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The Year Before Go-Live.

Every ERP go-live has a date everyone remembers. Almost nobody remembers the decision made eleven months earlier — and **that's the one that determined how the next five years went.**

I've watched two companies implement a new ERP system. What separated them wasn't the software. It was master data — the codes and structures underneath every transaction, the ones that decide whether a number can ever be traced back to a unit, a machine, or a supplier.

The first company took a year before anyone touched configuration.

I remember the rooms. Subject matter experts pulled out of every function — finance, operations, procurement, maintenance — not to review a design, but to create one. Not the plan for the system: the content of it. **The structures, the interfaces, the master data underneath.** These were the people who would later have to sit with the reports and explain last quarter. That was the logic. **Only someone who will one day interrogate the output knows what the foundation has to carry.**

What started as an argument of functions defending their own corners quickly shifted. People began to see the complexity on the other side of the table, working with modules they'd never had to consider before. By the end, we stopped defending corners and started building one unified system.

That paid off in a way nobody had anticipated. ERP implementations are usually IT against the business. This one wasn't — **because when the system arrived in each function, it arrived with someone who actually helped build it.** Every new system feels harder than the old one at first, but that usual complaint had nowhere to land here.

The second company had three months. Master data was on the list, somewhere, as something to tidy after go-live.

Six months on, you could tell them apart from across the room.

The first company had come through four or five challenging months of learning into ordinary work. They could still ask questions about last year and get answers. They'd opened a help desk

on day one and closed it at six months — not because it was ignored, because nobody was calling anymore.

The second had lost its own history. Old codes didn't map to new ones, so the thread broke at unit, equipment, and supplier level. Years of performance data still existed and could no longer be used. And the spreadsheets came — one, then another, then hundreds. Meetings where two functions arrived with the same metric and two different numbers and wasted the hour on the difference instead of the business.

They spent the next several years rebuilding a year they hadn't spent — while running the company at the same time.

It seems like common knowledge now, but it is still a challenge to get it right: master data isn't a technical debt you can service later. **Every transaction entered against a weak foundation deepens that debt.** The clock starts at go-live and only runs one direction.

The year is not what the foundation costs. The year is the asset.