



Marc Descheemaeker

AUTHOR · BUSINESS LEADER

Transforming a large, politically constrained institution is categorically harder than restructuring a private business. Workforce decisions require negotiation with governments and unions. Investment horizons span multiple political administrations. Commercial logic competes, daily, with public service obligation. Most change management frameworks were designed for organisations that can move fast and cut deep. State-owned enterprises, regulated utilities, and large public authorities cannot. Their leaders are left with tools that were not built for the problem they face.

A former CEO who grew Belgium's national railway ridership by 60% while cutting the workforce, Marc Descheemaeker is a practitioner on transforming large, politically constrained organisations, and on the specific leadership disciplines that make it possible.

Marc Descheemaeker's 2026 Biography

Why organisations work with Marc Descheemaeker

- He has done the thing that most change management speakers have only studied: turned around a nationally significant, politically exposed, heavily unionised institution, with verifiable numbers. That gives him a standing in board and C-suite conversations that credentialed academics cannot replicate.
- His SNCB experience surfaces a distinction most transformation programmes ignore: the difference between change in organisations that can move freely and change in organisations that cannot. Leaders in regulated industries, public bodies, and large state-influenced enterprises hear something they rarely get: a framework built for their actual constraints.
- Having chaired Brussels Airport during the 2016 terrorist attacks, he brings direct experience of leadership under acute operational crisis, not as a crisis consultant but as the person publicly accountable for the institution's response and recovery.
- His simultaneous positions across a national railway, a national bus operator, Brussels Airport, the European Investment Bank, and the European Investment Fund gave him a view few practitioners hold: where European capital allocation meets national infrastructure governance, and where the two pull in opposite directions.
- Career that moved from McKinsey analysis through consumer goods and facilities services to four major European transport institutions gives him a genuine cross-sector perspective on operational transformation. He is not a transport specialist; he is a change practitioner who happened to work in transport.

AVAILABLE FOR

- Speaking

MARC'S SPEAKING THEMES

- Business Continuity and Crisis Management
- Change Management
- Leadership
- Organizational Agility
- Risk Management
- Workforce Transformation

LANGUAGES: English

Biography highlights

- CEO, NMBS-SNCB (Belgian national railway), 2004–2013: grew passenger numbers by 60%, reduced workforce by approximately 20%
- Turned loss-making Belgian operations of Thalys and Eurostar into a profitable shareholding; oversaw the separation and partial sale of the SNCB freight division
- Chairman, Brussels Airport Company (BAC), 2013–2021
- Chairman, De Lijn (Belgian national bus and tram operator), 2016–2022
- Director, European Investment Bank (EIB), 2015–2022; Director, European Investment Fund (EIF), 2016–2022
- Board member, Gimv NV (listed Belgian investment company)
- Postgraduate in European Economics, College of Europe, Bruges; Master in Business Economics (cum laude), UFSIA University Antwerp; career began at McKinsey Amsterdam

Biography

Belgium's national railway was losing passengers and carrying a workforce structure it could no longer sustain when Marc Descheemaeker was appointed CEO in 2004. Over nine years, he reversed both. Ridership grew by 60%. The workforce reduced by almost 20%. Neither result was achieved by bypassing the constraints that define a state-owned enterprise. They were achieved by understanding them precisely, and leading within them.

The SNCB work went beyond the headline numbers. The Belgian operations of Thalys and Eurostar were structurally loss-making; Descheemaeker restructured them into a profitable shareholding. The freight division, a separate challenge, was carved out as an independent entity and partly sold to a financial partner. These were not sequential projects. They ran concurrently, each requiring negotiation across government ministries, unions, and private capital.

His subsequent board positions; Chairman of Brussels Airport Company, Chairman of De Lijn, Director at the European Investment Bank and the European Investment Fund extended that operational picture into institutional governance. Few practitioners have seen, from the inside, how capital decisions at European level translate into choices on the ground at a national transport authority. He has sat on both sides of the table.

His academic formation; Master in Business Economics (cum laude) from UFSIA Antwerp, postgraduate in European Economics from the College of Europe in Bruges gave him the analytical base. The McKinsey apprenticeship sharpened it. The credential that resonates with senior audiences, however, is neither. It is a national railway, genuinely transformed.

Key speaking topics

- Large-scale organisational transformation in politically constrained environments
- Change leadership in state-owned and regulated enterprises
- Workforce restructuring under political and union constraint
- Infrastructure governance and European investment strategy
- Operational crisis leadership
- Transport and mobility as a strategic policy challenge
- Board governance across public and private capital

Ideal for

- CEOs and senior executives leading transformation in regulated industries, utilities, or public-sector adjacent organisations
- Boards and chairs of state-owned enterprises, infrastructure authorities, or large government-funded bodies
- CHROs and transformation leads navigating workforce restructuring in politically sensitive environments
- European policy, infrastructure, and public investment forums where governance and commercial strategy intersect

Audience outcomes

- A clearer articulation of how change management in constrained organisations differs from private-sector transformation – and what that difference demands of leadership
- Concrete case material from the SNCB turnaround: what decisions were made, what levers were available, and what did not work
- A practical lens on managing multiple simultaneous stakeholder mandates (government, unions, commercial partners, and public) without losing operational momentum
- Insight into how European investment institutions think about national infrastructure; useful for leaders navigating public funding cycles and cross-border capital decisions
- Honest reflection on leading an institution through acute public crisis, and the communication and governance choices that followed

Marc Descheemaeker's Videos

