would take the time to answer well in advance of rolling out changes, attending to issues as they emerge and making it clear they were a committed sponsor to this new cause.

Alternatively, you could just ignore all of that and let the various silos and fiefdoms fight about why their team is actually more important than everyone else's…

Key Lesson:
Take Charge

You don't need to actively sabotage anything if no one's taking charge. Just let everyone naturally revolt against the programme's most vague stipulations.



Case Study

Try Coming Up With Contradictory Requirements

If you really want to make everyone waste a lot of time spinning their wheels, insist on an important requirement and then insist on another requirement that directly contradicts it.

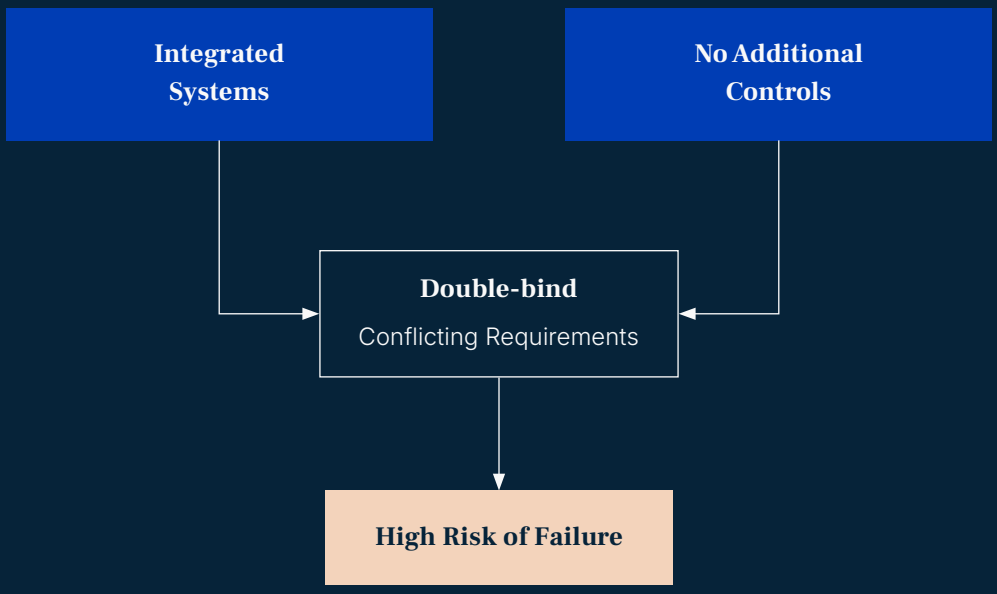
For instance, several years ago, one executive at a large organisation demanded that a number of different systems be integrated together. A perfectly common requirement.

However, once the integrations had been made and new dependencies between all these systems had been established, the executive also insisted that no additional controls be put in place to make sure changes in one system didn't corrupt another.

It's a perfect double-bind. One requirement introduces a whole new level of risk to the enterprise. And the other requirement necessitates that nothing be done about it.

With a limited pool of technical talent to oversee the integrations and take responsibility for all the new risk, they practically guaranteed catastrophe.

That's high-level subversion.

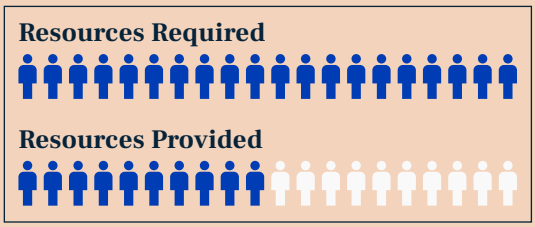


Under-Invest in the Whole Endeavour

A lot of the stories and methods we've covered so far have involved fairly abstract concepts like playing with people's emotions and expectations.

But if you really want to undermine a transformation initiative, there is no more direct way to get it done than by simply identifying the resources required to do it well...and cutting them in half.

The best people are resourceful and intelligent enough to overcome a lack of resources. But if you refuse to invest in those people...



"What have the Romans ever done for us?"

Start by being thoroughly dismissive of programme management, project management and change management skills.

Instead of acknowledging that the people who do these jobs well have an incredibly potent skill set for predicting issues, motivating teams, breaking problems down, understanding stakeholders and driving through change...

Simply refer to their jobs as 'following a plan', 'making spreadsheets' or 'doing the fluffy stuff'. If push comes to shove and you really do have to eventually concede that these roles matter, just make sure you've wasted plenty of time before you change your mind.

Case Study

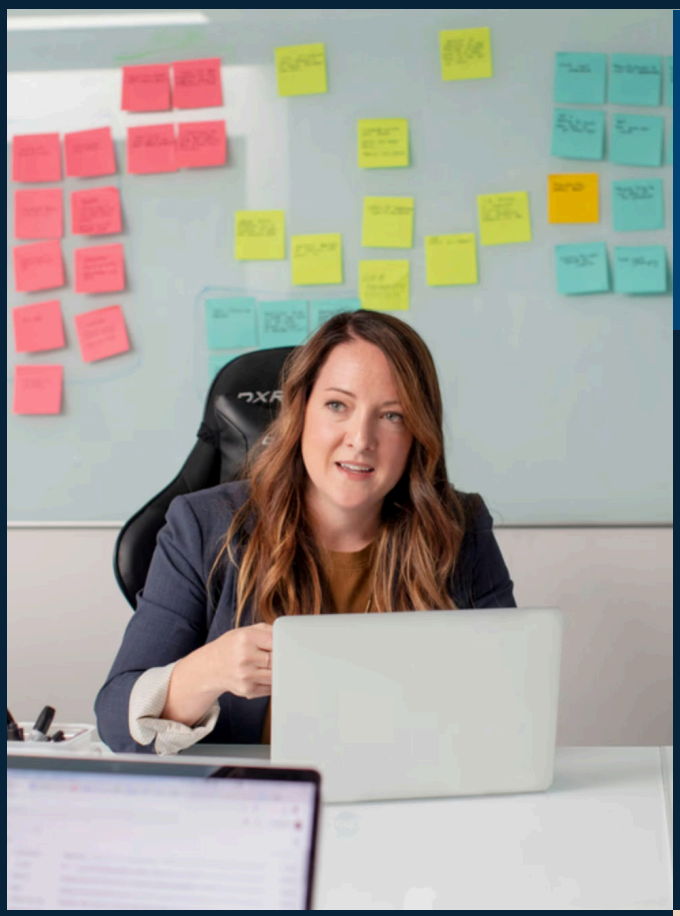
Change Managers Don't Add Value

For instance, a group of executives we worked with several years ago refused to acknowledge the need for change management roles in their organisation's transformation programme. In spite of repeated requests for such a role and a mountain of evidence that people were resisting the programme, they insisted that change managers don't really add value.

After three months of not budging on the issue, they finally relented and decided to hire someone.

The opportunity cost here wasn't just the time spent trying to force change through without anyone actively trying to bring employees along on the journey. It was also that now whoever they would eventually hire would have an even bigger mountain of resentments and issues to overcome.

The best way to sabotage an initiative is to stop these people from entering the programme. The second best way is to slow them down.



The Hidden Benefit of Hiring Good People

We can tell you from painful, personal experience as the hired bulls in several enterprises' china shops, a lot of that 'fluffy stuff' makes a real difference.

The very best programme managers don't just oversee programmes, they actively make the stakeholders they report to better at their jobs.

Here's what one CEO had to say about an executive that had been working with one of our best people.

> **"I can see a material difference in [REDACTED]'s demeanour. They're so much more excited to be here and finally feels like they can make a real dent in their workload."**

Great stewards for your programme don't waste your time. And they make sure you don't waste your own time either. They bring structure when you're disorganised and clarity when it's needed most.

Key Insight:
Transformation Is Relentless

Transformation is a non-stop, full-contact sport. Requirements change, context evolves and there's always a new problem to be dealt with. The enterprises that handle this kind of change the best are the ones that have multiple people dedicated to programme management. They purposefully recruit for resilient people who can roll with the punches.

So if you're trying to sabotage an initiative, identify these people and keep them out of the building for as long as humanly possible.

Most Transformation Programmes Sabotage Themselves

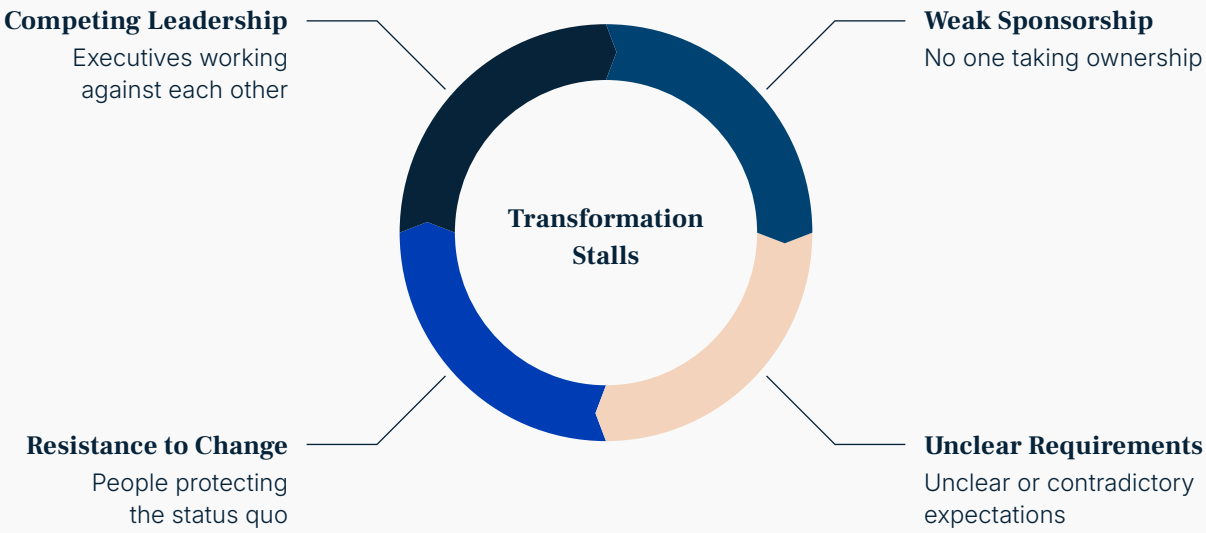
Conclusion

If there's one thing to be learned from all the methods of subversion we've detailed in this guide, it would be that most transformation programmes don't need a saboteur.

The thinly-veiled contempt of competing executives, cronyistic recruitment models, lack of sponsorship, ill-defined requirements and rough-shod communication styles adopted by so many programmes means most are well-placed to sabotage themselves.

The fact of the matter is, even with the best of intentions, any time an enterprise tries to change its status quo it will be met with resistance by those who benefit from that status quo.

No matter how exciting the outcomes look in some fancy consultant's expensive deck, the reality of making change stick is that it is hard.



Effective, Long-Lasting Transformation Requires:

Commitment

It takes vision to lay out a plan. But it takes patience and dedication to see it through. For leaders this means having the humility to accept they don't know everything, the vulnerability to have difficult conversations with their critics and the courage to prioritise what actually matters more than what reflects best on you.

Capability

Effective change is only possible when the people leading that change are capable enough to know what good looks like and how to get there. The hard thing for most CEOs and leaders is looking their colleagues in the eye and objectively diagnosing whether or not the skills they currently have are adequate for the programme ahead.

Capacity

Every transformation needs dedicated programme, project and change management resources. People who have experience of delivering in difficult circumstances and the wherewithal to see change through. Because the need for change is constant. So you need the right skills. But more than that, you need to deliberately direct those skills towards continuous evolution.

This is why it helps so much to have external help. Delivery partners who can tell you what you need to hear and not just what you want to hear. People separate enough from the internal politics to be able to act as objective, independent adjudicators.

That external perspective on the quality of your people, tools and processes is vital if you're motivated and ambitious enough to make a real difference.

On the other hand, if you want to see the transformation programme stall while violent politics and counter-dynamics overrule your best intentions, well...now you know where to start.

If you're sick of consultants, give us a call.

We work with CEOs, executives and private equity firms that understand execution matters just as much as strategy.

If you're trying to deliver real change that sticks, we should probably talk.

Reach out at **info@condor-group.uk.**

Condor Group