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Whānau Ora 2.0
the real problem isn't the who, it's the what

Abstract

The evolution of Whānau Ora is often seen as a contest between providers, but the deeper issue is the erosion of its original institutional logic. This shift weakens the policy's transformative potential and risks diminishing Indigenous-led approaches to entrenched social issues. As social investment becomes more influential, understanding and intentionally applying models of impact creation is vital. Whānau Ora's foundation in self-determination and relational practice offers valuable lessons that could significantly enhance contemporary investment strategies, but only if its core logic is preserved and applied with fidelity.

Keywords Whānau Ora, self-determination, mana motuhake, social investment, social impact, commissioning models

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Whānau Ora has long stood apart in the landscape of public policy in Aotearoa, not as a programme or service, but as a bold expression of belief in the transformative potential of whānau. Conceived as a model grounded in self-determination, relational practice and whānau-led aspiration, it offered a rare alternative to transactional approaches in the social sector. Today, that vision stands at a crossroads.

This article is written for policymakers, public servants and community leaders grappling with the future of Whānau Ora. It argues that the current reforms risk hollowing out its original intent, not through overt rejection, but through deliberate shifts in funding logic, relational practice and trust. What is at stake is not simply the design of a commissioning model, but the integrity of a policy that has demonstrated a unique capacity to restore mana motuhake and foster intergenerational wellbeing. In what follows, we revisit the founding design of Whānau Ora, examine how it has been realised through Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu, and assess

the implications of recent policy changes that threaten to erode the foundations of this transformative approach.

The original vision of Whānau Ora

Whānau Ora was born from an uncompromising belief in the transformative capacity of whānau. Its introduction, evolution and expansion since it first emerged in the health sector with the symbolic blueprint of He Korowai Oranga in 2002 has been arguably one of the most distinctive developments in approaches to lifting wellbeing and social impact creation more generally over the last two decades (see Smith et al., 2019 for a compelling and comprehensive overview of the evolution of Whānau Ora).

Spearheaded by Tariana Turia and guided by the intellectual leadership of Mason Durie, the policy emerged from a deep conviction: that whānau, when properly supported, have the ability to alter their own life trajectories. Whānau Ora as originally conceived was a policy expression of self-determination, not in the overtly political sense of sovereignty or constitutional recognition, but in the subtler, often overlooked domain of community habit and mindset. In many ways, it sought to restore the soft infrastructure of mana motuhake: the inner architecture of aspiration, relational strength and collective efficacy that enables whānau to act as self-determining units.

As Turia put it, 'Whānau Ora is not about health, education, or welfare – it is about the people. It is about restoring to our whānau the belief that they have the solutions to their own problems and the power to create their own futures' (Turia, 2010). This was never intended to be a service delivery mechanism. It was a deliberate intervention to disrupt dependency thinking and enable whānau to move from surviving to thriving, on their own terms.

In so doing, it resonates with earlier Māori leadership, such as the philosophies espoused by Tā Apirana Ngata, or the waiata of composers such as Henare Waitoa and Tuini Ngawai. The latter claimed that the end result of income support would be the destruction of the people; it would attack the memories, it would erode the essence of their souls. 'Patu tangata, patu mahara, patu mauri.'

The original Whānau Ora commissioning model ... often overlooked, logic that whānau defining their own goals was the means to, rather than product of, positive trajectory shifts.

Durie similarly articulated Whānau Ora not as a narrow intervention but as a holistic repositioning of state–community relations: 'The goal of Whānau Ora is whānau wellbeing – to empower whānau as a whole, not just individuals, to take control of their futures. It requires us to trust whānau, not just to support them' (Durie, 2011, p.3). This emphasis on trust, holistic wellbeing and collective capacity underpinned the distinctive nature of Whānau Ora. It was not about delivering to whānau, but investing in their potential; not about building programmes to 'fix' narrowly defined 'problems', but restoring rangatiratanga at the flax roots.

This conceptualisation of self-determination diverges from dominant academic and policy narratives, which typically understand self-determination in political or institutional terms. One prominent perspective is grounded in constitutional claims, such as those advanced by Te Aho (2011), which assert the need for autonomy from the Crown and the restoration of Māori political authority. Another, seen in the tribal governance literature (Cornell and Kalt, 2000), focuses on developing effective Indigenous institutions capable of delivering outcomes through self-governance. Both have made critical contributions to our understanding of Māori development.

Yet these frameworks tend to assume a foundational capacity for self-determination; that the psychological, relational and cultural infrastructure necessary for collective autonomy is already in place. In reality, colonisation has disrupted not only political structures but also the internalised sense of agency that underpins them. The ability to think beyond constraint, to believe in one's own capacity and to act in unison has been profoundly undermined by generations of deficit positioning and external control. The original vision of Whānau Ora understood this implicitly. It sought to address not the structures of governance, but the fabric of whānau life: to reawaken a sense of possibility and renew the relational practices that sustain mana motuhake.

This is what makes Whānau Ora unique among public policies in Aotearoa: its original design aimed to move beyond prescribed interventions to catalyse, restore and amplify collective imagination to be futures building. While this may seem ethereal for a policy architecture, there is an important premise that achieving wellbeing relies on whānau rewriting the stories they hold about themselves and the life trajectories they believe themselves capable of realising. In doing so, it provides the conditions for deeper, more enduring change. As McMeeking and Savage (2020) argue in the context of Covid-19 responses, kaupapa Māori approaches to development do not just seek equitable access to services, but aim to re-establish the capacity for whānau to act with agency, resilience and vision. These characteristics are often seen as the desirable outcomes of social interventions. Whānau Ora, as originally conceived, inverts this positioning so that the reclamation of agency is the causal pathway by which social 'goods' are achieved.

The original Whānau Ora commissioning model was premised on this important, but often overlooked, logic that whānau defining their own goals was the means to, rather than product of, positive trajectory shifts. To enable whānau to be self-determining in this way was given effect to through two key commissioning approaches: Whānau Ora navigation and direct commissioning. Whānau Ora 'navigators', rather than acting as case managers or brokers of services, were

Figure 1

catalysts of possibility – working alongside whānau to surface dreams, stitch together relational support, and map out pathways to a better future. This aspirational mode of practice was a deliberate rejection of the transactional mindset that characterises much of the social sector (Savage et al., 2017). Direct commissioning practices varied across the three initial agencies (Pacific Futures, Pou Matakana (later the Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency) and Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu). However, commonalities included centring whānau-defined goals to direct what was commissioned and placing high relational trust in community-embedded entities to realise whānau aspirations. Across both aspects of commissioning, the approach challenged the Crown by resting on the premise that solutions reside not in state bureaucracies but in communities. The investment logic cohered on the principles that investing in the capacity of whānau to define a vision for themselves, to act on their own priorities, and to hold their own definitions of success leads to snowballing gains across multiple social outcome areas.

In this way, Whānau Ora represented a practical expression of what might be called 'everyday self-determination' – a set of relational practices, norms and investments that support whānau to act with confidence, connection and control. It took the radical position that self-determination is not only an outcome of political reform, but a necessary condition for it, for without the ability to collectively dream, organise and act, the legal recognition of tino rangatiratanga remains hollow.

Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu approach

Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu stood as a powerful exemplar of how the original Whānau Ora vision has been realised in practice. Established as the Whānau Ora commissioning agency for the South Island, Te Pūtahitanga consistently grounded its approach in a belief that whānau are not passive recipients of support, but active agents of transformation. Its model was built on the principle that investing directly in whānau leadership – through flexible, strengths-based commissioning – can unlock latent potential and catalyse long-term, intergenerational wellbeing (Smith et al., 2019).

While there is demonstrable value in the investment Te Pūtahitanga directed to Whānau Ora navigators, we believe the critical exemplar for this article are the direct commissioning activities. The direct commissioning model enabled whānau to determine their own aspirations, design bespoke responses, and draw on cultural strengths and whakapapa to guide their decision making. Rather than seeing whānau as units of service need, Te Pūtahitanga commissioned to invest in capability – resourcing whānau to act, not just cope. In practical terms, what Te Pūtahitanga directly commissioned ranged from intergenerational maara kai (community gardens), whānau social enterprises and community gyms to cultural reconnection initiatives and beyond. The diversity of 'what' was invested can obscure the shared fundamentals: whānau identified an ambitious undertaking that they believed would shift trajectories and produce ripple gains across multiple social outcomes. The act of commissioning was not merely the transfer of enabling funds, but an affirmation of belief in the people behind, and purpose of, the initiative (McMeeking, Leahy and Savage, 2020).

This type of commissioning can, to cynical eyes, look as though 'nice to have' soft outcomes are being prioritised over squarely addressing gritty social issues. Such a view fails, however, to comprehend the originating investment logic: investing in aspiration and human potential is the causal mechanism by which people solve the 'gritty issues' they may experience now or in the future through self-defined trajectory change. In effect, the soft infrastructure of mana motuhake – the norms, habits and relationships that underpin self-determination in everyday life (McMeeking, 2018) – are the conduit through which multiple social gains are catalysed and sustained. Fundamentally, Te Pūtahitanga understood that long-term sustainable change will only occur when agency, authority and accountability rests with those who are the focus of the intervention (i.e., whānau), rather than those external to their unique circumstances. The way the commissioning was delivered also aligned with the position that self-determination must be grounded in relational strength and collective confidence, not just formal autonomy (McMeeking and Savage, 2020). In this way, Te Pūtahitanga preserved and amplified the purpose of Whānau Ora, maintaining fidelity to its original intent even as institutional pressures have shifted around it.

The effectiveness of this approach was borne out by the evaluations of successive investment waves, conducted by Ihi Research. Across these evaluations, a range of 'social goods' were consistently empirically validated across multiple domains of quality of life, including subjective sense of life satisfaction, whānau cohesion, financial stability and beyond (Leonard et al., 2025). Perhaps the most important insight across the corpus is that investing in intangible change catalysts such as belief, purpose and aspiration has eminently tangible outcomes, albeit through an attenuated causal pathway. In broad terms, the impact pathway was as shown in Figure 1.

One evaluation used a social return on investment methodology to estimate that every dollar invested by Te Pūtahitanga

generated a return of $2.40, derived from the combination of avoided costs and positive gains. Avoided costs captured the savings generated by preventing downstream demand for expensive government services: for instance, by reducing youth justice involvement, averting mental health crises, or lessening reliance on emergency housing. Positive gains were the tangible social and economic benefits created through enhanced employment and educational outcomes, strengthened whānau capability, and improved long-term wellbeing (Leonard et al., 2023). These economic metrics are compelling and closely aligned with governmental priorities for increased employment, lower benefit payments and reductions within the criminal justice system. What seems difficult to translate is that these gains come not from narrowly intervening in the site of the 'problem', but rather from investing purposively in human potential to overcome multiple 'problems' through the cumulative gains arising from self-determined trajectory shift. In our view, these findings affirm that investing in whānau agency yields not only better outcomes, but also deeper impact by building the very foundation from which structural self-determination can be enacted.

The relational quality of Te Pūtahitanga's approach was also central to its success. Rather than adopting a transactional model of grant-making, the commissioning process was relational, iterative and grounded in trust. As we have argued elsewhere, kaupapa Māori responses to social need are often characterised by their focus on reweaving the relational fabric of community life – reconnecting people to each other, to their purpose, and to a sense of collective capacity (McMeeking, Leahy and Savage, 2020). This is not an ancillary benefit of Te Pūtahitanga's work; it was a critical mechanism of change that we have argued elsewhere gained a multiplied impact through a network effect (ibid.). Through sustained investment in relational practice and whānau aspiration, Te Pūtahitanga helped rebuild the soft but essential infrastructure that enables whānau to imagine and pursue lives of their own choosing.

While navigators have long been recognised as a valuable part of the Whānau Ora approach, serving as trusted connectors who walk alongside whānau, this increased emphasis signals a narrowing of focus.

That is why the recent shift in policy settings is so concerning. What is at stake is not simply a set of contracts or the outcome of a procurement process, but the character and vision of Whānau Ora itself. If Whānau Ora is reduced to a delivery mechanism – assessed on narrow outputs, disconnected from whānau aspiration, and detached from its relational foundations – we risk eroding one of the few spaces in the state sector where mana motuhake is actively nurtured.

The original vision of Whānau Ora still matters. It matters because it was never just a policy; it was a proposition about what whānau are capable of which anchored an institutional and investment logic that now has a robust body of empirical evidence behind it. The visibility and intentionality of investment logics, in our view, matters now more than ever as we face deepening inequities and growing demands for systems transformation.

The shift in Whānau Ora's institutional logic

The recent reconfiguration of Whānau Ora commissioning arrangements has sparked considerable debate, much of it centred on the identities of the new contract holders. While the selection of new commissioning agencies is significant, this focus risks overshadowing a more profound transformation: a shift in the underlying philosophy and operational logic of Whānau Ora itself.

At the heart of this transformation was the 2025 request for proposals issued by Te Puni Kōkiri, which outlined a restructured funding model. Under the new arrangements, commissioning agencies are required to allocate a minimum of $125,000 out of every $150,000 (excluding GST) payment specifically for navigator salaries and associated service provider overheads (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2025b). The significance of this prescription is that it fundamentally rebalances the allocation between navigation and direct commissioning. Whereas under the original commissioning models, the bulk of Whānau Ora funds were available for direct commissioning, navigation now commands over 80%, with only the slender residue available for innovation or direct commissioning. Under this model, the wide array of whānau-led initiatives that Te Pūtahitanga invested in to fuel whānau potential will have limited opportunities within a contested and far more competitive environment.

While navigators have long been recognised as a valuable part of the Whānau Ora approach, serving as trusted connectors who walk alongside whānau, this increased emphasis signals a narrowing of focus. The original purpose of Whānau Ora was expansive and aspirational. It aimed to empower whānau to identify and pursue their own goals, and to reweave the relational and cultural fibres of collective wellbeing. By prioritising navigator roles within a tightly prescribed funding envelope, the new model risks reducing Whānau Ora to a delivery mechanism – one focused more on brokering static services to individuals than on enabling transformation within whānau.

The request for proposals further reinforced this shift by placing greater emphasis on reporting requirements, the use of data to identify risk, and demonstrable improvements in 'individual and whānau wellbeing' (ibid., 2025b). While outcomes-based accountability is an

important feature of effective policy, there is a risk that this model overcorrects, pulling Whānau Ora into the logic of upstream triage and performance measurement. In doing so, it may lose sight of its original character: to provide whānau with the space, support and trust to imagine and act on their own aspirations.

Equally significant is the replacement of the original three commissioning agencies – Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu, the Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency and Pasifika Futures – with new entities. While framed as a refresh, this restructuring severs long-standing relationships with the community change agents each have commissioned over a decade of practice, including both whānau and established social-good organisations. As Merepeka Raukawa-Tait, chair of the Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency, warned, the change 'puts a decade of relationship building at risk' (Natanahira, 2025). This rupture has implications not just for service continuity, but for the deeper relational fabric that Whānau Ora was designed to nurture.

The revised model also suggests a shift in orientation, from collective to individualistic approaches. With its increased emphasis on navigator-led support and case-based interventions, the system may inadvertently prioritise individual outcomes over the broader, relational development of whānau as cohesive units. This is not a minor technical adjustment; it represents a conceptual retreat from the founding assumption of Whānau Ora: that it is the whānau as a whole, not the individual, that is the primary site of wellbeing.

Perhaps most concerning is the implicit reduction in trust. The original Whānau Ora model entrusted commissioning agencies and whānau with flexibility and discretion, enabling them to respond creatively to whānau-identified goals. The new framework, with its more prescriptive funding allocations and heightened compliance demands, signals a move away from this relational trust model and towards a centrally governed, standardised framework that prioritises data collection over impact. The new contracts have mandatory data sharing with government agencies, which will cascade to all organisations delivering navigation services as well as the few entities that are directly commissioned for wider Whānau Ora initiatives. While this may look like a sound, efficient way of ensuring service quality, it both connotes low trust from government and may well impair engaging with the so-called 'hard to reach' segments for whom mandatory data collection may induce trust barriers with providers.

Over the past decade, Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu has cultivated not only a network of funded initiatives, but an ecosystem designed to regenerate the soft infrastructure of mana motuhake – restoring confidence, capability and connection within and between whānau.

In composite, these changes reflect a fundamental shift in the institutional logic of Whānau Ora. What was once a bold and relational approach to transformation is at risk of becoming a narrow service infrastructure. While the changes have been presented as administrative updates, they entail a deeper repositioning – one which replaces trust with control, aspiration with measurement, and collective empowerment with individual triage. If this trajectory continues, we may look back on this moment not as a debate over contracts, but as a turning point in the character of Whānau Ora itself.

What is at risk

The promise of Whānau Ora has always been more than programme efficacy; it is about transforming the underlying conditions that produce intergenerational inequity. At its heart, Whānau Ora is a policy expression of self-determination, one that recognises the enduring power of whānau to heal, organise, and flourish on their own terms. This approach is not only morally compelling, but demonstrably effective, as described above. As we also wrote in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, kaupapa Māori approaches grounded in self-determination are not merely responsive; they are preventative, generative and system-changing. Self-determination, we argued then, is a net gain to the nation, and remains the only approach in contemporary Aotearoa that has reversed entrenched disadvantage at scale (McMeeking and Savage, 2020, p.38).

That observation was borne out during the pandemic, when Māori-led initiatives were able to respond with agility, care and cultural resonance – saving lives, protecting communities and delivering higher-trust outcomes than government-led mechanisms. The capacity for these responses did not emerge overnight; it was built through years of investment in kaupapa Māori infrastructure like Whānau Ora. These investments nourished the relational ecosystems, leadership capability and cultural authority needed to act decisively under pressure. To dismantle that infrastructure now, or to reconfigure it into something narrower and more transactional through the prescribed and compliance-driven contracting, is to squander that capacity and the hard-won lessons it represents.

Nowhere are the risks of the new commissioning model more acute than in Te Waipounamu. Over the past decade, Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu has cultivated not only a network of funded initiatives, but an ecosystem designed to regenerate the soft infrastructure of mana motuhake – restoring confidence, capability and connection within and between whānau. This has not been a passive process. It has required sustained, high-trust

investment in whānau aspirations, capability development and cultural innovation. As the final impact evaluation notes, wave commissioning enabled over 150,000 whānau to activate their own potential, reaching nearly 400,000 people, including some of the most rural and isolated communities in the country (Leonard et al., 2025). The slender funds available for commissioning outside navigation under the current approach will leave most of these whānau unable to access further Whānau Ora investment, and it is unclear whether the new commissioning agency will draw upon this existing network as they chart the next chapter.

To dismantle that infrastructure now – and at speed – carries real and immediate risk. This is not simply the end of a contract; it is the removal of a key node in a self-fuelling network of transformation. The strength of the model lay not just in its funding flows, but in its layered scaffolding: navigators, enterprise coaching, capability workshops, relational brokerage, cultural validation, and a deliberate cultivation of whānau leadership. These components were designed to interact and mutually reinforce, enabling whānau not just to initiate change but to sustain and expand it. As the evaluation observed, wave funding 'created pathways to long-term transformation', with initiatives often becoming local hubs of inspiration and connection, catalysing change well beyond the original participants (ibid.).

The hope – and it is a genuine hope – is that the network has matured to a point of inner resilience; that whānau-led entities, connected through shared vision and reinforced by years of capability support, can weather this disruption and find new pathways forward. But we must be honest: removing Te Pūtahitanga as a central node in this ecosystem will send ripples across it. Many funded entities have expressed concern about their viability beyond their contracted investment from Te Pūtahitanga, with only 15% expressing confidence that they could secure future investment from the new Whānau Ora commissioning entity (ibid.).

What is at risk is not just service continuity; it is the cohesion, trust and shared purpose that enable a kaupapa Māori ecosystem to function. In contrast to transactional models, wave commissioning was relationally embedded and locally anchored. It cultivated a distributed leadership infrastructure rooted in mātauranga Māori and whānau ingenuity. The decision to replace this model with a faster, more centralised approach risks tearing that fabric. Even with the best of intentions, rapid transitions rarely honour the slow work of relational infrastructure building. And in the absence of transition investment, relational stewardship or continuity planning, the risk is amplified. Put plainly: Te Pūtahitanga was not just a funder, it was a weaver of community capability and leader of deep transformation. Its removal is not a policy refresh; it is a rupture.

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Underneath these fault lines lies a fundamental and somewhat intangible concern: the erosion of belief. The dropdown banners that would adorn every Te Pūtahitanga hui stated that belief: 'Your tupuna believed in you, so too do we', or 'Step up – it's your time to shine'. Whānau Ora is unique in the Crown policy environment in that it deliberately invests in restoring belief – belief within whānau, belief in whānau, and belief that transformation is possible even in the face of long-standing harm. It stands apart from the deficit-laden, compliance-heavy practices that dominate the social sector. In fact, Whānau Ora may be the only Crown initiative designed to directly counter the psychological and relational damage of colonisation. While other entities – iwi, urban Māori authorities, kaupapa Māori NGOs – are also working to restore mana motuhake, they do so without the scale, mandate or visibility that Whānau Ora provides. Most importantly, they do not carry the same moral weight: that of the Crown accepting responsibility to fix what it broke.

This is not just a technical design choice; it is a point of constitutional and ethical principle. The shift we are witnessing now does not simply reassign contracts; it retreats from that principle. It signals that healing and transformation can be devolved or outsourced, rather than being upheld as core responsibilities of a Treaty-based public policy system.

This retreat also sits uneasily alongside the current focus on social investment. The essence of social investment is to prioritise root causes and preventive action. Yet the changes to Whānau Ora shift the focus away from upstream transformation and towards downstream service delivery. That is not merely ironic; it is self-defeating. Whānau Ora, as originally designed, is arguably one of the most advanced expressions of preventive social investment in Aotearoa's history. It intervenes not in crisis, but in aspiration. It builds capability, not dependency. It restores the conditions for whānau to flourish, not just survive. In this light, the dismantling or dilution of Whānau Ora's core kaupapa is not only short-sighted, but actively undermines the broader social investment agenda.

What is at risk, then, is not just a model or a mechanism, but a movement; a policy that dared to align with the dignity of whānau, that trusted communities to lead, and that embodied a living expression of te Tiriti o Waitangi in public policy. What is at risk is the hope and belief that these values might still guide how we build a better future together.

Conclusion

The recent changes to Whānau Ora commissioning should not be viewed merely as a procurement decision or administrative reset. They represent a

deeper re-anchoring of the state. Liu and Pratto (2018) articulate how, when systems face pressure, actors can respond through rupture, continuity, or re-anchoring, stabilising the system by reasserting familiar symbolic, institutional and technological structures. In this case, the state has responded to a decade of Indigenous-led innovation by recentralising control and redefining success through the narrow lenses of compliance, output measurement and state-defined accountability. This is not a rupture, but a deliberate reassertion of colonial-era governance modalities, where the Crown reserves the right to define the terms of empowerment, and relational trust is replaced with contractual control.

What is re-anchored, then, is not just a funding model, it is the state's symbolic and technological dominance within public policy pertaining to Māori wellbeing. Rather than expanding the space for whānau-led futures, the reconfigured Whānau Ora model risks collapsing the probability space for transformation back into a familiar attractor: one where Māori aspirations are permitted only to the extent that they align with state logics. As Liu and Pratto argue, the power to define legitimacy, allocate resources and set the terms of engagement is central to how colonisation operates, and how it persists. In this light, the Whānau Ora 2.0 changes mark a critical juncture: one where the state has chosen re-anchoring over relational accountability, and in doing so threatens to neutralise one of the few institutional sites where mana motuhake has been given life in the policy system.

If Whānau Ora is to survive in name, it must also survive in character. Too many failed to grasp – or chose not to see – the institutional logic that made it transformational. What we now face is an incalculable opportunity loss, one that risks remaining invisible precisely because it was so effective. At a time when social investment is in vogue, the Leonard et al. evaluation offers something rare: evidence that investing in mana motuhake delivers measurable economic and social returns. This is not a rhetorical claim; it is a documented fact.

But we cannot get those returns through a stripped-down version of Whānau Ora. What some dismissed as soft or intangible – aspiration, trust, connection – was in fact the engine of impact. If social investment is serious about long-term change, it must look again at Whānau Ora 1.0 and understand what made it work.

That will require deliberate, disciplined resistance to the system's instinct to snap back to default settings: short-termism, control and compliance. The value of what was can still be realised – but only if we are willing to see it clearly, and choose differently.

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