SAP Is Not the Problem

How to Lead Successful
Large-Scale SAP Transformations

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English translation of SAP ist nicht das Problem

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To all the clients and colleagues with whom I have had the privilege of shaping and delivering demanding SAP projects over the years. Many of the experiences, insights and recommendations in this book grew out of that shared work. I want to pass this knowledge on so that future SAP transformations can benefit from clearer leadership, better governance and more successful delivery.

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Preface

Why I wrote this book

This book grew out of practice. Not an idealised project world in which strategies are clearly articulated, requirements fully understood, every role filled by exactly the right person and transformations delivered in a straight line. It grew out of real, large-scale SAP programmes, where none of that can be taken for granted.

Programmes in which the vision was compelling, but the organisation first had to learn what delivering it would actually involve. Programmes in which business functions were expected to define requirements before they fully understood the possibilities and implications of their future SAP environment. Programmes in which architecture, data, processes, budgets, change management and accountability within the permanent organisation had to work together from the outset, rather than come into play one after another.

That is where the realities of large-scale SAP transformation become clear.

SAP projects rarely fail because people are not working hard enough. In many programmes, the amount of work is enormous. People draft solution designs, run workshops, document requirements, draw up plans, maintain risk registers, prepare governance meetings and seek agreement on decisions. Yet this is not always enough. Effort does not automatically mean progress. Documentation does not automatically bring clarity. An approved blueprint does not automatically provide a sound basis for implementation.

In large transformation programmes, I have seen conventional approaches reach their limits: lengthy design phases, waterfall thinking and extensive blueprints. Not because structure is wrong. Not because SAP Activate has no value. But because, in complex SAP

programmes, complex organisations often discover what the business actually needs, what is technically feasible and what the organisation can sustain only by putting things into practice.

That learning cannot be fully captured in an upfront plan.

The turning point comes when a programme starts to be managed differently: more iteratively, more transparently, with greater discipline and a closer connection to reality. When business functions, IT, architecture, programme management, testing, change management and the permanent organisation stop merely discussing the future and begin to build it in small, verifiable steps. When requirements are broken down into manageable pieces that can be assessed, funded and delivered. When priorities become a means of directing the budget, rather than the budget merely being monitored. When an early end-to-end implementation proves technical feasibility. When progress is demonstrated in System Demos, rather than simply reported.

This book describes that journey.

It is not a technical SAP manual. It does not replace SAP documentation, an implementation methodology or detailed advice on individual modules. Nor is it simply a book about SAFe, Flight Levels or Lean Budgeting. It brings these elements together from a different perspective: how to deliver successful large-scale SAP transformations in complex organisations. Its purpose is deliberately practical.

It addresses the questions that determine outcomes in real programmes:

- Why is a conventional blueprint often insufficient for a complex SAP transformation?
- How can business functions, IT and architecture learn together what is actually needed?
- How can SAP Activate and SAFe be combined effectively?

- How can portfolio requirements be broken down so that they remain manageable enough to plan?
- How can budgets be protected against uncontrolled scope growth?
- How can technical feasibility be demonstrated early enough?
- How can SAP be protected from distortion by local requests for special treatment?
- How can data quality become a responsibility of the permanent organisation?
- How can an integrated SAP landscape remain testable over time?
- How can change management move beyond communication to become a leadership responsibility?
- Which roles genuinely need to be filled?
- Why is go-live the beginning of real organisational learning, rather than its conclusion?

The examples and insights in this book are drawn from real project experience. Organisations, project names and internal details have deliberately been anonymised. The focus is on transferable patterns, rather than on any particular organisation. These patterns recur in many large enterprises: in infrastructure, industry, energy, public administration, logistics, manufacturing and services, and wherever SAP serves as the digital backbone of value creation rather than simply another system.

Successful SAP transformation does not come from a perfect plan. It comes from a manageable system that combines strategy, standardisation, iterative learning, end-to-end accountability, budget discipline and demonstrable delivery. This book is for people who want to see SAP projects through to a successful conclusion, not merely launch them. It is for board members, CIOs, heads of busi-

ness functions, programme directors, transformation leads, enterprise architects, product managers, process owners, change leaders and everyone who carries responsibility in a large programme.

It is written for readers who know that transformation does not happen on presentation slides. It happens when decisions are made, habits change, data is maintained, processes are followed, people fulfil their roles and progress becomes visible.

If this book achieves one thing, I hope it helps make SAP programmes more honest, more manageable and more effective. SAP itself is rarely the real problem. More often, the problem is that organisations learn too late, decide too late and leave responsibility with the project for too long instead of embedding it in the permanent organisation.

That can change.

Marc Bender

Chapter 1 SAP Is Not the Problem

Many SAP projects begin with the wrong diagnosis.

When a major transformation programme runs into difficulties, attention quickly turns to the system. SAP is too complex, people say. The processes are too rigid. The interface takes some getting used to. Integration demands too much effort. The data models are complicated. Business functions are struggling, IT is overstretched, consultants are too expensive and the timetable was ambitious to begin with.

There may be some truth in all of this. SAP is not a small system. It was not designed to give a few local activities a more polished appearance. SAP is a deeply integrated enterprise system. It connects processes, data, financial value flows, roles, authorisations, organisational units, reporting and management. That is precisely its strength. It is also precisely what makes it so demanding for organisations.

Because SAP reveals how a company really works.

Not how its work is described in process manuals. Not how it is presented on strategy slides. Not how it sounds in management meetings. It reveals how decisions are actually made, how well data is maintained, how consistently processes are followed, how clearly responsibilities are defined and how effectively functions work together across organisational boundaries.

That is why SAP itself is rarely the real problem. Often, it is the mirror.

An SAP project shows whether an organisation is prepared to think from end to end. It shows whether business functions take responsibility. It shows whether process management goes beyond documentation. It shows whether leaders support shared objectives across functional boundaries. It shows whether data is regarded as

a strategic asset or an inconvenient project task. It shows whether decisions are made where they are needed, or become trapped in committees, repeated rounds of consultation and political considerations.

This is uncomfortable. But that is precisely where its value lies.

A large SAP programme is not simply an IT initiative. It is a business transformation with technology at its core. Managing it as an IT project reduces its chances of success from the outset.

The dangerous illusion that IT will implement SAP

In many organisations, SAP initiatives still begin with a way of thinking that looks something like this:

The business function describes its requirements. IT translates those requirements into a solution. External partners support design, configuration and implementation. Project management looks after schedules, budgets, risks and status reports. After go-live, the permanent organisation takes over the system.

At first glance, this logic seems reasonable. It is familiar. It fits conventional project structures. It allocates responsibilities. It gives those involved the sense that everyone knows their role.

In large SAP transformations, this logic is not enough.

The business function is more than a source of requirements. It owns the future business process. IT is more than an implementer. It is the architect of an integrated platform. Project management is more than a coordinator. It is responsible for managing dependencies, risks, contribution to value and the programme's ability to make decisions. The permanent organisation is more than the eventual user. It is part of the transformation and must take responsibility early.

When these roles are misunderstood, a structural problem emerges. The business expects a solution. IT expects clear requirements. The project expects decisions. The permanent organisation

expects stability. Management expects progress. And everyone underestimates how SAP changes the way the organisation works.

Transformation then quickly becomes a transaction: requirements in, implementation out.

That is not how large-scale SAP programmes work.

SAP changes more than screens, workflows and reports. It changes how work flows. It changes which data is needed and when. It changes which roles carry responsibility. It changes which process steps must be standardised. It changes the relationships between costs, services, quantities, orders and reporting. It changes which decisions can be made locally and which require end-to-end alignment.

An exclusively technical SAP implementation will, at best, produce a live system. It will not yet have delivered an effective transformation.

SAP forces organisations to face the truth about their processes

Every organisation has official processes. And every organisation has the processes people actually follow.

The gap between them is often wider than anyone wants to admit at the beginning of an SAP project. On paper, a process looks orderly. In practice, there are exceptions, special arrangements, local interpretations, personal shortcuts, handovers that have evolved over time, Excel spreadsheets, individual analyses, manual corrections and informal agreements.

As long as these working practices remain hidden in existing systems, local tools or personal routines, they do not always attract attention. SAP makes them visible.

An integrated SAP system is less forgiving of ambiguity at a local level. Incorrect or incomplete master data affects subsequent processes. A poorly defined role creates delays or incorrect postings.

Different local interpretations of process steps undermine end-to-end consistency. Poorly modelled financial value flows weaken financial management. Unstable interfaces cause processes to break down at handover points.

This is not a fault in SAP. It is the consequence of integrated process logic.

In conventional organisations, functional boundaries can conceal many problems. Each function optimises its own part of the business. Each unit has its own view of priorities, data, processes and success. SAP partly removes that separation. Value is no longer created solely at a local level, but across the entire process chain.

This means that a successful SAP implementation requires the organisation to align itself around end-to-end processes.

Not just in theory. Not just in process maps. That alignment must be reflected in accountability, objectives, roles, data maintenance, test management, change management and leadership.

The real bottleneck is the ability to make decisions

Many SAP programmes appear technically complicated. And technical complexity certainly exists. System landscapes have grown over time. Interfaces are numerous. Data models carry historical baggage. Requirements are diverse. Dependencies between modules, platforms, business functions and external partners are real.

Nevertheless, the more critical bottleneck often lies elsewhere: in the organisation's ability to make decisions.

Large SAP projects need decisions constantly:

- Which process will follow the SAP standard?
- Which local deviation is genuinely necessary?
- Which requirement contributes to the target vision?
- What level of data quality is mandatory before migration?

- Which interface will be retired, and which will remain for the time being?
- Which role has authority to make business decisions?
- Who sets priorities when objectives conflict?
- What will be implemented in this Program Increment?
- What will deliberately be deferred?
- Which risks will management accept?
- What responsibility will the permanent organisation assume after go-live?

When these decisions are not made, the project compensates for the gap. It produces more designs, organises more discussions, documents outstanding issues, adds risks to registers, escalates matters to committees and tries to keep delivering despite unresolved decisions.

This costs time. It costs money. It costs trust.

And it creates a dangerous dynamic: the organisation thinks the project is slow when, in reality, the project is waiting for decisions.

In SAP transformations, speed is not simply a question of development capacity. It is a question of clarity. The clearer the target vision, responsibilities, priorities and decision rights, the more smoothly implementation can proceed.

Why business functions must do more than supply requirements

A common mistake in SAP projects concerns the role of the business function. Business functions are often treated as sources of requirements. They are expected to describe what they need, and the project is then expected to turn that into a solution.

This view does not go far enough.

Business functions must take genuine business ownership in SAP transformations. They must do more than say what they want.

They must take responsibility for ensuring that the future solution makes business sense, stays close to the standard, is economically justifiable, can be tested and used, and can be embedded in the permanent organisation.

That sets a different expectation.

Business ownership means:

- taking responsibility for business value;
- actively setting priorities;
- resolving conflicts between objectives;
- being willing to standardise processes;
- participating in Fit-to-Standard;
- taking responsibility for data quality;
- providing key users and testing capacity;
- supporting change management;
- preparing the permanent organisation to use and operate the solution.

Without this ownership, the relationship becomes one of customer and supplier. The business function places an order and the project delivers. If the solution later proves unsuitable, the parties renegotiate. This generates change requests, frustration and cost.

Genuine ownership produces a different quality of collaboration. Business functions, IT, architecture and programme management work together on a solution that is not only technically functional but supported by the organisation.

The distinction is crucial:

SAP projects fail when business functions remain customers of the project instead of becoming owners of the change.

Choosing the SAP standard is a leadership decision

At some point, almost every large SAP project encounters the same debate: standard functionality or a bespoke solution?

At first glance, this sounds like a technical detail or a question of business requirements. In reality, it is a leadership decision.

Every departure from the standard has consequences. These extend beyond the current implementation. They affect testing effort, maintenance, the ability to adopt new releases, training, documentation, integration, operations and subsequent development. A bespoke solution may be necessary for the business. But it should never be introduced lightly.

Many organisations underestimate these downstream costs. They assess special requests in terms of the immediate problem, rather than the future platform. One function wants to retain a familiar way of working. A department needs an exception. A manager wants to protect a particular process. A team argues that 'things simply work differently here'.

Sometimes that is true. Often, however, it is merely habit supported by a convincing justification.

The SAP standard forces the organisation to examine these habits. That is uncomfortable. But it is necessary.

The standard offers an opportunity to harmonise working processes, reduce complexity and build end-to-end capability. Making the most of that opportunity requires horizontal process management. An organisation must consider its value creation as a connected whole, rather than function by function.

Without this perspective, SAP is adapted to the existing organisation. With it, the organisation develops around the SAP standard.

That is the difference between digitising existing complexity and genuine transformation.

Why SAP projects need leadership

SAP programmes need project management. They need architecture. They need experienced consultants. They need capable Product Owners, test managers, data owners and change leaders.

Above all, however, they need leadership.

Leadership in this context does not mean occasionally attending a steering committee and noting the traffic-light status reports. It means setting clear objectives, deciding priorities, resolving conflicts, holding people accountable and aligning the organisation with the transformation.

Leaders must ensure that SAP objectives derive from the overall strategy. They must embed those objectives horizontally across the end-to-end process chain and vertically through the permanent organisation. They must prevent individual functions from pursuing local optimisation while the programme as a whole is expected to deliver integrated outcomes. They must understand change management as a leadership responsibility, rather than an adjunct to communications.

Leaders must also accept that not everything can be known at the outset of a complex programme. This is not a loss of control. It is reality. The task is not to deny uncertainty, but to make it manageable.

This is where SAFe, Flight Levels, Lean Budgeting, PI Planning, Sprint Reviews, System Demos and backlog management come into play. They do not replace leadership. They give it an operational rhythm.

They make the following visible:

- what is being worked on;
- what has been delivered;
- which dependencies exist;
- which risks are emerging;

- which decisions are needed;
- which requirements contribute to the overall objectives;
- which issues must be deferred.

This makes SAP transformation something that can be actively led.

The real objective is the ability to manage the business effectively

Many SAP projects begin with promises of efficiency. Less manual work. Fewer breaks in the flow of information. Faster processes. Better reporting. Lower error rates. These are valid and important aims.

The greater objective, however, is the ability to manage the business effectively.

A successful SAP programme enables an organisation to understand and manage its value creation more effectively. It provides transparency across processes, data, costs, services, quantities, assets, orders, projects and results. It reveals where work originates, where bottlenecks lie, where quality suffers, where costs arise and where decisions are needed.

That management capability emerges only when the technical, business and organisational elements fit together.

These include:

- a clear strategic target vision;
- horizontal accountability for end-to-end processes;
- objectives embedded vertically in the permanent organisation;
- a consistent commitment to the standard;
- effective business ownership;
- clear accountability for data;
- integrated architecture;
- prioritised implementation;

- transparent budget management;
- comprehensive test management;
- change management backed by a leadership mandate;
- a robust operating and product model after go-live.

If one of these elements is missing, the system may still go live. But its impact will fall short of its potential.

The central lesson

The most important lesson from large-scale SAP transformation programmes is simple:

SAP does not solve organisational problems. It makes them visible.

Unclear processes do not automatically become clear in the system. Where accountability for data is missing, migration will not create data quality. If business functions do not make decisions, the project will not move faster. If leaders do not prioritise the transformation, the permanent organisation will remain passive. If local exceptions dominate, the standard will be undermined. If test management starts too late, quality becomes expensive. If responsibility for operations and the product remains unresolved, go-live leads into a new set of problems.

SAP can be a powerful instrument for change. But only if the organisation is prepared to change with it.

That is why a successful SAP project does not begin by asking: which functions do we need?

It begins with different questions:

- What strategic value do we want to create?
- Which end-to-end processes must we genuinely master?
- What responsibility will the business function take?
- Which processes will we adapt to the standard?
- What level of data quality is essential?

- Which roles must be formally and reliably filled?
- How will we make decisions?
- How will we manage the budget through priorities?
- How will we make progress visible?
- How will the organisation continue to learn during and after implementation?

Only when these questions are addressed seriously is there a foundation for an SAP programme that delivers more than a live system.

That is when transformation happens.

Management check: Is your SAP project really a business project?

Question	Assessment
Are the SAP objectives clearly derived from the corporate strategy?	
Are there formally appointed Business Owners with decision-making authority?	
Is horizontal accountability in place for the relevant end-to-end processes?	
Are objectives embedded vertically throughout the permanent organisation?	
Is there a clear principle of standard functionality before bespoke solutions?	
Are accountability for data and data quality requirements clear on the business side?	
Are the Product Owner, architecture, testing, change and operations roles effectively filled?	
Is the budget managed through prioritisation and scope?	

Question	Assessment
Are implementation results demonstrated regularly?	
Is go-live understood as a transition to a product and operating model?	

If several of these questions cannot be answered clearly, this is not an administrative detail. It is a strategic risk.

Key messages from this chapter

- SAP projects are not simply IT projects. They are profound changes to the business.
- SAP exposes organisational weaknesses, particularly in processes, data, roles and decisions.
- Business functions must take business ownership, rather than merely supply requirements.
- Choosing the SAP standard is a leadership decision to reject unnecessary complexity.
- The principal bottleneck in large SAP programmes often lies in decision-making capability rather than technology.
- Successful SAP transformation requires horizontal end-to-end accountability and vertical alignment within the permanent organisation.
- Go-live is not proof of transformation. It is a milestone on the path to organisational impact.

A practical principle for decision-makers

Do not treat SAP as a system implementation. Treat it as a leadership responsibility. Only then will technology deliver genuine transformation.