INSIGHTS FROM AN INVITE-ONLY EXECUTIVE ROUNDTABLE

# Enterprise adaptation is not a change management problem.

It is an operating-environment problem. Most enterprise change fails through gradual disengagement rather than visible opposition.

> **Pull adaptation rather than push change**
>
> Behavior follows context. Design an environment that reinforces ownership, relevance, safety, and learning, and adaptation becomes the natural outcome.

BY
Jesse Hopps, Founder
Commercial Excellence Consortium™

FORMAT
Executive brief
10 minutes

THE ROOM

# A persistent question senior leaders keep circling back to.

Senior Commercial Excellence, Transformation, and GTM leaders convened for a private executive roundtable to examine one question: **why does adaptation remain so difficult, even when strategy is clear and intent is aligned?**

The session ran without slides or vendors in the room. What surfaced was less a disagreement about strategy than a shared account of the same failure, one that shows up months after the launch, in the decisions that go unescalated.

WHO WAS IN THE ROOM

### Operators, not advisors.

Medtech, specialty chemicals, industrial manufacturing, logistics, FMCG, pharmaceuticals, and B2B services — collectively responsible for influencing behavior across tens of thousands of employees, often without direct authority.

Between them they own commercial performance in businesses where a point of margin is measured in tens of millions.

WHAT THEY EXAMINED

### One question, asked plainly.

**Why does adaptation remain so difficult, even when the strategy is clear, the funding is approved, and the intent across the leadership team is aligned?**

Few in the room argued that their people were the obstacle. That is what made the pattern worth naming.

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**Change rarely fails through visible opposition. It fails through gradual disengagement.**

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# People comply where required : and preserve habits where it matters.

Compliance is easy to observe. Commitment is not. Where it counts most, in customer conversations, pricing decisions, account prioritization, and daily trade-offs, experienced professionals keep doing what has long worked for them.

This is passive resistance, and it seldom announces itself. There is no confrontation to manage and no objection to answer, which is precisely why it survives the meeting that was meant to settle the matter. By the time the gap shows up in results, the launch is months behind and the conversation has moved on.

Leaders read the silence as consent. It is a judgment about which behaviors the organization will keep rewarding once attention moves elsewhere. The cost surfaces late, in a pricing discipline that survives the deck and slips in the deal.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

### People nod and agree in the meeting.

Heads move. Questions are few. The room reads as aligned and the initiative is recorded as agreed.

Agreement costs them nothing.

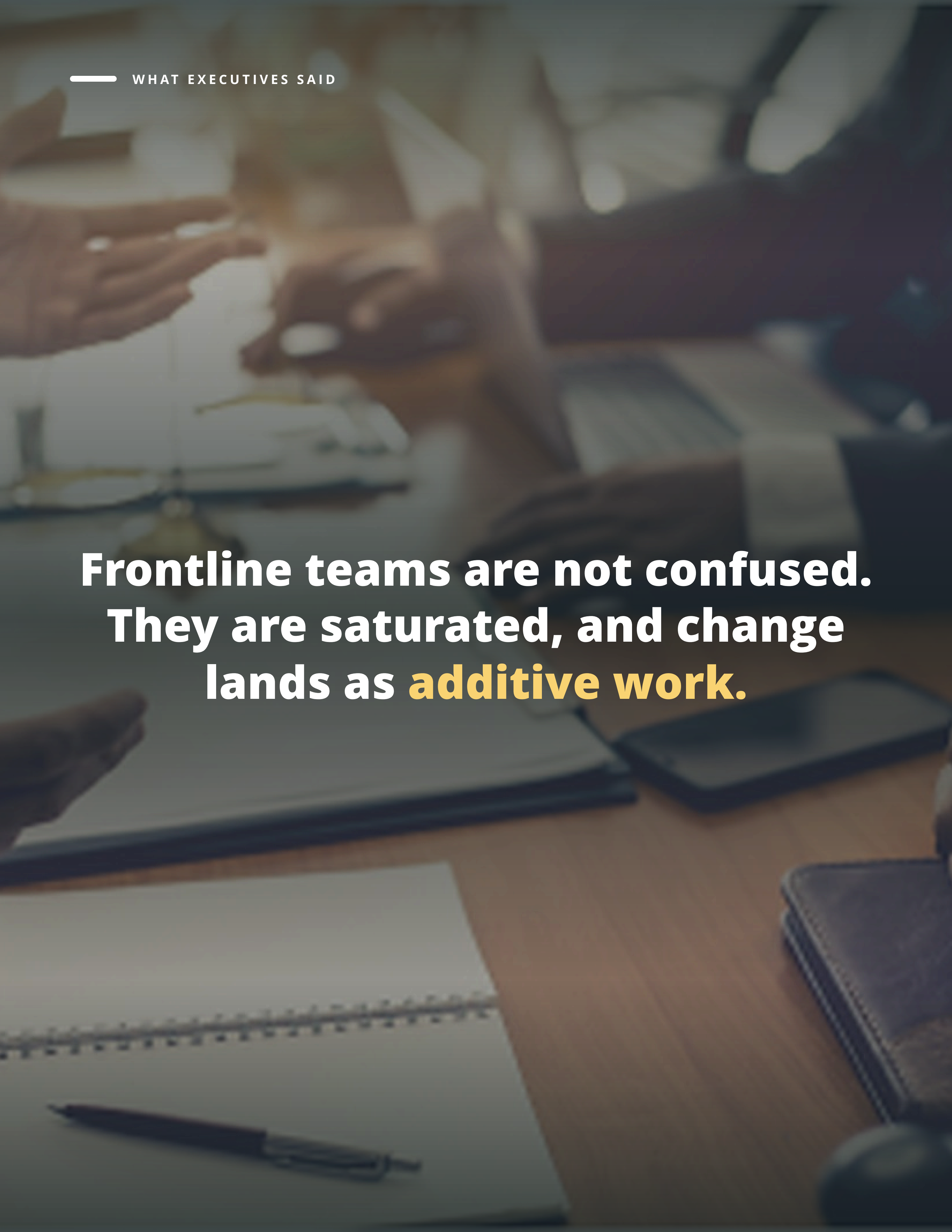
WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

### They go back to what they were doing the next day.

The work returns to the pattern that has been rewarded for years. Nothing was refused, and little of it reached the field.

The initiative reports as adopted until the quarter says otherwise.

## Agreement in the room is not adoption in the field.



WHAT EXECUTIVES SAID

## Frontline teams are not confused. They are saturated, and change lands as **additive work.**

# Capacity, identity, and fatigue — and not one of them is clarity.

Executives named six drivers across the session. The first three have nothing to do with whether people understand the plan — they are about what the organization has capacity to absorb, who was consulted, and what the last four initiatives taught people to expect.

## 01 Capacity is the dominant constraint.

Frontline teams are not confused. They are saturated. Unless something is deliberately removed, change becomes additive work on top of a full plate, and the plate is what the day is judged on.

## 02 Identity and ego are frequently triggered.

Resistance emerges when experienced professionals feel excluded from the design of the new ways of working they are asked to adopt. Being handed a method built by people who have not done the job reads as a verdict on their judgment.

## 03 Change fatigue builds faster than leaders expect.

After enough half-finished initiatives, people ration their effort. They wait to see whether this one is real before committing anything to it, and waiting has rarely cost them much.

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**Resistance is not emotional.**
**It is adaptive.**

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# Fear, passive resistance, and a manager layer with little room to coach.

The remaining three sit in the machinery of the operating environment: what the work feels like in a high-stakes moment, who the process is built to serve, and whether anyone reinforces the change once training ends. Each is fixable, and few of them are fixed by explaining the strategy again.

## 04 Fear of failure and ambiguity are under-addressed.

New pricing models, CRM workflows, and negotiation approaches create real uncertainty in high-stakes moments, so people fall back on what feels safe. The cost of getting it wrong lands on them, not on the program.

## 05 The “feed the monster” problem undermines adoption.

Frontline teams are asked to enter data and follow processes that primarily serve governance and reporting, rather than their own work. Effort flows to the system rather than the customer, and the people doing it can tell the difference.

## 06 The manager layer is the silent bottleneck.

Where managers lack the time, skill, or incentives to coach, behavior change decays rapidly after training. The middle layer is where adoption lives or dies, and it is usually the layer with the least room to absorb one more thing.

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**Few of these are problems of willpower. They are properties of the environment.**

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THE SHIFT

**Stop pushing change through the organization. Design the conditions that let adaptation occur on its own.**

# Three moves that change how the environment behaves.

Each works on the conditions rather than the message — transferring ownership, freeing capacity, and sustaining the new behavior once pressure returns.

01 · CO-DESIGN

### Let operators design it.

When the people who live in the work help design it, realism improves and ownership shifts from imposed systems to shared solutions.

02 · SUBTRACT FIRST

### Subtract before adding.

Before introducing new expectations, deliberately retire the reports and processes they replace. Capacity is the constraint, so create some.

Subtraction is the clearest signal that this one is different from the last four.

03 · COACH

### Coach, not just train.

Training creates awareness. Coaching creates behavior. Without it, the new way decays back to the old the moment pressure rises.

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**Training creates awareness.
Coaching creates behavior.**

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SIDE BY SIDE

# Six drivers. Six conditions the environment could reinforce instead.

Read the left column as what the operating environment rewards today; the right as what the same environment produces once the three moves are in place.

| THE CHALLENGE | | THE DESIRED OUTCOME |
|---|---|---|
| Saturated calendars | ⟶ | **Deliberate capacity** |
| Imposed solutions | ⟶ | **Co-designed solutions** |
| Rationed effort | ⟶ | **Proof it will endure** |
| Fear in the moment | ⟶ | **Practiced confidence** |
| Data that feeds reporting | ⟶ | **Work that serves customers** |
| Managers with no time | ⟶ | **Coaching as the engine** |

**The lever is not the message.**
**It is the environment the message lands in.**

THE NEXT STEP

# Ready to equip your people to meet the adversity transformation generates?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Jesse Hopps

Founder and Group Moderator of the **Commercial Excellence Consortium™**, an invite-only peer community of 300+ senior executives at large global enterprises responsible for enterprise transformation and organic growth.

The Consortium hosts monthly executive roundtables and convenes practitioners who believe that operators, not consultants, are best positioned to solve the hardest problems in commercial excellence.

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