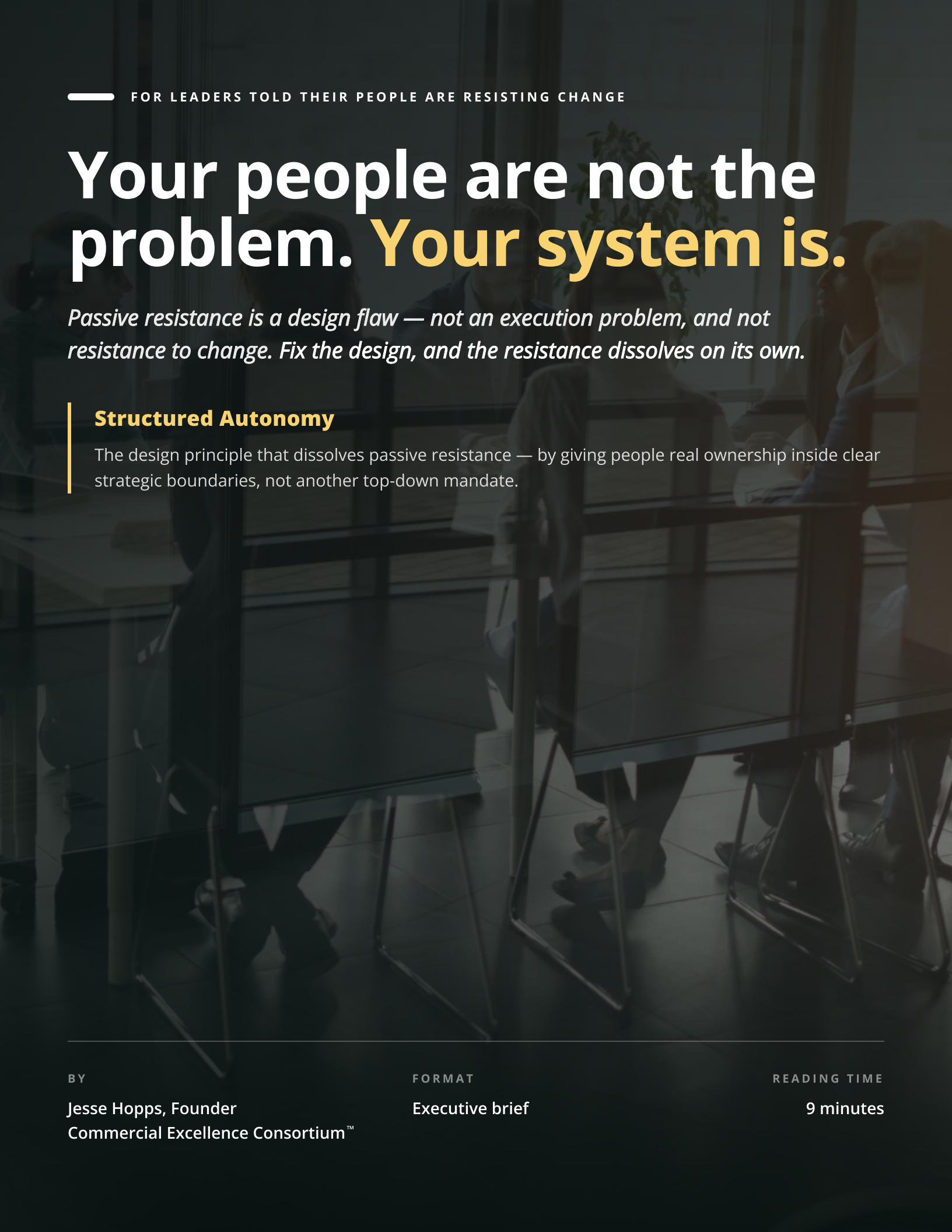




— FOR LEADERS TOLD THEIR PEOPLE ARE RESISTING CHANGE

Your people are not the problem. **Your system is.**

Passive resistance is a design flaw — not an execution problem, and not resistance to change. Fix the design, and the resistance dissolves on its own.

Structured Autonomy

The design principle that dissolves passive resistance — by giving people real ownership inside clear strategic boundaries, not another top-down mandate.

BY

Jesse Hopps, Founder
Commercial Excellence Consortium™

FORMAT

Executive brief

READING TIME

9 minutes

We spend more on change than ever — and get **the same result.**

70%

OF CORPORATE
TRANSFORMATIONS
FAIL TO ACHIEVE THEIR
INTENDED OUTCOMES

MCKINSEY

75%

FAIL TO GENERATE
LASTING VALUE

BCG

88%

UNDERDELIVER
AGAINST THE BUSINESS
CASE

BAIN

You cannot fail at something
eighty percent of the time
and conclude that **the method works.**

The playbook has been refined for thirty years. The failure rate **has barely moved**.

The firms disagree on the precise figure — McKinsey says 70%, BCG 75%, Bain 88%. They agree on the pattern: most transformation efforts underdeliver. And the investment behind those failures is staggering. Global spending on digital transformation alone exceeded **\$1.8 trillion** in 2022. Add consulting, systems integration, change management, and training, and the footprint enters the multi-trillion-dollar range.

The conventional response is to refine the playbook: better governance, better communication, better technology, better project management. But if the playbook has been refined for three decades and the failure rate has barely moved, the honest conclusion is uncomfortable — the playbook itself is the problem.

Passive resistance is not a people problem.
It is a **design problem.**

WHAT THAT MEANS

The solution is not better change management.

It is a different relationship between the people **designing change and the people expected to execute it.**



— THE FAILURE MODE THE DASHBOARD MISSES

People log in. They fill the fields. The dashboard lights up green — and **the behavior stays the same.**

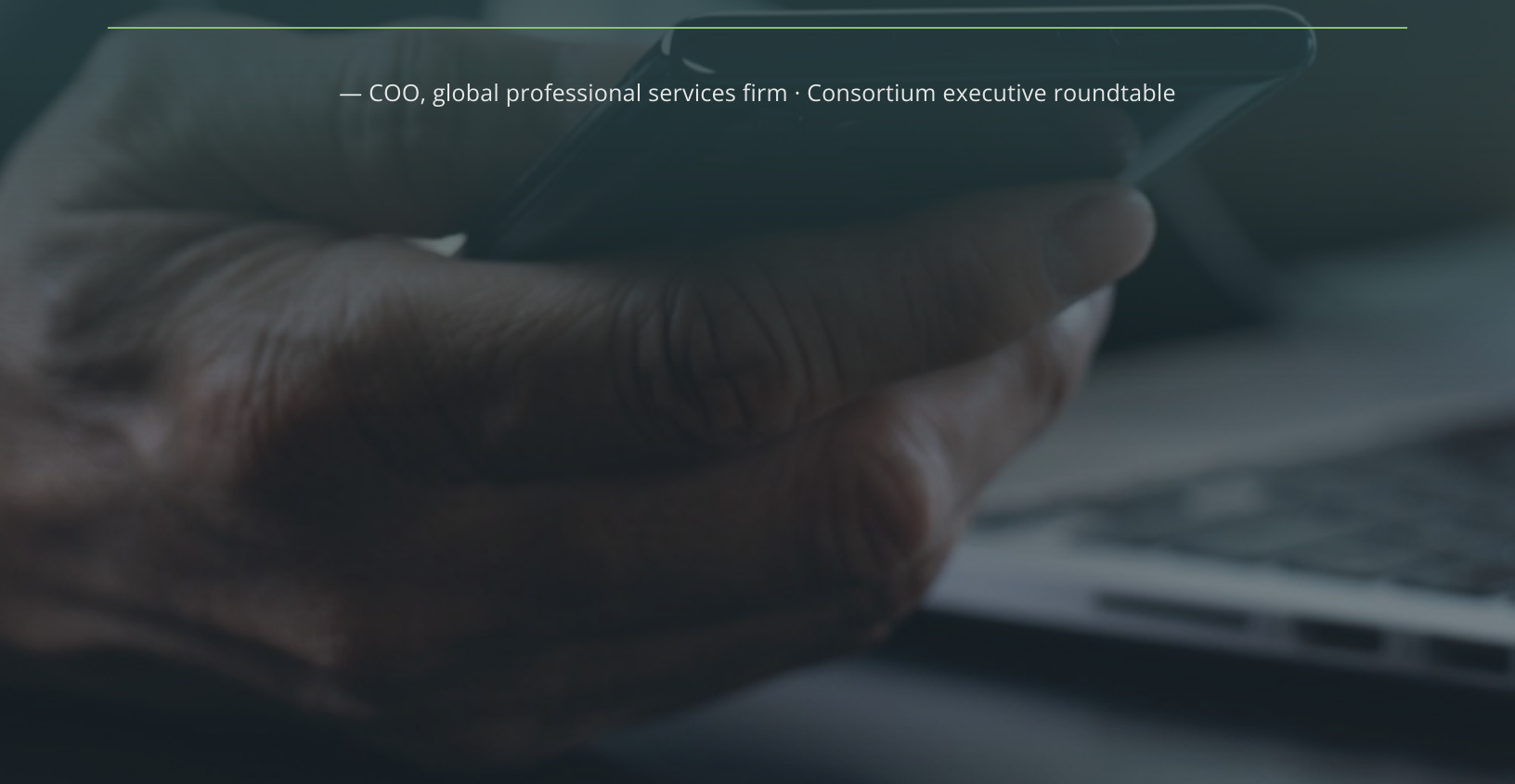
Not sabotage. Not defiance. **Something more corrosive.**

It is surface-level compliance that produces nothing of consequence. The data is unreliable, the behavioral change does not follow, and the growth that was supposed to follow the investment simply does not arrive. It lives in the hallway conversation after the town hall, in the eye roll after the executive leaves the room, in the decision to wait this one out because the last three initiatives died on their own.

It is the rational response of intelligent people who have learned that transformation is done *to* them, not *with* them — and that the safest strategy is to comply without committing.

**When you talk about passive resistance,
what you're really saying is that you
haven't spent enough time hearing
what your people **actually care about.****

— COO, global professional services firm · Consortium executive roundtable



Each one is a **design flaw**, not a character flaw.

01 **An empathy gap at the top.**

The people who design transformation are more resilient, adaptable, and engaged than the people expected to execute it — and assume, unconsciously, that everyone else is too. A McKinsey study of ~30,000 employees found only 23% self-report as highly adaptable. Nearly eight in ten do not.

02 **The systematic destruction of intrinsic motivation.**

Self-Determination Theory names three conditions for lasting change: autonomy, competence, relatedness. Most programs violate all three — autonomy dies with the top-down mandate, competence is undermined without coaching, relatedness collapses when the work feels disconnected.

03 **A broken incentive structure.**

Leaders launch programs and rotate out before results land. Consultants sell engagements that pay regardless of outcome. Software firms sell platforms that get implemented but rarely adopted. Few in the chain are paid for adoption.

THE THROUGH-LINE

None of these are failures of will.

They are failures of **design — and design is something you can change.**



— THE SHIFT THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

**The moment people co-
design the change, they
stop resisting it — because
it is theirs.**

Set the boundaries. Then give people **real ownership** inside them.

Structured autonomy is not a methodology. It is a principle: define the strategic boundaries clearly, then give the people within them genuine ownership over how to move the needle. The direction comes from the top — that is non-negotiable. But the design of *how* to get there must involve the people doing the work. Not as a courtesy. Not as a feedback exercise. As genuine co-designers with authority over real problems.

Strategy comes from the leadership. But the people closest to the work usually know what is actually stopping them — and the moment they own the solution, the complaints stop.

FROM THE FIELD

The moment someone says ‘this was my idea,’ they will not let go. The CRM not working is no longer a complaint — because it's **their idea, and they want it to work.**

— Global Head of Commercial Excellence, specialty chemicals company

Five principles for **dissolving passive resistance.**

Principles that shape how the work itself is designed — so resistance rarely forms in the first place.

1

Begin with mindset, not tools

Reverse the conventional sequence. Measure how people respond to adversity and build adaptive capacity before asking anyone to adopt a new tool or process.

2

Design execution from the ground up

Strategy comes from the top; execution design comes from the people closest to the work. Replace the post-mortem with a pre-mortem — ask the frontline what's stopping them before you launch.

3

Convert resistors into champions early

The likely resistors are known before any initiative launches. Bring them into the design phase instead of managing around them.

4

Build quick wins into early milestones

Transformation fatigue is partly a function of delayed proof. Show something working fast.

5

Stop calling it transformation

The word has become counterproductive — it signals another top-down program people have learned to outlast. Find a better one.

TransformationOS: the operating system your program runs on.

TransformationOS™ is a behavioral operating system — the layer that runs underneath a program and keeps it running after the pressure lifts. It sits beneath the training, the tools, and the governance, and governs the order they land in: Mindset, then Skillset, then Toolset.

THE OPERATING SEQUENCE — MINDSET, SKILLSET, TOOLSET

Mindset → Skillset → Toolset

01 · MINDSET

Build the capacity to change first.

Grounded in Adversity Quotient (AQ®) and GRIT™. Adaptive capacity is not a soft skill — it is what makes everything else possible.

02 · SKILLSET

Build skills through real work.

The muscle of acting differently forms by working real growth obstacles with coaching — not in a classroom.

03 · TOOLSET

Add tools only when the work demands them.

Demand Metric's 1,000+ playbooks and diagnostics, pulled in on demand. Tools become springboards, not cages.

**When you get the sequence right,
execution becomes inevitable.**

AIRAS: the rhythm an Academy or Accelerator runs on.

Mindset–Skillset–Toolset names what to build. AIRAS is how a program builds it — the five phases a cohort moves through together, on real work.

A

Align.

Leadership pre-work. A red-dot exercise surfaces the real growth obstacles inside the business units — not the ones headquarters assumes are there.

I

Inspire.

Cohort kickoff. AQ®/GRIT™ coaching reframes adversity as fuel. This is where the mindset gets delivered.

R

Reflect.

Teams self-organize into charters around obstacles they are motivated to solve. Self-selection is the rule — nobody is assigned a project they don't believe in.

A

Apply.

The 90 days. Each team runs a 90-day Growth Project™ with weekly operator-coach support, pulling tools in on demand — then presents the outcome to a senior committee.

S

Scale.

The phase most functions skip. Proven projects roll out through field pull, not central push. The field discovers the standard; the center codifies it.



— THE COURAGE PROBLEM

Few disagree that involving people works. **Fewer are brave enough to try.**

Vulnerability is the **stronger strategy.**

The conventional playbook fails 70–88% of the time. Structured autonomy, when genuinely implemented, has anchored full Commercial Excellence portfolios that delivered mid-eight-figure EBITDA impact, 80% reductions in consulting spend, and capability programs participants describe as the best development experience of their careers.

Passive resistance is not a force to be managed. It is a signal to be heeded.

Fix the design, and the resistance **dissolves on its own.**



— THE NEXT STEP

Ready to equip your people to **harness the adversity** transformation generates?

For Consortium members and their leadership teams, the next step is straightforward: book a confidential Executive Briefing. No pitch. No proposal. A candid, peer-level diagnostic.

For senior Commercial Excellence, Strategy, Transformation, and Growth leaders
at \$1B+ enterprises.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Founder and Group Moderator of the **Commercial Excellence Consortium™**, an invite-only peer community of 250+ 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.

— BY INVITATION ONLY —

The Executive Fellowship

A working circle for **Heads of Commercial Excellence, Strategy, Transformation, and Growth** at \$1B+ enterprises — operators building the next commercial operating model, together.

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