WHITE PAPER

REORGANISE THE WORK, NOT THE BOXES

Why most organisational reviews redraw the chart and change nothing — and what the evidence says to do instead.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An organisational review is usually commissioned because the work is not getting done: delivery is slow, accountability is unclear, cost is rising, or a strategy has not translated into performance. The brief that follows almost always asks for a structure. New reporting lines are drawn, functions are consolidated or split, titles change, and the organisation is asked to absorb the disruption in exchange for an improvement that, in a great many cases, does not arrive.

This paper argues that the sequence is wrong. Structure is a weak place to intervene in an organisation, and the evidence for that is older and better established than the restructuring practice it contradicts. What determines whether work gets done is the design of the work system: the purpose a unit is actually pursuing, the demand arriving at it, the flow of that work across handoffs, where decisions may be made, and how jobs are designed. Diagnose that first, and structure follows from it as a conclusion rather than preceding it as an assumption.

Headline argument. Redrawing the chart without changing purpose, measures, decision rights and job design reliably reproduces the same performance under new titles — and adds the cost of the disruption. Reorganise the work, and the boxes largely draw themselves.

70%

the failure rate everyone quotes for change programmes — with no traceable empirical source (Hughes, 2011)

$23.7m

minimum direct cost of a single 2019 NSW departmental restructure, in an audit that found benefits were not monitored

12

places to intervene in a system, in Meadows' ranking — structure and rules sit near the weak end

4

questions to answer about the work before anyone proposes a new chart

WHAT THIS PAPER ARGUES

The industry's favourite statistic is not evidence. Before commissioning a review on the strength of received wisdom, check whether the wisdom was ever measured.

Structure is a low-leverage intervention. Purpose, measures, decision rights and job design generate the behaviour that the chart merely arranges.

How a review is run predicts its result better than what the new structure looks like. Procedural fairness, voice and honest information are design variables, not communications tasks.

A review that cannot state what it will cost, what it will improve, and how that improvement will be measured is not ready to be commissioned.

Author. Pat Sheehan, Managing Director, NSC Group. This paper draws on peer-reviewed research, Australian audit-office reporting and our own consulting practice. Where a claim rests on practitioner experience rather than published evidence, we say so.

1. THE NUMBER THAT IS NOT TRUE

Somewhere near the front of most restructuring business cases sits a familiar sentence: seventy per cent of change initiatives fail. It is the most-quoted number in this market, and it appears to have no empirical source.

Hughes (2011) traced the claim through the change-management literature and found it propagating from citation to citation without a study underneath it. Where an origin is offered, it is usually Kotter's 1995 *Harvard Business Review* article, which opened with an observation drawn from the author's own consulting experience rather than from a dataset. There was no sample frame, no definition of failure, and no measurement. Thirty years later, the figure is quoted as though it were an epidemiological finding.

The point is not that Kotter was careless. His argument about the difficulty of transformation has held up rather better than the number attached to it. The point is that an industry has spent three decades quoting a statistic nobody ever measured, and that this tells you something useful about the evidential standards applied to organisational change generally.

It matters practically, too. A board that accepts a seventy per cent failure rate has accepted, in advance, that most of what it is about to spend will be wasted — and has therefore stopped asking the harder question of what would make this particular review one of the ones that works. The honest answer is that we do not have a reliable population failure rate for organisational change, because failure is not consistently defined and outcomes are rarely measured. What we do have is good evidence about which design and process choices predict better outcomes. That is the more useful body of knowledge, and it is what the rest of this paper draws on.

How NSC Group applies this

We do not open a review with a fear statistic, and we ask clients to strike them from business cases we are asked to review. Where a claim about likely outcomes is made, we cite the study, name its limits, and say plainly where the evidence is practitioner-reported rather than peer-reviewed.

2. WHAT A REVIEW IS ACTUALLY ASKED TO DO

There is almost always a gap between the brief and the problem. The brief says: review the structure, recommend an operating model, reduce duplication, clarify accountabilities. The problem, described by the same people ten minutes into the first conversation, is different: decisions take too long, nobody owns the customer, two teams are doing the same thing and a third thing is not being done at all, and the strategy agreed eighteen months ago has not visibly changed what anyone does on a Tuesday.

Those are statements about work, not about reporting lines. Structural design frameworks acknowledge this. Galbraith's Star Model treats structure as one of five interdependent design choices alongside strategy, processes, rewards and people practices, and is explicit that changing one without the others produces misalignment rather than improvement. Burton and Obel's contingency work makes a similar argument from a different direction: there is no universally superior structure, only a better or worse fit between structure and the strategy, environment and technology it has to serve.

The practical consequence is that the brief should be treated as a symptom report rather than a specification. A review that accepts 'design us a new structure' as its terms of reference has agreed to answer a question before establishing whether it is the right one.

How NSC Group applies this

Our first deliverable in an organisational review is not an options paper. It is a restatement of the problem in terms of the work, tested with the executive who commissioned it. If that restatement is not recognisable to them, we have not understood the organisation yet and we say so before proceeding.

3. THE STRUCTURE-FIRST TRAP

Structure is the default intervention for good reasons. It is visible, it can be decided in a room, it produces an artefact the board can approve, and it signals action to a workforce and a market. A new chart is one of the very few organisational changes that can be announced as complete on the day it is announced.

What it reliably fails to change is the work. Duplication is usually a symptom of unclear demand and undefined handoffs, not of two boxes sitting side by side; move the boxes and the duplication migrates with them. Gaps in accountability are usually the residue of decisions that nobody is authorised to make, not of a missing role; create the role without the authority and the gap persists under a new title. Worren (2018) makes the point that complexity in organisations is generated by the interdependencies between units, and that redrawing unit boundaries redistributes those interdependencies rather than reducing them.

The sociotechnical tradition reached the same conclusion in a coalmine seventy-five years ago. Trist and Bamforth (1951) documented what happened when the longwall method reorganised mining work into specialised shifts: the technical logic was sound, the social system was destroyed, and productivity and wellbeing both fell. Their finding — that the social and technical elements of work must be designed jointly — is the oldest and most durable result in this field, and it is routinely ignored by reviews that treat structure as a purely technical exercise.

The most reliable diagnostic of a structure-first review is the counterfactual: if the new chart were implemented tomorrow, which specific decision would be made differently, by whom, on what information? If that question cannot be answered concretely for at least three decisions, the review has not yet found anything.

How NSC Group applies this

We ask the counterfactual question in the first workshop and write the answers down. It is the cheapest way we know to establish whether a structural change is doing work or performing it.

4. WHY STRUCTURE IS LOW LEVERAGE

Six largely independent research traditions — sociotechnical systems, cybernetics, system dynamics, soft systems methodology, the Deming quality lineage and complexity theory — converge on a conclusion that is unhelpful to the restructuring market: rearranging the parts of a system, without changing what generates their behaviour, produces the same behaviour in a new arrangement. Three of those arguments are worth a board's attention, and none of them requires a diagram.

Some places to intervene are stronger than others. Meadows (2008) ranks twelve leverage points in a system, from weak to strong. Adjusting numbers — budgets, headcount, targets — is the weakest. Changing structure and rules sits low in the ranking. The strongest interventions are the system's goals, the distribution of power over the rules, and the mental models the whole arrangement rests on. An organisational review that changes reporting lines and leaves purpose and measures untouched has intervened at the weak end of that scale, at considerable cost, and should not be surprised by a weak result.

Simplification can be a reduction in capability. Ashby's law of requisite variety (1956) holds that a controller must have at least as much variety in its responses as the system it is trying to regulate. Consolidating decision points, standardising responses and removing local discretion all reduce the organisation's response variety. If the environment has not become correspondingly simpler — and it rarely has — the result is an organisation that is tidier on paper and less able to respond. This is the mechanism behind the familiar pattern of a consolidation that reduces cost in year one and quietly loses responsiveness by year three.

Purpose and measure generate behaviour; the chart only arranges it. Deming (1986) argued that most of what looks like individual or team failure is produced by the system people work in, and that measures drive behaviour more powerfully than instructions do. Seddon (2003, 2008) extended this to service organisations with the useful concept of failure demand: demand caused by a failure to do something, or to do something right, for the customer. In many service functions a substantial share of workload is failure demand, and it is invisible to a structural review because it looks like ordinary volume. Reorganise around that volume and you have built a structure optimised to process your own defects. It is worth noting that Seddon's public sector performance figures are self-reported by his consultancy rather than independently trialled; the concept is valuable, the numbers should not be quoted as evidence.

There is a fourth argument, from system dynamics, that explains the timing. Forrester and later Sterman showed that in systems with delays, an intervention often produces a short-term improvement followed by a delayed counter-effect — which is a reasonable description of the organisation that restructures, reports early progress, and restructures again three years later for the same reasons.

How NSC Group applies this

Before we discuss structure, we ask four questions about each significant unit: what is its purpose in the eyes of the people it serves; what demand actually arrives at it, and how much of that is failure demand; what is it measured on, and does that measure reward its purpose; and what can it decide without asking. Where the answers are misaligned, structural change will not fix it, and we say so even when the engagement was scoped to deliver a chart.

5. THE COST OF GETTING IT WRONG

The economic case for restructuring is weaker than its popularity implies. Datta, Guthrie, Basuil and Pandey (2010), reviewing three decades of downsizing research in the *Journal of Management*, found the relationship between workforce reduction and subsequent financial performance to be weak, inconsistent and frequently negative, with implementation quality mattering more than the size of the cut. Guthrie and Datta (2008) found the damage is worse in research-intensive and growth industries, where the capability being cut is the capability the firm competes on.

The mechanism is documented in the survivor literature. Brockner's work established that the people who remain after a restructure show measurable declines in trust, commitment and discretionary effort, and that those declines are strongly conditioned by whether the process was perceived as fair. The cost of a badly-run restructure is therefore not confined to redundancy payments; it is carried in the reduced effort of the people the organisation kept.

The Australian public evidence is more pointed still, because it is auditable. The NSW Auditor-General's performance audit *Machinery of government changes* (2021) examined recent departmental restructures and found that the anticipated benefits had not been articulated in sufficient detail, that benefit achievement was not monitored, and that costs were not tracked or reported. The audit estimated a minimum direct cost of $23.7 million for a single 2019 departmental change — a figure it had to construct, because the organisation had not counted it. The Australian National Audit Office reached comparable conclusions in its own machinery-of-government work (2016–17).

Read that finding twice. These were not organisations that restructured and failed to get the benefit. They were organisations that restructured without establishing what the benefit was meant to be, and without counting what it cost. Whatever else may be uncertain about organisational change, an intervention whose costs and benefits are both unmeasured cannot be described as evidence-based, and a board approving one is approving an act of faith.

How NSC Group applies this

We require a cost line and a benefit statement in every options paper we produce: the direct cost of implementing the option, the disruption cost expressed in months of reduced throughput, the specific improvement claimed, and the measure that will show whether it arrived. If we cannot complete that table for an option, we do not recommend it.

6. CHANGE FATIGUE IS MEASURABLE

Consultants talk about reorg fatigue. The research community has a better-defined version of the same thing. Bernerth, Walker and Harris (2011) developed and validated a change fatigue scale in *Work & Stress*, establishing cumulative exhaustion from repeated organisational change as a measurable construct rather than a figure of speech. Rafferty and Griffin (2006) had earlier shown that the frequency of change and the uncertainty surrounding it each independently predict psychological strain — frequency being the variable that most restructuring business cases treat as free.

This has a direct design implication. If each review imposes a cost on the workforce's capacity to absorb the next one, then how often an organisation reviews itself is a design decision with consequences, in exactly the way that how it structures itself is. An organisation on its fourth restructure in six years is not simply an organisation that has not yet found the right answer; it is an organisation whose people have learned that answers are provisional and that engaging with them is not worth the effort. That learning is rational, and it is expensive to reverse.

The practical test before commissioning a review is therefore not only 'is this the right change' but 'has this organisation the capacity to absorb another one, and what did the last three teach people about what happens when they engage'.

How NSC Group applies this

We ask about change history in the diagnostic phase and treat a high recent change load as a constraint on the recommendation, not as background colour. Sometimes the right advice is a narrower intervention now rather than a comprehensive one the organisation cannot absorb.

7. PROCESS QUALITY IS THE VARIABLE

If one finding from this literature deserves to survive contact with a board paper, it is this: the way a review is conducted predicts its outcome more reliably than the content of the structure it produces.

Kernan and Hanges (2002) found that procedural justice, interpersonal justice and informational justice during a reorganisation each predicted survivors' trust in management, organisational commitment and turnover intentions. Procedural justice concerns whether the process itself was fair and consistently applied; informational justice concerns whether people were given adequate and honest explanations; interpersonal justice concerns whether they were treated with dignity while it happened. These are not communications outputs bolted on at the end. They are properties of how the review is designed.

This is also where consultation earns its cost. Voice — a genuine opportunity to influence a decision, as distinct from a listening tour after the decision is made — is one of the strongest predictors of procedural justice perceptions. Staff distinguish the two accurately and immediately, and an organisation that runs the second while describing it as the first spends the money and acquires the cynicism.

There is a hard-nosed reading of this for a board. Process fairness is not a soft consideration weighed against the commercial case; it is a substantial part of the commercial case, because it determines the discretionary effort of the workforce that has to deliver the new arrangement.

How NSC Group applies this

We design the consultation before we design the options: who is asked, at what point, what they can genuinely influence, and how they will be told what was decided and why. Where a decision is already made, we advise clients to say so rather than to stage a consultation about it.

8. REORGANISING THE WORK

If structure is the wrong starting point, the obvious question is what the right one looks like. Four things are worth diagnosing before anyone opens a drawing tool.

Purpose and demand. What is this unit for, described from the point of view of the people it serves rather than in the language of the strategy document? What demand actually arrives — by type, by volume, by variation — and how much of it is failure demand created by the organisation's own earlier failures? Units frequently discover that a third of their workload exists because something upstream did not work.

Flow and handoffs. Follow a representative piece of work end to end and record where it waits, where it is re-entered into another system, where it is checked by someone who adds no information, and where it goes back. Delay in organisations is overwhelmingly concentrated in handoffs and queues rather than in the value-adding steps, and handoffs are precisely what a structural change redistributes without reducing.

Decision rights. Map what each level may decide without escalating, and compare it with what it actually escalates. The gap between formal and practised authority is usually large, and it explains more about organisational speed than the shape of the chart does. Escalation is a variety problem: every decision that has to travel upward is response capacity the organisation has chosen not to hold where the work is.

Job design. Parker's (2014) review of the job design evidence establishes that autonomy, skill variety, task significance and social support predict performance, learning and wellbeing, and that these are design choices rather than personality outcomes. Cherns' sociotechnical principles (1976, 1987) give the practical rules: specify only what is essential, place control at the point of variance, and give the people doing the work the information they need to manage it.

Structure follows from these findings rather than preceding them. When the work is understood, most structural questions answer themselves: teams form around the flow of work rather than the taxonomy of professions, boundaries are drawn where handoffs are cheapest, and authority is placed where the variance occurs. The resulting chart tends to be less elegant than the one a design workshop would produce, and considerably more likely to survive.

How NSC Group applies this

This is the core of our organisational review method. We spend the early weeks on demand, flow, decision rights and job design, and we present the structural options as a consequence of that analysis, with the reasoning visible so the executive can disagree with the logic rather than only with the conclusion.

9. CONTEMPORARY ALTERNATIVES, HONESTLY ASSESSED

Several alternatives to the periodic structural review are in circulation. They are worth different amounts.

Continuous and adaptive design — treating structure as something adjusted regularly in small increments rather than overhauled every few years — is theoretically well-founded and consistent with the change-fatigue evidence, but it demands a governance discipline most organisations do not have. Done badly it produces perpetual low-grade uncertainty, which is the worst of both approaches.

Ambidexterity — O'Reilly and Tushman's argument for structurally separating exploratory work from exploitative work — has reasonable empirical support and is genuinely useful where an organisation is trying to run an innovation agenda inside a delivery machine. It is a specific remedy for a specific pathology, not a general operating model.

Organisational network analysis maps how work and information actually flow, as distinct from how the chart says they should (Cross and Parker, 2004). As a diagnostic it is often revealing — it locates the people the organisation actually depends on, who are frequently not the people it has promoted. As a design method it is weaker, and it raises legitimate privacy and consent questions that should be settled before the first survey goes out, not after.

Self-managing structures attract disproportionate attention relative to their evidence base. Lee and Edmondson (2017) provide the most balanced treatment: these models can work, they are demanding to sustain, and the published successes are a small and self-selected sample. Recommending one to a large, regulated organisation on the strength of that evidence would be irresponsible.

None of these removes the need to understand the work. Each of them, applied without that understanding, becomes the same mistake in more contemporary language.

10. A REVIEW METHOD THAT HOLDS UP

Drawing the evidence together, a defensible organisational review has six stages.

- **1. Frame the problem in terms of the work.** Restate the brief as a description of what is not getting done, and agree that restatement with the commissioning executive before analysis begins.
- **2. Diagnose the work system.** Purpose, demand and failure demand, flow and handoffs, decision rights, job design. Evidence gathered from the work itself, not only from interviews with the people who manage it.
- **3. Establish the baseline.** What the current arrangement costs, what it delivers, and how both are currently measured. If the organisation cannot measure the present state, it will not be able to demonstrate improvement in the future one.
- **4. Develop options with honest trade-offs.** Each option carries what it improves, what it costs to implement, what it degrades, and what would have to be true for it to work. Options that only have benefits

have not been analysed.

- **5. Implement in stages, fairly.** Sequenced change with genuine voice at the points where influence is possible, honest information about what is decided, and an explicit account of how people will be treated.
- **6. Re-measure.** Return to the baseline measures at a defined interval and report against them, including where the change did not deliver. This is the stage that is almost always omitted, and it is the only one that produces organisational learning.

The commissioning questions

Before signing the engagement, a board or chief executive should be able to answer six questions: what specific decision or piece of work will be done differently; what evidence says the current arrangement is the cause; what the change will cost, including disruption; what improvement is claimed and how it will be measured; how many changes this workforce has absorbed in the past three years; and who will report on the results, to whom, and when. A review that cannot answer these is not yet ready to be commissioned, whoever is proposing it — including us.

11. RISKS, OBJECTIONS AND WHERE WE DREW THE LINE

A paper that argues against the prevailing practice owes the reader its own limits.

Sometimes structure genuinely is the problem. Where accountability for a critical outcome is split across two executives with equal standing, where a merger has left two parallel organisations running the same function under different systems, or where a governance obligation requires separation of duties that the current arrangement does not provide, structural change is the correct and sufficient remedy. The argument of this paper is about sequence and default, not about prohibition.

The evidence is convergent rather than conclusive. The sociotechnical and job-design literatures are peer-reviewed and robust. The systems thinking material is theoretically strong and supported by documented cases rather than by controlled trials, and some of the most-quoted practitioner results are self-reported by the consultancies that produced them. We have cited those concepts for their explanatory value and have deliberately not quoted their numbers.

Whose purpose, and where the system ends. Ulrich (1983) and Jackson (1991) make an objection that applies to this paper as much as to any other framework: deciding what counts as 'the system' is a value judgement, not a technical one, and whoever draws that boundary has already made political choices. This paper treats the purpose of the organisation as seen by the people it serves — customers, citizens, patients, students — as primary, and treats internal efficiency as secondary to that. That is a defensible position, not a neutral one, and a reader who holds a different view of purpose should expect different conclusions. Midgley (2000) is the practical reference for making that boundary choice explicitly rather than by default.

A gap we could not close. We looked for Australian or New Zealand public sector reviews that had explicitly adopted a systems or sociotechnical methodology and reported outcomes. We could not verify one. That absence is itself mildly interesting — the argument in this paper is not being tested at scale locally — and we would rather report the gap than imply an evidence base that does not exist. We also found no doctoral research on this question that we could verify to the standard of exact title, author, institution and locatable record, and have therefore cited none.

12. HOW NSC GROUP APPLIES THIS

Our organisational review service is built on the sequence this paper argues for. We begin with the work — purpose, demand, flow, decision rights, job design — and produce structural options as a conclusion drawn from that diagnosis, with the reasoning set out so an executive can test it. We baseline before we recommend, we cost the disruption as well as the implementation, and we design the consultation as part of the method rather than as communications support.

We also decline work occasionally. Where an organisation has decided on a structure and wants a review to substantiate it, or where the recent change load makes another restructure unwise, we say so at the proposal stage. It is a short conversation and it saves both parties an expensive year.

Where an engagement requires validated measurement of culture, leadership behaviour or capability — instruments with defensible items and comparison groups rather than an internal survey — we work alongside Influential Solutions (influential.solutions), whose instruments are built for that purpose.

13. CONCLUSION

The organisational chart is the most visible artefact of an organisation and one of the least powerful. It arranges the work; it does not determine it. Purpose, demand, measures, handoffs, decision rights and the design of jobs determine it, and a review that leaves those untouched has moved the furniture and invoiced for the architecture.

None of this makes structural change wrong. It makes structural change a conclusion rather than a starting point — something you arrive at once you understand why the work is not flowing, and can say precisely which decisions the new arrangement will change. Organisations that work that way restructure less often, spend less doing it, and are able to demonstrate afterwards what improved. Organisations that start with the chart tend to be back in the same room three years later, with a different consultant and the same problem.

Reorganise the work. The boxes will largely draw themselves.

TALK TO NSC GROUP

Before you commission the review

If a structural review is being proposed in your organisation, we will run the six commissioning questions in section 10 against it with you and tell you plainly whether it is ready. No cost, no obligation.

nscgroup.au/services/organisational-review · info@nscgroup.au · +61 401 625 132

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Where validated multi-rater measurement is required, we work alongside Influential Solutions (influential.solutions).

ABOUT NSC GROUP

NSC Group is an Australian workforce culture, organisational review and performance consultancy led by Pat Sheehan. We work with boards, executives and leadership teams on culture diagnostics, organisational review, capability frameworks and executive coaching. Learn more at nscgroup.au.