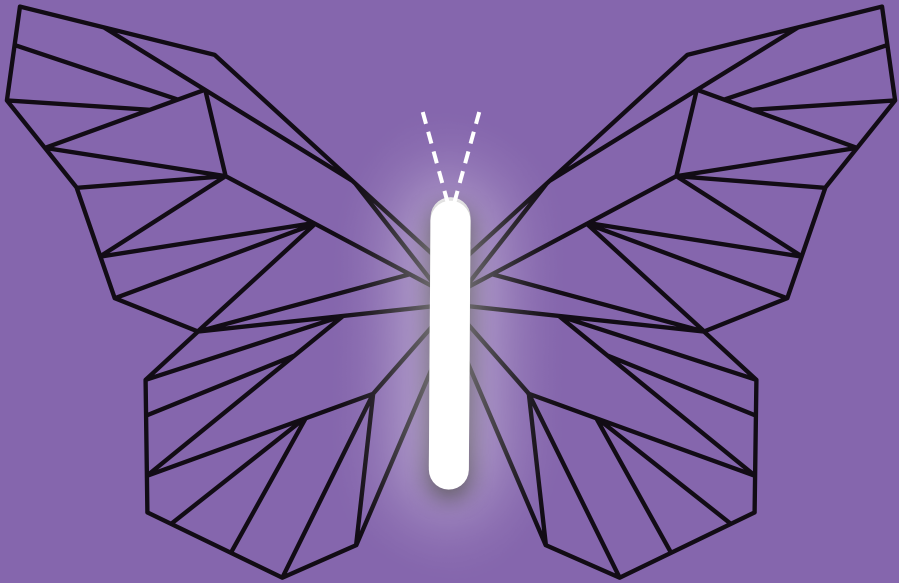**Brightline**
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ROGER L. MARTIN

The fundamental problem with transformation implementation

I have a rule. When something doesn't seem to work and doesn't for a long time despite people's hard work, I stop asking how to work harder. Instead, I try to find the dog that didn't bark, as in *Silver Blaze* when Sherlock Holmes cracked the case by focusing on something inconsistent with the dominant premise. Only Holmes asked: "Why did the stable dog fail to bark while strangers absconded with the prize horse?" While everyone else was looking for the stranger, Holmes focused on an inside job because only that explained the non-barking dog. I see the "Transformation Implementation" question in a similar light. People are focusing on the wrong part of the scene before them. They are focusing on implementation, not transformation.

Consider first the framing of the problem. There is assumed to be an organization that is doing badly enough to need 'transformation.' That is a pretty loaded word. It is not 'improvement,' 'tweaking,' 'course correction,' or 'acceleration.' All of those latter words connote modest changes to the status quo. Transformation connotes a fundamental, discontinuous change – a revolution, a reboot, a makeover – otherwise we wouldn't call it 'transformation' in the first place and we wouldn't have a problem with transformation implementation.

Then let's think about who complains incessantly about the challenges to transformation implementation? It is, of course, the propagators of transformation attempts. They come up with a transformational plan and then complain about the failure of, cost of, and/or delays in its implementation. Who do they complain about? It is the human beings who occupy the organization for which they have a transformational objective and plan. These human beings resist, drag their feet, and/or attempt to undermine the transformation.

That defines the task for transformation implementation: to persuade these recalcitrant human beings to get with the programme and let the transformation happen. This means things like: figuring out better incentives to compel transformational behaviour, creating more detailed plans to drive transformation,

communicating more clearly about the transformation, creating project teams to better organize transformation, creating a Project Management Office with singular power to turbo-charge the transformation, etc. And generally speaking, despite lots of talk and effort in these areas, transformation implementation remains a thorny and daunting challenge.

What, then, is the dog that didn't bark? It is the transformation plan itself. In this narrative, it is assumed to be not only valid, but to be the right answer. Bright transformation plan propagators do all the thinking work necessary to come up with the optimal transformation plan. They analyze deeply. They may even, in modern style, seek the ideas of the human beings who will be subject to the transformation. But in the end, it is the transformation plan of the propagators. And therein lies the fatal flaw.

The fundamental problem isn't the presence of human behavioural roadblocks in the implementation of the plan; it is in the mental models of the propagators of these plans. Their model is that of the technocrat. Technocrats believe that they can study an issue, apply superior intellect and analytical rigour, figure out the right answer, and then provide that answer to the organization for it to bring it to fruition.

This fundamental model contains two really problematic assumptions. First, the model presumes that one can be scientific about creating something different in the future than is operational in the present and/or has been operational in the past: faux science. Second, the model presumes that one can, with reasonable accuracy, predict in advance how the transformation will work out when it is actually implemented: false precision.

Faux science

Transformation is fundamentally about creating something different in the future from what is operational in the present (and past). The father of science, Aristotle, warned against the use of science in what he termed "the part of the world where things can be other than they are." In the part of the world where things cannot be other than they are – e.g. the force of gravity; the speed of light, etc. – science is an extremely helpful tool for predicting the future: it will, by definition be the same as the past. But not in the world of transformation where, by definition, the future is going to be different from the past. For this reason, science can't tell us what an appropriate transformation would be or whether a given transformation effort will be successful or not. Science is limited to analyzing the past and predicting a future that is a simple extrapolation of the

past. So, technocratically analyzing the present and past to determine the right answer for the future is a fool's errand.

In this part of the world, Aristotle told us that the way to create that better – dare we say 'transformed' – future is to imagine possibilities and choose the one for which the most compelling argument can be made. He saw processes of imagining possibilities and choosing the most compelling as deeply social processes in which many participate in the imagination of possibilities and in which the arguments about alternative futures are aired in the relevant public spaces and debated openly and fairly. He termed the approach rhetoric – the deep exchange of ideas that helps develop and select for the future more compelling ideas over less compelling ideas. To be certain, Aristotle's world does not include providing one favoured solution and attempting to achieve buy-in!

Rarely, if ever, in the creation of transformation plans are the human beings who will have to live through and implement the transformation in question involved in a genuine dialog about alternative possibilities. Yet those subject to the transformation, whose jobs depend on it being an extremely thoughtful transformation, have to take it on faith that the propagators have done a smashing job. Most are not foolish enough to think that is the case. They are right to be sceptical.

False precision

If the transformation propagators were intervening in a machine, in which it is pretty clear what actions result in what effects, they would be in a better position to argue that they have figured out the perfect transformational path forward in advance. But in fact, they are intervening in a complex adaptive system – an organization that exists within an uncertain and fluid competitive and societal context. In such a system, one can never be certain about the effects of given actions. Does that mean that transformation propagators should throw up their hands and give up? No. But it means that they should not attempt to sell their particular transformation as more precise and perfect than it will ever be. Instead, they should admit openly that no plan survives contact with the enemy fully intact and get ready to tweak and tweak and tweak that transformation plan as new things are learned – often from members of their own organization.

Alternative routing

A better transformation implementation philosophy stops obsessing about implementation and instead focuses on the transformation plan. Rather than minimizing dialog and debate over real alternative transformational possibilities, the process of creating the plan should maximize dialog and debate. Many will respond that there is no time to engage in that dialog. To those people, I say: "Then stop complaining about the time it takes to achieve transformation implementation. Your method is generating that delay as a matter of course. If you want to keep ramming your transformation down the throat of your organization, then shut up and accept the delays, the pushback, the sabotage."

And rather than espousing certainty and showing inflexibility, focus on maintaining agility and flexibility to respond to the eventualities that can never be accurately predicted. Many will say that is not strong or leaderly. To those people, I say: "Read some military history and understand the horrible human toll of inflexible plans – whether Stalingrad, Bay of Pigs, Charge of the Light Brigade, or Dieppe." Think like a designer and see your transformation as a series of increasingly higher-resolution prototypes.

These two changes – first to the process of creating the plan and second to the acceptance of the limitations of planning – will accomplish much more than continuing to ignore the dog that isn't barking and obsessing about the nuances of implementation.

About the author

Roger L. Martin is a writer, strategy advisor, and was ranked as the number one management thinker in the world by Thinkers50 in 2017. From 1998 to 2013, he served as Dean of the Rotman School of Management, from 2004 to 2018 Director of the Michael Lee-Chin Family Institute for Corporate Citizenship, and from 2013 to 2019 the Institute Director of the Martin Prosperity Institute. He has published 11 books, the most recent of which are *Creating Great Choices* (with Jennifer Riel, 2017), *Getting Beyond Better* (with Sally Osberg, 2015), and *Playing to Win* (with A.G. Lafley, 2013).