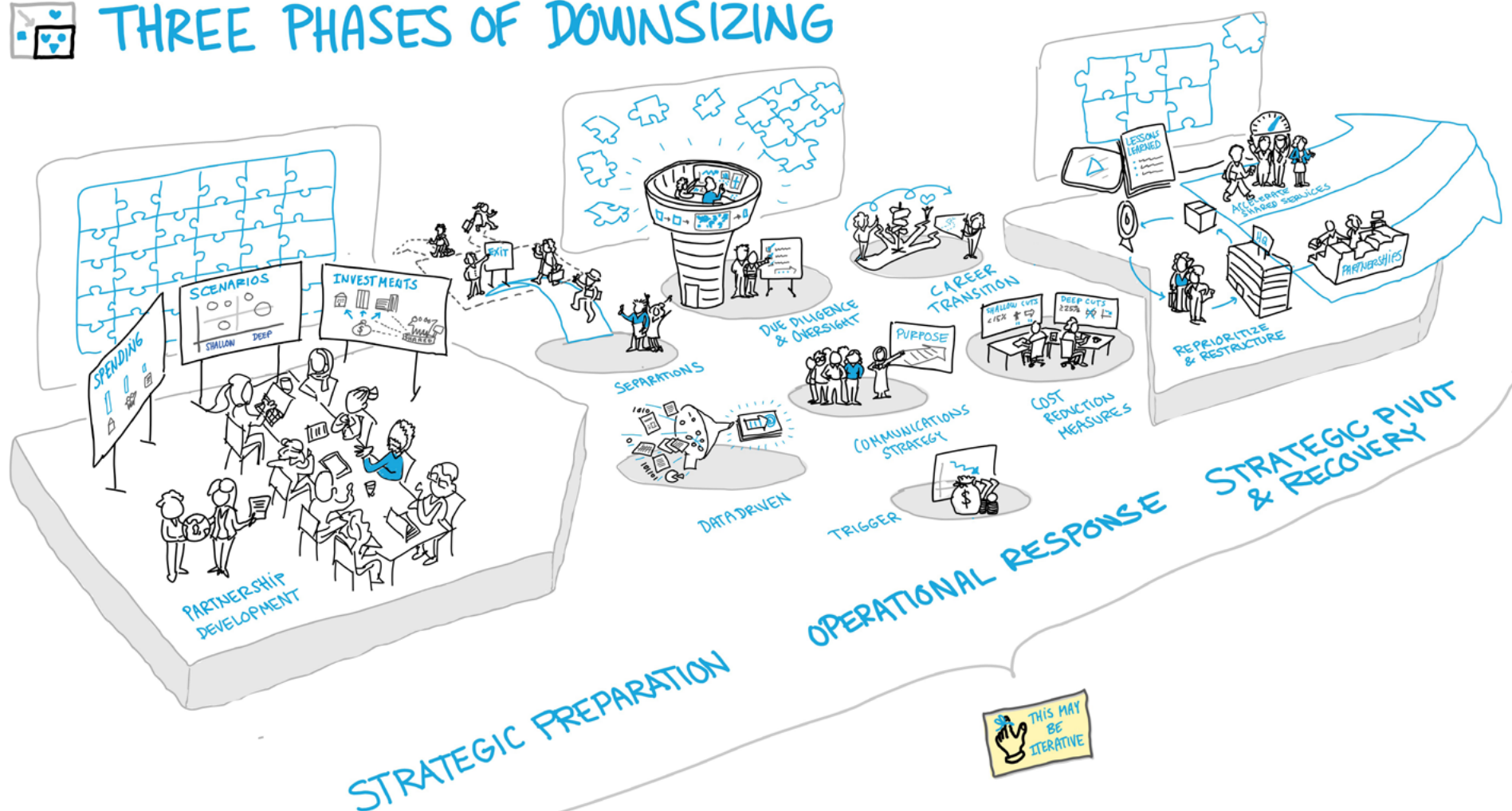


Downsizing in the United Nations: Managing impact, building resilience, and seizing strategic opportunity

THREE PHASES OF DOWNSIZING



1. The purpose: Why downsizing must be reframed

Downsizing is no longer a rare event in the UN system – it's a recurring reality. Nearly half of UN entities are currently undergoing some form of reduction in headcount, restructuring of operations, or reframing of their delivery model. But here's the truth: Downsizing isn't just about cutting costs – it's about shaping the future of the United Nations.

In today's climate of shrinking budgets, shifting donor priorities, and rising delivery expectations, downsizing is a strategic necessity. It's a moment to:

- Recalibrate the mission to match evolving global needs
- Streamline operations for greater agility and coherence
- Accelerate reform that might otherwise stall in stable times

When done well, downsizing becomes a strategic inflection point – a chance to strengthen institutional resilience, renew purpose, and build trust. When done poorly, it erodes morale, fragments operations, and damages credibility.

This is not just a technical exercise. It's a leadership test.

“Downsizing, while often triggered by crisis, can also serve as a powerful catalyst for transformation.”

- Manoj Juneja (former Deputy Executive Director and Chief Financial Officer at WFP)

2. The prescription: What must be done for downsizing to succeed

To turn downsizing into a moment of renewal, UN leaders and change managers need to lead with strategy, empathy, and precision. Here's what that looks like:

A. Frame the change strategically

- Tell the truth. Staff need to understand the “why” behind the change.
- Use scenario-planning. Avoid blunt instruments and design multiple pathways.
- Lead with purpose. Position downsizing as a pivot, not a retreat.

B. Put people first

- Provide holistic support. Offer career transition services, emotional support, and recognition.
- Treat separations with dignity. How people leave matters as much as who stays.
- Ensure fairness. Equity across grades, regions, and contract types builds trust.

C. Sustain morale and productivity

- Plan for survivor's guilt. Remaining staff need clarity, recognition, and support.

- Retain institutional memory. Use phased transitions and priority rehiring.
- Recognize contributions of those leaving.

D. Use data to drive decisions

- Track what matters. Monitor savings, reassignment rates, and staff adaptation.
- Enable accountability. Sharing of dashboards and metrics build credibility with staff and donors.
- Course-correct in real time. Don't wait for postmortems – adjust as you go.

E. Empower change managers and networks

- Establish and empower change agents. Reforms with change-agent networks are twice as likely to succeed.
- Coordinate across silos. Change managers must be conveners and facilitators, not just implementers.
- Model the culture you want. Leaders must “walk the talk” – especially under pressure.

F. Seize strategic opportunity

- Shallow cuts? Pivot. Use the moment to innovate, reallocate, and strengthen partnerships.
- Deep cuts? Protect the core. Prioritize mandate delivery and staff well-being.

Checklist for leaders and change practitioners

- ✓ Prepare in advance – agility comes from investing in systems and learning
- ✓ Invest in scenario-planning and preparedness before crisis hits
- ✓ Frame downsizing as a strategic pivot, not a technical fix
- ✓ Activate change-agent networks to deepen reform
- ✓ Prioritize staff support and transparent communication
- ✓ Use data to guide decisions and build trust
- ✓ Document lessons and build internal change capacity

Final thought

Downsizing may be inevitable right now. But how it's done will define the United Nations' credibility, relevance, culture, and capacity for years to come. This is a moment to lead – not just manage.

“We are in this together. If we get new projects, you will be the first one to be called back in.”

— Sungah Lee, Deputy Director General, IOM