

JUST ONE THING: The Secret to Transformation

BY

TIMOTHY GRAYSON

We know digital transformation is weighing on you. Last week you read about the five or seven steps to make your organizational transformation a success. You bought the book at the airport. Maybe you saw the author speak.

We also know your secrets. Secret one: because the steps sound about right—and who are you to dispute all the “case study”—this may be the extent of your transformation knowledge. Secret two: you’re not sure it will work. Secret three: You’ll probably do it anyway.

Lucky for you, I have the real secret of successful transformation. I came by it honestly: trial and error. It does not come swaddled in famous proof points. There is no set of instructions, although method doesn’t hurt. The real secret of transformation is flexible and universal, and works well with any method and at any level you choose.

The secret to successful business transformation is just one thing.

Do just one thing. And do it well.

The most successful changes focus on and make a single, valuable change correctly. The least successful and sustaining are those that try to fix intractable problems by addressing everything.

But what if the reason for transformation is a systemic problem that touches on operations, finances, human resources, policy, innovation, and so on? How do you pick just one thing? How can doing just one thing have any impact?

That's the wonder of time. Not everything happens at once anyway. So why fight it? *Change* is one thing; *transformation* is a lot of changes. A transformation must necessarily sequence changes no matter how vast the scope. Doing just one thing focuses on doing one part right before moving on. More important: it creates the space to let change impacts ripple out.

How do you eat an elephant?

This six-word riddle has an equally elegant five-word answer: *One bite at a time*. Transformations are elephants. Since the elephant will never be eaten in one swallow, you have to simply start eating. Then keep at it.

Transformation is not an event, it's an expedition: a multitude of steps, passages, and meanderings. That journey is complex and complexity is not easily charted. While the destination may remain fixed, the path to it is guaranteed to evolve.

Sticking to the metaphor, one question might be what to eat first. Not all parts are equal. Some can't be gotten to before others; some are harder to swallow. For transforming your organization, this may be the most relevant question. What's first?

Unfortunately, the answer to that question often sounds like "quick wins" or "low hanging fruit." That may be right. It is certainly specific to the situation. To help evaluate the question while further assuring you about focusing on just one thing, consider the following.

Organizational transformation is people

At best, it's facile to declare, "the technology's easy." At worst, it's misguided because there are plenty of challenges with any technology change. Having said that,

remember that ultimately transformation is about changing people. And people, by and large, tend to resist change—even for excellent cause. This is evident at every level from individual to societal.

The purpose of organization transformation is *always* some variant of operational or purpose or governance overhaul. Each of these depends on human performance. So, technological or procedural change without human behaviour change suboptimizes or defeats the transformation. Such “transformation” is but a coat of new paint.

Resisting Change

People don’t change—at least not fast. At the individual level, recidivism rates are high because it takes both discipline and time to lock in new patterns. And even then, it’s the relatively few that do not relapse to previous behaviour. Groups amplify these extreme tendencies of inert stasis and wild gyration, but ultimately enforce a self-regulating habit.

A physiological and emotional fact is that at the individual level we don’t have enough energy or (self-)discipline to manage multiple changes at once. Groups are worse. The bell curve-based notion that there are early leaders who will bring along followers is true but over-simplistic. Comfort with and willingness to change doesn’t cluster around some magical median as the normal distribution suggests. It follows a power law where resistance becomes exponentially tougher. (But, so does the say of the herd...)

There’s (scientific) method to the madness

Experimentation always underlies transformation to some extent. It works best if conducted by the scientific method, which isolates just one variable to observe outcome. So, properly managing transformation requires evoking changes of state and identifying causal relationships. There are myriad, often unseen relationships in social and commercial systems. That complexity makes multiple material changes at once reckless at best. Even if you get the desired result, you can’t know why. That is directly counter to systematically pursuing efficiency and productivity.

You can't get there from here

The transformational journey is complex. More than that, we never know what circumstances will exist tomorrow that will make today moot. A single shift may affect much more than what seems obvious. Said differently, some problems may resolve themselves after one change while others might appear. The tableau of your environment is evolving and, like a chess board, is itself new as soon as you move a piece. The importance of focusing on just one thing is blatantly evident here. Making just one move can unlock the system to expose other information/options or eliminate threats/problems.

The only way to get to an objective "there" it is to move from "here." If that is presently unachievable, doing just one thing changes "here," opening a whole new range of possibilities for getting "there."

A complex system, like an organization, is one in which the number of potential outcomes to any single system fluctuation is unpredictable, and typically asymmetric. Sometimes we call these unpredictable, downstream impacts *second order effects*. In a complex system, just one thing can set off a cascade of changes that may eliminate or alter other planned changes. In short: it's possible you may not have to deal with a lot of the changes you see now to get the transformation you want after you make that one change first.

The Secret

The secret to successful transformation is not following a seven-step process. It is not extensive research and strategy. It is not elaborate planning of steps and stages, and changes upon changes. The secret to transformation is the discipline to make just one change at a time and do it well.

The magic is identifying a high-leverage change that is substantial enough to create a ripple of second order effects. The hard work is figuring out what that one change is and then executing it fully and completely.

Having done that, let that change take effect; take stock and select the next high-leverage change. It may not be what you planned. Rinse; repeat. Do this and you're on your way toward transforming into an organization that succeeds because persistent change is a core capability.

This kind of *Adaptive Transformation*™ is the best approach to long-term success and relevance in a world that rewards innovation. Such adaptive evolution is unavailable to organizations that cannot persistently change. The best part is all you have to do is make just one change—again and again and again.

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Timothy Grayson is a thought leader and organization transformation counsellor focused on technology-driven changes. Find him at tim@institute-x.org

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