When Growth Starts Breaking Structure

Staying close to everything stops working. Something has to replace it.

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"I can be in every meeting and still be the bottleneck."

One leader said that to me, mid-conversation, almost as an aside. Not a complaint about her team. A description of what had actually happened to her organisation. Every decision of real weight still passed through her in person, no matter how many senior people she had hired, promoted, or brought in to make those calls instead.

That sentence is the clearest description of the problem described in this paper.

Most leaders look for a people explanation in case of a stalled decision, a meeting that goes in circles, or a hire who isn't working out. The COO isn't strong enough. The team isn't senior enough. Someone isn't stepping up.

That explanation is wrong far more often than leaders think, and being wrong about this is expensive. It will have them look for a new hire or a promotion, while the actual problem sits underneath every decision they took.

About the author

Astrid Konings has spent more than 30 years building, leading and restructuring organisations through growth and change. She has built and sold businesses, led multiple acquisitions and integrations, served at board level, and led international teams in global organisations.

The argument

Here's the claim this paper makes, stated plainly. Growth, change, and complexity don't create a people problem. They create a decision-architecture problem. The informal system that let one person make every call at the start is still running long after that person can no longer carry it. Nobody thought about redesigning it. Most of what looks like weak leadership, underperformance, or a bad hire is the same architecture gap. It just looks different each time.

It doesn't matter whether that one person built the organisation, inherited it, or stepped in to fix it. The mechanism is the same.

The rest of this paper is about that mechanism. Why it happens, why the fixes people try first won't solve it, and what doing nothing will actually cost.

Why Staying Close Stops Working

At the start, structure is invisible because it doesn't need to exist yet. One person is the structure. Every decision, every judgment call about a client or a hire runs through them.

This is called proximity. It's fast and coherent, and it depends entirely on one person staying close, physically and mentally, to everything that matters.

Growth removes proximity long before it removes anything else. So does a restructuring. So does the day a new CEO takes over a business that was quietly still running on the previous leader's judgment. So does the day an interim leader walks into an integration nobody has mapped yet. At fifty people, or three months into a merger, you can no longer be close to every client, every hire, every deal. Further in, you can't even be close to every person on your own leadership team.

What replaces proximity, when someone actually lets it go, isn't a stronger team. It's a different system.

What proximity did at the start	What has to replace it later
Every decision ran through one person with full context.	Written decision rights: who owns which call, documented.
Judgment travelled hallway to hallway, instantly.	A decision log: what was decided, and why, so the reasoning outlives the room.
New hires learned the culture by watching that one person.	Documented principles: judgment encoded so it travels without them in the room.
Problems got solved by whoever was standing closest.	Named ownership: one person accountable for the outcome, not just the update.

Most leaders never build that system. They hold on to proximity for as long as it will hold them. They stay in every deal review. They want to meet every senior hire personally. They keep approving decisions that used to be theirs to make, because letting go feels like losing visibility or even control.

The bottleneck doesn't disappear when someone does this. It moves. From the calendar to the inbox. From the meeting they're in, to the message thread they're copied on regardless.

What This Looks Like From the Inside

It rarely feels like a structural problem from inside the organisation. It feels like a collection of unrelated irritations. A senior hire is in place, but proposals above a certain size still come back to the leader for approval. Middle managers carry messages up and down the organisation but rarely make the call themselves. When something goes wrong, everyone knows who will eventually be pulled in.

After a while, this becomes normal. The leadership team learns which decisions are really theirs and which ones only appear to be. The leader sees people hesitating and concludes they need to step up more. The team sees decisions being overridden and learns to check first.

Monday is a message thread on fire, a client escalation, and a meeting invite that appeared overnight. None of it was chosen. All of it was absorbed.

Why the Obvious Fixes Don't Work

A new hire. A restructured org chart. An offsite with a clean set of principles everyone nods at. A tool that drafts the decision log automatically. Most people reading this have already tried at least one, and two months later, the pattern is back.

Not because the fix was badly chosen. None of these touch the actual mechanism. A new hire inherits the same undefined decision rights the last person had. An org chart can be redrawn in an afternoon, but the habit of checking with one person took years to build. An offsite produces agreement in the room that doesn't survive the following Monday, because agreement isn't a rule anyone will enforce. AI drafts the paperwork faster, but if nobody has the authority to decide, faster documentation just produces a more detailed record of the same standoff.

There's a reason the new hire so often lands in the same trap. The person doing the choosing is the same person the old structure has been protecting. The candidate who feels easiest in the room is often the one least likely to push for the clarity that would actually change anything. Comfort in a hiring decision is a warning sign, not a good one.

Here's what actually determines whether a change holds. The first time someone makes a call under the new structure and it gets quietly overridden, the new structure is dead. Everyone recalibrates to what actually happens, not to what was announced.

What a Postponed Decision Actually Costs

The conversation that's been on the list for two quarters doesn't stay cheap while it waits.

A leadership hire who isn't meeting the bar costs more than salary. There's the revenue that didn't get made. The account manager quietly smoothing things over with a client who is one bad week from leaving. The hours someone spends personally covering a gap that was never supposed to be theirs to cover.

I've watched the total cost of one unresolved leadership hire land between one hundred thousand and half a million euros a year. More than once. It depends on how large the gap is, and how long it's been left open. That range comes from client work, not a study. What it captures matters more than the number itself: the cost isn't the eventual hard conversation. It's everything the organisation absorbs while that conversation keeps getting postponed.

There's also a cost the euro figure doesn't capture. Every week nothing changes. The rest of the leadership team is quietly watching. They're not watching the person who's struggling. They're watching the leader. Will the leader act on what everyone can see, or do nothing. The best people don't leave organisations that are struggling. They leave organisations where the struggle is visible, privately named by everyone, but addressed by no one.

The Choice

Here's the uncomfortable part: nobody decides this on purpose. It happens slowly, one postponed decision at a time. In the end, the organisation depends on one person, not on a strong structure.

There's a reason this is hard to catch in time. It never shows up as failure. The organisation doesn't collapse. Nothing breaks in a way anyone can point to. It just quietly stalls. The deal that didn't get chased. The hire that didn't get made. None of it could get past one person's desk.

And while the organisation stalls, you're the one covering it, every week, until covering it is the only work left.

You will never know how big the organisation could have grown. That's the real cost. It's the one number that never shows up anywhere.

Does some of this look familiar?

If growth, change or increasing complexity has left too many decisions in too few hands, I'm happy to compare notes.

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