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ROME WAS NOT TRANSFORMED... IN A DAY

BY TIMOTHY GRAYSON

Like any other consultant and successful business book writer, I pontificate like an oracle at Delphi. In my case, about digital transformation. The trouble is that transformation is like baklava: exquisite until you've had too much, when it becomes progressively more unpalatable and eventually nauseating. Today, I already hear government executives threaten: "Don't say transformation!" Which is unfortunate because, especially for digital, transformation continues.

The word is practically stripped of meaning, having been abused by too many that inflate their own importance by calling every change a transformation. (Complicated) change can be hard and is important – but not often transformational. Applying "transformation" to change devalues both by creating expectations that result in skepticism, even as the organization has to remain dedicated to the change and ultimately to the transformation.

Transformation is an outcome: the result of many consequential changes that alter the essence of the thing transformed. A directed change is a defined and limited alteration of some facet of a thing. A change may be cosmetic or of consequence. In all likelihood, no single change will alter the organization's essential being.

The boast, "We transformed our customer engagement," after some noticeable impact following new systems, training, and performance measures implementation is typical. It is a change – maybe even a good one. But it does not rise to the level of transformation unless how the customers are treated has truly changed and the organization does it "even in the dark when nobody's watching." New behaviour usually goes through a few bumps and refinements, so transformation only happens eventually anyway. This is key.

Nature provides examples. A predatory

bird that develops feathers to fly nearly silently and eyes that allow it to see with fierce perspicacity in the dark would be significantly changed. It might be an owl not a hawk. But we're still talking about a bird. On the other hand, a prehistoric beast that eventually becomes a chicken has transformed. Closer to home, selectively breed a wolf for traits such as domesticity and loyalty, and you end up with a husky. That is a transformation. Taming an individual wolf is not.

Organizational transformation does not take thousands of years, but the principle is the same: change is not necessarily transformation.

Organizations can change. Some organizations can transform. Some have to – as long lists of case studies attest. The ongoing march of digitization is (or will be) a compelling cause of transformation for most organizations. Digitization has transformed music, photography, telephony, and communications of every sort. It threatens healthcare, manufacturing, and transportation. We see the effects of digitization on work, community, and even knowledge/intelligence. It will eventually reverberate through and transform everything.

Digitization has followed a logarithmic trajectory over the past half-century, its impact exponentially more pervasive every year. Although the pace will eventually abate, for now its tide is rising, and transformation is on the horizon all around.

The thing about real transformation is it doesn't happen at once. Transformation – particularly the kind driven by digitization – is an evolutionary proposition and long-term commitment likely to outlast most careers. Senior executives, particularly CEOs upon whom digital (well, any) transformation has to rest, need to remain fully aware of their place in the time-

line of their organization and recall that changes on their watch are just (valuable) contributions to the longer-term, on-going transformation of the organization.

Senior leaders have to be patient with transformation despite its moment of fashion receding. Transformation will soon be overtaken by "reinvention" and other novel marketing words. Old wine in new bottles! Whatever the name, when it comes to the wave of digitization we are living through, bear in mind three things:

1. Digital will inexorably and repeatedly damage all you rely on, from business models to operating processes to stakeholder (customer) relationships and beyond.
2. Your organization will either repeatedly change or perish through this period of digital transformation, which may persist another decade or another century.
3. Like a child become an adult, your organization's ultimate digital transformation will be the result of continuing, sometimes enormous, but mostly imperceptible changes – some formal, others informal.

So: transformation is a journey, not a destination. You cannot get to the end except through the middle. And the only way to get through the middle is to stick with transformation – no matter how unpalatable.



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