

A CONCEIVIAN BRIEFING · I

# On the *Turnaround*

Why your best people can no longer deliver, and how an executive team, a culture, and an enterprise actually change.

SAQIB RASOOL · APRIL 2, 2025

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PREPARED FOR LEADERS, MISSION CAPTAINS, AND MOBILIZERS

**Conceivian**

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“The most thought-provoking thing in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.”

MARTIN HEIDEGGER

## ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

For the leader whose company has lost its old velocity and cannot say why. Read this if your best people have begun to hesitate, your handoffs arrive hedged, and your strategy sessions have stopped producing strategy. You will leave able to see the layer beneath the work where the trouble actually lives, and the moves that change a company rather than decorate it.

There is a moment every leader recognizes but rarely names. The people are talented. The resources are adequate. The strategy makes sense. And still, nothing moves the way it should.

**C**ommitments slip. Projects stall. Teams that used to collaborate now operate as separate islands. What should take weeks takes months. Meetings multiply, but decisions do not. Everyone is working hard, and yet the enterprise has quietly stopped moving forward. If you are living inside this, you know the feeling in your body before you can put words to it.

So you do what every serious leader does. You try the standard interventions. Process improvements. A reorganization. A new methodology. Leadership training. A technology upgrade. Each one promised transformation. Each one delivered a burst of activity and then a slow regression to exactly where you were. The consultants came with their frameworks, mapped your workflows, and left you a deck. Some of it was implemented. Nothing fundamentally changed.

Here is why. The problem was never your processes. The problem, the one that lives beneath every symptom you have been managing, is that your organization has lost its capacity to coordinate action through language, and it is living in moods that make high performance impossible. This is not a metaphor. It is a diagnosis. And it calls for a different kind of intervention entirely.

## **I** **The substrate beneath everything**

Every enterprise is built on a substrate that precedes and enables everything else, and that substrate is conversation. Not conversation as chat or discussion, but conversation as the actual mechanism through which human beings coordinate action toward a shared future.

Think about how work truly happens. Someone makes a request. Someone else makes a promise to fulfill it. Conditions get negotiated, time gets committed, judgments get made, and declarations change what is possible. When these moves are clear, when promises are reliable, when what would satisfy a request is made explicit, when breakdowns are handled with care, coordination becomes almost automatic. Work flows. Trust builds. The organization moves.

When they break down, everything becomes friction. And this is what most leaders miss: your processes, your org chart, your technologies, your dashboards are all secondary structures built on top of this conversational substrate. When the substrate is broken, optimizing the structures on top of it

accomplishes nothing. You cannot Six Sigma your way out of vague requests and unreliable promises. You cannot install a tool that creates clarity where the language is broken. You cannot reorganize your way past teams that no longer trust each other's commitments.

The substrate must be rebuilt first. Everything else is built on top of it.

## II

### The moods underneath the words

Beneath the conversations lives something even more fundamental, and it is the thing leaders are least trained to see. Mood. Not emotion, not what someone feels in a passing moment, but the background orientation that quietly decides what seems possible at all, what gets noticed, and which actions even appear available.

A team in a mood of ambition sees openings everywhere, and treats obstacles as interesting problems. The very same team, in a mood of resignation, sees futility, and asks why bother, it never changes anyway. In trust, people make bold commitments and handle breakdowns with care. In fear, every request feels like a trap, and every promise arrives wrapped in insurance language. Moods are contagious, they persist, they reinforce themselves, and they are almost entirely invisible to the people living inside them until someone names them.

Most organizations in trouble are living in some blend of fear, control, and resignation, and calling it realism. You can hear it if you listen. The passive voice that creeps in, it was decided, mistakes were made. The commitments that always come with an escape clause. The emails that copy everyone as insurance. The meetings where no one states a clear position. The retrospectives that name the same problems again and again and change nothing.

This is why culture work so rarely lands. Culture is an effect, not a cause. It is produced by the actual structure of work, by how requests are made, how commitments are tracked, how breakdowns are met, whether care or control shows up in the daily mechanics. You cannot poster your way out of a mood of fear, and you cannot run an offsite into ambition. Moods are not decorated. They are designed, through the way leaders speak and coordinate.

## III

# How the executive team actually changes

This is where a turnaround truly begins, and it is the part most transformation programs avoid, because it asks something of the leaders themselves. Most programs let the executives stay comfortable while everyone else is asked to change. This work begins the other way around. The executive team learns to redesign its own conversations first.

They learn to distinguish a request from a wish. A wish is, it would be nice if someone handled this. A request is, will you commit to this, by this date, to this standard. They learn the difference between a promise and an intention, between an assessment and a fact, between a declaration made with real authority and one made without it. These sound like small distinctions. They are not. They are the difference between an enterprise that coordinates and one that only appears to.

And they learn to design mood deliberately. To shift a team from fear toward trust by making commitments reliable and handling breakdowns without humiliation. To shift resignation toward ambition by designing small wins and restoring people's sense of agency. This is not motivational speaking. It is engineering at the level of language and practice. When the leadership team starts speaking and listening differently, the change propagates outward, because the executive conversations are the ones the rest of the company is quietly imitating.

Leadership, seen this way, is not control. It is the design of the conditions under which people choose to commit.

## IV

### Trust, and how it returns

Underneath all coordination is trust, and trust is not a feeling to be hoped for. It is an assessment, the judgment that someone is reliable, sincere, and competent to take care of something that matters. It breaks along different dimensions, and it breaks differently depending on which one failed. A reliability failure is not a sincerity failure, and confusing the two means you repair the wrong thing.

Because trust is an assessment, it cannot be demanded or declared. It returns only one way, through new commitments made and kept, visibly, until the evidence accumulates and the judgment shifts on its own. This is slow, specific, observable work, and it is the work that lets an enterprise move again. When

language is repaired, trust follows. When trust returns, the enterprise moves.

V

## What changes when the substrate is rebuilt

When this work succeeds, the change is not abstract. Coordination becomes frictionless, so the same people produce far more without working harder. Cross-functional work stops feeling like a negotiation between rival nations. Bold commitments become possible again because people believe promises again. Breakdowns get met with learning instead of blame. The emotional climate shifts from fear toward ambition, from resignation toward care, and innovation, which is impossible in a frightened company, becomes available once more.

Underneath all the visible results is a single recovery: the organization regains its capacity to coordinate toward a shared future. That is what a turnaround actually is. Not process engineering. Not change management. Not culture building. It is the repair of the substrate that precedes and enables every other kind of work. And for a company facing a real breakdown, it is the only work that matters.

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This Briefing draws on the tradition of Fernando Flores, and the work of Heidegger, Maturana and Varela, Austin and Searle, and our teacher Chauncey Bell. We offer it in their debt.

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