INSIGHT 04

Building operating models that actually scale

Jaques Fouché, Founder · Via Clara · 2026

Most operating models are designed for the organisation as it is today. They break when the organisation grows, expands into new regions, or absorbs change. Here is how to build one that holds.

What breaks first is never what you expect

> *"The first thing that broke was consistency of interpretation — not process design. On paper the model was standardised. In reality, different regions interpreted key steps differently."*

When scaling fleet operations across Australia and New Zealand, the operating model looked solid on paper. The processes were documented. The standards were agreed. But the first visible symptom of failure was not a process breaking — it was variance creeping into cycle times and rework rates across regions.

Different regions had interpreted key steps differently — especially around approvals, prioritisation, and what constituted an exception. Nobody was doing anything wrong. They were just solving their local reality.

Paper model vs real model

A paper model describes how work should flow.

A real operating model survives contact with local incentives, system limitations, and human shortcuts under pressure. The difference is not quality of design — it is whether the model was built to accommodate deviation or to ignore it.

> *"Real operating models are designed for deviation, not perfection."*

The most common long-term mistake

The biggest issue I have seen is designing for alignment instead of adaptability. Organisations over-standardise early, assuming consistency will create control. But without built-in tolerance for local variation, the model starts to fragment under real operational load.

Ironically, the more rigid the design, the faster it drifts in practice.

Signs your model is already drifting

WATCH FOR THESE EARLY SIGNALS

— Cycle times vary significantly across sites without a clear reason

— Exception rates are rising — more things require escalation

— Workarounds are becoming standard practice at the team level

— Onboarding new sites takes longer each time, not shorter

— The same decision is being made differently in different regions

What makes a model actually scalable

Decision rights that survive personnel change. The structure works even when individuals move on. Clarity lives in the model, not the person.

Standardised core with local tolerance at the edges. The non-negotiables are clear. Everything else has room to flex without breaking the system.

Performance measurement that surfaces problems automatically. Leaders see where things are drifting before it becomes a crisis — not because someone manually compiled a report.

Governance light enough not to slow things down. Strong enough to maintain consistency. The test is whether decisions get faster as the organisation grows, not slower.

Where to start

Download the Execution Clarity Diagnostic at viaclara.co.nz — a structured framework for identifying where your operating model is under stress before it breaks. Or contact us directly to discuss your situation.

contact@viaclara.co.nz · +64 27 802 4143