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THE LIVING LOOP

The engagement and trust mechanism beneath the operating model lifecycle

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WHAT THE LIVING LOOP IS

The Living Loop is the mechanism that keeps an operating model adaptive. It runs on one thing: trust, built through continuous, honest engagement at every level of an organisation, about the reality of the work rather than any single decision.

Trust here is a working condition, and it delivers. It is how a leader learns the true current state of the operating model. It is how they get honest information about where it should go. It is how change lands and holds. And it is how an organisation builds the capacity to keep changing in small, continuous steps, instead of storing change up until it arrives as a programme too large to manage.

The loop is living because it never closes. It runs continuously, and each turn returns something: the operational truth, honest feedback, discretionary effort, early warning, and the standing capacity to adapt. What goes round comes round, and it compounds.

WHAT TRUST IS

Everything in the Living Loop rests on a precise definition of trust.

Trust is the condition in which people believe they can give honest information and opinions, that these will be meaningfully taken into account, that they will not be used punitively even when they are unwelcome, and that when a decision goes another way, they are told why, in terms connected to the strategy.

Most of those clauses describe safety: people can speak, they will not be harmed for it, and this holds even when the truth is not what leadership wants to hear. The last clause is what separates the Living Loop from psychological safety as it is usually described. Safety says honesty will not be punished. The Living Loop adds that honesty will count.

That distinction is load-bearing. Safety alone earns attendance and silence: people show up, they are not punished, and they still spend nothing, because being safe to speak is a long way from having a reason to. What moves a person into genuine engagement is having watched their input actually change something. Efficacy is what earns the effort.

The final clause carries its own discipline. Meaningfully considered is a long way from acted on. A decision will often go against the room, and it must be free to. What preserves trust is being genuinely weighed, and then, when the decision goes elsewhere, being told why in terms that

connect to the strategy. A decision can go the other way without spending people's trust, provided they are told why it did. The silence around the decision is what does the damage.

HOW THE LOOP TURNS

The Living Loop runs as a chain, and the chain has three links that a single word like communication would hide.

The act. A leader engages continuously, and transparently, at every level, about the reality of the business. This is a standing practice, running all the time, rather than a response to a decision or a piece of news.

The condition. Done consistently, and held to the definition above, that engagement earns trust.

The return. Trust hands back the operational truth, the way the work actually happens beneath the organisation chart. It returns honest feedback, discretionary effort no one required, problems surfaced early, and the capacity to keep adapting.

Communication is the act. Trust is what it earns. The operational truth and the discretionary effort are the evidence. Collapse the three into one and you have a slogan every leadership book already prints. Hold them apart and you have a mechanism, because the second and third links are the parts no one gets specific about, and they are where the Living Loop does its work.

THE THREE MOMENTS

The loop is one mechanism, and it shows its face at three moments in any change. These are three windows onto the same thing. The loop is present at all of them, catching a different reflection at each.

Front: Surfacing the Real Structure

Before a change is designed, the loop surfaces the operating model as it actually runs: the undocumented knowledge, the informal networks, the workarounds that are quietly load-bearing. This is the invisible infrastructure, and it shows itself only to someone already in continuous, trusted contact with the people who run it. Engage narrowly and you design around an organisation chart. Engage across every level and you design around how the organisation actually works, while there is still time to design for it rather than discover it later as resistance.

The hardest version of the front is the change you cannot yet name: the restructure under embargo, the acquisition in the background, the regulated matter you are not free to disclose. The instinct is to treat that period as dead time and break the news cold. The Living Loop treats it as the most valuable preparation window there is. The embargo limits what you can name. It leaves the engagement itself untouched. You keep asking how the work is going, which sharpens both the plan and the eventual message. You keep the channel warm with everything that is not embargoed. And you disclose the existence and the frame of what is in progress by default, holding back only the content, and only where there is a genuine reason. Secrecy is the exception that has to earn itself. When you can finally name the decision, you anchor it to an operating reality people described to you themselves, which is what turns a wall of resistance into some openness.

Most leaders will meet the loop late, standing in a channel that has already gone cold, one they may not have built. The move there is the same loop, begun out loud from where they actually are. The people already know the channel was cold, so naming it reveals nothing they cannot feel. An honest acknowledgement that the communication was not what it should have been, and a clear statement that the approach is changing now, is the first turn of the loop. It is available even to the leader who inherited the silence, because acknowledging a gap is a long way from owning the fault for creating it. Honesty buys a beginning. The weeks that follow are spent proving the words meant something.

Middle: The Signal the Change Is Holding

A change has landed when it can be read horizontally: people advocating it sideways to their peers, honestly and meaning it, arriving with curiosity rather than hostility, and offering honest feedback because they have watched leadership act on it. That reading cannot be mandated or faked, because it happens in the layer furthest from anyone who would benefit from faking it.

The signal is discretionary effort, and it is read on a gradient of depth rather than a count of presence. There are three bands: participation at all, participation without active engagement, and active engagement. Almost all the information sits on the line between the second and the third. Fear does not mainly show up as performing for power. It shows up as presence without depth: people who come, listen, ask nothing, and leave. Compliance and engagement look identical from any distance that only counts heads. The whole difference is whether anything discretionary happens once people are in the room. The hardest case is the surface-level question, which is compliance wearing the costume of engagement, and telling a real question from a performed one is a judgement made in the moment. This is why the signal cannot be turned into a metric. Score it and people perform it, and the candour it depended on is gone. What resists the dashboard also resists the manual.

Effort spent where power cannot see it, the mood once the leaders have left the room, advocacy to a peer who cannot reward it, is worth more than the same depth of effort performed while the decider is watching. In a high-stakes change, fear inflates the lower bands: everyone attends because absence is dangerous, so attendance climbs to near-total and tells you almost nothing. The frightening change, the one where you most need to know whether it is holding, is the one where only the top band still carries signal, because the discretionary surplus is the only thing fear cannot counterfeit.

The earliest warning is withdrawal, and it has a precise shape. It is active engagement draining out while attendance stays, a slide from the third band back to the second. The person still comes and has gone quiet inside the room. Nothing visibly stops and the count is unchanged, which is why no dashboard can catch it. It reads at all three moments: the voice that stops pushing back at the front, the volunteer who does not return in the middle, the team that stops bringing you problems at the back.

Back: The Standing Muscle

When a change has landed, the work does not end. It stops being a programme. The organisation with the muscle metabolises change continuously, in small, legible adjustments. The one without it stores change up until it comes due all at once. The loop at the back is the same loop as the front, still running. It is leadership communicating in the quiet when there is nothing dramatic to report, feedback mechanisms people can see being acted on, and a steady series of small changes in place of a held-back accumulation.

THE STABLE GROUND

If nothing returns to a stable business as usual, the obvious worry is permanent churn. People need stable ground to do good work.

In the Living Loop, the stable ground is not the structure, which moves. It is two things that hold steady while the structure changes underneath them. The first is rhythm: a dependable cadence of communication and feedback, so that change stops feeling like an ambush. People absorb a great deal of change when the way change arrives never surprises them. The second is legibility: every change expressed in terms of why it moves the organisation towards effective execution of the strategy. The strategy is the fixed point. The operating model moves beneath it, and each move is legible as serving it. A predictable rhythm of changes people cannot connect to anything is just churn. The rhythm and the line back to strategy together are what people stand on.

THE FAILURE SIGNAL

The large transformation programme has not always been a failure signal. When change came in periods, a concentrated programme was a reasonable instrument, and the Living Loop was what made those programmes succeed, through the trust and the surfaced truth that raised their odds. What has changed is the environment. As the gaps between changes collapse, driven primarily though not solely by AI, the pause the programme model assumed, a stretch of stability to settle into on the far side, is disappearing.

In that world, the large programme becomes the failure signal of the Living Loop. It is the evidence that adaptation did not happen continuously, and that change was stored up until it came due at once, in an environment that no longer grants the gap the programme model was built for. Transformation fatigue is a design failure: change deferred until it can only arrive as something too big to absorb, and treating it as a people problem to be managed misreads it at the root.

This reframes the purpose of the work. The Living Loop exists to build the capacity that keeps change from ever accumulating into an unmanageably large or unexpected programme, in a world that no longer waits.

WHERE THE LIVING LOOP SITS

The Living Loop sits beneath diagnosis and design rather than beside them. It is the condition under which a leader can see the operating model truthfully in the first place and get honest input on where it should go. Diagnosis and design describe what you are looking at. The Living Loop describes what lets you see any of it honestly. It is a substrate, and not another method in the stable.

It also completes a family. Living Arch™ describes what an adaptive operating model is: the structure. The Living Loop describes what keeps it adaptive: the motion. The arch holds. The loop turns.

And the loop closes where the work begins. You cannot express why this month's small change serves the strategy if you never understood the operating model in the first place. Trust is what surfaces the truth. Diagnosis is what makes sense of it. The Living Loop is what carries an organisation through change, again and again, without ever needing to be rescued.

The arch holds. The loop turns.

Trust is what surfaces the truth. The loop is what carries you through.

To discuss how the Living Loop framework applies to your organisation, or to explore an engagement, get in touch.

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Living Loop™ is the proprietary engagement and trust framework of Sarah Heffron Advisory & Consulting.