Michael Leswick
CPA · MBA | ML FINANCE & TRANSFORMATION ADVISORY
mleswick@mlfinanceadvisory.ca
linkedin.com/in/michaelleswick

A FIELD GUIDE

Driving Lasting Change

the six moves that keep change from stalling

Most finance transformations do not fail on the technology. They stall on the choices made around it: how the case for change is told, how the work is designed, and whether the organization can sustain it once the early energy fades. Across enterprise finance leadership and independent advisory work, I have seen the same patterns time and time again, in large-scale programs and single stuck processes alike. Here are six of them, each paired with the move that keeps a good idea from quietly losing momentum.

1 Start with the why

WHERE IT STALLS

The real reason goes unspoken. A cost-driven move gets dressed up as standardization and professionalization. All of it true, none of it the actual driver. People fill the silence with "the organization does not care," and the layer just below the executive moves into fault-finding that becomes self-fulfilling.

WHAT MAKES IT SOAR

Tell the whole story, including the uncomfortable part, and make it relatable to the people hearing it. "Less time retyping the same numbers from one screen into another" lands; "uplifted analytical capability for all" does not. Stay on message, and keep the business case honest, because overstated benefits push forward changes the buy-in cannot support.

From the field: a payables overhaul the team co-designed succeeded because they already felt the pain. A reorganization of work explained by everything except its real driver did not.

2 Build the process to fit the tech

WHERE IT STALLS

A team bends modern software to preserve the way it has always worked. In a built-for-many platform, customization is expensive and fragile, and it quietly forfeits the automatic updates and economics that justified the move. Workarounds invented to survive an old system's limits get mistaken, over the years, for vital controls.

WHAT MAKES IT SOAR

Separate outcomes from activities. The outcome, validated and reconciled data landing where it belongs, is non-negotiable. The activity used to get there is not. A manual approval that once compensated for a system that could not reconcile is no longer a control once the new system reconciles upstream.

From the field: a posting approval everyone defended as essential turned out to be a relic of an old system, replaced by a capability the new platform already had built in.

3 Make the tools stick

WHERE IT STALLS

The tools are deployed and nobody uses them. Licences get collected and left idle, and adoption is "marketed" internally with a broadcast and a click-here link that no one clicks. Push-marketing works no better inside an organization than it does outside one.

WHAT MAKES IT SOAR

Engineer adoption as pull plus accountability. Grassroots enthusiasm gives people a reason to try; visibility at the senior level on who is actually using what keeps it honest. Plan the wind-down as carefully as the launch, because a broad rollout with no exit creates its own friction later.

From the field: a deliberate broad-then-narrow rollout drove real usage and tens of thousands of hours of reclaimed annual capacity. The later pullback, less planned, created avoidable friction.

4 Question what you have always trusted

WHERE IT STALLS

A method is tuned for stability rather than accuracy, and comfortable assumptions go unexamined because the controls keep saying everything is fine. Stability is often a proxy for a conversation no one wants to have.

WHAT MAKES IT SOAR

Test the lineage rather than trust the output, and treat "it is consistent with the last run" as a question, not an answer. The cost of a comfortable assumption compounds quietly until someone finally looks.

From the field: a long-standing allocation model, trusted for years, had been overcharging one part of the business the whole time. The fix took a one-time relevel and real change management, but the numbers had been wrong for years.

5 Fund it like it is different

WHERE IT STALLS

A sound, well-run project is asked to live inside a fixed annual run-rate that has no room for it. Run-the-business priorities win by default, and a compelling business case loses to a budget that was never built to absorb a one-time investment of that size.

WHAT MAKES IT SOAR

Have the funding conversation before the project starts, as a decision separate from the operating budget. Large change needs a financing model, not just a business case. The mechanism to scale up for a one-time investment has to exist before the work is ready, not after.

From the field: a technically ready platform decision was shelved not on its merits but because the budget had no way to absorb an investment of that scale.

6 Make it outlast its champion

WHERE IT STALLS

A transformation rests on a single sponsor. The sponsor moves on, the successor inherits something they did not build, and the work quietly unwinds. Strategy does not always outlive sponsorship.

WHAT MAKES IT SOAR

Broaden sponsorship until no single departure can undo it. The most durable changes are owned across enough of the leadership that continuity survives a reorganization. And when a new leader starts building something adjacent to your mandate, engage early, because neutrality is not a safe position.

From the field: a cross-functional transformation group with strong early results was dissolved after its sponsoring executive moved on, because the mandate had never been broadened beyond them.

TEN QUESTIONS TO PRESSURE-TEST YOUR OWN CHANGE READINESS

A quick self-check. The more of these you can answer cleanly, the more momentum your initiative is likely to keep.

1. Can everyone explain the real reason for the change in one sentence, including the uncomfortable part?
2. Would the people giving up work describe the why the same way leadership would?
3. Would you still commit to this if the projected benefits came in at half?
4. Which of your "controls" are actually workarounds for a system you no longer run?
5. Have you agreed on the outcomes and left the activities open to change?
6. Do you know who is actually using the new tools, not just who has access?
7. Have you planned the sustainment activities as carefully as the launch?
8. When a number matches the last run, are you sure it is right, or is consistency passing as a control?
9. Does this initiative have a funding decision separate from the run-rate budget?
10. If the sponsor left tomorrow, would it survive?

Michael Leswick
CPA · MBA

I spent much of my career as a senior finance executive inside a major financial institution, both running finance functions and leading their transformation. Now I work independently, alongside leaders on the problems that are hardest to solve from the inside. I get up to speed on the business, work with the team to find the root cause, and build a solution they can carry once I am gone. The goal is always to deliver a better outcome, not just a report: stronger processes, modernized approaches to work and reporting, and analysis that drives action.

If any of these tactics or questions land, reach out for a conversation. mleswick@mlfinanceadvisory.ca