

One decision-maker per team: Inside Pfizer's cross-functional operating model

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Executive Summary

This article examines how Pfizer operationalized lessons from its COVID-19 vaccine development into a permanent cross-functional operating model. The central problem addressed is how to sustain the speed and decisiveness of crisis-mode operations within a large, historically bureaucratic organization. Sherry Cassano, Pfizer's chief talent officer, describes a framework called 'project-based ways of working,' anchored by three principles: a single accountable decision-maker per team (the 'pilot in command'), a maximum of one governance layer above the team ('air traffic control'), and fit-for-purpose team composition. Key evidence includes the model's scaling trajectory from 9 to 700 teams, and its embedding into Workday's performance management system, where the pilot in command — not the functional manager — assesses project-related performance. Two implementation challenges are identified: functional managers required more transition support than anticipated, and teams systematically underestimated the scope of their own authority. The article concludes that structural change requires both system-level reinforcement and deliberate psychological safety work to become culturally embedded.

Key Insights

1. Pfizer's 'pilot in command' model assigns single-person accountability to cross-functional teams, explicitly displacing committee-based and co-lead structures.
2. Performance management system integration — specifically graying out functional manager fields for project goals in Workday — was identified as a critical mechanism for making authority structures visible and enforceable.
3. Functional managers experienced significant role disruption as their responsibilities shifted from decision-making to coaching, a transition the organization underestimated and had to address through dedicated support forums.

Practical Takeaways

- Embedding authority structures directly into performance management software (e.g., restricting field access by role) can operationalize organizational design decisions in ways that slide decks and policy documents cannot.
- Scaling a new operating model requires parallel workstreams: one for team-level capability building and one for the managers whose roles are substantively changed by the new structure.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article provides unusual operational specificity — the Workday field configuration detail, the scaling numbers (9 to 50 to 700 teams), and named implementation failures (functional manager disorientation, teams underestimating their own authority) lend credibility. The aviation analogy is internally consistent and appears to have been applied with deliberate design intent rather than as branding.

Limitations: The article presents no outcome data — no metrics on speed, decision quality, employee satisfaction, or business performance — making it impossible to assess whether the model achieved its intended objectives. It is a first-person practitioner account from a company insider, creating inherent selection bias toward positive framing. The COVID-19 vaccine success is used as proof-of-concept, but the article does not establish that the vaccine's speed was primarily attributable to the operating model rather than regulatory fast-tracking, external funding, or pre-existing mRNA research.

Biases: The source is an HR executive publication, and the account is drawn from an i4cp interview, both of which favor practitioner legitimacy narratives. No critical voices — from employees, functional managers, or external observers — are represented.

Organizational Practice

Pfizer operates 700 cross-functional teams under a 'project-based ways of working' model in which each team has a single designated 'pilot in command' with full decision-making authority over the team's work. A maximum of one governance layer sits above the team. Team composition is determined by the pilot in command based on project need rather than functional representation norms. Performance reviews for project-related goals are completed by the pilot in command rather than the functional manager, with this authority structure enforced through field-level configuration in Workday. Functional managers retain responsibility for coaching and development but not for project decisions. Separate forums exist for functional managers to receive guidance and raise concerns distinct from pilot-in-command learning circles.

Strategic Implications

The Pfizer case illustrates a pattern in which crisis-induced organizational simplification becomes the basis for permanent structural redesign, suggesting that emergency operating conditions may function as proof-of-concept environments for governance changes that would otherwise face significant resistance. The integration of authority structures into performance management technology represents an emerging design principle — using system constraints to encode organizational intent — which has implications for how PMS platforms are configured and governed. The friction experienced by functional managers points to a structural tension in matrix organizations when accountability is formally shifted toward project-based rather than functional lines, a tension that performance management systems may either clarify or intensify depending on their configuration.

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