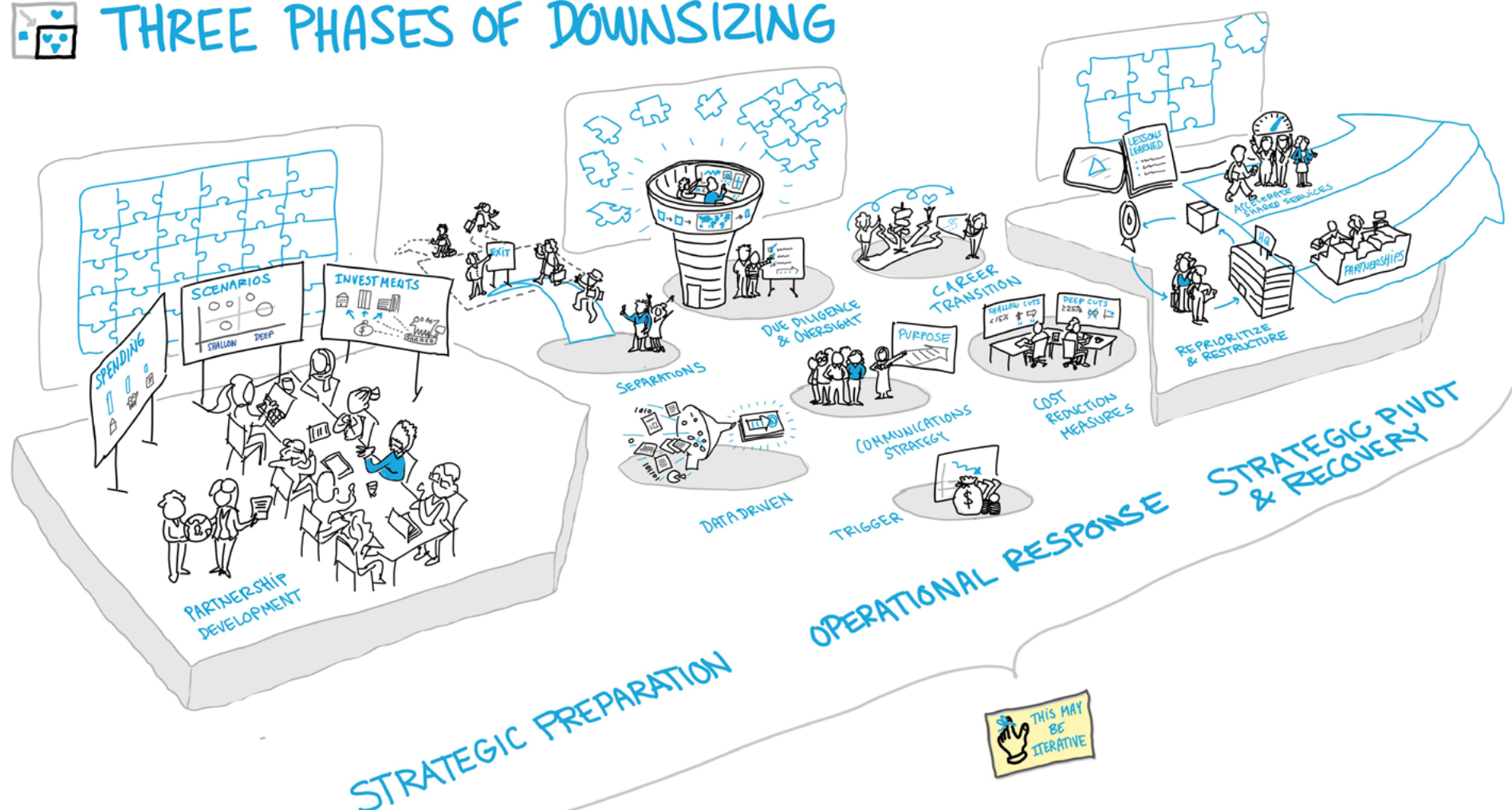


## Downsizing in the United Nations: Managing impact, building resilience, and seizing strategic opportunity

### 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