OPERATING-MODEL TRANSFORMATION

Transform *the Core*

Real transformation changes how strategy becomes governed work and provable value.

A point of view for executives, boards, and value-creation leaders accountable for converting transformation investment into governed execution and measurable enterprise value.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Brief

The transformation industry has spent a generation building methodologies for the layers around the operating model. Far fewer give executives a standard for proving whether the model actually changed.

That gap is a structural cause behind the failure rate the market keeps reporting. McKinsey says 70 percent fall short. Bain says 88 percent, and finds that transformations which succeed avoid overloading top talent. BCG, on digital transformations, reports 70 percent. The methodologies differ; the signal does not. Enterprises have become better at launching transformation than landing it.

McKinsey puts the structural cost at 30 percent: even among high-performing companies, that share of strategy's full potential never reaches the P&L – a gap attributed directly to shortcomings in the operating model. One European telecom CFO summarized it after a major operating-model transformation: *"All that work, and what did it get us?"*

This paper installs the missing discipline. It calls the working operating model the *Core*: the conversion system through which strategy becomes governed work and provable value. That is what makes transformation Big-T – not scale, spend, sponsorship, or urgency, but a change in the working operating model. The contribution is not the noun. It is the method that makes the standard legible: what must change, what the enterprise must own to make the change real, and what proof shows the model changed.

If the operating model did not change, it is not Big-T Transformation. *Transform the Core.*

THE WOUND

> *"All that work. What did it get us?"*
>
> — CFO, European telecom

THE STANDARD

Big-T is a change in the working operating model – not scale, spend, sponsorship, or urgency.

THE FIVE QUESTIONS

01 Foundation
02 Traceability
03 Evidence Chain
04 Value Assurance
05 Defensibility

THE PRESSURE POINTS

AI, platforms, cost pressure, integration, and board oversight now punish decorative transformation.

THE ARGUMENT

The Word → The Category Error → The Core → *The Undeclared Work* → The Test

01

The Word

Walk into any enterprise transformation and ask what is being transformed. The answers will be long and varied. The technology stack. The process. The operating rhythm. The customer journey. The data architecture. The change muscle. The portfolio. The leadership. Each answer may be true. None of them is the same answer. That is the first problem.

Transformation has become a catch-all for nearly any initiative that is large, urgent, expensive, cross-functional, technology-enabled, or executive-sponsored. A strategy refresh is called transformation. A platform implementation is called transformation. A cost-reduction program, a shared-services move, a process-improvement portfolio, an AI pilot, a target-operating-model design, and a change-management campaign all claim the same label. Some of that work matters. Much of it is necessary. Each can wear the label. None of it is automatically transformation.

Language shapes governance. When every major initiative carries the same word, leaders lose the ability to tell the difference between activity that improves the current enterprise and change that alters how the enterprise actually works.

Executives inspect milestone progress. Boards review initiative volume. Investors underwrite value-capture plans. Platform providers deploy capability. Transformation offices report status. The activity is real. The transformation is often not.

The market has been measuring this for years. McKinsey cites roughly 70 percent of transformations falling short.[1] Bain's 2024 research puts that figure at 88 percent.[2] BCG, on digital transformations, reports 70 percent.[3] The methodologies differ. The signal does not: enterprises have become better at launching transformation than landing it.

The sharper question is the one boardrooms rarely ask. Where is the working operating model itself being transformed — not described, not optimized around, not re-platformed, but changed? That question usually produces silence. The silence is not accidental.

SIGNAL

When everything is transformation, nothing is.

02

The Category Error

The category error hides in plain sight. Every discipline that surrounds the operating model assumes the operating model can absorb what the discipline asks of it. Strategic planning sets ambition. Enterprise architecture draws the future state. Program offices track milestones. Change management supports adoption. Lean and Six Sigma remove waste. Enterprise platforms digitize workflows. AI now promises to accelerate them. Each works at a useful altitude. Each presumes the Core can absorb what it asks. That assumption is the category error.

When the operating model is assumed rather than examined, every test that should distinguish transformation from activity gets replaced by something easier to measure. Initiative volume substitutes for change. Milestone completion substitutes for conversion. Platform go-live substitutes for capability. Cost achieved substitutes for value. Board updates substitute for governance. Each metric tells leaders something true. None catches the Monday-morning reality: the performance succeeds where the conversion does not. The customer still waits the same days. The exception still finds the same VP. The forecast still misses for the same reasons.

This is why a strategy can be coherent and still fail because the operating model cannot convert it. A target operating model can be elegant and still fail because the transition into working state is underbuilt. A transformation office can run disciplined governance and still fail because the work entering the portfolio was never validated against real capacity, margin, capability, or evidence logic.

The category error is not harmless. It weakens executive oversight, because leaders review activity instead of conversion. It weakens board governance, because directors see initiative volume without seeing what changed. It weakens investor diligence, because value-capture narratives are accepted before the operating model has been tested. It weakens platform investment, because capability gets deployed before the enterprise has specified what the Core must absorb. It weakens AI investment, because use cases multiply before workflow, decision rights, evidence quality, and correction loops are ready.

The result is a familiar pattern. Transformation everywhere. Transformation nowhere.

SEE EXHIBIT 1

Exhibit 1 draws the boundary. The test is not whether the work matters. The test is whether it changes the Core.

SIGNAL

Every method works around the Core. Few examine it.

EXHIBIT 1

Adjacency-led activity versus operating-model transformation

A boundary test for whether work improves around the Core, or changes the Core.

WHAT IT SHOWS

The boundary between adjacent activity and Core-changing transformation.

HOW TO USE IT

Run any initiative against both columns to see whether it changes the Core or only improves around it.

WHAT IT GUARDS AGAINST

Mistaking useful work around the model for transformation of the model.

ADJACENCY-LED ACTIVITY		OPERATING-MODEL TRANSFORMATION
Funds a workstream, not a new operating logic PMO, platform, AI, OpEx, TOM, or change work advances inside existing decision rights.		**Redesigns the work path that carries strategy** Entry, classification, sequencing, execution, proof, correction, and ownership are reset.
Leaves the work path largely intact Intake, routing, funding, staffing, handoffs, approvals, and proof remain distributed.	*vs.*	**Drives a step-change in performance** Lifecycle pain, seam and handoff risk, and value leakage define what must change in the Core.
Optimizes artifacts before requirements Roadmaps, dashboards, business cases, and controls move without actual-state evidence.		**Moves authority to where value breaks** Funding, arbitration, governance, resource tradeoffs, and margin logic are reassigned.
Reports progress without locating leakage Milestones, adoption, spend, or savings are tracked, but strategy-to-value failure stays hidden.		**Tests whether the forecast held** Evidence shows where value converted, where leakage appeared, and whether the Core changed.

STANDARD If spend improves a tool, function, initiative, or control layer without changing the workflow foundation that carries strategy to proof, it is adjacency-led activity – not Big-T Transformation.

EX. 01

03

The Missing Subject

The subject most transformation work surrounds, and most rarely changes, is the working operating model. This paper calls it the *Core*. The name matters because most transformation literature names the operating model in forms that stay abstract: as ambition, as future state, as a deck. The Core is not the org chart, the technology stack, the process repository, the target-operating-model deck, or the initiative portfolio. Each of those may describe, support, or surround the enterprise. None of them is the Core by itself.

The Core is the conversion system: the practical architecture through which demand enters, work is classified into governable units, accepted work becomes executable commitment, execution produces evidence, evidence becomes correction, and correction creates value. Quote-to-cash, hire-to-retire, procure-to-pay, contract lifecycle, demand-to-delivery, issue-to-resolution – these are the lifecycles through which the enterprise actually moves. Big-T Transformation changes how these lifecycles work, not what they are called on an architecture diagram.

This is why a coherent strategy fails when the Core cannot convert it. Cost returns when the Core that produced it remains intact. Margin leaks when the qualification, pricing, scope, staffing, delivery path, and proof logic are not governed as one system. Each failure looks operational. Each is structural.

30%

of strategy's full potential never reaches the P&L — a gap McKinsey attributes to operating-model shortcomings.[4]

The Core is where strategy becomes operationally honest. A growth strategy becomes honest when demand can be captured, qualified, routed, resourced, priced, delivered, proven, and improved. An AI strategy becomes honest when use cases connect to classified demand, embedded workflow, governed decisions, proof-quality evidence, and correction loops. Margin, digital, and integration strategies follow the same rule: each becomes honest only when the Core can carry it.

Every transformation adjacency depends on the Core. Strategy, change, platforms, AI, cost programs, and governance all require proof of how value actually moves through this system. EXHIBIT 2 names the playing field.

SIGNAL

Strategy is a claim. The Core is the proof.

EXHIBIT 2

The operating-model conversion foundation

Every transformation adjacency depends on this system – and each claim must prove how value actually moves.

WHAT IT SHOWS

The conversion chain through which demand becomes work, execution, evidence, and value.

HOW TO USE IT

Trace strategy, platform, AI, cost, or governance claims through the chain before accepting the value case.

WHAT IT GUARDS AGAINST

Assuming a strategy, tool, or program creates value before the workflow proves it.

ADJACENCIES DEPEND ON THE CHAIN

STRATEGY	TMO / PMO	PLATFORMS	CHANGE	AI	COST-OUT
sets intent	tracks activity	instrument work	drives adoption	automates work	targets expense

Demand	→	Work	→	Execution	→	Evidence	→	Value
What enters		Accepted & routed		What gets done		Proves completion		Changes performance
GET		SORT		DO		PROVE		IMPROVE

CONVERSION BOUNDARIES · WHERE TRANSFORMATION IS TESTED

Demand → Work

Does ungoverned work consume capacity the enterprise never authorized?

Work → Execution

Does routing reconcile price, scope, capacity, and margin before work starts?

Execution → Evidence

Can completion be proven by system evidence, not status narrative?

Evidence → Value

Does the system learn before cost, rework, or risk returns?

STANDARD If the Core does not change, the enterprise has funded activity around transformation, not transformation itself.

EX. 02

04

The Hidden Intelligence

Leaders are surrounded by intelligence that describes everything around the Core and almost nothing about its working state.

Most executive teams already receive market intelligence on demand and positioning, financial intelligence on performance and capital, customer intelligence on satisfaction and churn, competitive intelligence on strategic threats, workforce intelligence on talent and capacity, and increasingly AI-derived intelligence to summarize, predict, recommend, or detect patterns. Each source improves a different decision. Together, they can make the enterprise look well instrumented.

VOICE OF THE SYSTEM

VotS shows where the operating model stops being able to convert strategy into governed work and provable value:

Where does work really enter?

What logic classifies, routes, rejects, or hides it?

Where does ownership shift between functions?

Where does evidence get too weak to defend value?

Where does the same failure return under a new name?

But most of that intelligence describes the world *around* the Core: markets, capital, customers, competitors, talent, capacity, patterns in the data. It does not show the working state of the Core itself.

The evidence was already there: in the delays, workarounds, handoff failures, hidden labor, weak proof, exception paths, and corrections that never closed. Those signals show how the enterprise actually converts intent into work, commitment, evidence, correction, and value.

The answers come from the Core itself, not from the people interpreting it. The principle has scholarly lineage: W. Edwards Deming made systems thinking foundational to modern management – a system produces what it is designed to produce, and the discipline that does not study its own system keeps generating outcomes it cannot explain.[5] Forty years on, the principle remains underused at the strategy layer. Most enterprises still diagnose their Core through interview, opinion, or framework. The Core is visible in the work. Most governance is looking somewhere else.

SIGNAL

The Core has been speaking. The enterprise measured everything else.

04 · CONTINUED

Structure turns the signal into a system

Voice of the System needs structure, or the signal becomes anecdote. *GSDPI* provides it. Get reveals how demand enters. Sort reveals how demand becomes a governable unit of work. Do reveals how execution actually happens – workflow, systems, decision rights, exceptions, handoffs. Prove reveals whether completion can be validated by evidence rather than narrative. Improve reveals whether evidence becomes correction, or the same pain recycles through the next initiative. GSDPI is not a methodology to install. It is the universally applicable grammar of how work moves.

It makes three planes legible at once – horizontal (how actors move, where handoffs fail), vertical (each stage as a diagnostic surface), and systemic (the pattern across the whole). Exhibit 3 renders all three.

A local pain may be a process issue. A pattern of pain across actors, stages, and seams reveals an operating-model challenge no single function can see from inside its lane. That pattern surfaces hidden *Enablement* requirements: authority, decision rights, workstreams, proof obligations, and ownership altitude to bind transformation at the seams.

Cross-functional decision rights cannot be reallocated by a function head. No CFO rewrites Legal's thresholds; no COO resets Sales' qualification rules. That happens at an executive layer with authority across the lanes. Bain's research corroborates it: enterprises that succeed often install a dedicated transformation officer for the work no function can own.[2]

GET	SORT	DO	PROVE	IMPROVE
How demand enters	Classification & routing	Workflow execution	Evidence & validation	Response & learning

ONE GSDPI DISCOVERY · A CONTRACT-MANAGEMENT VALUE CHAIN

32	11	7	9	7	10	2
Work nodes	Capabilities	Systems	Cross-functional	Sessions	Hours	Months

Not theory – what the operating model had been saying that nobody had a structure to hear.

SIGNAL

Local pain is process. Pattern pain is the operating model.

EXHIBIT 3

Workflow visibility through GSDPI

An anonymized contract-management value chain — 106 pain points across 32 work nodes, weighted by severity and frequency.

WHAT IT SHOWS

Actors, systems, pain, seams, and requirement signals across the Core.

HOW TO USE IT

Read horizontally for handoffs, vertically for lifecycle-stage failure patterns.

WHAT IT GUARDS AGAINST

Mistaking a process map or status report for what the model can actually do.

106 pain points · 32 work nodes · 7 systems · mapped across five verticals, weighted by severity × frequency

	GET *Drop-offs*	SORT *Heroics*	DO *Rework*	PROVE *Blind-spots*	IMPROVE *Drift*	LANE
Legal	4	3	7	6	5	25
Business	5	4	5	3	2	19
Finance	2	3	4	5	4	18
Procurement	4	3	5	4	3	19
Operations	3	4	6	6	6	25
STAGE	18	17	**27**	24	20	**106**

DOMINANT PAIN BY STAGE

Intake & handoff failure · Silos & heroics · Process defect · Weak proof · Governance & cost gap · Tint depth = concentration

No vertical is clean. The pain is systemic, not local — heaviest at Do *and* Prove, *where work is executed and where it must be proven.*

OUTCOME

Surfacing this stopped the CLO from digitizing a broken model. Correcting the gaps — not the tool — let the rebuild target **60% faster contract review, 95% risk-flag accuracy, and 30% less manual effort**, protecting the platform spend before a dollar was committed.

STANDARD Begin with actual-state. It exposes the enablement requirements hidden by current-state, ideal-state, and launch-first planning.

05

The Undeclared Work

The strategy deck named the ambition. The portfolio deck named the initiatives. The platform deck named the capability. The change deck named adoption. The transformation office named the milestones. None of them named the work that holds those decks together

when execution begins – the *undeclared work* transformation depends on, met as friction nobody planned for.

It is not soft work, not optional, not "support." It is authority that must be assigned, decision rights that must be reassigned, capacity that must be released, and proof standards that must be installed. Each is concrete, executable, structural. Most appear nowhere on a transformation Gantt chart until the moment they block one.

Modern leadership scholarship completes the picture. Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety shows that organizations carry intelligence about their own operating reality that stays unspoken unless the conditions to surface it are engineered.[6] Voice of the System gives the model a way to speak; psychological safety lets people corroborate what it reveals.

THE REQUIREMENT EVERYONE UNDERWEIGHTS

TRANSFORMATION REQUIREMENT
What must change in the Core. The part most teams already write down.

ENABLEMENT REQUIREMENT
What must be owned, funded, sequenced, governed, installed, or corrected so the change can land. Invisible until it blocks delivery – and where transformation actually fails.

THE ENABLEMENT GAPS ONE DISCOVERY SURFACED

- Inconsistent intake
- Unclear ownership
- Unmanaged exception paths
- Weak risk evidence
- Manual review burden

Correcting these – not the platform – is what the contract-management rebuild monetized (Exhibit 3).

SIGNAL

Transformation lands on the work no function will name.

EXHIBIT 4

From Voice of the System to requirements

How actual-state evidence becomes requirements, enablement work, and investment logic.

1 **ACTUAL-STATE EVIDENCE**
Locate where strategy becomes work.

→

2 **VALUE / RISK SIGNAL**
Identify the operating consequence.

→

3 **REQUIREMENT LOGIC**
Resolve VotS requirements; set the Enablement mandate.

→

4 **INVESTMENT LOGIC**
Fund what unlocks value, reduces risk, protects the thesis.

	VALUE / RISK SIGNAL	REQUIREMENT LOGIC	INVESTMENT LOGIC
Conversion Point	Where does strategy become work?	Which surfaced requirements block Core conversion?	What investment protects or unlocks value?
Operating Friction	Where does work stall, fragment, repeat, or bypass governance?	What missing Enablement authority keeps friction recurring?	What Enablement cost or dependency belongs in the value case?
Seam Evidence	Which seam exposes failure: demand, routing, execution, proof, correction?	Which new seam metric proves ownership has changed?	Who owns value across every handoff, high enough to drive the decision?
Value Proof	What outcome must the system prove?	Which value target must the seam evidence defend?	Where does the forecast hold, leak, or require correction?

STANDARD Voice of the System makes operating evidence, not opinion, set the transformation agenda.

06

The Reckoning

The urgency is not abstract. Five forcing functions are now exposing operating-model debt from outside the enterprise. None of them is kind to decorative transformation.

39%

report enterprise EBIT impact, though 88% use AI

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Gartner: 80% of CEOs expect AI to force medium-to-high change in operational capability.[7] Yet the value has not arrived.[8][9] AI scales whatever operating model it enters – orphaned approvals, unclear decision rights, weak data, proof gaps.

70%

of recent ERP initiatives will miss their business case by 2027

PLATFORMS

Gartner also finds 75% of ERP strategies poorly aligned to business strategy.[10] Target Canada: product data right only ~30% of the time, ~$5.4B pre-tax loss.[11] SAP did not fail – it made the actual state impossible to hide.

20 → 80%

odds of success when cost work is operating-model-led

COST

BCG: blunt reductions leave structural inefficiency in place.[12] A task-layer productivity gain is not structural value until roles, capacity, sourcing, service levels, workflow, and proof are governed as one system. Otherwise the cost returns.

2 → 1

one conversion system, or two wearing one logo

INTEGRATION

McKinsey: post-merger implementation of the combined operating model determines whether synergy targets are met.[13] Two reporting structures can be combined on a Friday. Two operating models cannot.

60%

of directors rank execution oversight #1 for 2026

BOARDS

NACD's 2026 Governance Outlook.[14] Boards no longer ask for richer transformation dashboards. The question now is what management can defend on the next results call: did the company change, or did only the deck change?

SIGNAL

The technology landed. The value did not.

07

The Test

Leaders need a standard the board, the executive team, the investor, the operating partner, and the transformation officer can all apply to any transformation claim. Not a framework. A test.

Exhibit 5 names that test in five categories, each addressed to a different governance question, each answerable in plain language by the people who fund and oversee the work.

None of these questions is new. Boards have always wanted to know whether the company changed. Investors have always wanted to know whether value got captured. What is new is the discipline that connects them: actual-state evidence at intake, requirements that separate transformation from enablement, an executive layer with authority to bind change at the seams, and a proof loop that closes correction back into the operating model.

The standard does not make transformation easier. *It makes transformation harder to claim and easier to prove.*

FIVE GOVERNANCE QUESTIONS

01 **Foundation**
Change the model, or redistribute value within it? The first cut.

02 **Traceability**
Does every funded initiative trace to evidence, a requirement, or a constraint?

03 **Evidence Chain**
Can each unit show whether the intake forecast held, and where value leaked?

04 **Value Assurance**
Did value actually move – leakage, variance, benefits, impact, ROI exposure?

05 **Defensibility**
Can leadership prove it to a board, investor, auditor, or regulator? The last gate.

SIGNAL

Either the Core changed, or it didn't. There is no third answer.

EXHIBIT 5

The executive test

Five questions that separate Core-changing transformation from activity funded around it.

WHAT IT SHOWS

Five governance questions that separate Core-changing transformation from funded activity.

HOW TO USE IT

Apply before funding, during governance, and after delivery to test whether the Core changed.

WHAT IT GUARDS AGAINST

Crediting transformation before leaders can defend traceability, evidence, and outcomes.

01 FOUNDATION

Will it change the working operating/service-delivery model to create new value, or simply redistribute existing value?

02 TRACEABILITY

Can every funded initiative trace to actual-state evidence, an operating-model requirement, or a value-delivery constraint?

03 EVIDENCE CHAIN

Can each new unit of work show whether its point-of-entry forecast held through execution, and where value leakage first occurred?

04 VALUE ASSURANCE

Will it reduce leakage, control variance, lift benefits, scale impact, or change ROI exposure?

05 DEFENSIBILITY

Can leadership prove what changed, what value moved, what capability was created, and why the outcome is defensible to a board, investor, auditor, or regulator? The last gate.

STANDARD If the Core did not change, the enterprise funded activity around transformation, not transformation itself.

08

The Charge

Our work across F500 enterprises, private-equity portfolios, post-merger integrations, and digital-first launches keeps surfacing the same fault line: capability deployed, conversion absent. Cost programs funded, operating models intact. AI piloted, decisions ungoverned. Integrations announced, two operating models still going to market under one nameplate. The activity changes. The Core does not.

This is a structural argument, not a rhetorical one. The Core is the thing that does not change when everything else does. It is also the only thing whose change makes the rest of the work mean anything.

So stop calling platform go-lives transformation. Stop calling AI pilots transformation. Stop calling process-improvement portfolios transformation. When the work changes how strategy becomes value at the conversion seams — *that* is transformation.

The test is in your hands now.

Transform the Core.

SOURCES & NOTES

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Darrin advises executives, boards, operating partners, and value-creation leaders on the operating-model discipline required to convert strategic intent into governed work, workflow evidence, corrective action, and defensible enterprise value. Since 2004 he has led, structured, or advised 60+ transformations across PE-backed and corporate enterprises, from $400M to $20B in revenue. He holds an MBA from The Citadel and is a doctoral candidate in Strategic Management at Liberty University, with executive education from MIT and Harvard.

ABOUT ETEGY

ETEGY helps executive teams, boards, operating partners, and value-creation leaders determine whether transformation work is changing the operating model or only funding activity around it — diagnosing actual operating-model state, translating strategy into transformation and enablement requirements, and installing the governance, evidence, and correction discipline required to make enterprise value defensible.

FOR EXECUTIVE DISCUSSION OR BOARD-LEVEL APPLICATION OF THIS POINT OF VIEW

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GET · SORT · DO · PROVE · IMPROVE