RIfT — RESEARCH INITIATIVE FOR TRANSFORMATION

RIfT Working Paper I

The Missing Account of Institutional Formation

Why organisational change theory struggles to account for transformation

David Hoogland

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Working paper — for discussion and critique

This paper is the first in a series that develops RIfT's research programme. Paper I diagnoses the gap: why the dominant theories of organisational change cannot account for transformation. Paper II asks what forms of organisational design, inquiry and practice allow an institution to become alterable by what its participants come to know. Paper III asks how relational transformation can be studied empirically. Paper IV asks what relational transformation demands of power and answerability.

Version note. Draft v0.4 is a structural revision of v0.3.1. It retitles the paper and condenses the evidence on the seventy per cent failure statistic. Section 5 is developed into the centre of the paper: it defines relational architecture, adds adaptation as a mechanism of invisibility and the situated change-maker, and treats the dimensions of formation as a revisable research object rather than a settled model. The central proposition is restated in terms of formation rather than transformation, so that transformation keeps the meaning defined in Section 2. The former section on regenerative theory has been removed and an author position added. Quotations and empirical claims carried forward from v0.3.1 were independently fact-checked in earlier drafts; no new quotations have been introduced, and references added in v0.4 were checked against bibliographic records. A revision of register and a fuller engagement with research on organisational socialisation, identity regulation and institutional formation will follow in v0.5.

Abstract

Organisations routinely describe change programmes as transformational, yet influential theories used to design and evaluate those programmes offer limited agreement about what transformation is, how it differs from change, or what would allow an observer to determine whether it has occurred.

This paper asks why organisational change theory struggles to account for transformation and argues that the problem is partly one of theoretical object. Managerial approaches are strongest at explaining movement between identifiable states: new strategies, structures, technologies, behaviours or operating models. Developmental, systemic and regenerative approaches recognise limitations of planned transition and direct attention toward learning, consciousness, purpose and the quality of relationships. Both bodies of work illuminate important dimensions of change, but neither consistently places institutional formation at the centre of the analysis.

The paper proposes a different starting point: institutions do not merely provide settings in which already-formed people act, learn, resist or develop. Through repeated relationships, permissions, obligations, classifications and patterns of participation, institutions participate in forming perception, identity, agency and responsibility. These formative effects can become difficult to see precisely when adaptation succeeds, because behaviour learned in response to institutional conditions is easily interpreted as a characteristic of the individual rather than information about the relationship.

This account also creates an epistemic problem for predetermined transformation. The people diagnosing an institution and specifying its desired future are themselves situated within the conditions they seek to change. If institutions participate in shaping what appears possible, legitimate and valuable, then some of the categories through which a future state is imagined may themselves belong to what transformation places in question.

Institutional transformation is therefore defined provisionally as a durable alteration in the relational conditions through which an institution forms persons, distributes agency and becomes answerable to those affected by its actions. The paper calls the patterned conditions through which these relationships are organised relational architecture. It concludes that a theory of transformation must account not only for how people change institutions, but for how institutions change people and whether what people come to know through participation can alter the conditions themselves.

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Literature

1 Introduction: A Field That Cannot Establish What It Changes

1.1 The statistic that isn't

A familiar statistic appears throughout management presentations, consultancy reports and articles on organisational change: approximately seventy per cent of change initiatives fail. The number creates urgency and suggests that a general empirical problem has already been established. Its provenance shows otherwise.

Hammer and Champy (1993, p. 200) offered an explicitly "unscientific estimate" that 50 to 70 per cent of organisations undertaking business-process reengineering did not achieve the dramatic results intended. In transmission, the qualification disappeared, the scope widened from reengineering to organisational change in general, falling short of dramatic results became failure, and the upper bound became a point estimate. Beer and Nohria (2000) subsequently stated that "about 70% of all change initiatives fail" without evidential support. Kotter (1995), frequently treated as an origin for the claim (for example by Keller and Aiken 2009), contains no seventy per cent figure and no thirty per cent success rate; its quantified failure claim concerns only the first phase of his model.

Hughes (2011) reviewed published instances of the claim and found no valid and reliable empirical evidence supporting a general seventy per cent failure rate. De Waal (2026), reviewing the issue again, concludes that "failure prevalence is best understood as a distribution conditional on what is counted and for how long."

One episode is particularly revealing. A 2010 call for papers in the Journal of Change Management repeated familiar consultancy failure figures to motivate a special issue (Burnes 2010). The issue that followed restated those figures in its introduction (Burnes 2011) and then published Hughes's demonstration that the general claim lacked valid empirical support. The statistic and its refutation therefore circulated within the same scholarly venue. The statistic proved more durable.

The point of this paper is not to establish a better universal failure rate. It takes the evidential problem as a platform for a different question: why has organisational change been so difficult to evaluate as a general object in the first place?

1.2 Why the number cannot be repaired

The problem is not only citation hygiene. A general failure rate requires a stable population of interventions, a defensible definition of success and a time horizon over which outcomes can be judged. Organisational change provides none of these consistently.

Barends et al. (2014) found a predominance of one-shot studies with low internal validity across thirty years of change-intervention research, with replication rare. Stouten, Rousseau and De Cremer (2018) similarly observe that widely used practitioner models often rest more heavily on expert opinion than scientific evidence. Studies that do count outcomes (for example Jones et al. 2021; McBurnett 2019) produce results that are difficult to compare, because they count different interventions, use different criteria and assess outcomes over different periods. Hagebakken, Olsen and Solstad (2024) show how the same public-sector change can support competing outcome narratives when goals are ambiguous or contested, while Heracleous and Bartunek (2021) demonstrate that apparent short-term failure can coexist with deeper change over longer horizons.

The problem is therefore conceptual before it is statistical. A technology rollout, merger, leadership transition, restructuring, cultural programme, postcolonial institutional reckoning and shift in economic purpose may all be classified as organisational change, yet they do not concern the same object or ask the same thing of those involved. Some require adoption. Some require learning. Some redistribute authority. Some place identities, privileges, purposes or standards of legitimacy themselves in question.

A field that groups these processes together and asks whether "change" succeeds risks concealing the distinctions theory should explain.

1.3 From measurement to object

The language of transformation has expanded while its meaning has weakened. Strategies, technologies, leadership programmes, reorganisations and efficiency initiatives are all described as transformational. Transformation can become an intensifier: a way of saying that change is important, extensive or ambitious.

But scale is not the same as transformation. An organisation may replace technology while preserving assumptions about control; decentralise decision-making while retaining informal penalties that make dissent unsafe; or adopt the language of purpose and participation while leaving unchanged who may define reality, whose knowledge counts and who bears the consequences of institutional decisions. Extensive change can therefore occur without transformation of the conditions through which the institution reproduces itself.

This paper begins from a sharper distinction. Change alters the state of a system. Transformation alters what the system is, including relationships, purposes and some of the criteria through which it understands and evaluates itself.

If this distinction holds, transformation cannot be understood solely as successful implementation of a predetermined future state. The entity responsible for specifying and evaluating that future is itself implicated in the transformation. Its purposes, categories, identities and standards of legitimacy may no longer remain stable.

Nor can transformation be reduced to individual consciousness. An organisation may contain highly reflective people and still reproduce domination, avoidance, extraction or silence through its relationships and structures. Awareness matters, but awareness does not stand outside institutional formation. What people can perceive, say, risk and enact is shaped in part by the environments in which they participate.

The question is therefore not only how people change organisations. It is also how organisations participate in changing people, and whether what people learn through that experience can alter the institution in return.

Every institution distributes attention, permission, obligation and possibilities for participation. Repeated over time, these arrangements do more than coordinate activity. They cultivate dispositions and adaptations. Institutions participate in forming the people who inhabit them.

This is the missing account of institutional formation.

1.4 The argument and its course

The paper asks: why do influential theories of organisational change struggle to account for transformation, and what becomes visible when institutional formation is treated as part of the object?

Section 2 distinguishes change from transformation. Section 3 examines a managerial family of theories that largely conceptualises change as managed transition between knowable states. Section 4 examines developmental, systemic and regenerative approaches that recognise emergence and interior change but often leave the formative role of the institution underdeveloped. Section 5 develops the institution as a formative apparatus, defines relational architecture, examines adaptation as a mechanism of invisibility, and considers the epistemic problem created when change-makers are themselves situated within the conditions they seek to transform. Sections 6 and 7 examine simulation and practical implications. Sections 8 to 10 state limitations, open questions and conclusions.

The argument is not that existing theories are useless. Many are effective within the domains for which they were designed. The problem arises when theories of implementation, adoption, learning or awareness are treated as sufficient theories of transformation. They describe real phenomena, but not necessarily the same one.

2 Change and Transformation Are Different Objects

2.1 Change as movement between states

Organisational change is commonly represented as movement from a current state toward a desired state. The existing condition is diagnosed, a future condition is specified, and an intervention is designed to close the gap between them. The form varies, but the underlying sequence remains recognisable: establish why the present state is inadequate; define the desired future; mobilise leadership and participation; remove barriers; implement new structures or behaviours; stabilise and sustain the result.

This model is appropriate for many organisational tasks. A new digital system must be adopted. Reporting lines must be clarified. A service must be redesigned. A regulation must be implemented. A merger requires new routines and decision rights. In such cases, the destination can be described with reasonable precision. The organisation remains sufficiently continuous with itself to determine what success will mean before the process begins.

This paper uses change to refer to movement between states whose destination can be meaningfully specified in advance and whose principal evaluative criteria remain sufficiently stable across the movement.

This does not make change trivial. Change can be technically complex, politically contested and emotionally demanding. It can involve substantial loss and uncertainty. The distinction concerns the nature of the object, not the difficulty of the process.

2.2 Transformation as alteration of identity and criteria

Transformation is a different kind of movement.

A person undergoing a profound passage may not merely acquire new behaviour. Their relationship with authority, responsibility, belonging, suffering or the future may change. An institution undergoing transformation may not merely adopt new practices. Its understanding of purpose, value, membership, knowledge or accountability may be altered.

Transformation therefore affects the terms by which the entity recognises itself. Transformation is an alteration in what a system is, including the relationships, purposes and evaluative criteria through which it constitutes and judges itself.

This definition has several consequences.

First, the destination cannot be fully known in advance. This does not mean that transformation has no direction or that any outcome should be accepted. It means that the present institution cannot completely define the future using only the categories whose adequacy is under question.

Second, transformation involves loss. Existing identities, privileges, explanations and forms of competence may cease to organise the world effectively. Machado de Oliveira (2021) makes a version of this point at civilisational scale: what cannot be sustained must be allowed to end well, and the desire to bypass endings — to reach renewal without relinquishment — is itself part of the pattern that requires transformation. A process that adds new practices without allowing anything constitutive to end may be development, adaptation or expansion, but not necessarily transformation.

Third, transformation is not adequately measured by implementation alone. An organisation may complete every activity in a programme plan while preserving the relational logic of the former system.

Fourth, transformation cannot be assumed from the intensity of participants' experience. A programme may be emotionally powerful without altering institutional life. Insight, catharsis and shared language can coexist with unchanged authority, incentives and consequences.

Finally, transformation has an ethical dimension. If the purposes and relationships of an institution are at stake, then the process concerns whose lives are shaped, whose losses count, who has the authority to define improvement and to whom the institution becomes answerable.

2.3 Why the distinction matters

When change and transformation are treated as synonyms, three problems follow.

The first is category error. A framework designed for implementation is criticised because it does not produce transformation, even though it was never theoretically equipped to do so.

The second is inflated evaluation. Organisations declare transformation because a programme was delivered, new language was adopted or behaviour temporarily shifted.

The third is ethical concealment. The language of transformation can dignify processes that ask others to adapt while protecting the institution from being changed by what they know.

A more disciplined field would reserve transformation for cases in which the organisation's formative relationships have changed. This raises the central problem of the paper: dominant theories of organisational change have limited means for perceiving such alteration because they do not consistently treat institutional formation as their object.

3 The First Family: Change as Managed Transition

3.1 The organisation as an object of intervention

The managerial family includes stage models, implementation frameworks and diagnostic tools commonly associated with planned organisational change. It encompasses diverse traditions and should not be treated as internally uniform. Nevertheless, many of its influential approaches share a recognisable orientation. The organisation is understood as a system that can be diagnosed, directed and aligned. Leaders or change agents identify a need, formulate a desired state and organise the transition. The primary challenges are commitment, communication, capability, coordination and resistance.

The evidential status of this family deserves to be stated at the outset, because it is rarely stated at all. Stouten, Rousseau and De Cremer (2018), reviewing the seven most widely used prescriptive change models, conclude that "with one exception … these models have not been subject to direct empirical study, despite their popularity." The models that organise a large share of the world's change practice are, in the strict sense, untested as models.

Their derivations repay attention.

Lewin's work (1947, 1951) is transmitted through the simplified sequence of unfreezing, changing and refreezing — but Cummings, Bridgman and Brown (2016) established that Lewin never developed the model in the form attributed to him, and that it took form after his death in 1947. The three-step idea occupies 131 words in a 338-page posthumous book; Lewin "never wrote 'refreezing' anywhere" — the re-phrasing entered, as far as Cummings and colleagues can ascertain, through a 1950 conference paper co-authored by his former student Leon Festinger; and the prescriptive tool taught today was assembled by later authors and canonised through the 1980s textbook market. Burnes (2004, 2020) disputes this reading, arguing that the underlying intellectual content is present in Lewin's field theory and that the gaps are terminological. Both points can stand: the terms are Lewin's, and the management instrument is not. For present purposes the significant feature is the third step. Freezing presupposes that change terminates in a stable, specifiable state. That is an ontological commitment, not a methodological detail.

Kotter (1995, 1996) proposes a staged process beginning with urgency and ending with the anchoring of new approaches in culture. Its stated evidential basis rests on one sentence — "Over the past decade, I have watched more than 100 companies try to remake themselves into significantly better competitors" — followed by the naming of several of them. There is no methodology section, no sampling frame, no data collection protocol, and no citations. Appelbaum, Habashy, Malo and Shafiq (2012), reviewing fifteen years of subsequent literature, found support for several individual steps but "no formal studies … covering the entire spectrum and structure of the model": the eight steps have never been tested together, in sequence, as a model. Stouten and colleagues find the central prescription contradicted: "The focus on creating an initial

sense of urgency, particularly in lieu of careful diagnosis, is not supported by research. Urgency can lead to fear, and accompanying rigidity and avoidance … that can undermine employee responses to change."

ADKAR (Hiatt 2006) concentrates on the individual requirements of awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement, treated as sequential and gating. Its supporting research is proprietary: Prosci's benchmarking reports correlate respondent ratings of change-management quality with respondent ratings of project success — the same people rating both, from a pool drawn from the vendor's own community, with the data unavailable for independent reanalysis. No construct-validation study, no test of the claimed sequential dependency, and no controlled comparison appears in the peer-reviewed literature.

The McKinsey 7S framework examines alignment among strategy, structure, systems, skills, style, staff and shared values. By Peters' own retrospective account (2011), it was produced at "a two-day séance in San Francisco," under Athos's insistence "that, corny as it appeared to be, we develop an alliterative model — find stuff that began with 'Ss' in this case." The number of categories was set by alliteration. It is worth adding that 7S is not a change process model at all — it is a static alignment diagnostic with no temporal theory and no account of power or conflict — though it is routinely listed alongside Lewin and Kotter as if it were the same kind of object. Its parent research programme, In Search of Excellence, was substantially discredited on methodological grounds (Rosenzweig 2007).

The strength of these models is practical intelligibility. They give leaders a sequence, vocabulary and set of intervention points. They make change discussable. Their limitation is equally clear: they are primarily theories of managed transition, resting more on the authority of their transmission than on evidence.

3.2 The future is defined before the passage begins

In managerial change, the future is generally formulated by those who sponsor or govern the intervention. Participation may influence implementation, local design or interpretation, but the legitimacy of the destination is often established before the wider organisation encounters it.

This orientation is not inherently illegitimate. Organisations frequently need to make binding decisions. A public institution cannot make legal compliance optional. A company facing insolvency may have limited room for extended collective inquiry.

The problem arises when a process remains managerially predetermined while being described as transformational. If the organisation already knows what it will become, what success will mean, which behaviours are required, which values will be institutionalised and which outcomes are non-negotiable, then the process may be extensive, but it is not transforming the institution's basis of judgment. It is applying that basis to organise a transition.

The institution remains the author of a future in which its own authority to author is not transformed.

3.3 The individual as unit of adoption

The managerial family often approaches the person as a unit whose adoption is required for organisational change. The person must understand the case for change, relinquish previous routines, acquire capability and behave consistently with the new arrangement. When this does not occur, the problem may be classified as resistance, insufficient communication, lack of readiness or weak sponsorship.

This can produce an impoverished account of disagreement — and the clearest illustration is the model through which many organisations read the emotional side of change. The "change curve" derives from Kübler-Ross's (1969) five stages of dying, developed from clinical interviews with terminally ill patients: a model about dying people, not bereaved people, and not people undergoing organisational restructuring. In its source domain the stage model has been disconfirmed. Stroebe, Schut and Boerner (2017) summarise decades of research: most people do not grieve in stages; the trajectory traditionally assumed to be common describes roughly one bereaved person in nine, while the largest group shows consistently low distress throughout; and the model conflates incommensurable construct types, since denial is a defence mechanism, depression an affective state and bargaining a behaviour. Their conclusion: "stage theory should be discarded by all concerned (including bereaved persons themselves); at best, it should be relegated to the realms of

history." Avis, Stroebe and Schut (2021) put it flatly: "no study has ever established that stages of grief actually exist."

How such a model became standard change-management equipment is itself instructive. Holdsworth and Bridgman (2025) trace the migration as bricolage — "disparate theoretical elements are assembled based on their ability to serve the needs and interests of those developing the model" — and their verdict names the practical consequence: the curve "presents a universal and linear view of emotional responses, and a narrow interpretation of resistance to change." The curve licenses a manager to read any objection as a predictable psychological stage to be waited out rather than as information about the change itself. It converts dissent into pathology on a timetable.

Yet resistance may communicate knowledge that the intervention cannot perceive from its governing position. People may resist because they recognise contradictions between formal purpose and operational reality. They may understand that the new structure transfers risk downward, conceals loss, intensifies work or requires public agreement with claims they do not believe. When resistance is treated mainly as friction, the institution protects itself from being addressed by the experience of those it seeks to change.

The deeper issue is not that managerial theories ignore people. Many devote considerable attention to communication, emotion, motivation and participation. The issue is the role assigned to people within the theory. They are frequently the recipients, carriers or enactors of change, rather than co-constitutors of the criteria by which the change is judged.

3.4 Culture as an implementation variable

Managerial approaches often recognise culture as decisive. New practices must be anchored. Shared values must align with strategy. Leaders must model desired behaviour. Yet culture is commonly treated as something an organisation possesses and can intentionally reshape in support of performance. This misses culture's formative depth.

Culture is not only the set of values people say they share. It is the accumulated pattern through which people learn what happens when bad news travels upward; whether uncertainty can be admitted; whose anger is interpreted as authority and whose as instability; whether care is rewarded or exploited; whether accountability moves with power; whether participation can alter a decision; and whether institutional language corresponds to lived experience.

These lessons are learned relationally. They are carried not only in policy but in anticipation, posture, silence, humour, avoidance and bodily readiness.

A culture initiative that introduces new values without changing these conditions adds a language layer to an existing formative apparatus. The language may be sincere. It may even create temporary openings. But the older apparatus will tend to interpret, contain and repurpose it.

3.5 The honest exception

One figure in this family deserves separate treatment, because the contrast clarifies what is actually wrong with the others. William Bridges (1991) distinguished change — external, situational, dated — from transition, the internal reorientation that follows it. His model begins with endings rather than mobilisation, where every other model in this section opens with urgency, awareness or unfreezing; it treats the intervening "neutral zone" as generative rather than pathological; and it carries no efficiency promise, no success rate, nothing to certify against. Bridges was not a management researcher and never claimed to be — his model is hermeneutic in origin, drawn from depth psychology and the rites-of-passage literature, and he asserted no empirical warrant he did not have.

Bridges is nonetheless unvalidated: no empirical test of his structure appears in the literature. But three epistemic positions should not be flattened together. Bridges is unvalidated and honest about it. Kotter and ADKAR are unvalidated while claiming validation. The change curve is actively disconfirmed in its source domain and still in use. These are different failures, and only the first is innocent.

3.6 Why managerial models cannot account for transformation

The managerial family is limited not because it is insufficiently humane or participatory, although particular applications may be either. It is limited because its object is generally the transition. It asks how to generate movement, alignment and adoption. It does not usually ask how the institution's relational constitution forms the persons who must inhabit the change.

As a result, it struggles to distinguish new behaviour from new capacity; declared values from changed relations; compliance from consent; participation from influence; cultural language from cultural formation; and institutional transformation from its successful simulation.

Sturdy and Grey (2003) name the underlying commitments: "a practical and ontological prochange bias, managerialism and universalism." The desirability of change is never itself in question; change is theorised only from the standpoint of those directing it; and generic models are applied across radically different contexts.

The managerial family models change and often calls the result transformation.

4 The Second Family: Change as Developmental Awakening

4.1 From control to emergence

A second family of thought arose partly in response to the limitations of planned change. Systems thinkers, organisational learning theorists, developmental psychologists and regenerative practitioners challenged the image of organisations as machines that could be redesigned from above. In this family, organisations are more often understood as living systems, social fields or evolving wholes. Change is not simply implemented; it emerges through shifts in perception, relationship, learning and consciousness.

Senge (1990) emphasises the disciplines required for learning organisations. Scharmer (2007; Scharmer and Kaufer 2025) directs attention toward the source from which action arises and the capacity to sense and actualise emerging possibility. Stroh (2015) asks actors to recognise their own participation in systems that reproduce unwanted outcomes, and insists on distinguishing the purpose people espouse from the payoffs of the system as actually configured — the closest this literature comes to an incentive-based theory of resistance. Laloux (2014) describes organisational forms associated with self-management, wholeness and evolutionary purpose. Sanford (2017, 2022) treats organisations as developmental fields capable of cultivating human capacity, and Kegan and Lahey (2016) describe deliberately developmental organisations designed around that premise. Regenerative leadership literature (Hutchins and Storm 2019) challenges mechanistic assumptions and draws on the organising patterns of living systems; its most operationally serious academic formulation is Hahn and Tampe's (2021) proposal that a firm's level of aspiration be set by the state of the social-ecological system rather than by its own business case.

This family makes several essential contributions. It recognises that complex systems cannot be transformed through linear control. It attends to feedback, interdependence and unintended consequences. It treats interiority as relevant rather than incidental. It understands that the quality of attention and relationship shapes the possibilities available to a group. And in Sanford's concept of indirect work — the claim that capability is developed not by acting on people but by changing the design of work, roles and relationships — it contains the beginnings of a genuine theory of formation, a point to which Section 5 returns.

It is closer to a theory of transformation than the managerial family. Yet it contains a different risk.

4.2 Causation moves inward

Where managerial theories locate the principal problem in implementation, developmental theories often locate it in consciousness. Systems reproduce harmful outcomes because people cannot see the whole. Organisations remain stuck because actors download familiar interpretations, defend existing identities or act from fear, ego and separation. Transformation requires deeper awareness, more complex meaning-making, presencing, personal development or a shift in worldview.

These claims capture something real. Human beings often defend systems from which they also suffer. Increased perception can alter action. The capacity to remain present to contradiction, uncertainty and complicity is indispensable to transformation.

But when consciousness becomes the primary causal site, institutional power can recede from view — and the critical literature has documented how far this can go. Heller (2019), examining Theory U's philosophical foundations, notes that Scharmer interprets the strategic vision leading to the Iraq War as a "lack of listening": a war reduced to an attentional deficit. Kühl (2020) identifies the structural blind spots — the assumption that changing individuals changes organisations and societies, and an emphasis on collective harmony that systematically denies "opposing interests between individuals, groups, organizations, or classes," with the practical effect that organisations can adopt the approach while leaving hierarchies untouched. Scharmer's (2020) reply deserves fair weight: he concedes that "real decisions in real organizations do not conform to clear phases" and reclassifies the U as a field theory rather than a phase model, which is the most defensible reading available. But it deepens the empirical problem rather than resolving it — a field theory requires an account of what a field is and how a shift in one would be detected, and no peer-reviewed study operationalising presencing as a measurable construct appears to exist. Adoption figures are offered instead. Adoption is not evidence.

The general proposition — that the organisation is the expression of the consciousness of its members, so that changing awareness changes the institution — is incomplete. People do not enter organisations as disembodied states of consciousness. They enter systems of employment, dependence, status, history and consequence. They learn what can be said, to whom, at what cost and with what likelihood of effect. Their attention is organised by deadlines, incentives, workloads and categories of measurement. Their willingness to risk candour is shaped by whether the institution has protected truth-tellers before them.

Consciousness matters, but consciousness is institutionally conditioned.

4.3 The person before the institution

The developmental family often begins with a person capable of becoming more aware, more whole, more systemic or more self-authoring. The institution can support or obstruct this development, but the basic developmental movement belongs to the person. This creates a subtle theoretical sequence: the person develops; developed people relate differently; their relationships generate a more evolved organisation.

There is considerable truth in this sequence. Institutions do not transform without people acquiring capacities they did not previously possess. But the sequence can become circular. If the institution is constituted by the consciousness of its members, while the consciousness of those members is treated mainly as an individual developmental achievement, the theory lacks an account of how institutional arrangements systematically produce certain forms of subjectivity.

The most influential statement of the developmental sequence illustrates the difficulty. Laloux (2014) proposes that organisational forms track stages of human consciousness, culminating in self-managing, purpose-driven organisations. Hassan (2015) states the methodological problem without ornament: "There is unfortunately no scientific basis for the arguments made in this book. No, not even a little." The twelve case organisations were selected because they already exhibited the practices the theory predicts — selection on the dependent variable, with no comparison group, no failure cases and no longitudinal follow-up — and the developmental substrate on which the colour scheme rests has no validated measurement instrument. The design cannot, even in principle, distinguish "these practices cause flourishing" from "organisations with unusual founders, protected niches or favourable labour markets can afford these practices."

4.4 The social field carries history — and sits inside material conditions

The concept of the social field deepens systems thinking by directing attention toward the quality of relationships, attention and intention from which collective action arises. It correctly recognises that visible organisational outcomes are rooted in less visible relational conditions.

However, a field is never only immediate. It carries history. A meeting is shaped by who has previously been interrupted, ignored, promoted, exposed or punished. Trust is not simply a quality generated in the present moment; it is an interpretation of accumulated evidence. Silence may not indicate closed-mindedness. It may be a precise adaptation to prior consequences. Similarly, an invitation to speak does not itself create voice. Voice exists where speaking can alter the relation and where the speaker remains protected from disproportionate retaliation.

A field also sits inside material and political conditions that the consciousness-and-design layer does not reach, and the flagship case of the self-management literature demonstrates this exactly. Buurtzorg's achievement is real: Martela and Nandram (2025) document growth to more than 950 self-managing nursing teams with roughly eight per cent overhead against a sector average near twenty-five. The same study documents the hidden architecture — a platform performing managerial functions including transparency about individual performance, regional coaches, persistent informal hierarchy — and the model travelled poorly into a differently financed system, where nurses in an East London pilot "felt unable to exercise full operational autonomy despite management intentions" (Lalani et al. 2019). In early 2026, Dutch press reported a loss of nearly eight million euros on long-term-care work, attributed to reimbursement tariffs running below cost; the figure is press-reported rather than audited, but the analytical point does not depend on it. The organisation's viability is currently being decided at the level of tariffs set by insurers and the state — a level the model's explanatory apparatus does not contain.

Without an account of history, material dependence and institutional consequence, attention to the social field can overestimate what presence alone can transform.

4.5 Development can be absorbed

Developmental interventions often generate genuine shifts. Participants may recognise defensive patterns, discover new language, experience deeper connection or revise their understanding of leadership and responsibility.

The test begins when they return to the institution.

A leader may become more aware of their controlling behaviour while remaining accountable for targets that punish uncertainty. A team may learn to name emotional states while still lacking the authority to alter the conditions producing chronic threat. An organisation may embrace purpose while financial and governance arrangements continue to reward extraction. In these cases, the institution metabolises the intervention — a mechanism this paper states as a formal prediction in Section 5.10. Kühl's observation that organisations can adopt Theory U while leaving hierarchies untouched is the empirical face of it.

This does not mean the intervention was false. It means individual development occurred inside an unchanged formative apparatus. The apparatus can use what people learn without becoming answerable to it.

4.6 Why the developmental family remains incomplete

The developmental family gestures toward transformation because it recognises emergence, interior change and the limits of control. But it frequently locates the generative source of transformation in awareness, consciousness or human development. It therefore risks making institutional transformation dependent on the arrival of sufficiently developed people while under-theorising how institutions continuously develop people in the opposite direction.

The displacement this produces is now directly documented. Longo, Isgren and Carolan (2025), writing from critical realism, target approaches that treat the mind as the root cause of structural problems, restating an argument developing across sustainability science: "solutions that ignore structural causes are more likely to reproduce the status quo." Maniates (2001) named the general mechanism as individualisation — framing collective, structural problems as matters of individual choice forecloses political contest — and Purser (2019) traced its organisational form in workplace mindfulness, where relocating the cause of suffering from working conditions to the worker's relationship with their own attention converts a claim on the employer into a task for the employee. The framing is not merely inadequate. It is actively convenient for the party with

the power to set conditions, which is part of why it diffuses so readily through consultancies and executive education.

The field's best reply should be given fairly. Ives, Schäpke, Woiwode and Wamsler (2023) confront the charge directly, arguing that their integrated inner-outer framework "resists ontological dualism" and offers "a radically relational and integrative perspective." That is a serious response at the level of ontology. It is not yet an answer at the level of method: the interventions the field actually runs remain overwhelmingly individual and small-group, and asserting that inner and outer are mutually constitutive does not by itself alter ownership, financing, regulation or the distribution of authority.

Scoones and colleagues (2020) supply the map on which this gap is visible. They distinguish structural approaches, which target political economy, institutions and the distribution of resources; systemic approaches, which target complex system dynamics and leverage; and enabling approaches, which target human agency, capacities, values, mindsets and relationships. Nearly every author in this section sits in the enabling quadrant, with Stroh straddling systemic. None sits in structural.

The managerial family treats the individual as a unit of adoption. The developmental family treats the individual as a source of awakening. Neither fully treats the institution as a source of formation.

5 The Missing Object: The Institution as Formative Apparatus

5.1 Institutions do not merely organise action

An institution is usually described through its formal characteristics: purpose, structure, governance, rules, roles and procedures. These features matter, but they do not exhaust institutional life.

Institutions organise conditions under which people become recognisable to one another. They shape what counts as relevant knowledge; which forms of speech appear credible; who may make claims without extensive justification; whose experience becomes an institutional concern; which obligations are enforceable; how responsibility is distributed; and whether experience from the margins can alter the centre.

The theoretical resources for this claim are not absent from scholarship. Institutional theory, accounts of socialisation and identity regulation, critical studies of normative control, and work on institutional logics all examine aspects of how organisations shape perception, identity and action. The problem developed here is therefore not that institutional formation has never been theorised. It is that these accounts remain insufficiently integrated into the dominant theories through which organisational change and transformation are conceptualised and practised.

Douglas (1986) argued that institutions confer identity, classify experience and shape what can be remembered. The institutional logics tradition (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012) shows that institutions supply not merely rules but categories of the thinkable. Bourdieu's (1977) account of habitus similarly directs attention to dispositions formed through social position. These neighbouring traditions complicate any model that begins with a person who simply enters an organisation as an already constituted adopter, resister or learner.

Through repeated arrangements, institutions participate in the formation of perception, identity and character. A person repeatedly rewarded for certainty may learn to conceal honest doubt. A professional required to translate suffering into administratively acceptable categories may increasingly attend to what those categories can hold. A leader protected from the consequences of decisions may experience power as competence rather than insulation. A worker whose care is continually relied upon but institutionally unrecognised may learn that responsibility means absorbing what the system refuses to carry. These are not merely attitudes; they can be intelligent adaptations to recurring institutional conditions.

5.2 Formation through relationship

The institution forms people through the relationships it creates and stabilises. A role is not simply a bundle of tasks. It establishes a position from which one person may address another and carries permissions, expectations, dependencies and limits. A reporting line determines more than information flow: it shapes who evaluates whom, whose interpretation becomes official and who must make themselves understandable to whom. A performance system teaches participants what kinds of reality are visible to the institution. A consultation process communicates whether voice is consequential. A grievance procedure reveals whether the institution can be altered by the harm or contradiction it encounters.

This paper uses relational architecture to describe these patterned conditions through which an institution organises relationship: who may participate, what may be known or said, what is owed, what may be refused, how responsibility and authority are distributed, and whether lived experience can alter the conditions from which it arose. Relational architecture is not a claim that formal structure is irrelevant. It is a way of studying how structure becomes lived through repeated encounters. The idea is close to Sanford's (2022) account of indirect work, in which capability develops less through acting on people directly than through the design of work, roles and relationships. The formative account adds that such design shapes people whether or not it is intended to.

The empirical warning here is Barker (1993). When hierarchical supervision was removed in the teams he studied, formation did not stop. The teams generated concertive control: peer-enforced normative rules experienced as more totalising and less escapable than the bureaucracy they replaced. Removing formal hierarchy therefore did not remove control; it changed its relational form. Critical work on normative control

(Willmott 1993; Fleming and Sturdy 2011) develops the same warning: apparently emancipatory organisational forms can intensify identity regulation when the conditions through which belonging is granted remain unexamined.

5.3 Four dimensions of institutional formation

A preliminary account of institutional formation can be organised around four dimensions.

Attention concerns what the institution trains people to notice. Metrics, agendas, reporting structures and professional categories direct attention; what receives no category, time or legitimate language becomes difficult to sustain as shared reality.

Permission concerns what people can say, refuse, question or initiate without disproportionate cost. Formal permission is insufficient because institutions teach permission through consequences.

Obligation concerns who owes what to whom. Institutions distribute duties, uncertainty, emotional labour, risk and exposure unevenly; questions of obligation therefore connect formation to power and responsibility.

Participation concerns whether those affected can alter purposes, categories and operations. Participation can cultivate agency when people experience themselves as capable of affecting conditions, and cultivate resignation when they are repeatedly invited to speak without influence.

These dimensions are analytic rather than exhaustive. Together they direct attention toward the relational environment in which particular adaptations become viable.

5.4 From dimensions to relational inquiry

The four dimensions should not be mistaken for a settled universal model. RIfT's wider Relational Architecture research examines additional questions concerning entry, belonging, knowledge, reciprocity, answerability, agency, boundaries and transformation. The purpose at this stage is not to stabilise a final taxonomy but to identify a researchable object: the patterned relational conditions through which institutions participate in forming people and through which people may, or may not, alter institutions in return.

This distinction matters methodologically. A framework intended to study formation should remain revisable by what inquiry reveals. The categories used to observe an institution are themselves interpretations, not neutral windows onto reality.

5.5 Every institution participates in forming people

The statement that every institution participates in forming people requires qualification. Not every institutional effect is deep, coherent or permanent. People interpret, resist and exceed the roles made available to them. They carry other histories, relationships, communities, places and sources of meaning. Institutional formation is never total.

Yet institutions exert persistent formative pressure. The central proposition is therefore that every institution participates in forming the people who inhabit it, not always consciously and not necessarily in the direction it declares. Formation in this sense is continuous; transformation, as defined in Section 2, is the rarer case in which the relationships and criteria that constitute a person or an institution are themselves altered. The question is not whether formation occurs, but what capacities and adaptations are repeatedly cultivated, for whose benefit, and with what consequences.

This proposition reframes organisational ethics. An institution is not only responsible for outputs. It is implicated in the human capacities and adaptations its operation repeatedly makes viable. A mission-driven organisation may cultivate care while also cultivating self-sacrifice and boundarylessness. A participatory organisation may cultivate agency, or teach people that participation is ceremonial. A sustainability programme may cultivate responsibility, or shift the burden of systemic harm onto individual behaviour. The formative question does not replace questions of performance, impact or justice; it connects them.

5.6 Adaptation as a mechanism of invisibility

Institutional formation can become hardest to see when adaptation succeeds. Behaviour developed in response to repeated relational conditions may come to appear as a characteristic of the person rather than information about the relationship. Silence may be read as disengagement, compliance as preference, hypervigilance as personality, withdrawal as lack of commitment, or constant availability as dedication. This is related to, but distinct from, the fundamental attribution error: the tendency of observers to explain behaviour by disposition while underestimating the force of the situation (Ross 1977). Attribution error concerns how behaviour is explained; formation concerns how repeated conditions participate in producing durable dispositions in the first place, so that the trait an observer sees may be real while its origin is relational. Lewin's (1936, p. 12) formula, $B = f(PE)$, already treats every psychological event as depending on both the person and the environment; the formative account asks how, under sustained institutional conditions, the environment comes to be carried in the person.

The analytic task is not to reverse the reduction and attribute every individual response to the institution. Personal history, health, temperament, material circumstances and relationships beyond the organisation remain consequential. The question is whether recurrent adaptations, especially when they appear across people or over time, contain information about the conditions in which they became reasonable.

An institution therefore becomes visible not only through what it intends, decides or produces, but through what people repeatedly learn they must become in order to remain in relationship with it. This is one reason formative architecture can remain hidden from both managerial and developmental approaches: successful adaptation is easily mistaken for an individual trait, while the relational conditions that made it adaptive disappear from view.

5.7 Institutional deformation

Formation is not necessarily beneficial. Institutions can cultivate narrowing as well as development, and people can become increasingly effective at operating within conditions that diminish truthful perception, reciprocal responsibility or meaningful agency.

This paper uses institutional deformation to describe arrangements that systematically reward such adaptations. Examples include normalising silence around preventable harm; separating decision-making power from exposure to consequences; converting care into unbounded availability; rewarding certainty where honest uncertainty is required; fragmenting problems so that no actor remains answerable for the whole; or using participatory language to secure consent without redistributing influence.

Deformation should not be reduced to individual pathology. It may consist precisely in intelligent adaptation to conditions that remain institutionally unread.

5.8 Transformation as change in formative relations

If institutions form people through relationships, institutional transformation must involve those relationships. A transformed organisation is not simply one in which people feel different or perform new behaviours. It is one in which the relational conditions through which attention, permission, obligation and participation are distributed have durably changed.

Institutional transformation can therefore be defined provisionally as a durable alteration in the relational conditions through which an institution forms persons, distributes agency and becomes answerable to those affected by its actions. Durable means that the alteration survives beyond a workshop, leadership cohort or charismatic sponsor. Relational conditions directs attention beyond policy to lived interaction and consequence. Forms persons recognises that institutions cultivate capacities and adaptations. Distributes agency asks who can initiate, refuse, interpret and alter conditions. Answerability introduces reciprocity: an institution is not transformed merely because it changes others; it must become changeable by what those others know and experience.

5.9 The situated change-maker

The formative account has a consequence for one of the most familiar assumptions in planned change: that a current state can be diagnosed, a desired future specified, and an intervention designed to close the gap. That sequence is appropriate where the destination can be meaningfully known in advance and the criteria of success remain sufficiently stable. It becomes less secure when those criteria are themselves implicated in what must transform.

The people specifying the desired future are not external to the institution. Leaders, strategists, consultants, researchers and participants have themselves been formed within relationships, categories and histories that shape what appears possible, legitimate, valuable or realistic. If institutions participate in forming perception, identity, legitimacy and agency, those attempting to transform an institution cannot be assumed to occupy a standpoint outside those formative conditions. The categories through which a future state is imagined may themselves belong to what transformation places in question.

This does not imply institutional determinism. People are multiply formed and can encounter contradictions, relationships and knowledge that exceed any single institution. It does imply an epistemic limit: a system may reproduce aspects of itself through the very imagination being used to transform it. Transformation therefore cannot always be understood solely as implementation of a future state specified from within the present one.

The difficulty is sharpest where the specification of a desired future has been formalised. Theory of Change, which developed out of theory-based evaluation (Weiss 1995) and is now widely used by philanthropies, government agencies and non-governmental organisations (Center for Theory of Change n.d.), asks those planning an initiative to define its long-term goals, map backwards to the preconditions those goals require, make the assumptions linking them explicit and agree in advance on indicators of success (Taplin and Clark 2012). It is among the more reflective planning practices available, and its insistence on surfacing assumptions is close to the reflexivity this paper argues for. By its proponents' own account, however, a theory of change derives not from an independent body of theory but from what those proposing the change already know and expect (Clark 2021). Where transformation alters the criteria by which success is judged, an agreement reached beforehand about what will count as success may itself be among the things transformation calls into question. The question this leaves open is therefore not whether planners' assumptions are made explicit and revisable, but whether what participants come to know can alter the conditions under which those assumptions, the criteria of success and the desired future were defined.

This paper does not attempt to resolve what follows when an existing form becomes inadequate while its successor cannot yet be fully specified. It establishes the prior problem: a theory of transformation must account for the situatedness of the people imagining transformation. Working Paper II takes up a related question: what forms of organisational design, inquiry and practice allow an institution to become alterable by what its participants come to know?

5.10 A testable prediction

The formative-apparatus account generates a specific, falsifiable prediction: an intervention that raises individual awareness inside substantially unchanged formative conditions will tend to be metabolised by those conditions. Participants may return with new vocabulary while encountering largely unchanged permissions, obligations, incentives and distributions of agency; the new vocabulary can then be recruited to describe the existing arrangement more attractively.

The prediction is falsifiable in both directions. It is weakened wherever development interventions, without accompanying change in formative conditions, durably alter what can be said, refused and revised. It is corroborated wherever the vocabulary of transformation spreads while the conditions of action remain substantially unchanged.

The prediction is offered as an empirical commitment rather than a settled finding. Section 6 examines forms that such simulation may take in practice; the empirical designs needed to test the prediction are the subject of a later paper.

6 Transformation and Its Simulation

6.1 Why simulation is structurally likely

Contemporary organisations face strong pressure to appear adaptive, inclusive, purposeful and sustainable. The language of transformation helps them signal movement without necessarily surrendering control over what may change.

Simulation is not always deliberate deception. It can arise from sincere efforts conducted within an inadequate theory. Leaders may believe that new vocabulary indicates new culture; that psychological safety surveys indicate safety; that participation indicates influence; that purpose statements indicate purpose; that decentralised structures indicate distributed power; or that personal insight indicates institutional learning. Each may provide evidence of movement. None, alone, demonstrates transformation.

6.2 Vocabulary without altered conditions

One of the most common forms of simulation is linguistic absorption. An organisation adopts terms such as vulnerability, wholeness, systems thinking, regeneration, co-creation or belonging. These terms allow previously excluded experiences to become speakable. But the institution may then define how the terms are to be used and what consequences they may have.

Vulnerability becomes an expectation imposed downward rather than a risk taken by those with power. Wholeness becomes an invitation to bring more of oneself into a system that claims greater access without accepting greater obligation. Co-creation becomes participation within boundaries that cannot themselves be questioned.

Language opens a possibility. The formative apparatus determines whether the possibility can alter the relation. This is the metabolisation of Section 5.10 as it appears from inside.

6.3 Emotional disclosure without institutional response

The growing recognition that emotions matter in organisational life is important. Feelings communicate information about safety, attachment, value, loss, threat and unmet need. Ignoring them impoverishes decision-making and pushes their influence underground.

Yet institutional attention to feeling can become extractive. People may be invited to disclose fear, grief, exhaustion or frustration while the conditions generating those states remain outside the scope of change. The organisation gains insight into employees while employees gain no corresponding power to alter the institution. Emotional expression then serves regulation without transformation.

A relational account asks not only whether feelings are voiced, but whether the institution can be changed by what they reveal.

6.4 Participation without the ability to change the place

Participation can range from information-gathering to shared authority. Treating all forms as equivalent allows organisations to claim inclusion without clarifying the influence being offered. The relevant question is not simply whether people were consulted. It is: what became alterable because they participated?

The critical systems tradition examined this problem three decades ago, and its result has never been integrated by the popular systems and developmental literature. Jackson and Keys (1984) proposed classifying problem contexts by whether participants' interests are unitary or pluralist; the fuller scheme adding coercive contexts is developed in Jackson (1990) and Flood and Jackson (1991). The argument that follows is that participative, soft-systems methods presuppose pluralism — sufficient shared interest for debate to produce agreement — so that in coercive contexts, where interests are irreconcilable and power asymmetric, they do not merely fail. They risk legitimating the stronger party's position by dressing imposition as consensus. Ulrich (1983) supplies the practical discipline of boundary critique: asking who

decides where a system's boundary falls and who is thereby excluded; Midgley (2000) develops it into a full methodology. The position is itself contested — Tsoukas (1993) argues the classification is circular — but that is a debate the literature surveyed in Section 4 has not entered. None of Stroh, Senge, Scharmer, Laloux or Hutchins cites Ulrich, Jackson, Midgley or their critics.

Where participation changes purposes, categories, priorities or distributions of responsibility, it can become transformative. Where it cannot, it may form people into compliant contributors to decisions already made — and the invitation itself becomes part of the formative curriculum.

6.5 Development without redistribution

Leadership development may increase empathy, complexity and self-awareness while leaving material relations intact. A senior leader may learn to listen more deeply without sharing authority. A management team may understand systemic interdependence while externalising risk. An organisation may cultivate purpose while preserving governance structures that privilege short-term financial claims over ecological and social obligations.

Development is not meaningless in these cases. But it is not self-authenticating. The test is whether new capacities alter the institution's relationships — the test of Section 5.10.

7 Implications for Organisational Practice

7.1 Retire the failure statistic

Practitioners and researchers should stop citing the seventy per cent figure. Where a base rate is needed, none exists; where evidence is needed, the graded, outcome-specific findings of intervention reviews are available and should be used with their qualifications intact. The honest position is that the base rate is unknown and that the question, posed at that level of aggregation, may not be well-formed.

7.2 Begin with formation, not intervention

Before designing a change programme, practitioners should investigate what the existing institution is already teaching people — not through its values statements, but through repeated experience.

Questions might include: What must people ignore to succeed here? What truths are expensive to speak? Who carries consequences without corresponding authority? What forms of dependency are denied? Which emotions are legitimised, and in whom? Who can say no? What happens when experience contradicts strategy? What kinds of people advance? What kinds of people leave? What does the institution make people practise every day?

These questions reveal the formative curriculum of the organisation.

7.3 Treat resistance as relational data

Resistance should not be romanticised. It can protect privilege, reproduce prejudice or prevent necessary action. But neither should it be treated automatically as an obstacle — and never as a stage on a curve to be waited out.

Resistance may disclose unacknowledged loss; contradictions between official claims and lived conditions; threats to identity or livelihood; histories that make present assurances unbelievable; or knowledge excluded by the intervention's frame. The practitioner's task is not to celebrate or overcome resistance in the abstract. It is to determine what relationship the resistance is describing.

7.4 Ask the boundary question before convening

Before a participative process begins, establish whether the context is pluralist or coercive: whether the parties share sufficient interest for dialogue to produce agreement, and whether the outcome will bind those

with the authority to decide. Where it will not, a participative method risks legitimating an imposition. This is the practical form of boundary critique, and it is a question of professional ethics as much as of method.

7.5 Connect power with answerability

Transformation requires more than distributing decision-making. It requires connecting power to obligation. Those who can define reality, allocate resources and expose others to consequences should remain answerable to those affected.

This may involve clearer rights of refusal; protected routes for challenge; governance representation; transparent decision rationales; mechanisms through which experience can revise policy; and consequences for the misuse of authority.

Power without answerability is formative. It teaches those who hold it that consequence belongs elsewhere.

7.6 Evaluate what becomes possible to perceive and do

Conventional evaluation asks whether the planned outcome was delivered. Transformational evaluation must also ask whether the institution's capacities changed.

For example: Can people now raise information that previously remained suppressed? Can a decision be revised when consequences contradict assumptions? Has responsibility moved closer to power? Can groups name uncertainty without losing legitimacy? Are those affected able to influence the conditions affecting them? Has the organisation become capable of receiving knowledge it previously excluded? Do people experience more agency, or merely new expectations? What old pattern became less viable? What new obligation became institutional rather than personal?

These questions do not eliminate the need for performance measures. They expand the object of evaluation — and they operationalise the prediction of Section 5.10: if none of their answers has changed, that is evidence that the intervention has been metabolised, whatever participants report having experienced.

7.7 Do not confuse safety with comfort

Transformational work is unlikely to feel continuously safe in the ordinary sense of comfort or predictability. It may involve conflict, grief, accountability and the loss of status or identity.

The relevant distinction is not between discomfort and safety. It is between dignified difficulty and uncontained threat. People can encounter demanding truths when there is sufficient relational protection, clarity, consent and support. They cannot be expected to transform through conditions that reproduce coercion while calling it growth.

7.8 Transformation cannot be done to others

An institution cannot credibly claim transformation when one group retains the authority to define the process while another is expected to undergo it. This is Freire's (1970) enduring argument: liberation cannot be a gift from those who hold power to those who lack it, because the relation of donor and recipient reproduces the structure it claims to dissolve. Transformation is done with, or it is domestication.

This matters particularly in culture programmes, organisational integrations, community interventions and decolonial work. Transformation requires reciprocal exposure. Those who initiate the process must themselves become alterable by it. Their purposes, assumptions and claims to innocence cannot remain categorically protected. Otherwise the intervention changes the subjects of the institution while preserving the institution's own position as the unchanging subject.

8 Limitations, Ethical Cautions and Author Position

This paper is conceptual. It does not present new empirical research and should not be treated as establishing the causal effects of particular institutional arrangements.

Its critique of absent validation rests substantially on negative search results. That no peer-reviewed construct validation of presencing, no independent evaluation of ADKAR's sequential claims, and no empirical test of Bridges' structure were located is a finding about extensive searches, not proof of non-existence. These searches are defeasible and should be revisited. Several factual claims also rest on press reporting and are flagged where they occur.

The division of organisational change theory into managerial and developmental families is intentionally heuristic. It clarifies a pattern at the cost of flattening real differences. Many scholars and practitioners cross the boundary, and several approaches discussed in this paper are partial exceptions on specific points.

The concept of the formative apparatus also carries risks. It could imply that people are passive products of institutions. They are not. Human beings participate in multiple relationships, communities, cultures and histories; they resist, reinterpret and exceed institutional formation. The argument is that institutions participate in formation, not that they determine persons.

The argument could also be used to justify intrusive organisational development. If institutions form people, leaders may conclude that they should intentionally design employees' identities or inner lives. This would repeat the problem in a more totalising form. The ethical implication should be the opposite. Because institutions inevitably exert formative effects, they must become more modest, transparent and answerable about those effects. The purpose is not to perfect the institutional production of persons, but to create conditions in which people retain dignity, agency, plurality, boundaries and the capacity to challenge the institution itself.

A further limitation concerns scale. Organisations are nested within legal, economic, technological, colonial, cultural and ecological systems. They cannot freely redesign all the relations that shape them. Institutional transformation must therefore be studied in relation to wider systems and histories.

Transformation is also not inherently good. Institutions can transform in authoritarian, exclusionary or destructive directions. The term should not function as moral praise. Any normative account of transformation must make its ethical criteria explicit rather than smuggling them into the word itself.

Author position. This paper is written from within the research programme it seeks to establish. I am the founder of RIfT, an independent research initiative developing Relational Architecture as a theoretical inquiry and as a basis for participatory research. I therefore have an intellectual and practical interest in the usefulness of the argument advanced here. Consistent with the paper's own premise, RIfT is not treated as exempt from institutional formation; its concepts, methods and organising practices remain subject to the same inquiry they are intended to support.

9 Open Research Questions

The argument developed here suggests a wider research programme.

Institutional formation. Through which everyday relationships do institutions shape perception, identity and agency? How can formative effects be studied without reducing persons to institutional products? Which organisational arrangements cultivate truthful perception, meaningful difference and reciprocal responsibility?

Transformation. What empirical indicators distinguish institutional transformation from behavioural or linguistic change? Over what period must altered relational conditions persist before transformation can be claimed? Can transformation be identified while it is unfolding, or only retrospectively?

The metabolisation prediction. Does the prediction of Section 5.10 hold empirically? Can it be tested prospectively against cases where development interventions demonstrably did shift authority or formative conditions, and what distinguished them?

Relational architecture. Which dimensions are necessary to describe how institutional relationships form participants? How should attention, permission, obligation, participation, entry, refusal, boundary and answerability relate analytically without hardening prematurely into a universal model?

Power and participation. What forms of participation genuinely alter institutional purposes and categories? How do histories of punishment and exclusion shape present possibilities for voice? Under what conditions can an institution become answerable to knowledge generated at its margins?

Adaptation and interruption. When do recurring patterns of silence, compliance, withdrawal, resistance or distress provide information about institutional conditions? How can such patterns be investigated without reducing individual experience to organisational causation or romanticising disruption?

Culture and formation. How do repeated relational adaptations become collective expectations and cultural patterns? How do cultures in turn shape the people through whom they are reproduced? Under what conditions can individual experience travel through relationships strongly enough to alter collective and cultural conditions?

Situated transformation. How do the formative conditions of an institution shape what leaders, participants and researchers can imagine as a desirable future? When does predetermined change reproduce the categories of the present, and what forms of inquiry make those categories themselves available for examination?

Across literatures. Organisational socialisation, institutional theory, identity regulation, critical systems thinking, organisational development and sustainability transformations each contain partial accounts of formation, power, agency or emergence. What becomes visible when these literatures are read together rather than treated as separate conversations?

Method. What combination of ethnography, relational mapping, participatory inquiry and longitudinal research is needed to study formative change? How can researchers identify divergence between official institutional narratives and lived relational conditions? What would constitute a disconfirming case for the formative-apparatus thesis?

These questions concern not an additional variable within organisational change, but the relationship between the institution, the people it forms, and the possibilities from which transformation can be imagined.

10 Conclusion: From Managing Change to Understanding Formation

Contemporary organisational change theory contains powerful tools for implementation, learning, systems analysis and human development. Its weakness is not a lack of intelligence, technique or concern. It is a lack of distinction.

The field frequently uses change and transformation as though they name different degrees of the same process. They do not. Change can move an organisation between states while leaving sufficiently stable the purposes and criteria by which success is judged. Transformation places some of those purposes, relationships and criteria themselves in question.

The managerial family is strongest when the destination can be defined and the problem is mobilisation, coordination or adoption. Its limitation is that successful transition can be mistaken for evidence of transformation. The developmental family recognises that deeper change may require shifts in awareness, meaning-making and relationship, but risks locating the source of transformation primarily in consciousness while underestimating the institution's role in forming consciousness itself.

The missing object is therefore not the person or the organisation considered separately, but the formative relationship between them. People do not merely enter institutions as adopters, resisters, learners or reflective subjects. Institutions participate in shaping what participants notice, what they can say or refuse, what they experience as legitimate, what responsibilities they assume, and what forms of agency become viable. These formative effects are never total: people are shaped through multiple relationships, communities, histories and worlds, and they can resist, reinterpret and exceed institutional demands. But institutional formation is sufficiently persistent to matter for any theory of transformation.

This is why transformation cannot be evaluated only by asking whether people adopted something new or experienced something profound. We must ask whether the institution's formative relationships changed. Can it now hear what it previously excluded? Can those affected alter the conditions that affect them? Has power become more answerable? Has responsibility become more reciprocal? Has the organisation changed what it teaches people to notice, suppress, expect and become?

The argument has a further consequence, developed in Section 5.9. Those who diagnose an institution and specify its desired future are not external to the conditions they seek to change: leaders, strategists, consultants, researchers and participants have all been formed within them. The categories available for imagining a future state may therefore be among the things transformation calls into question, and a transformation planned entirely within those categories can reproduce aspects of the institution it set out to change.

This does not make strategy or predetermined outcomes inappropriate in general. Many organisational changes require exactly that kind of clarity. It does mean that transformation cannot always be reduced to movement toward a future state specified entirely from within the present one. Where the adequacy of the institution's own categories, purposes and evaluative criteria is at stake, the capacity to question those categories becomes part of the transformation itself.

This establishes the central proposition of the research programme: every institution participates in forming the people who inhabit it, not always consciously and not necessarily in the direction it declares. The question is what kinds of capacities and adaptations it cultivates through the relationships it creates — and whether it can itself be transformed by what those people come to know.

That is the missing account of institutional formation. Without it, organisational theory risks mistaking movement for transformation, development for redistribution, language for relation and aspiration for altered conditions.

A further question follows. Because people are formed through more than any single institution, knowledge that exceeds an institution's categories is often already present among its participants. If those attempting transformation are themselves situated within the conditions being transformed, what forms of organisational design, inquiry and practice allow an institution to become alterable by what its participants come to know? That is the question taken forward in Working Paper II.

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About the author

David Hoogland is the founder of RIfT — Research Initiative for Transformation. His work develops Relational Architecture as an inquiry into how institutions participate in forming people, how people experience and adapt to institutional conditions, and how what is learned through those relationships may alter institutions in return.

About RIfT

RIfT — Research Initiative for Transformation is an independent research initiative studying the relationships between individual, collective and cultural transformation. Its current research includes Relational Architecture, the Soul of Change, and participatory methods for investigating how transformation is experienced and how institutional conditions become visible through relationship. RIfT treats its concepts as propositions for inquiry rather than settled doctrine and expects them to change through research, critique and practice.

RIfT — Research Initiative for Transformation

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This is a working paper. It presents an argument for discussion and critique, not a validated finding. Its claims are open to revision and its author welcomes disagreement.