

MANREAU PERSPECTIVE

Before You Ask Whether They Will, Establish Whether They Can

By Waheeda Görlitz | 21 September 2026

The same lack of movement can arise from unwillingness, inability or both. The distinction matters because each diagnosis demands a different leadership response.

A failure to act does not prove a failure of commitment.

When a transformation stops moving, leadership often reaches quickly for a motivational diagnosis: people do not understand the ambition, managers are not committed or the organization is resisting change.

Sometimes that diagnosis is correct. Sometimes people do not accept the consequences, prefer the existing order or have incentives to delay. But the same visible behavior can arise when people are willing and unable.

The distinction is not semantic. It determines what leadership must do next.

Will And Can Are Different Constraints

Will is the commitment to make the choices, accept the trade-offs and carry the consequences transformation requires. It concerns interests, credibility, conviction and whether the proposed exchange is legitimate enough for people to support.

Can is broader than personal competence. It includes the skill to perform unfamiliar work, the authority to decide, the resources and time to act, the rigor to handle evidence and dependencies, the cadence that sustains coordinated movement, and the human energy required to continue over time.

A manager can believe in the transformation and still lack the authority to resolve a cross-functional dependency. A team can possess the skill and still be carrying too many priorities. An organization can begin with genuine commitment and lose the capacity to sustain it through three years of repeated initiatives and invisible value.

These are not failures of will. They are failures in the conditions of action.

The same symptom can have different causes

Delay may be political obstruction, or it may reflect unresolved decision rights. Minimal compliance may protect an existing interest, or it may be the only feasible response to conflicting demands. Skepticism may signal opposition, or it may be accumulated learning from prior promises that did not materialize.

Leaders cannot infer the cause from the behavior alone. They need to make the operating conditions visible and test competing explanations against evidence.

A useful diagnostic begins with two questions: Is the organization unwilling to act, unable to act under the conditions provided, or facing both constraints? And what evidence would distinguish among those explanations?

Will and can also shape one another

The two conditions are distinct but not independent. Weak commitment can prevent leaders from allocating the authority and resources required for action. Repeated inability can erode motivation until people stop believing further effort will matter.

This is why transformation fatigue is consequential. It shows how an initially practical constraint can become a motivational one. When effort repeatedly fails to produce visible movement, the organization learns to conserve belief as well as energy.

Diagnose before prescribing

If the constraint is will, leaders must address interests, consequences, credibility and commitment. If the constraint is can, they must change capability, authority, resources, rigor, cadence or load. If both are present, treating only one leaves the transformation structurally incomplete.

The leadership principle is simple: before diagnosing unwillingness, establish whether people can act and sustain action under the conditions provided.

That principle does not excuse weak performance. It makes accountability more exact. People should be accountable for choices within their agency; leaders should be accountable for the conditions that determine whether coherent action is possible.

Sources

This Perspective codifies MANREAU's will-or-can diagnostic. It is designed to prevent motivational explanations from obscuring the practical conditions that leadership controls.

About MANREAU

A transformation program is not yet a transformation.

Your strategy can be sound, delivery disciplined and change carefully planned. Yet your transformation can still fail.

Managing the initiatives is one job. Managing the system that must transform the business is another. Most organizations manage the first explicitly. The second goes unmanaged. That system is the Transformation Operating System.

MANREAU works with leaders on their Strategic Mobilization to improve the conditions for successful transformation by making the Transformation Operating System visible and manageable. Strategic intent turns into coherent action, booked and sustained value, and the capacity to transform again.

About the author

Waheeda Görlitz is the founder of MANREAU. She works with leadership teams on the organizational, political and human system through which transformation becomes executable and enduring.

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