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The Slow Death of Organisational Surprise

Why “nobody could have seen that coming” and “the signs were there” are rarely as contradictory as they sound.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Nobody could have seen that coming” is often followed, moments later, by “looking back, the signs were there” — and those two sentences have never sat comfortably together. Experience is exceptional at recognising familiar patterns, but it also teaches an organisation what deserves attention, and everything else gradually fades into the background. Change rarely announces itself; it whispers, through an odd question, a hesitation, a supplier behaving slightly differently — signals too ordinary, on their own, to deserve much discussion. Organisations are rarely surprised by a single event. More often, they’re surprised by a series of small changes they stopped noticing.

1. Introduction

There's a phrase I have heard countless times throughout my career: "Nobody could have seen that coming." Sometimes said with genuine disbelief, sometimes in frustration, occasionally as though it explains everything. I've never been entirely comfortable with it — not because truly unexpected events don't exist, they do exist and always will. What has always peaked my interest is how often that sentence is followed, sometimes only moments later, by: "Looking back, the signs were there."

> *If nobody could have seen it coming — how were the signs there?*

Those two observations together have never sat comfortably with me, and I have found myself returning to that question again and again. One of the unintended consequences of experience is that we become remarkably good at recognising familiar patterns — one of its greatest strengths, letting us decide with relative confidence how to avoid repeating old mistakes. But experience has another characteristic that gets far less attention: it teaches us what deserves our attention.

2. Accustomed to Familiarity

No organisation has the capacity to pay attention to everything. The real challenge, I think, is deciding what should be relegated to the sidelines. I've often wondered whether organisations do not so much become blind to change as become accustomed to familiarity. Reports look familiar. Meetings follow familiar agendas. Projects follow familiar rhythms. Customers behave largely as expected. Nothing appears wrong — the organisation does not stop paying attention, it simply keeps paying attention to the everything it has always paid attention to. That distinction seems small, but it explains more than we realise.

2.1 The Whisper Before the Change

One of the more fascinating characteristics of externally driven change is that it rarely announces itself. It whispers. A customer asks an unexpected question. An employee raises a concern that does not quite fit. A supplier behaves differently. A project takes slightly longer than usual. A new competitor appears in a market nobody had been watching. Individually, none of these observations feels especially significant — most aren't. But every now and then I've wondered whether the future first introduces itself through a series of observations that, on their own, seemed too ordinary to deserve much discussion.

> **Key Point:** Organisations don't gradually lose awareness because people become less capable. They lose awareness because familiarity becomes normal — and normal, by definition, stops attracting a second look.

A few of the ordinary, easy-to-dismiss signals worth a second look, precisely because they rarely look significant on their own:

- A question from a customer, or a concern from an employee, that doesn't quite fit the usual pattern.
- A supplier, project or partner behaving slightly differently than expected.
- A new competitor appearing in a market nobody had been watching.

3. The Conversation That Never Makes the Agenda

I've sat in enough governance meetings to know that organisations are exceptionally good at discussing what they already understand — budgets, performance, delivery, compliance, risk. Those conversations matter. But occasionally wondered whether the more interesting conversation is the one that never quite makes it onto the agenda — not because anyone deliberately excluded it, but because nobody yet recognised it as important. That strikes me as a very different challenge: not managing what we know but recognising what we don't yet understand.

Over the years I've become less interested in dramatic failures — they're easy to study because everyone notices them. I'm far more interested in the months, sometimes years, that preceded them: the period when nothing appeared especially unusual, when every individual decision seemed reasonable, every report was technically accurate, every conversation felt entirely appropriate. Looking back, that period often seems strangely uneventful. Perhaps that's precisely the point.

I've also noticed something about surprise itself. We often describe it as evidence that something unpredictable occurred. I am no longer convinced. Sometimes surprise simply reveals the limits of our attention — a very different proposition, suggesting the event wasn't invisible, just that we were not looking in the right place, or we had stopped looking altogether.

A few questions worth putting to any governance forum, alongside the usual agenda:

1. What would happen if we became as interested in small changes as we are in large ones?

2. Which conversation is not on today's agenda, not because it was excluded, but because nobody has recognised it as important yet?
3. What pattern have we noticed recently that doesn't quite fit yesterday's explanation of the world?

4. Recognising the Future While It Unfolds

The older I become, the less interested I am in predicting the future. Prediction has become like such an impossible standard. I'd much rather become better at recognising the future while it's unfolding around us. There's a humility in that approach that I find appealing — it accepts that none of us can know exactly what's coming next, but also accepts that we can become better observers, better listeners, better students of the organisations we lead and the environment we constantly collide with.

What would happen if organisations became as interested in noticing small changes as they are in responding to large ones? Not because every small change matters — most don't — but because every significant shift was once small enough to escape attention. That feels less like risk management and more like a habit of observation. Perhaps that is an important distinction.

Conclusion

I began this essay with a sentence I've heard many times: "Nobody could have seen that coming." Perhaps that is true occasionally. More often, I suspect something else is happening. The future rarely arrives as a single dramatic event. It arrives as a conversation, an observation, a hesitation, an unexpected question — a pattern that does not quite fit yesterday's explanation of our world. Most of those moments pass quietly. And a few change everything.

Which leaves one final question worth sitting with: what conversations are taking place inside our organisations today that, with the benefit of hindsight, we'll one day wish we had explored just a little further?

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