

Supporting Executives In The Eye of The Storm

Why transformation success depends on how the team at the top navigates pressure

Sander van Muijen MBA, MDiv, Executive PhD Candidate – April 2026



Higher Purpose
Consulting

Executive Teams In Transformation

When the Greatest Unmanaged Risk – Is the Top Team Itself

The risks in transformational change are not only the change plan and its execution. What if it's the fitness of the top team itself – to lead effectively under pressure?

The executive team's own effectiveness shapes outcomes quietly:

- in the boardroom
- in each phase of the transformation journey
- behind the numbers and updates in progress reports

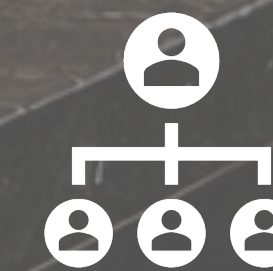
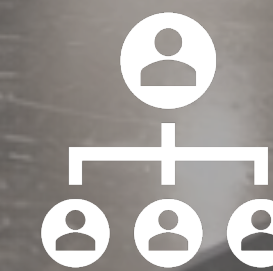
Yet the executive team's capabilities and even support for the organization's transformational change is:

- assumed, but rarely not tested
- hidden, and rarely surfaced
- sensitive, and rarely discussed openly
- influential, yet rarely monitored



What remains unaddressed at the top does not stay contained there.

It spreads into [delayed] decisions, [lack of] alignment, [struggling] execution, and – eventually – [lagging] business results.

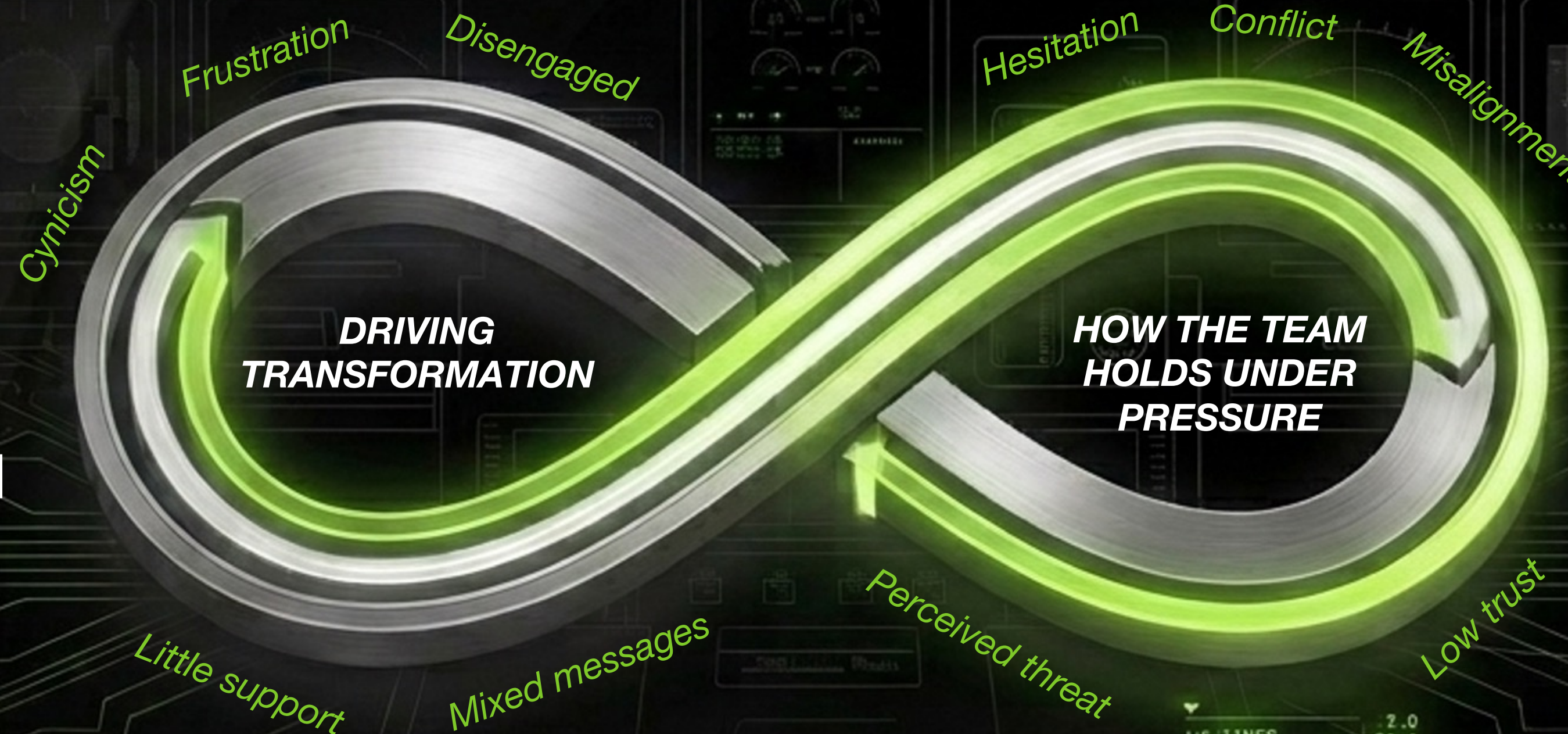


Transformation Fails Or Succeeds With The Team At The Top

If the Human Factor at the top is not surfaced, strengthened, and monitored, it will shape outcomes regardless.

LEADING THE TRANSFORMATION

- Strategy, direction, and ambition
- Decisions, alignment, and execution
- Driving change across the organization



HOW THE TEAM AT THE TOP OPERATES

- Capability, alignment, and engagement under pressure
- Team dynamics, trust, and decision behavior
- The ability to adapt, collaborate, and lead together

After: The Leadership Paradox, Marco de Witte

Executives themselves are not above the storm – they are in the eye and face the heat of it.

"I don't believe in change ever truly ending. So it's just one big continuous stream of changes. So even as an executive team, how do you equip yourself in such a way that you are adaptive in any continuous change?"

"..the main thing is to increase your adaptive change capability. Because one thing you know for sure: change will only accelerate. If you're not adaptive enough, that will be a problem."

"Do I think that the team who drives the change and the way they approach it and how they look at change impacts the way they run the change? I say absolutely, in my view, there really is no other way."

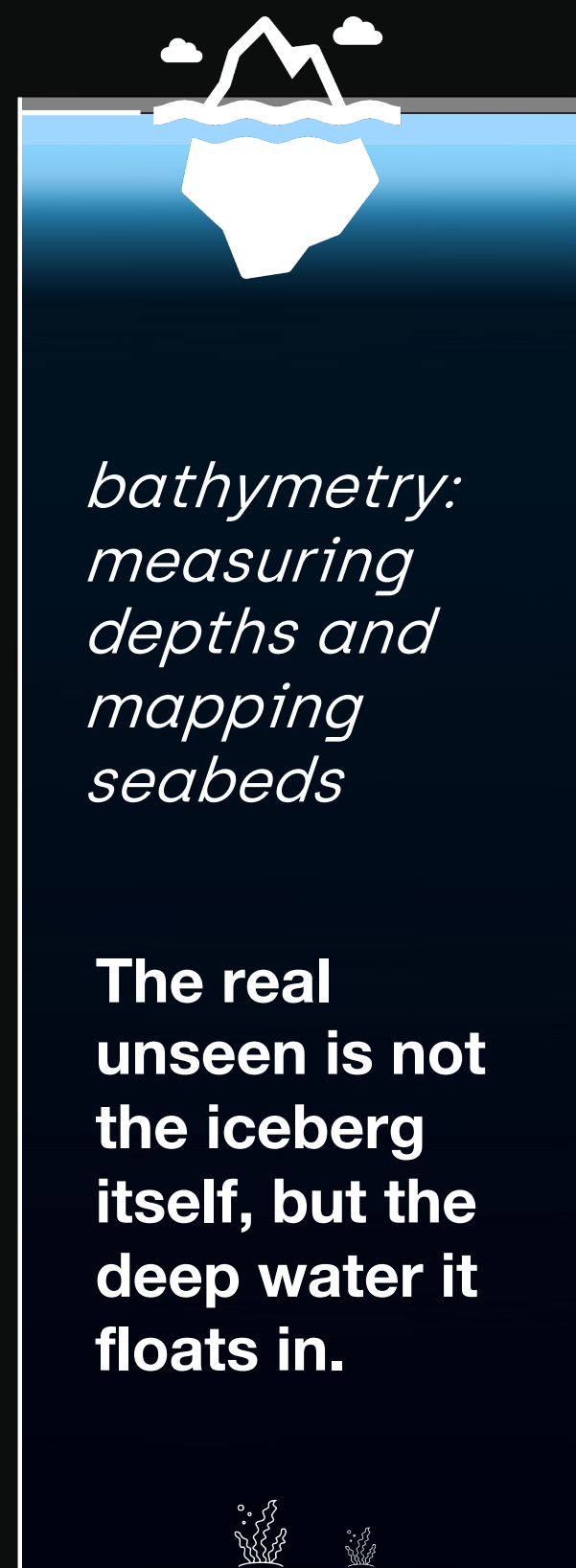
Quotes from C-level executive in NL, UK, US and Switzerland (PhD research Sander van Muijen, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Real-world lessons from honest executive when leading transformational change



Going Deeper: What's Below The Iceberg?

It's not the ice that drifts an iceberg, but the dark water beneath. In executives, these depths are still uncharted.

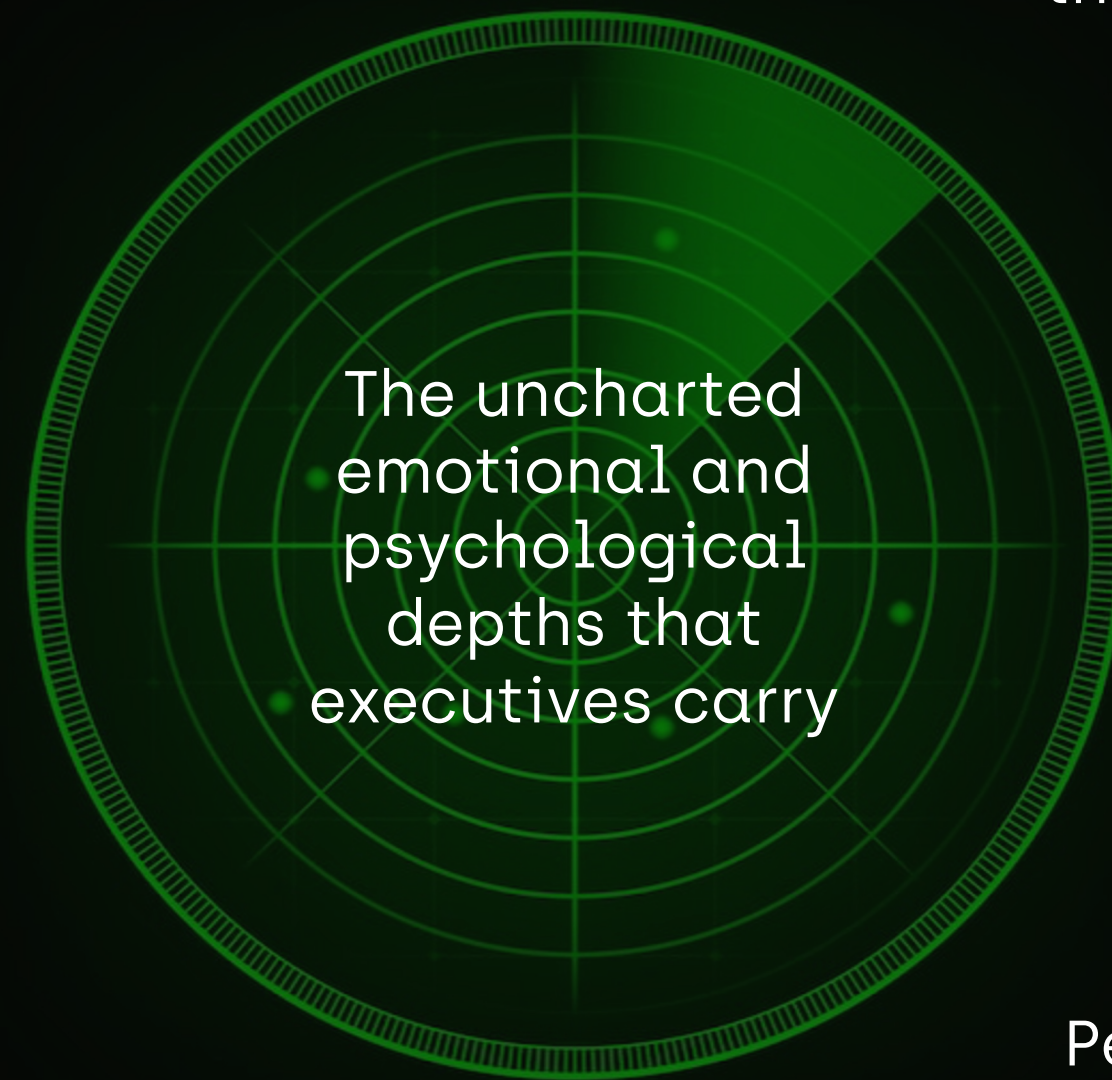


water level
iceberg

*bathymetry:
measuring
depths and
mapping
seabeds*

**The real
unseen is not
the iceberg
itself, but the
deep water it
floats in.**

seabed



The uncharted
emotional and
psychological
depths that
executives carry

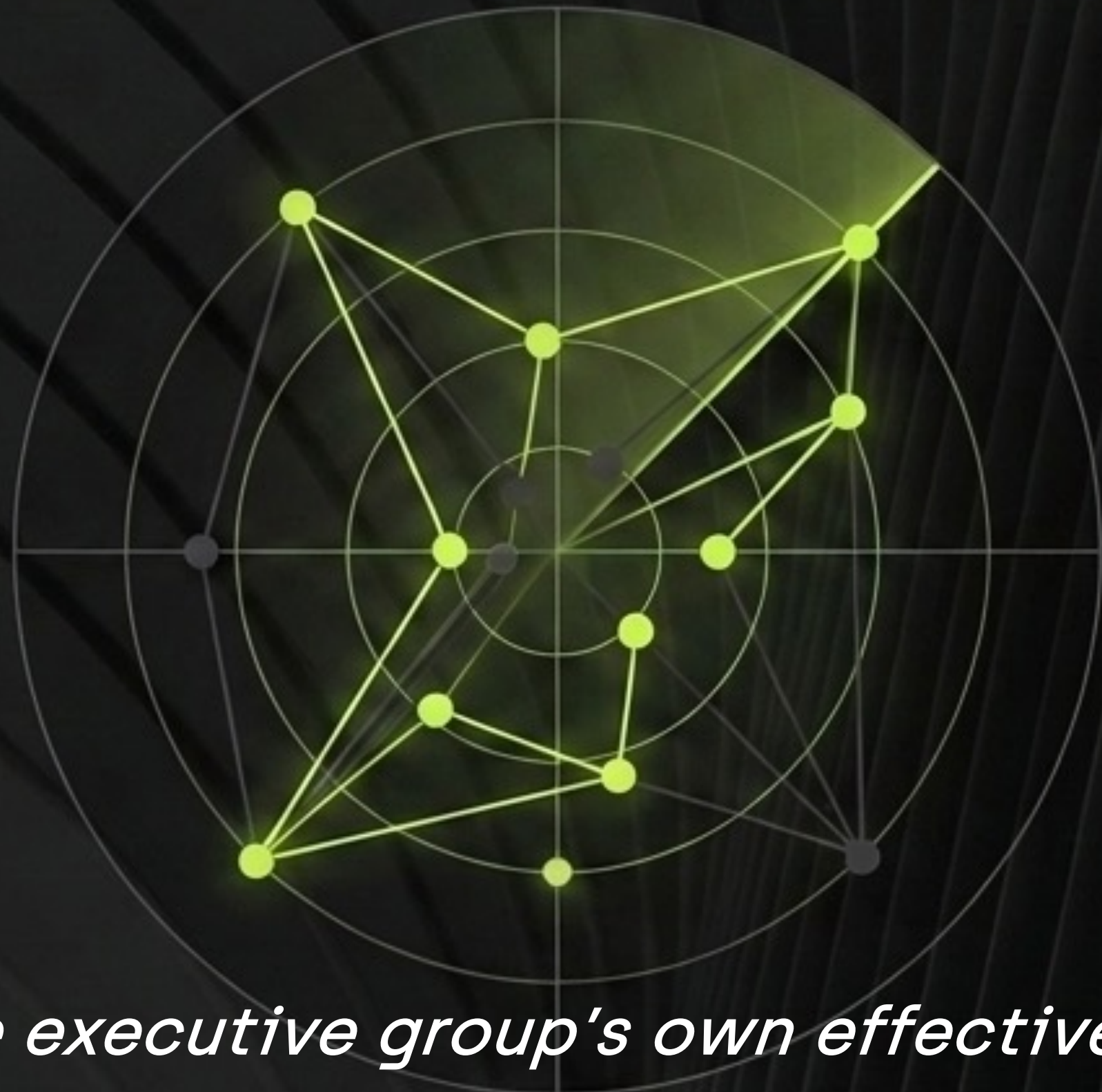
The iceberg model is a common way to explore the visible leadership behaviors above the waterline, and their hidden assumptions and beliefs below. But the real darkness lies even deeper — in the vast ocean beneath the iceberg, where currents and pressures move silently, unseen.

For decades, research has bypassed the response of executives to the realities of organizational change. Treated mostly as rational architects of change, their own human undercurrents and internal pressures remains largely uncharted.

Yet the deeper currents of executive's own responses in times of change are unseen forces that steer the iceberg — just as ocean currents, not the ice, dictate their drift.

Penetrating these hidden depths will help to map the powerful forces that lie below the iceberg itself — in the dark water rarely explored, but shaping their every drift, grounding, or collapse under pressure.

The Executive On The Radar



"The executive group's own effectiveness and ability as critical to transformation success — yet frequently overlooked"

"Turkeys, by definition, don't vote for Christmas."

"Any change starts with people asking: what does this mean to me? And executives are no different in that. They're gonna wanna know what it means to them as best they can figure it out. And in fact, this is the point in time where people are the most highly compensated. And ..depending on how they think about all that, feel like they have the most to lose"

"It was key to have a leadership team that could adapt to the changing strategy of the organization, and translate the business strategy to what it also means for us as leaders, for our leadership culture."

Quotes from C-level executive in NL, UK, US and Switzerland (PhD research Sander van Muijen, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Inspired by aviation: the central role of 'Human Factors'

Flying didn't become safe because pilots became flawless, but because systems and practices were rebuilt around their humanity.



In the 1970's

- Captain as infallible hero, expected to be flawless in executing all procedures – even under stress, rising above human limitations
- Heroic lone-captain model; co-pilots hesitant to challenge authority
- Little systemic focus on fatigue, stress, workload, decision-making under stress or communication within full crew
- Accidents investigated as individual failures, "Pilot error" blamed for accidents with no attention for systemic breakdowns

Developments in last 50 years

- Human Factors as reality of human limitations embedded in training, checklists, and culture
- Crew Resource Management (CRM) normalized cross-checking, call-outs, shared authority
- Fatigue, stress, and workload actively monitored
- Accidents analyzed with systemic lens (latent conditions + organizational design)
- Dramatic safety improvements industry-wide

From "Pilot Error" to Crew's Human Factor as a System Condition

1950s–1970s. Accidents primarily attributed to individual "pilot error". Limited attention to stress, communication, or decision-making under pressure.

1977 — Tenerife Disaster [583 fatalities]. Deadliest aviation accident in history. Revealed critical issues in communication, authority, and decision-making.

Late 1970s — NASA Human Factors Research. Identified crew coordination, authority gradients, and situational awareness as key risks. Laid foundation for a new discipline.

1980s — Crew Resource Management (CRM). Introduced systematic training for communication, teamwork, and decision-making. Shift from individual blame → team performance under pressure.

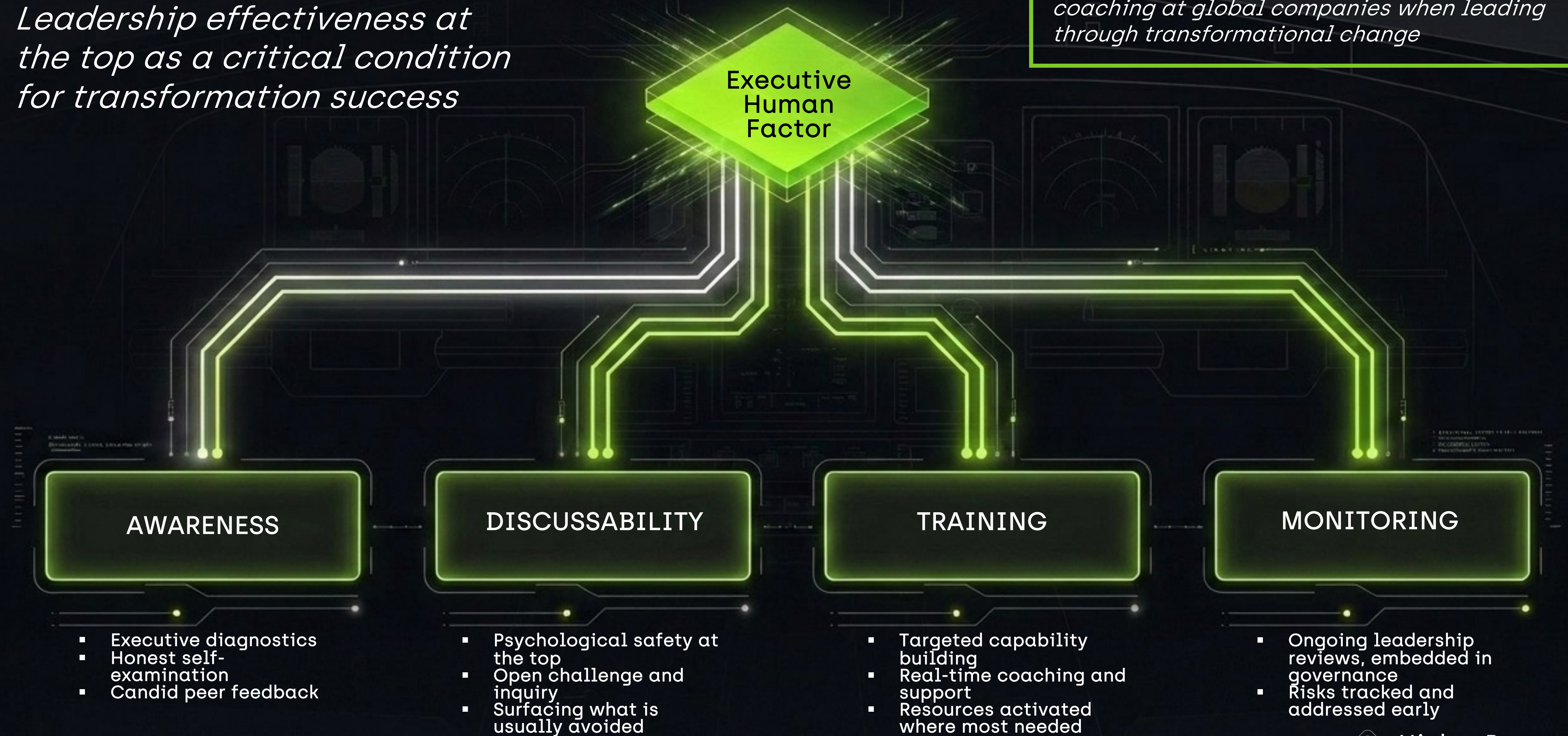
1990s–2000s — Systemic Safety Approach. Integration of Human Factors into: training & simulation, checklists & protocols, incident investigation (ICAO, FAA, NTSB). Recognition of latent system conditions (Reason, 1990)

Today — Embedded Human Factors Discipline. Continuous monitoring, recording, and review (e.g., cockpit voice/data recorders). Human performance under pressure is measured, trained, openly discussed and governed as a critical safety variable.

The Executive Human Factor

Leadership effectiveness at the top as a critical condition for transformation success

Based on ongoing PhD research at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (2022-present) and international experience of executive team coaching at global companies when leading through transformational change



The Executive Human Factor

Challenges frequently reported at the top, as negative conditions that impact transformation success

Based on ongoing PhD research at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (2022-present) and international experience of executive team coaching at global companies when leading through transformational change

Executive Human Factor



LOW AWARENESS

NOT SAFELY DISCUSSABLE

NO TRAINING OR SUPPORT

UNDER THE RADAR, INVISIBLE

- Can't see how their own behaviors and mindset influences the change
- Limited reality testing, bias and habits overrule
- Avoids uncomfortable truths

- Critical issues & conflicts stay unspoken
- Artificial harmony replaces real alignment
- Dissent and challenge are suppressed

- Leaders revert to habitual behaviors
- Limited ability to adapt style or mindset
- Capability gaps exposed too late

- Leadership effectiveness not actively reviewed
- Early warning signals go unnoticed
- Issues addressed only after escalation

Approach & Resources

Support & Services

Higher Purpose Consulting & A Network of Global Experts



Confidential Sparring

For addressing real-time challenges with executive teams can be sensitive. If helpful: **confidential** sparring for CEO's, CHRO's, Chief Transformation Officers and non-executive Boards.



Individual Coaching

Leading transformational change can take a toll – especially when dealing with development areas in the thick of it all. Let's talk and explore what you need and how my expertise and style may suit what you are looking for.



Research & Exchange

Reach out if you are interested in participating as an executive [team]. Also if you are researching similar dynamics or want to exchange on your experience and approaches!



Diagnostic & Team Support

A diagnostic effort can surface the strengths and growth areas for executive teams leading transformational change – when just getting started, in the thick of things or at risk of derailing. What's required of the team, what's already working well, and what's getting in the way?

I work together with several renowned organizations with expertise in relevant domains, to complement my background and experience where needed.



Lectures & Key Notes

From executive team off-sites to Board sessions and conferences, my learnings and research on what it takes for executives to lead through transformational change – with honesty, depth and humor – can inspire your team.

For universities and program directors: reach out if this holistic approach can be a useful addition for your executive education program, both virtual or in-person.



Approach & Resources

Change strategy, execution, and leadership effectiveness under pressure

Integrated Transformation System



Diagnostics & Leadership Instruments



Further Reading



Summer Intensive for Executives

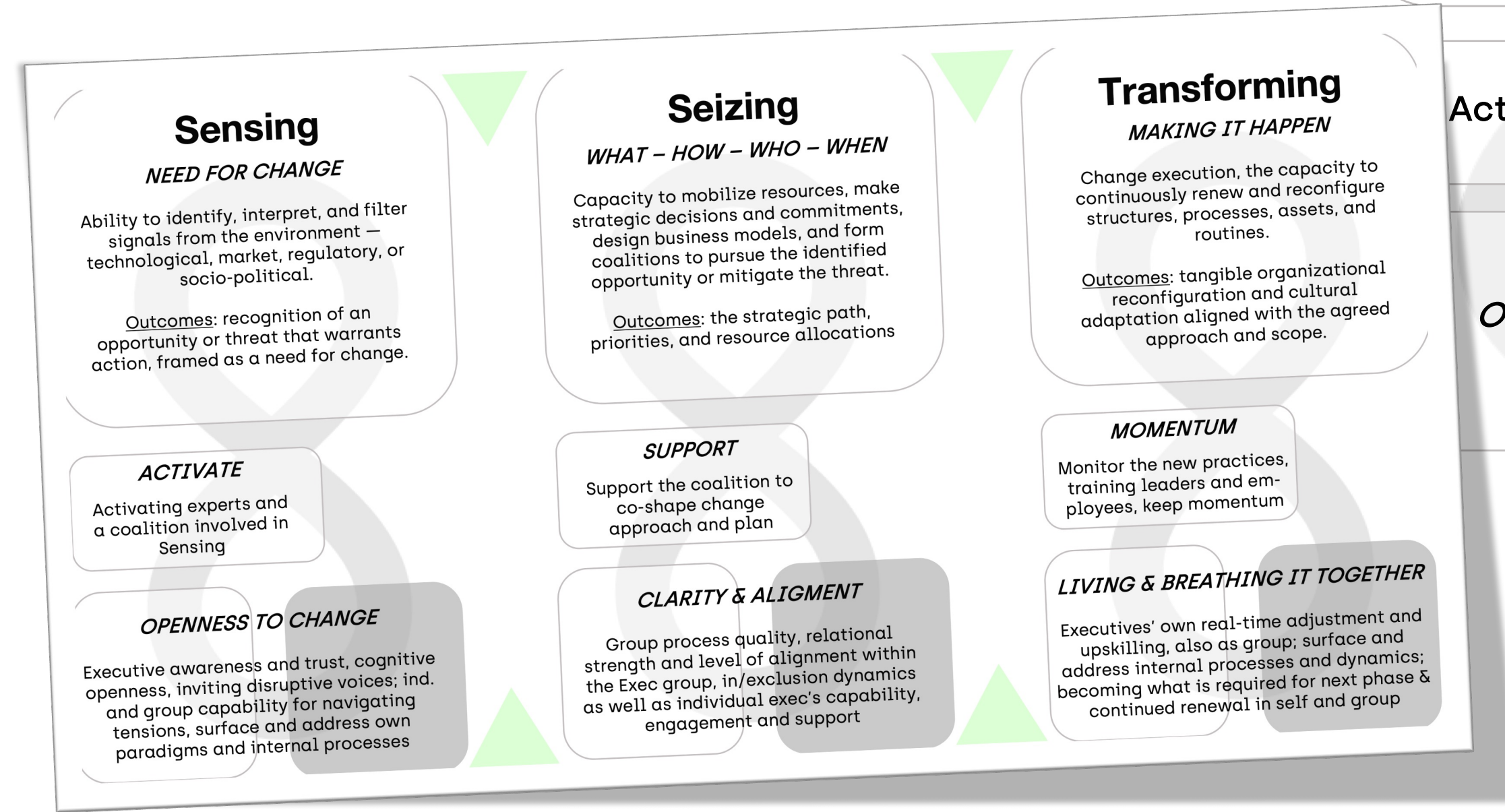
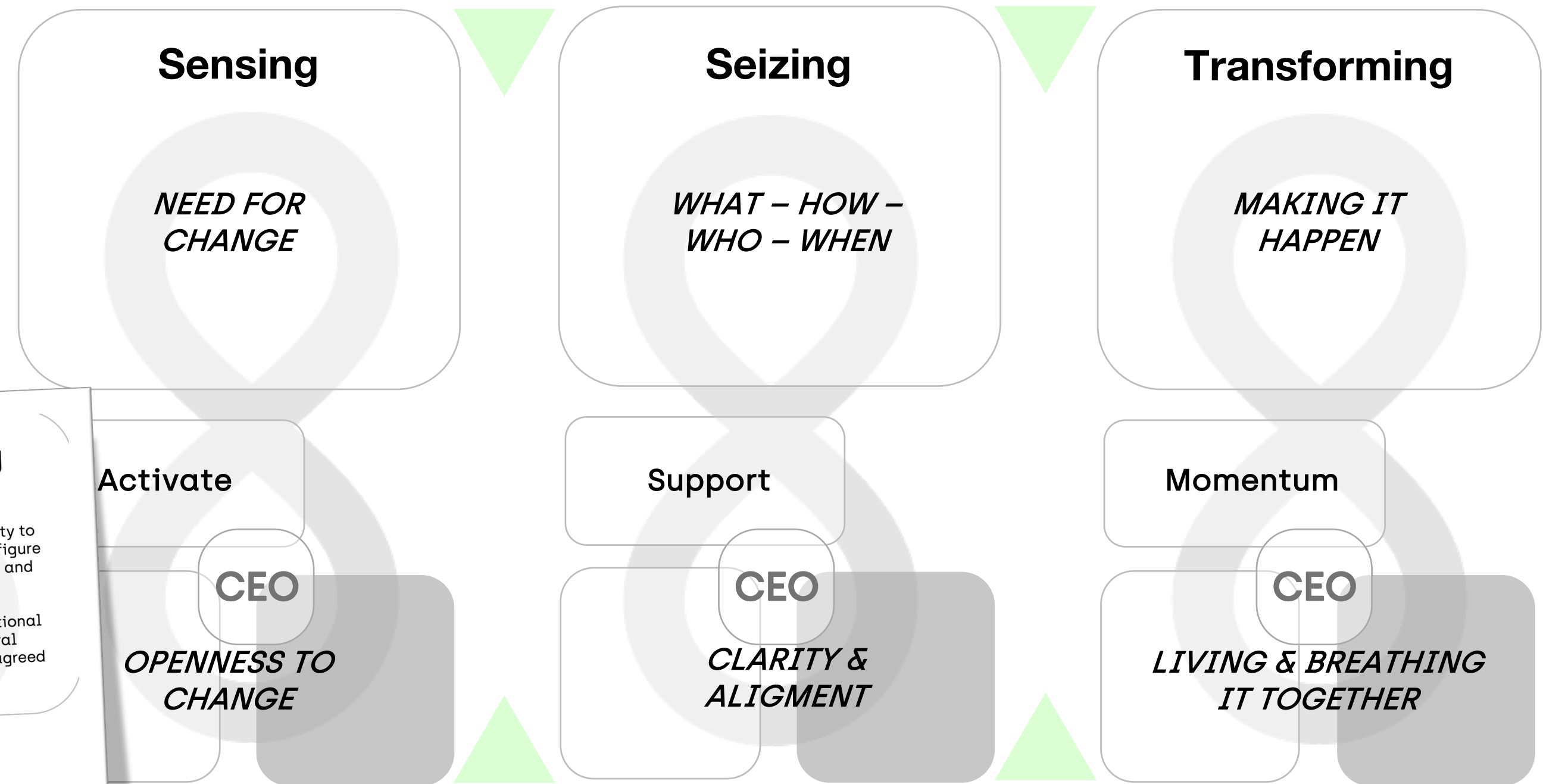


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Integrated Transformation System

Aligning strategy, execution, and leadership effectiveness across every phase of leading change.

- Each phase of transformational change requires specific organizational and leadership capabilities, with specific imprints to navigate.
- A best-practice outline serves as starting point for executive teams to assess and diagnose strengths, risks and growth areas – across the organizational, department/function, executive team and individual level.

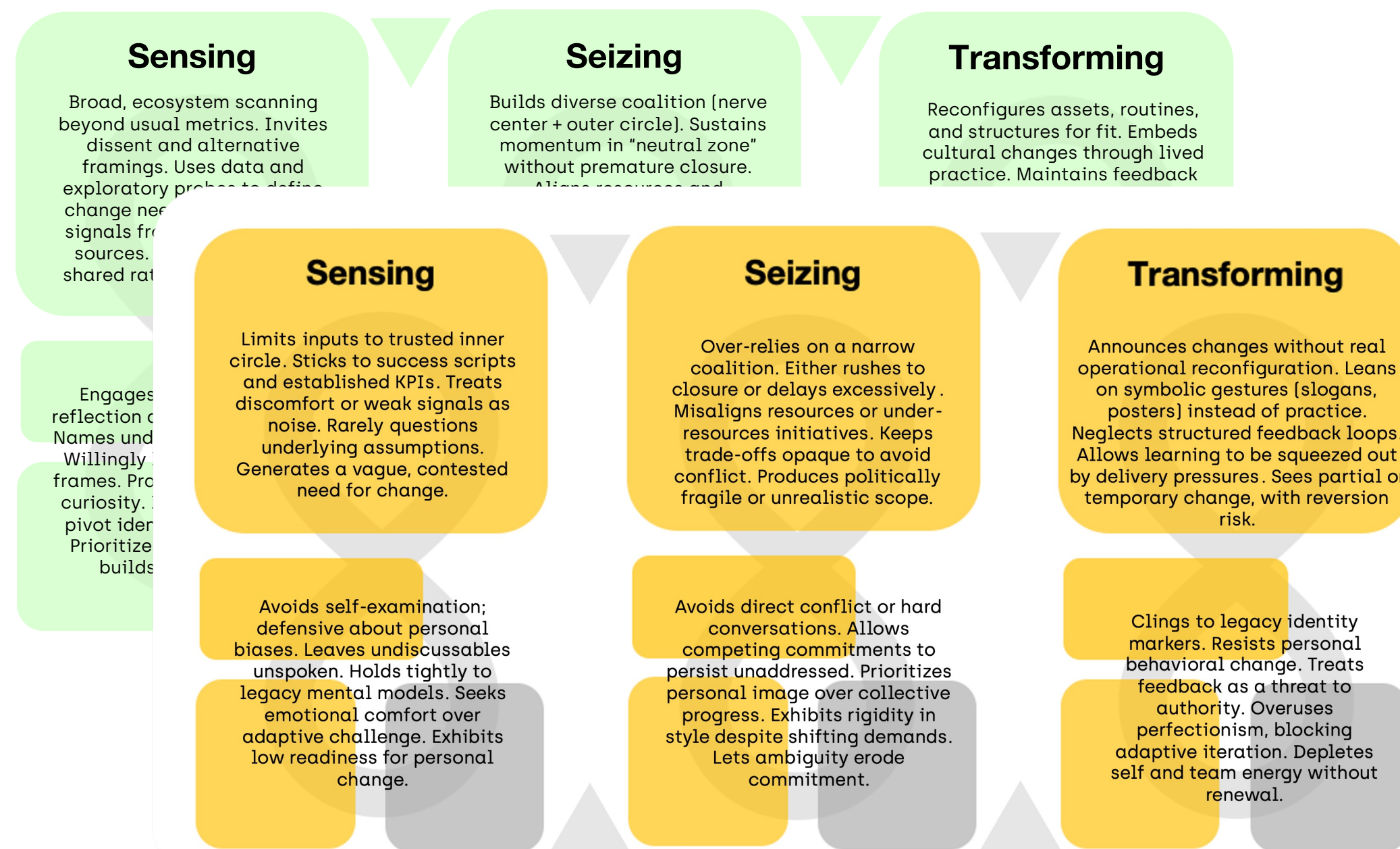


At each transition, disciplined and candid reviews test not only the change plan, but the readiness, alignment, and effectiveness of the executive team to lead what comes next.

Adapted from the Dynamic Capabilities framework [sensing–seizing–transforming] by D.J. Teece (2007)

Integrated Transformation System – Quality Reviews

Breakdowns in sensing, seizing, and transforming when leadership effectiveness at the top is assumed – instead of actively managed.



Ignoring the Executive Human Factor does not remove it. It allows it to shape decisions, alignment, and execution in ways that quietly undermine the transformation.

Sensing – Misreading Reality

- Weak or selective scanning; signals filtered through bias and legacy success logic
- Early warnings downplayed or avoided to protect stability and confidence
- Lack of honest challenge; uncomfortable truths remain unspoken
- False sense of clarity on the need for change

Seizing – Fragile Alignment

- Superficial agreement masking divergent views and hidden resistance
- Decisions rushed or delayed due to lack of real alignment at the top
- Narrow "inner circle" (nerve center) drives the change; others disengage
- Execution plans built on assumed, not tested, commitment

Transforming – Execution Breakdown

- Inconsistent leadership signals and behaviors under pressure
- Loss of momentum as misalignment and capability gaps surface late
- Defensive routines, avoidance, and blame undermine collaboration
- Partial or reversible change due to lack of collective ownership

Adapted from the Dynamic Capabilities framework [sensing–seizing–transforming] by D.J. Teece (2007)

Embedded Diagnostics & Leadership Instruments

Making leadership effectiveness measurable, visible, and actionable throughout the transformation.

Review & Development

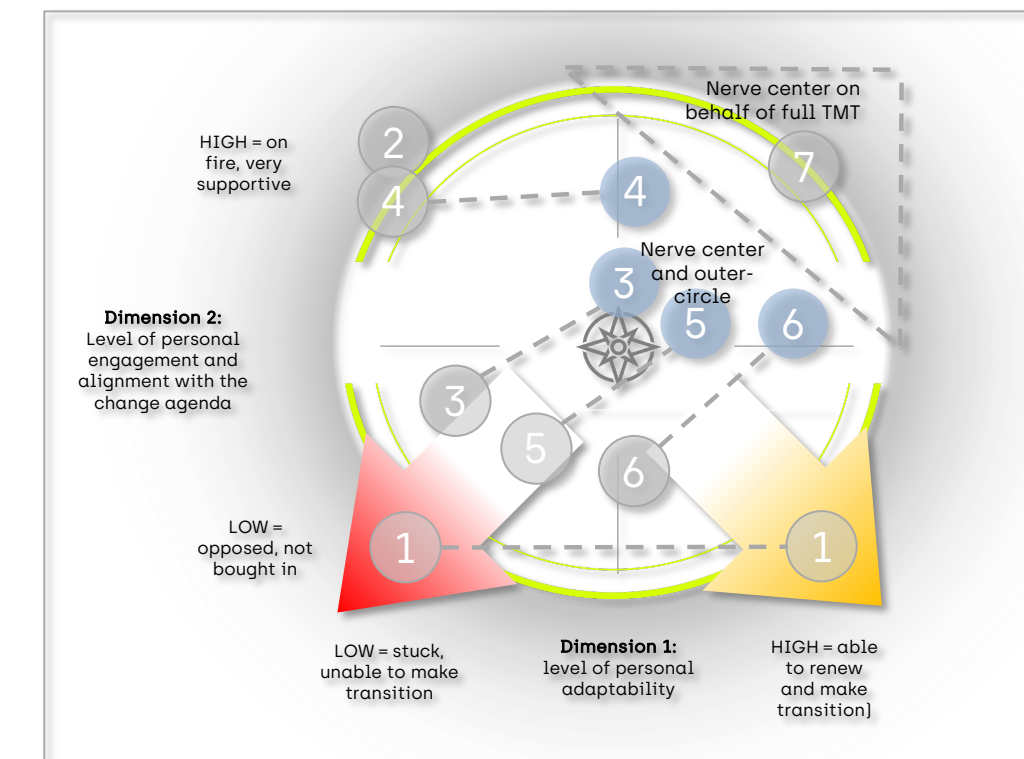
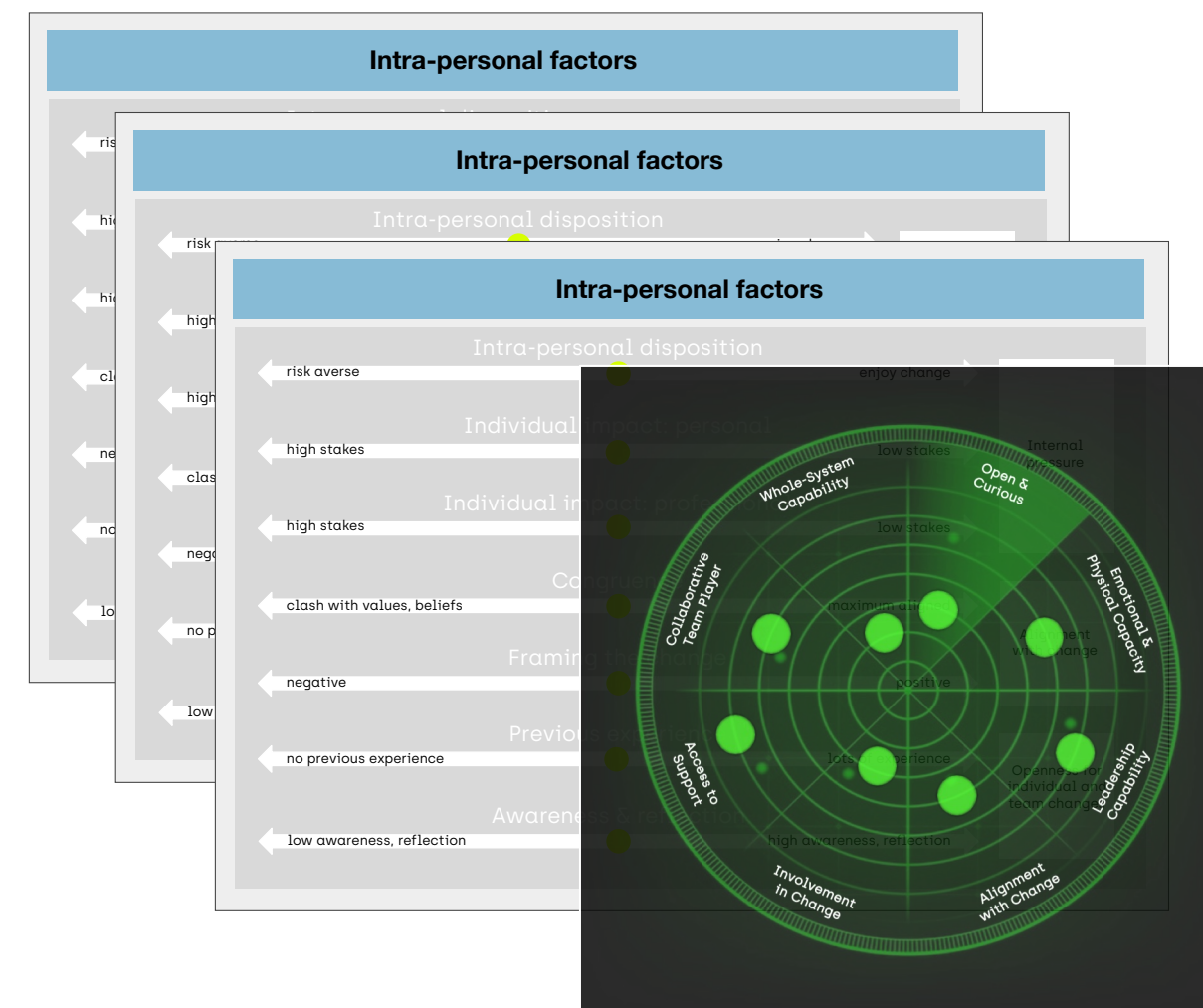
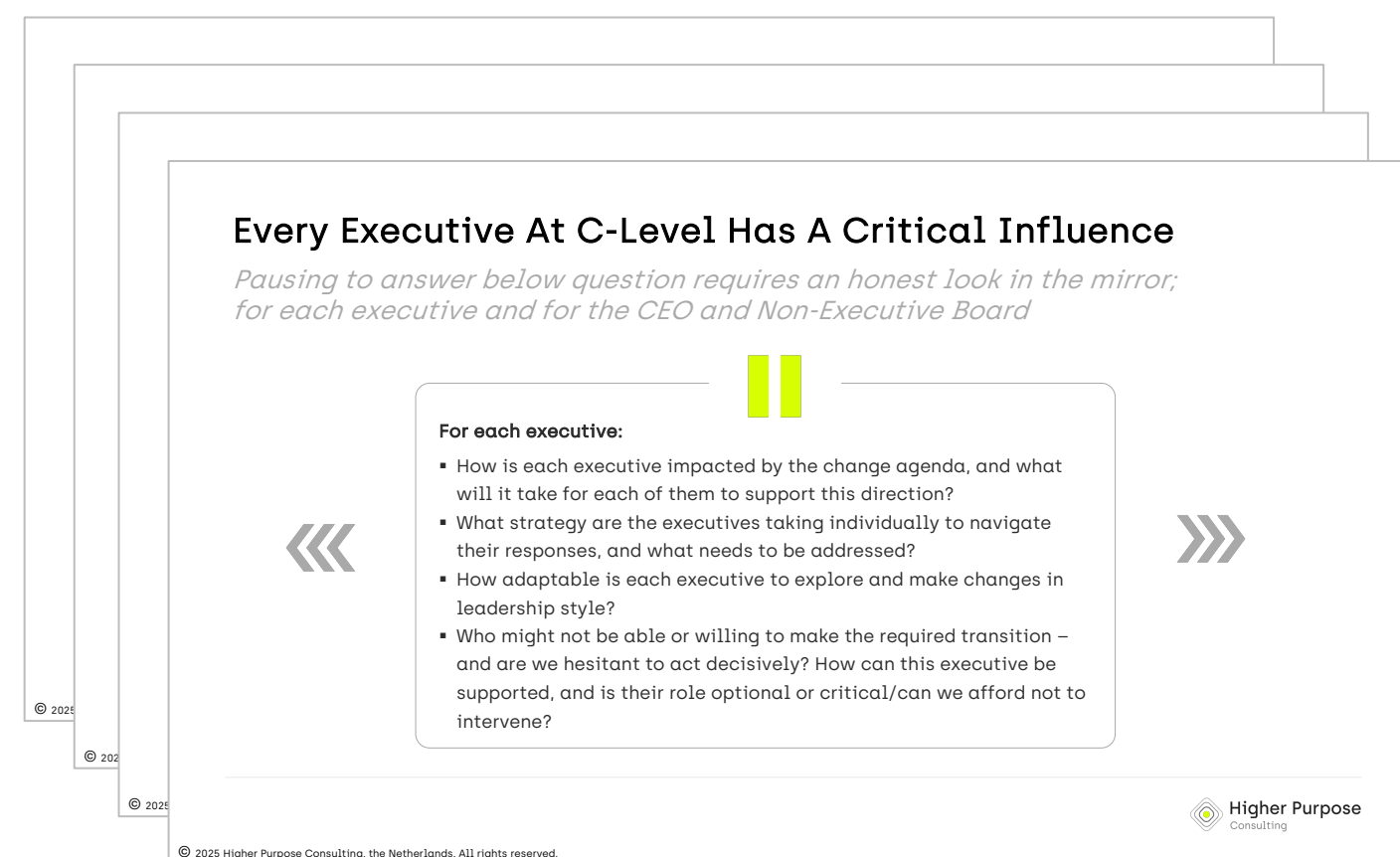
Establishes a clear starting point for CEOs, Boards, and Executive Teams by assessing real alignment, engagement, and readiness to lead the transformation. Surfaces where focused dialogue, development, and decisive action are most needed.

Diagnostic: Impact Analysis

Analyzes how each executive's behavior, mindset, and response to pressure influence decision-making, alignment, and execution. Turns these often invisible dynamics into actionable insight for stronger individual and collective leadership.

Diagnostic: Team Health

Assesses the team's capacity to operate as a cohesive transformation leadership unit under pressure. Identifies alignment gaps, engagement spread, and execution risks to strengthen collaboration and collective effectiveness.

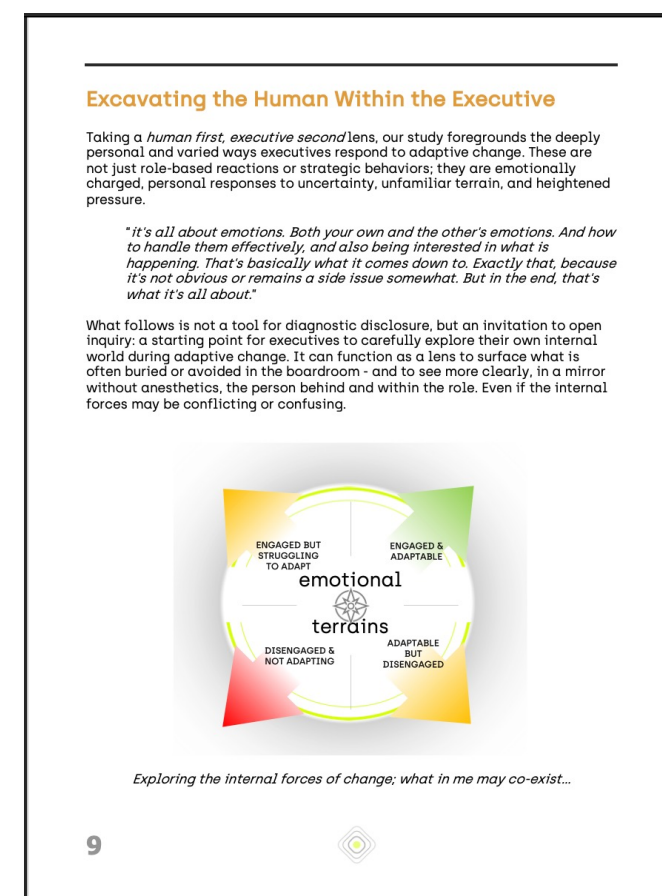


Further Reading

From practical to academic papers, as academic work in progress

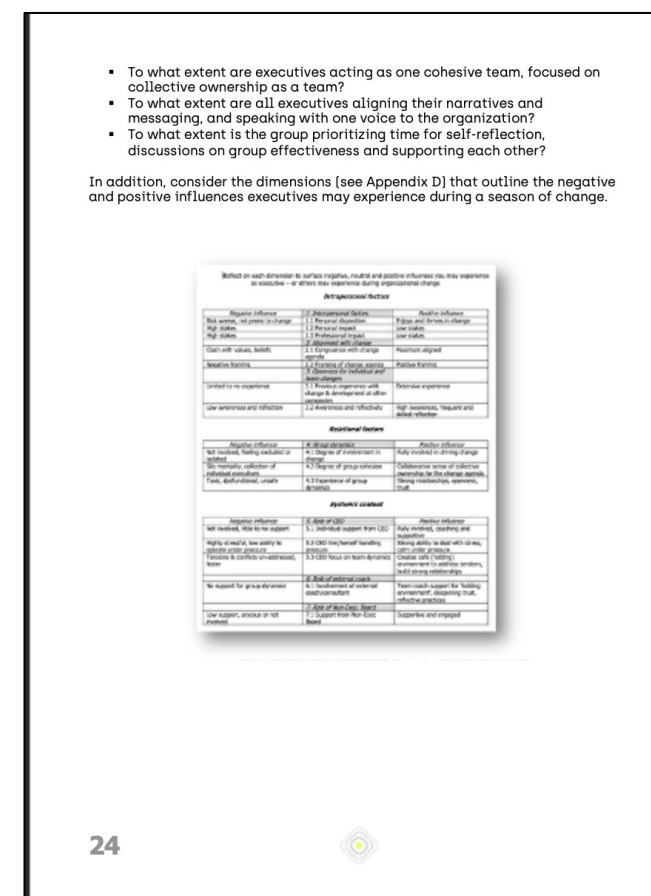
White paper: the executive in times of change

Detailed treatment of the research findings, with sections on: emotional and physical toll of leading change; anchoring change in deeper personal and organizational purpose.



White paper: deep-dive discovery for executives

Through interview quotes from research participants, this paper supports executives in exploring their own response to change and review/craft their strategy.



Academic paper: field research

Presented and discussed at EGOS 2025 [Greece, Athens], this academic paper outlines the research approach, methods, findings and discussions in detail – focusing on theoretical and practical contributions.



Summer Intensive for Executives

Objectives

- Boost self-awareness and effectiveness
- Push through boundaries/growth ceiling
- Set leadership goals for own development
- Build safe network of peers outside own company

Thursday – August 20, 2026

Morning: welcome, introductions
Peer group exchange: current leadership challenges
Afternoon: the human side of leading transformation
Close: key insights and learnings



Friday – August 21, 2026

Morning: cockpit simulation (close to Schiphol airport)
Afternoon: debrief and applications for leadership practice
Action planning and feedback
Next steps and close

Coaches & Faculty



Sander van Muijen, MBA/MDiv – Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Executive team coach and international consultant in leadership and change. Former leadership executive at JPMorgan Chase (NY, USA) Manager Organization Effectiveness at Shell – Projects & Technology (The Hague, Netherlands) and Senior Manager at Accenture Management Consulting. Supports world-class in-company executive development program, conducts research as Executive PhD candidate at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and serves as faculty in executive education at Nyenrode Business Universiteit and VU Amsterdam. He combines vast experience with transformational change, executive team coaching and a human-centric approach that is rooted in purpose, passion and self-leadership.



Paul Horstink – Zurich, Switzerland

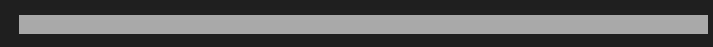
Senior Advisor at Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and Managing Director at Horstink Aviation and Aerospace Advisory. Senior executive and transformation leader with nearly three decades of experience driving large-scale operational and business transformations in the aviation and space industries. He combines strategic vision with deep operational and supply-chain expertise, leading complex, regulated organizations to improved safety, quality, cost efficiency and sustainable value creation across global, multicultural environments.



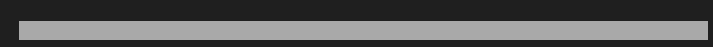
Information and registration

For confidential sparring and considering this opportunity for yourself (or as Chief People Officer, for a senior executive who could benefit from participating), reach out to: sander.vanmuijen@higherpurposeconsulting.org

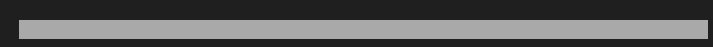
real people



real teams



real challenges

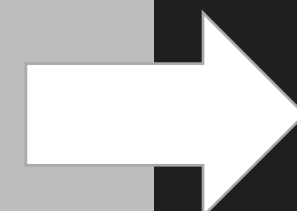
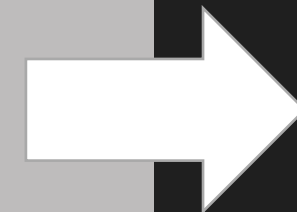
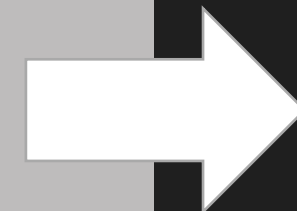
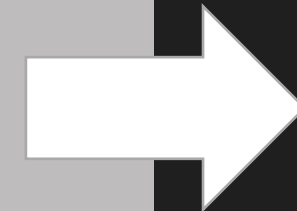


in **real**-time

Background & Contact Information

Implicit paradigms and practices in research and common change approaches

- Executive teams exclusively considered as **Change Agents** and are not 'recipients of change' or impacted by change themselves
- Executives' emotions do not impact their leadership in times of change (focus on cognitive and relational dimensions, next to demographics and role-specific factors)
- Executive teams operate as a homogenous unity with common interests, values, perspectives
- Executive teams can navigate strategic change without considering their own beliefs, assumptions and behavioral patterns



International experience & inter-disciplinary research challenges these as **myths**

- **Incomplete.** Executive teams are impacted by change, especially when personal identity, values and/or securities are at stake
- **False.** Executives are also emotionally impacted by uncertainties, risks etc in times of change – they do not cease to be human when promoted to the C-suite
- **False.** Executive teams experience conflicts of interest, personality clashes, power and influence struggles that needs addressing
- **False.** Considering the Executive teams' beliefs, assumptions and behavioral patterns are critical in times of strategic change

My Mission

Guide leaders and Boards to navigate the storms of change

Support executives willing to navigate their inner world

Constructively challenge those who overlook the personal impacts of change

Partner with fellow scholars, experts and coaches/advisors

Encourage new pathways of research and practice

Contribute towards purpose-driven and human-centric organizations

Celebrate the sacred value and uniqueness of every human, regardless of position

Sander van Muijen

Owner – Higher Purpose Consulting

Associate – Leadership & Change Consulting & Executive (Team) Coaching



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Languages: English, Dutch

Executive coach & senior leadership team coach. Supporting executive teams and senior leaders in transformational change and break-through performance at individual, team, department and organizational level. PhD research: executive teams in transformations.

International professional experience

- **Higher Purpose Consulting** (Amsterdam, 2021-present): associate at management consulting & executive coaching organizations. Focus: leadership, executive team coaching and change. Clients are global companies with HQ in US, UK, and continental Europe.
- **Nyenrode Business Universiteit** (Netherlands, 2022-present): core faculty in executive education (masterclass in change management for senior participants from public & private sectors)
- **JPMorgan Chase** (New York, 2016-2021): Executive Director – leading internal practice for executive coaching and senior team effectiveness; senior coach for top executive programs and executive teams across the firm; Global Head of Faculty for all leadership development programs (in-house) for 40,000 managers.
- **Royal Dutch Shell** (Netherlands, 2013-2016): Manager Organizational Effectiveness/Change Consultant for large division (Projects & Technology); design and deliver CEO Forum (Executive Committee summit with top 70 executives) and Senior Executive Forum (top 180 leaders); team coach for senior executive teams; co-head for firmwide senior team development
- **Accenture Management Consulting** (Netherlands, 2008-2013): Manager and Senior Manager, supported the launch of international coaching practice; serving global clients with leadership, culture and change solutions across industries (FMCG, technology, manufacturing, oil/gas, public services). Faculty for Accenture Consulting Academy and coach for senior executives at internal leadership programs.

Education

- PhD Candidate – School of Business & Economics, VU University/Amsterdam. Research: business transformations and role of executive teams
- Executive MBA, Nyenrode Business Universiteit/the Netherlands and Kellogg School of Management/USA
- Master of Divinity, Tyndale Theological Seminary
- Coaching certifications: Results Coaching Systems; Columbia University (in-house); Systemic Team Coaching (Peter Hawkins; in-house)

Specializations:

- Executive coaching and building internal coaching practice
- Senior Leadership Team Effectiveness
- Leadership & Executive Development Strategy
- Large-Scale Business Transformation, Culture & Behavior Change
- Organization Health Diagnostics & Improvement



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