

# “Here we go again. Just keep your head down and we’ll outlast this.”

*Why transformation succeeds or fails on belief and belonging*

If you've worked in retail, trade, or hospitality for longer than an election cycle, there's a good chance you'll recognise the scenario.

A new CEO arrives. There's a senior team shake-up. Change is pronounced. Then, like a magician preparing a trick, they disappear behind closed doors.

Months later, the invitations arrive, the stage is lit, the performance begins, and the strategy is unveiled.

The audience watches. They nod. They applaud.

But it isn't until the auditorium has emptied and people are talking over dinner, drinks, or in the queue to pay for parking that the performance is truly reviewed. It’s then that you’ll hear:

**“Here we go again. Just keep your head down and we’ll outlast this.”**

It's a sentiment Neil Munz-Jones, founder of *mdj2*, has heard throughout his career, from shop floor colleagues to dissenting senior managers.

And while plenty can go wrong during a transformation programme, one of the most overlooked hurdles often appears long before a strategy is shared.

"Glossy transformation strategies and detailed project plans developed without adequate colleague input may reassure boards and investors, but they rarely tell you how engaged your people are," says Neil.

"Yet it's colleague belief that determines whether a transformation gains traction or quietly stalls, because the work involved isn't done by the CEO, it's delivered by their people."

**Belief before buy-in**

"I'm of the belief that most people come to work wanting to do a good job. So, if you don't think they are, put yourself in their shoes to better understand why," says David Estyn-Jones, *mdj2* associate with more than 30 years' experience leading transformational change.

For David, the problem is that too many transformations are still designed behind closed doors, with little colleague involvement, before being presented as a fait accompli.

**"If you want colleagues to deliver change, they need to believe in it. They need to see themselves in it."**

**David Estyn-Jones**

"I'm always surprised when organisations ignore the expertise already within their teams. One of the most powerful things a leader can do is ask people what they think and genuinely listen," says David.

And when colleagues don't engage, David believes there's usually a good reason. Sometimes they haven't been told why the change is happening. Sometimes they're measured against conflicting objectives. Sometimes the plan doesn't bear up to operational scrutiny. But as David says, "if you don't ask, you don't know."

That challenge becomes particularly acute in retail, trade, and hospitality, where transformation must coexist with the realities of running customer-facing businesses.

**"There is already a day job."**

***John Alexander***

"Transformation arrives alongside trading pressures, budget cuts, staff shortages, rising customer expectations, and all the other realities of running customer-facing businesses," says John Alexander, *mdj2* associate who has project-managed multiple large-scale transformation programmes.

Every transformation eventually collides with operational reality.

"So many good ideas don't bear up to operational scrutiny," says John, who challenges leaders to test plans against the realities of peak trading with operational colleagues.

**More than a pay cheque**

Retail, trade, and hospitality have a unique advantage: they are highly operational sectors, and many senior leaders have worked their way up through the ranks. They've served customers, run stores/branches/pubs, and experienced the realities of making change land.

The challenge, David argues, is that today's frontline reality may differ significantly from what they remember.

"That early ops experience is invaluable, but it can also create blind spots if leaders stop seeking input from the people living those realities today," he says.

It also helps explain why so many colleagues in these sectors tend to be deeply invested in the organisations they work for.

"People genuinely care about their business and doing the right thing for customers," says David, "so work is often about more than a pay cheque."

Many derive a strong sense of identity from their work. That can be a powerful asset during transformation, but it can also create scepticism when people feel excluded.

"Your people are your force multiplier. That's amazing when they're working with you, but if they're working against you, life becomes much harder," says David.

"In my experience, most colleagues want what's best for their business and want to contribute positively. The question is whether they've been given the opportunity, clarity, and support to do so."

**The baggage organisations carry**

Neil argues leaders often underestimate the time needed to understand the human system they're trying to change.

"Organisations are systems with a complex web of connected humans," says Neil. "People are both rational and emotional. We all bring baggage from the places we've been and the experiences we've had, both good and bad."

Perhaps a previous transformation failed after months of effort and cancelled holidays, or a previous CEO promised change but left before delivering it.

**"Nobody thinks they're resistant to change, but the brain is excellent at self-preservation and one of the ways it does that is by spotting patterns."**

***Neil Munz-Jones***

When previous experience suggests to colleagues that transformation means hard work on their part followed by broken promises from leadership, it doesn't take long for people to become cautious about investing emotionally in the next initiative.

Why fully commit when experience suggests the programme, or those leading it, may not be around before it is delivered?

"All behaviour makes sense when seen in the context of the system to which it belongs," says Neil. "We learn the rules of belonging early. When you're new, you quickly start reading the tea leaves about how to behave."

Which is why Neil believes leaders sometimes need to slow down before speeding up.

**Before you build the future**

"Before you rush to create the future, you have to acknowledge what's already there," says Neil.

Yet too many leaders fail to acknowledge what came before, or worse, dismiss it entirely.

Every transformation inherits an existing system with its own history, loyalties, and unfinished conversations.

That includes colleagues whose roles disappeared during restructures, taking knowledge, relationships, and experience with them.

"When people leave or projects fail, we often want to move on quickly," says Neil. "But systems have a way of remembering. People notice when previous contributions are ignored or when earlier chapters of an organisation's story are dismissed. Those who join a system first need to be acknowledged, or those who follow can't find their place."

**Before asking people to build the future, leaders need to recognise those who helped create the present.**

Neil points to a familiar phrase: 'The capabilities that got you here won't get you there.' "There's truth in that," he says. "But what's often forgotten is that the people who got you here made an important contribution."

Ignore that reality, and those forces tend to reappear later. Acknowledge it, and people are better able to find their place in whatever comes next, because the biggest barrier to transformation is rarely a lack of strategy. It's a lack of belief, or a threat to the sense of belonging among the very people expected to deliver it.

And when leaders fail to recognise that, the conversations that matter most rarely happen within boardrooms or town halls.

They happen afterwards in corridors, on coffee runs, even as managers queue to pay for the launch conference parking.

And when colleagues can't see themselves, their ideas, or their concerns reflected in the change, that's where somebody quietly says:

*"Here we go again. Just keep your head down and we'll outlast this."*

---

*Neil, David, and John are part of mdj2, a consultancy focused on driving growth, efficiency, and lasting change across retail, trade, and hospitality. Their work spans strategy, transformation, project delivery, and colleague engagement. But as they have learned through decades of experience, successful transformation is rarely determined by the quality of the plan alone. It is shaped by the people expected to deliver it. If your organisation is navigating change and you'd like to explore how to build belief, belonging, and lasting results, we'd love to talk.*

**+44 (0)7788 748497**
**info@mdj2.co.uk**
**www.mdj2.co.uk**