



The State of Organizational Drift

2026

*How do we hold ourselves together
in a world that is pulling us apart?*

INAUGURAL EDITION

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Organizational Drift

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Holding ourselves together is the work.

Think about the last time your team left a meeting ready to act. The decision seemed clear. Then someone got handed a new priority. Someone else waited for approval that wasn't really necessary. By Friday, capable people were spending their time putting Monday's agreement back together.

We know this experience. We explain it away as a communication problem, a difficult employee, or the price of growth. We schedule another meeting. We work a little longer. Eventually, repairing the organization becomes so familiar that we mistake that effort for the work itself.

Organizational drift is the natural tendency of people within a human system to grow apart over time. Colleagues become less connected to one another, departments grow more isolated, and leaders lose touch with the people they lead. We can occupy the same building, attend the same meetings, and still lose our ability to accomplish something together.

I believe holding our human systems together in the face of accelerating change is the defining leadership challenge of our age. Technology is

advancing, expectations are shifting, and the arrangements that inherently connected us yesterday need our attention today. When those connections fray, people bear the strain and the work suffers.

This is why I founded the **Center for Organizational Drift**. Our purpose is to help people see the phenomenon of drift, recognize its consequences, and reverse it. This inaugural report brings established research, executive experience, and early assessment pilots into a common framework. It offers a way to examine the growing distance between people that may underlie seemingly separate workplace problems. It gives language to a condition leaders experience and recognize but struggle to name.

Our position is clear: every human system is subject to drift. In our companies, associations, families, and communities, connection requires deliberate care and investment. We can strengthen it through the choices we make about direction, fairness, contribution, and coordination. Recognizing drift gives us somewhere useful to begin.

As leaders, that work starts with us. We can ask people to take initiative and then delay every decision, or we can give them the authority and support to act. We can reward departments for protecting their own results, or we can reward them for succeeding together. Leadership means holding ourselves accountable for creating the conditions we ask others to work within.

Start with a situation you know. As you read, keep one recurring frustration in mind. What keeps getting harder than it should? You do not need to solve it yet. This report offers a way to understand what may be happening between the people involved and practical tools for deciding what to do next. We have spent enough time asking people to compensate for broken systems and leadership shortcomings that create separation instead of cohesion. We can build organizations that help our people come together. The opportunity is ours, and so is the responsibility.



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Executive Summary

Leaders are investing in AI, flattening organizations, trying to restore engagement, and deciding where work belongs. Across these efforts, the same frustrations keep returning. This inaugural edition brings existing research and early original evidence together to propose a framework for understanding organizational drift and set out an agenda for testing and measuring it.

Organizational drift is the natural tendency of people within a human system to grow apart over time. That distance shows up when decisions need repeated explanation, cooperation feels costly, identification with the group fades, and work breaks down between otherwise capable people. Maintaining connection is a leadership responsibility.

The people we rely on to hold work together are under strain.

Gallup's 2026 report places manager engagement at 22 percent in 2025, down from 31 percent in 2022. We ask managers to translate strategy, develop people, and connect teams. Their capacity to do that work belongs at the center of our response.¹

Surveys point to questions about leadership credibility.

Culture professionals surveyed by Bink and employees surveyed by Howdy and LiveCareer reported concerns about whether leaders' actions match their messages and whether decisions take employees' interests into account. For leaders, the practical task is to understand how a decision is experienced by the people expected to carry it out.^{2,3,4}

Organizational friction absorbs effort that people need for progress.

Research on duplicated work, meetings, information search, and organizational drag brings that burden into view. The leadership question is immediate: how much of our people's energy is being spent repairing the way we work?^{5,6,7,8}

Measuring drift could give leaders a new way to see where progress is possible.

Our early pilots begin by examining the connections that help people accomplish work together. The next step is to measure Corrective Effort: the energy people spend repairing or working around failures of connection and coordination. Tracking cohesion alongside that effort could help leaders see where people are growing apart, whether changes bring them closer together, and how much capacity becomes available for meaningful work.

The model brings four forces into view: Doubt, Self-interest, Withdrawal, and Discord. Their counterforces are Hope, Mutuality, Commitment, and Synchrony. These forces interact. An unfair exchange can erode belief in a leader's promises. A broken handoff can make people less willing to help next time. Leaders gain a fuller picture when they examine those connections.

Third-party studies, executive interviews, and early assessment pilots inform the report's point of view and practical agenda. The Methodology and Limitations section explains the evidence base and the work still ahead.

Four findings and priorities emerge from this evidence.

Start by thinking of a source of friction in your organization. The report offers a way to investigate it, a listening practice, a public conversation guide, and actions for strengthening each counterforce. Identify a change, put it into practice, then look for a difference in the work. Understanding drift changes what actions you might take and therefore what happens next.



PART I

Four Workplace Tensions

Executives, managers, and employees are pulling in different directions on AI, management layers, engagement, and where work happens. The debates look separate. The mechanics underneath may not be.

Four tensions are straining today's workplace. Executives want faster AI adoption while employees are questioning the future it creates. Managers are expected to shoulder more work while being

targeted for reduction. Organizations are asking for substantial energy for change from people who feel spent. Work-location and return-to-office (RTO) decisions are contests over whose needs count most.

These themes dominated headlines and executive agendas throughout 2026. They appear to be complex, separate issues. But are they?

54%

of workers surveyed bypassed AI tools and worked manually at least once in the prior 30 days.

WalkMe, 2026⁹

97%

of U.S. managers also carried individual-contributor responsibilities, taking a median of 40% of their time.

Gallup, 2026¹⁰

20%

global employee engagement in 2025: the lowest level since 2020, following a second consecutive annual decline.

Gallup, 2026¹

46%

of U.S. employees who work remotely at least some of the time say they would be unlikely to stay if their employer eliminated working from home.

Pew Research Center, 2025¹²

Resistance to AI adoption

Executives see possibilities and productivity gains in AI and want their organizations to move quickly. Employees may face a different calculation: whether the tools work well for their tasks, fit their workflows, and offer a future worth embracing. In WalkMe's 2026 survey, 54 percent of workers reported bypassing AI tools and completing tasks manually at least once in the previous 30 days. That figure does not explain why workers bypassed the tools. It signals leaders to ask what workers are experiencing.⁹

The squeezed manager

We reduce the number of management levels to speed up decisions, then ask the managers who remain to take on more coordination work. Gallup found that 97 percent of U.S. managers also had individual-contributor responsibilities, taking a median of 40 percent of their time. Removing management positions does not remove the work of connecting people.¹⁰

The depleted workforce

Another engagement survey arrives, another action plan follows, but nothing really changes. Gallup puts global employee engagement at 20 percent in 2025, its lowest level since 2020 and the second consecutive annual decline. As remote and hybrid work, AI, and shifting generational expectations reshape working life, we are asking an already depleted workforce to adapt without enough guidance or support.¹

Where we work

The debate over where we work quickly becomes a debate over who gets to decide. Leaders weigh collaboration, learning, coordination, and accountability. Employees weigh the effects on their time, families, flexibility, and ability to do good work. Research on hybrid work gives us reason to look beyond attendance alone. A workable agreement has to make sense from both sides of the desk.¹¹



What if these four tensions reveal the same underlying problem?

The tensions are clearly visible. What lies beneath them is not.

What connects the stories

Look beneath the separate debates and a shared pattern emerges. Workers are struggling to believe in the direction, see a fair exchange, contribute willingly and lean in, and make their work flow smoothly. We often treat the visible symptom without examining the conditions that keep it returning.

Organizational drift gives us language for the underlying mechanics. The model brings familiar pressures into a single view so we can examine how they reinforce one another and where leadership can make a difference. Understanding the challenges that plague today's work requires us to view an organization through a new lens.



PART II

Understanding Organizational Drift

Drift is the default. Connection between people requires deliberate care as people, expectations, and conditions change. Four force pairs make that work practical.

Organizational drift is the natural tendency of people within a human system to grow apart over time. This growing distance concerns how well we understand one another, believe in our shared direction, trust the exchange, identify with the group, contribute, and coordinate. People can sit beside each other and still be miles apart in the ways that matter to the work.

Growth can increase the demands of maintaining connection. As a company expands, new people bring new relationships and working preferences. Specialization creates different languages and priorities. Additional layers put more steps between a decision and the people carrying it out. As the organization changes, leaders need to revisit how people share priorities, make decisions, and coordinate work. A larger headcount, more customers, more resources, and more technologies won't do that work for us on their own.

One executive made the challenge tangible through a simple comparison: ten people create 45 possible pairings; 100 create 4,950. The argument isn't that every employee needs to speak to everyone else. It's that informal arrangements that serve a small group can become overwhelmed as the organization grows. Another executive recalled the moment he realized he no longer knew everyone's name or family. Growth had changed the conditions of tight connection.^{13,14}

The Center's study of organizational drift stands on substantial foundations:

- Lawrence and Lorsch studied differentiation and integration.
- Greiner examined the challenges of growth.

- Dekker and Snook showed how everyday adaptations can accumulate into wider vulnerability.
- Coase examined the costs of organizing work.

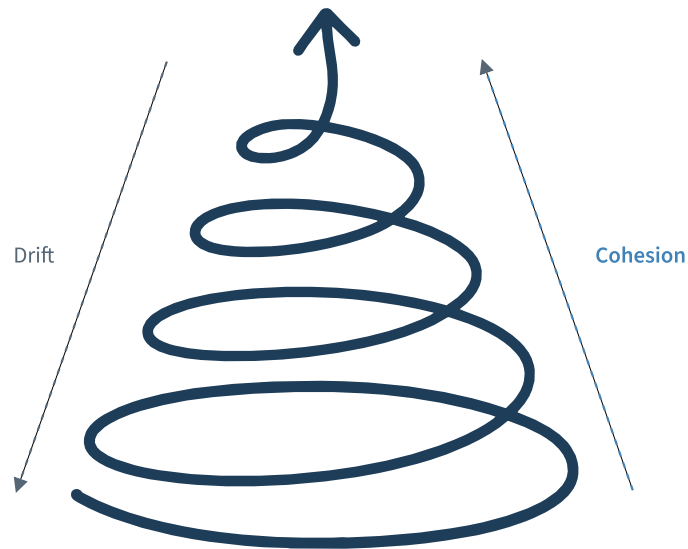
Organizational drift brings these related concerns into a common frame and names a universal vulnerability of human systems: the connections that make collective work possible require deliberate maintenance.^{15,16,17,18,19}

Dunbar's work reminds us that human relationships have limits. For leaders, the useful lesson is to design ways for connection to survive beyond the people we can personally know. Shared purpose, clear decisions, and reliable coordination become more consequential as familiarity becomes harder to sustain. Every human system is governed by its mechanical, relational, and intentional conditions. A breakdown in any one of these can disrupt the rest. Both the work and the workers suffer as a result.²⁰

The report's central proposition is that **drift is the default**: connection requires deliberate care as people, expectations, and conditions change. This is a research-informed theoretical position, not a claim that every organization is currently deteriorating. The extent of drift depends on how people sustain their relationships and renew their ways of working.

Cohesion is the organization's capacity to accomplish work together through Hope, Mutuality, Commitment, and Synchrony. People can disagree, specialize, and bring different perspectives while remaining connected to a shared purpose. Cohesion helps organizations stick together and better metabolize the inherent tensions of change, uncertainty, and stress.

Seeing drift in action



Drift pulls organizations apart and disrupts the flow of work, but it can be reversed.

The spiral models cohesion as a series of loops. The width of each loop represents how far apart the members of a team or organization have grown in their understanding, expectations, relationships, and ways of working. Wider loops illustrate greater distance between people; narrower loops illustrate stronger connection and greater cohesion.

The workplace pressures described in Part I give us reason to investigate these connections. They do not yet provide a direct measure of how much organizational drift is increasing.

Four interrelated forces and counterforces

The four force pairs help us examine what is pulling people apart and what could bring them closer together. A single workplace issue can involve several pairs. AI adoption, for example, can raise questions about the future, fairness, belonging, and coordination. Begin with a recurring workplace problem, then use the pairs to explore what is happening between the people involved. The sections below each begin with an invented workplace example. Executive interview accounts and research findings follow, with endnote numbers identifying their sources.

DRIFT FORCE	COUNTERFORCE	WHAT TO EXAMINE
Doubt	Hope	Is the future direction credible and personally attractive? Does action feel possible, with workable pathways?
Self-interest	Mutuality	Does contribution involve fair exchange, reciprocity, and shared benefit?
Withdrawal	Commitment	Do people invest attention, judgment, and initiative into their team or organization? Do they identify with it positively?
Discord	Synchrony	Does interdependent work flow smoothly across timing, shared understanding, ownership, and handoffs?

This model is informed by research on trust, psychological safety, commitment, shared understanding, relational coordination, performance psychology, and operations theory. It brings those insights together with a focus on the distance between people. Leaders can use it to connect recurring workplace symptoms with gaps in relationships and coordination, then identify changes that could counteract drift.

Doubt vs. Hope

ILLUSTRATION

An executive team sees an opportunity to increase productivity and requires employees to adopt new AI tools. The rollout explains how much faster the work will get done but says little about what will happen to the people doing it. Employees reading headlines about AI-driven job cuts fill in the silence themselves: helping the company become more productive could mean helping it eliminate their jobs. Leaders grow frustrated with slow adoption while workers wonder whether the future they are being asked to build has a place for them.

Doubt takes hold when people struggle to believe in a shared direction, their ability to influence it, or the promises being made. An uncertain future can still feel worth pursuing when people believe they can find their way together. Drift grows when that belief becomes harder to sustain. Research

on broken psychological contracts links perceived broken promises with poorer work attitudes and behaviors. Leaders’ assurances carry less weight when experience has taught people to question them.²¹

Hope gives people something they can act on. Snyder’s work connects a meaningful goal, a sense of agency, and pathways toward it. People need to see where we are going, why that future is worth pursuing, and how they can help bring it about. They also need workable routes forward when the first plan fails. Research on collective efficacy emphasizes the importance of confidence in what a group can accomplish together.^{22,23}

In the hypothetical AI rollout above, strengthening Hope means giving employees a credible account of their place in the change: how their roles may evolve, what support they will receive, and how they can influence decisions affecting their work. Leaders may not have every answer. They can be clear about what is known, acknowledge what remains undecided, and follow through on the commitments they make. People have more reason to invest in a shared future when they can see a place for themselves in it and a way to help shape it.

Self-interest vs. Mutuality

ILLUSTRATION

A sales team is measured on its own revenue target while simultaneously being asked to lend its expertise to a neighboring product team. Spending time helping the product organization could make the sales team’s targets more difficult to attain, so they resist requests to collaborate. The organization asks the teams to succeed together, but measures the sales team in a way that makes helping costly.

Self-interest becomes a force of drift when fear, anxiety, and self-protection undermine shared work. It is often a rational response when people believe the organization is asking more of them than it offers in return. Describing that response as selfishness can obscure the conditions that make cooperation expensive or risky.

Mutuality makes cooperation a fair proposition. People can see what they contribute, what they receive, and how others share the responsibility. Research on trust and social exchange helps explain why a request may feel safe in one relationship yet costly in another.^{24,25,26}

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Jordana Cole, MAPP, PCC
President, Ignited



We survey whether employees trust in leaders and peers. But trust is reciprocal, and those questions measure only one side of the equation. We rarely ask whether employees feel entrusted with information, decisions, and ownership. Overindexing on either side reads as self-interest. The manager who hoards tasks to protect the team “can’t give up control.” The new

leader who over-shares information in the spirit of transparency could be misjudged as scapegoating others or testing the team’s confidentiality. Mutuality isn’t simply about more trust. It’s about creating the sweet spot of giving and gaining that matches the context you’re in.

One executive reflected on how risk looks different depending on the position. An owner with substantial upside may welcome uncertainty that feels threatening to an employee with far less to gain. Calling the opportunity shared does not make the stakes equal. Leaders need to understand the exchange as others experience it.²⁷

When cooperation feels risky or unfair, people may withhold information, limit the time and energy they offer, or negotiate every request. If helping others has repeatedly brought an employee more demands without support, recognition, or relief, protecting their time and energy can feel

necessary. The AI-adoption and return-to-office examples in Part I may also involve failures in Mutuality; workers see the benefits for employers while feeling they are being asked to shoulder too much of the risk or burden.

Withdrawal vs. Commitment

ILLUSTRATION

An employee once spoke proudly about “our team,” helped new colleagues find their footing, and took a difficult week personally because the team’s success mattered to her. After repeated decisions that leave her feeling unheard and unvalued, she begins to describe the same group as “the people I work with.” She still completes her assignments, but increasingly treats each one as an obligation to discharge rather than a contribution to something she feels part of. Being part of the team has become something she does rather than part of who she is. Her work continues, but the attachment that helped her weather setbacks with the group is wearing thin.

Withdrawal is a pulling back of attention, judgment, energy, or identification. People may learn that speaking up changes nothing, taking initiative creates trouble, or giving more simply invites another assignment. Understanding Withdrawal requires us to ask what changed in the person’s experience of the group.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Tracie Sponenberg
Author, *The Frontline People Strategy*



I’ve seen many companies build beautiful new corporate offices and never fix the stained microwave and wobbly table in the warehouse break room. Frontline people see that, and they know exactly where they fall on the priority list. That’s when “our team” starts turning into a job: clock in, do the tasks,

clock out. No ownership, pride, or initiative. A break room says more about respect than any all-hands speech. People are proud to work somewhere when the company’s actions tell them their work matters. Leaders, walk your break room this week. What is it telling your people?

Research on engagement, loneliness, and belonging brings different aspects of people’s experience into view. For a leader, the invitation is to notice whose voice has gone quiet and learn what changed.^{1,28,29,30}

Commitment combines a willingness to invest ourselves in the work with a positive identification with the group: its membership becomes part of how we understand ourselves. Research distinguishes wanting to stay from

feeling obliged to stay and unable to leave. Keeping someone on the payroll tells us little about their sense of belonging or the judgment and initiative they are willing to offer. Psychological safety and meaningful attachment to the organization help us understand what makes fuller participation possible.^{31,32,33,34,35,36}

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Adam Weber

Founding Principal, Helm



I work with executive teams where people have sat beside each other for a decade. They like each other. They protect each other. By most measures they look cohesive.

And they cannot tell each other the truth.

On one team, a leader knew a major investment was a mistake. He never said it in the room, because the person championing it was two years from retiring. Nobody wanted to be the one who took that from him.

Cohesion measured as closeness can hide drift. Ask a team not whether they get along, but when someone last changed their mind.

Leadership decisions can affect people's willingness to contribute. One chief executive recalled overriding a senior leader on a change that he firmly believed was right for the business. His account of what followed was blunt: "He completely shut down. He stopped taking initiative." The operational change proceeded, but the leader's account suggests that the employee's initiative diminished.¹⁴

Leaders sometimes need to overrule a colleague. The question is how they do it: whether they explain the reasoning, hear the person's concerns, and preserve room for that person to contribute to the next step.

Managers need room to maintain the relationships that allow for healthy contribution. Gallup's feedback findings, Gallagher's work on survey follow-through, and Adobe's onboarding research all direct attention to what happens after we ask people for feedback or ideas. Asking for feedback and then failing to respond can weaken people's willingness to contribute again.^{10,37,38}

Withdrawal weakens both contribution and affiliation. Problems are raised later, fewer alternatives are offered, and the people closest to the work exercise less judgment. People may also stop seeing the team's success as part of their own identity. Restoring Commitment means rebuilding

credible opportunities to matter and maintaining a group that people feel proud to belong to. It is important to understand that demands for unpaid overwork should not be disguised as commitment.

Discord vs. Synchrony

ILLUSTRATION

A company reorganizes to give a growing product line more focused leadership. Rearranging names on the org chart takes an afternoon, but everyone is too busy to determine how requests, decisions, and handoffs will move through the new structure. A customer issue that once stayed within one team now crosses three, each assuming someone else owns the next step. Approvals stall, work gets duplicated, and meetings multiply as people try to piece together what should happen next. The new structure solves the leadership problem, but the work slows because it depends on connections that no longer match the organization.

Discord describes a failure of fit in timing, shared understanding, priorities, ownership, or handoffs. It may involve interpersonal conflict, but it can also arise from arrangements that make coordination difficult among people who respect each other.

Synchrony is the fit between interdependent pieces of work. People need compatible priorities, clear ownership, useful information, and timing they can rely on. Research on shared mental models and coordination provides a foundation. Gittell’s research on relational coordination emphasizes shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and communication suited to the work.^{39,40,41}

Research on work location shows why these connections matter in daily work. Changing where people work changes who they encounter and how information moves. Every arrangement needs an answer to the same question: how will the people who depend on one another stay connected?^{42,11}

An interviewed chief executive described an all-hands format that had worked when the company was smaller. As their population grew, fewer people felt comfortable asking questions in the room, and his own ability to answer had changed: “I didn’t know everything anymore, and so I wasn’t always able to give the right answer.” The format remained while the conditions that had once made it effective did not.⁴³ Gaps in communication quickly become gaps in execution.

Beneficial Effort moves the work forward, including necessary adaptation, learning, and relationship building.

When a handoff fails, putting more pressure on each team leaves the missing connection unaddressed. Trace a task as it moves from one team to the next. Specify the information the receiving team needs, who has authority to decide, and how changes will be communicated. The point of Synchrony is work that fits and flows smoothly.

The cost of drift

Drift increases the distance between members of a team or organization, and that distance makes the work more challenging.

Searching for the record of a decision already made. Repeating work because a handoff lacked essential information. Seeking approval because decision authority was never clarified. The organization needs this energy for delivery and improvement, but it’s already been used to fix mistakes that could’ve been avoided.

Think about two meetings. One resolves a difficult tradeoff and helps the team move ahead. The other repeats last week’s discussion because nobody recorded the decision or passed it to the people who needed it. Both take time. The first advances the work; the second repairs a preventable gap in coordination. That distinction helps us recognize Corrective Effort.

Corrective Effort is the effort spent repairing or working around failures of connection and coordination.

The effort model makes the tradeoff visible:

A

=

B

+

C

AVAILABLE EFFORT

BENEFICIAL EFFORT

CORRECTIVE EFFORT

For a given team and period, more effort spent on avoidable repair leaves less effort for real progress. Increasing cohesion may reverse drift, increase efficiency, and optimize the deployment of effort people have available.

Leaders need to reduce avoidable repair and support the capacity to do useful work.

Several studies put the burden of organizational friction into perspective:

SOURCE	REPORTED FINDING	DRIFT-ORIENTED LEADERSHIP QUESTION
Bain ⁶	More than 20 percent of productive capacity attributed to organizational drag, drawing on more than 300 senior executives and audits of 24 companies	Where do gaps in our operating practices make progress harder?
Asana ⁵	257 hours per employee annually attributed to duplicated work and unnecessary meetings	Which work are we needlessly doing twice?
Atlassian ⁷	Roughly a quarter of working time spent searching for answers, in research involving 12,000 knowledge workers and 200 executives	What should people be able to find without asking around?
McKinsey ⁸	Cross-cutting processes can absorb 40–65 percent of management and overhead time	Which recurring processes help decisions move, and which keep them waiting?

These estimates describe different kinds of burden and should be read separately. Their practical message is worth our attention: time spent working around organizational problems leaves less time to advance the organization’s purpose.^{5,6,7,8}

also need for their own work. The colleague who always saves the day may be showing us both what the organization has failed to provide and whose capacity is paying for it.^{44,45,46}

That repair work often falls to the same people. They know who to call, which approval is holding up a decision, and how to rescue a stalled handoff. Research on collaborative overload shows how a small share of employees can end up doing a disproportionate amount of the work that helps others collaborate. Every rescue draws on time and attention they

Korn Ferry’s workload findings capture the frustration of feeling too busy to do the work that delivers results. Before asking people to be more productive, follow where their effort goes. Identify one recurring repair and change the arrangement that has made it necessary.⁴⁷

The Center is developing a way to study drift’s economic cost. Leaders can begin now by identifying work that repeatedly needs repair, testing a better arrangement, and observing what changes. Reclaiming room for meaningful work is a practical reason to act.



PART III

Listening for Drift

Two exercises make drift visible by examining how we talk about our organization and how we experience the work.

The Pronoun Tell

Begin with a frustration people recognize. Then ask, “Yes, but why?” Stay with a specific example long enough to understand what happened. Who made the decision? Who carried the consequences? What information or authority was missing? The answer may reveal a relationship or working arrangement that has drifted.

Listen to the pronouns. “We decided” and “they decided” place the speaker in different relationships to a decision. “Corporate” can describe a location, an authority, or a group that now feels remote. The Pronoun Tell helps us notice where people locate themselves in the organization.

Consider a hypothetical disagreement about starting work for a new client. The delivery team says, “We need time to prepare before we can deliver what we promised.” Sales replies, “We need to start on the date we agreed with the client.” Each “we” refers to a different group with a legitimate concern. Who is taking responsibility for the handoff between the teams?

Context matters. “They” may accurately describe who made the decision. A warm “we” can refer to a team that has turned against the rest of the organization. Use the language as an opening to understand the relationship.

Ask who the speaker means by “we” or “they.” Listen to how those words are used when people describe success, difficulty, or responsibility. Does “we” include the whole organization in one situation but only a department

in another? A repeated pattern gives us something concrete to discuss with the people involved.

Ask about the relationship underneath the language: how was the decision made, what involvement did people have, and what would help them contribute to the decision? Asking someone to say “we” instead of “they” does not change whether they were heard or involved.

Also listen for “we” when everyone assumes someone else will handle a shared task. A sense of shared responsibility still needs a named person to take the next step. Chaser’s findings on shared tasks make unclear ownership an especially useful place to look.⁴⁸

Drift Self-Audit: a six-item conversation guide

Choose one of your teams, functions, or recurring cross-functional workflows. Consider the previous 30 days and mark each pattern Rarely, Sometimes, or Often. Invite team members and leaders to answer from their own experience; leaders should not guess how employees would respond. Ask together: what are we doing that sustains this pattern, and what can we change? Record examples and compare perspectives before drawing conclusions.

Use the following Drift Self-Audit to start a conversation. Record examples and compare perspectives. The responses are discussion prompts, not a validated scale, and should not be totaled into a score.

PATTERN OBSERVED DURING THE PREVIOUS 30 DAYS	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN
We reopen our decisions because our destination or decision rule is unclear.	☐	☐	☐
We protect our team’s performance targets when tradeoffs affect the wider organization.	☐	☐	☐
We wait for instruction where we once used our judgment.	☐	☐	☐
Our handoffs require meetings to rebuild context that should have been passed along.	☐	☐	☐
We describe other members of our own organization as “they” during difficult decisions.	☐	☐	☐
We leave our shared tasks without a named owner, due date, or clear next decision.	☐	☐	☐

Use the patterns to choose where to look. Reopened decisions invite a closer look at Doubt and Hope. Protection of local interests directs attention to Mutuality. Fading initiative asks us to examine Commitment. Repaired handoffs and unclear ownership bring Synchrony into view. Follow the experience before settling on an explanation.

Choose a pattern that people can describe with a recent example. Look at it from both sides of the relationship and consider workload, capability, customer needs, and necessary controls. Agree on one change and a time to return to the conversation.



PART IV

Practices That Strengthen Cohesion

Recognition matters when it changes our practice. Start with one recurring problem, bring the people closest to it into the conversation, and agree on a change with effects you can observe.

Recognition matters when it changes our practice. Start with one recurring problem, bring the people closest to it into the conversation, and agree on a change with effects you can observe. The following practices turn the model into everyday leadership work.

The four counterforces interact. Clarifying a handoff strengthens Synchrony and may also rebuild Commitment when repeated breakdowns have discouraged people from contributing. Making cooperation fairer strengthens Mutuality and may restore Hope when people have learned to doubt leaders' promises. Begin with a specific workplace problem, then examine which connections need attention.

Strengthening Hope to counteract Doubt

When people repeatedly revisit agreed priorities, examine whether people can describe the intended outcome and the choices available to them. A destination becomes more credible when leaders explain what success would look like, the time horizon, and the conditions that cannot be traded away.

Give people the reasoning they need to act. Explain the difficult tradeoffs behind a decision, while respecting limits on what can responsibly be shared. If circumstances change, explain which assumption changed and how it affects the route forward. Presenting alternatives can support agency when a single fixed plan would invite either blind compliance or repeated escalation. These practices reflect Hope's emphasis on goals, agency, and pathways.²²

Make the future personally meaningful. Explain how people's roles may evolve, what support will be available, and which decisions they can help shape. Where answers remain open, name the uncertainty and agree on when to return to it. Review approval rules that limit people's ability to act, retaining necessary safeguards while restoring useful discretion.

Make listening visible in what happens next. Explain what feedback changed, what remains unchanged, and why. Research from Qualtrics and Gallagher makes follow-through a useful place to start. Complete one promised response and show people the result.^{49,37}

SIGNS THIS COUNTERFORCE IS STRENGTHENING

Clearer accounts of priorities, a more credible sense of personal opportunity, and greater ability to act within agreed boundaries. Ask whether people can describe a place for themselves in the future and a practical way to influence it. A rise in questions may indicate useful honesty rather than worsening Doubt.

Strengthening Mutuality to counteract Self-interest

When cooperation repeatedly requires negotiation, examine what the participants are being asked to give and what they can reasonably expect in return. Include time, risk, recognition, authority, and the effect on their own responsibilities. Compensation is one part of the exchange, not its entirety.

One chief executive described the intention behind his own organization's lack of bureaucracy: "I really wanted to see if we could create an organization that didn't need to legislate behavior." His approach combines clear guidelines with conversations about exceptions, giving people room to exercise judgment.⁵⁰

Review measures and rewards alongside stated expectations. In the sales-and-product example, leaders could allocate time for the sales team's contribution, adjust its revenue target to reflect that time, or give it credit

for the shared result. Agree with both teams on what help is needed and how success will be judged. The measures and workload should make the requested cooperation feasible.

Give groups a goal that requires them to succeed together, with a fair arrangement for sharing the work. Sherif’s research on superordinate goals provides a foundation for this approach. Make the interdependence practical: name what each group needs from the other and what each will contribute.⁵¹

Recognize the work that makes another group more effective. Notice whether the same few people keep doing the work that helps other groups succeed. Research on collaborative overload gives leaders a reason to redistribute that burden and make essential connecting work visible.⁴⁵

SIGNS THIS COUNTERFORCE IS STRENGTHENING

More usable information crossing boundaries, clearer tradeoffs, and cooperation that does not depend on hidden overwork. A fair exchange should remain fair when people describe it from either side.

Strengthening Commitment to counteract Withdrawal

When initiative or attachment fades, ask what has changed in the person’s experience of the group. Do they feel heard, valued, and proud to belong? What happens when they offer an idea or take initiative? Does a new assignment replace something, or simply add to a workload that is already full?

Give managers room to manage. Examine their individual assignments, direct reports, administrative demands, and authority. Training is more likely to help when managers have time to put it into practice.^{10,52}

Make prioritization concrete by retiring or deferring work when new commitments arrive. Give people meaningful ownership, with the information and discretion needed to exercise judgment. Use feedback to connect their contribution to the team’s progress and ask what is preventing them from contributing as they would like. Weekly meaningful feedback is associated with engagement in Gallup’s research.¹⁰

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Andrew Hartman
Founder, Time Boss



Our firm was brought in to support the leadership team of a growing professional services firm after multiple leaders reported burnout. We found the senior leaders saying “yes” to every opportunity without evaluating the cost of each “yes”, or the work it might offset, and the team receiving the work buried and withdrawing due to the workload. By installing a

simple, repeatable methodology for each leader to evaluate trade-offs, prioritize high leverage work, and defer/delegate/delete lower priority work that no longer fit within their capacity, the leadership team dramatically increased their outcomes and dramatically reduced stress.

Build affiliation through real participation. Help new colleagues form relationships, understand the team's purpose, and contribute to shared work. Invite established members to shape team practices and recognize

contributions that express what the group stands for. Adobe's onboarding research also points to the need for accessible information: keep required material manageable and explain when to use it.^{33,38}

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Kevin Oakes

Founder of i4cp and author of *Culture Renovation*®



Change is inevitable, but cultural erosion is not. In my book *Culture Renovation*®, there are many examples of organizations which have evolved with the times without impacting the shared values, stories, rituals, relationships, and a sense of collective achievement that give people a reason to care about their work. That distinction matters a great deal today as leaders navigate industry and environmental disruption but applies to various triggers of organizational change

such as M&A, restructuring, or new leadership. One mistake leaders make during times of transformation is assuming that commitment comes from getting people excited about what is new. Commitment often comes from reassuring people that what is meaningful will not be lost. *Culture Renovation*® is built on that idea: cultural change requires preserving the best of an organization while renovating the parts that prevent it from maximizing value.

When someone raises a concern, offers an idea, or disagrees, explain how you will consider their input and when they can expect a response. Explain how the contribution influenced the decision, or why another course was chosen. These responses help people judge whether their voice matters to the group. Research on psychological safety and commitment supports attention to these conditions.^{35,31,32,36}

SIGNS THIS COUNTERFORCE IS STRENGTHENING

Earlier problem reporting, useful suggestions, and greater exercise of judgment, alongside a renewed sense of belonging and pride in shared accomplishment. Ask people what being part of the team means to them. Support these changes by keeping workloads manageable and allowing people to express concerns without pressure to display enthusiasm.

Strengthening Synchrony to counteract Discord

Choose a recurring handoff that requires repair. Follow it with the people on both sides, and identify what the receiving group needs in order to proceed. The missing element may be a decision, a purpose, a risk, an owner, or an agreed definition of completion.

Name accountability at the next decision point. Many people can contribute, and some decisions properly require shared authority. The arrangement should still make clear who brings the relevant people together, who decides, who executes, and how disagreement will be resolved. A due date only helps when the necessary inputs and authority make it feasible.

Carry context with the work. Include why it matters, its current state, relevant prior decisions, known risks, and the action now required. Keep that information proportionate to the task. A handoff template that

becomes another document nobody can use has recreated the problem in a different format.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Sarah Ohanesian

Founder & Keynote Speaker, SO
Productive + Super Productive (Asana
Certified Service Partner)



[LinkedIn](#)

A client's marketing team of five had five different trackers: a spreadsheet, email, and a shared drive with three versions of the same file. Nobody owned the handoff, so work kept getting passed around and rebuilt instead of finished, wasting hours. I call that the Clarity Gap, the distance between what's supposed to happen and what actually does. Client engagements

differ, but we land on one shared system with one owner per handoff. In this case, built in Asana, a task updates once and shows up everywhere it's needed. One source of truth instead of five. Before your next big project, name one owner for every handoff and give the team one system. That's synchrony.

As work becomes more specialized, give equal attention to how it comes back together. Research on differentiation, integration, and coordination helps leaders design how specialized teams will work together. A connecting role, a regular conversation, or clearer decision rights can help people see how their piece fits.^{15,40,41}

SIGNS THIS COUNTERFORCE IS STRENGTHENING

Less waiting, fewer repeated explanations, fewer defects at handoffs, and better end-to-end delivery. A department's improved local measure is insufficient if it simply moves the burden elsewhere.



PART V

The Research Ahead

This inaugural report establishes a point of view and a research agenda. The 2027 report will revisit five questions and report what the evidence supports.

Five research questions for 2027

1

How is manager engagement changing, and under what working conditions?

We will compare the next compatible global estimate with the 22 percent reported for 2025 and examine evidence on span of control, individual assignments, and support. We will distinguish changes in engagement from explanations that require further study.^{1,10}

2

How does clarity about AI affect readiness to adopt it?

We will examine whether understanding AI's purpose, its implications for one's role, and available support is associated with use and readiness beyond access alone. Measures should account for task suitability, resources, and working conditions.^{53,54,55}

3

Where does strategic clarity differ across organizational levels?

We will ask executives, managers, and frontline employees comparable questions about priorities, tradeoffs, and decision authority. We will examine differences in either direction rather than presume that clarity always declines farther from the executive team.

4

How do reorganizations change the work of coordination?

We will seek cases that document ownership, handoffs, waiting, and repair effort before and after restructuring. We will distinguish leaders' stated reasons for a change from evidence about what happened to the work.

5

How does coordination quality relate to outcomes across office, hybrid, and remote arrangements?

We will examine handoff reliability, shared understanding, delivery, and retention while accounting for job type and other differences. Location and the quality of connection deserve to be studied together.^{56,42,11,57}

Does recovery become disproportionately difficult?

Does there come a point when the distance between us becomes much harder to repair? Restoring cohesion may become harder as people leave, useful knowledge is lost, and disappointments accumulate. We need to understand if recovery becomes disproportionately difficult, and what leaders can do early on to prevent this.

Answering that question requires following distance and recovery over time. The findings should help leaders decide where to intervene and what a credible path back might require. For now, it remains an open research question with practical urgency.

Building a comparable measurement program

The planned annual measurement program will track Hope, Mutuality, Commitment, and Synchrony alongside Corrective Effort. It will also examine how connected people feel across organizational levels, how clearly they understand priorities, and how they describe their relationships in interviews.

The early pilots raise a specific question for further study. Among 22 construction-company respondents and 27 higher-education HR-association respondents, Mutuality and Synchrony were the lower-scoring pair; Hope and Commitment were the higher pair. Association respondents assessed their own workplace teams. These small convenience samples provide a starting point: does the pattern recur in broader samples? What working conditions might help explain it? The full results and limitations appear in Methodology and Limitations.

Our next work will also extend measurement to Corrective Effort and strategic clarity: how well people understand priorities, tradeoffs, and decision authority. A consistent protocol will help later results support meaningful comparisons.

We will broaden participation beyond professional networks, gather feedback on whether the assessment reflects participants' workplace experience, test its reliability and validity, and measure outcomes that can challenge as well as support the model.

An advisory board is being formed to strengthen this work. Larger samples, a normative base, and a way to estimate drift's economic cost are priorities ahead. Leaders already have a place to begin: look for the symptoms of drift, recognize the mechanics that are increasing distance, change the conditions that perpetuate it, and learn from what happens next.

Returning to the work

Return to the team that spent its week putting Monday's agreement back together. Ask what would have helped the agreement survive: a believable direction, a fair exchange, room to exercise judgment, or a handoff carrying the right context. Then change one condition that made repair necessary in the first place.

The promise of this work is more room for people to contribute, learn, and accomplish something together. The Center will continue to study the problem and its remedy. As practitioners, you can use these insights to reduce recurring repair and strengthen your people's capacity to accomplish meaningful work together.

Our people bring precious energy to the organizations we lead. Too much of it is spent compensating for the distance between us. We can give more of that energy a chance to become something worthwhile: an idea heard, a promise kept, work completed, a purpose shared. This is the deeper work of leadership.



**“Leaders are
healers of
separation.”**

— MATT POEPEL, PHD

Methodology and Limitations

Research purpose and scope

This report brings third-party research, seven executive interviews, and two early assessment pilots into a proposed framework for understanding organizational drift. Its purpose is to connect related findings, make organizational distance easier to recognize, and establish questions for further research.

Sources published through September 27, 2026, were eligible for inclusion. They were selected for their relevance to the framework and its practical implications rather than through a systematic review protocol. The evidence base includes peer-reviewed studies, government and institutional research, consulting research, industry surveys, vendor studies, and reporting.

Endnote numbers connect passages to their sources; COD identifiers are retained in the endnotes for traceability. Studies differ in design, population, quality, and independence. Their placement within a force pair reflects the Center's interpretation of their relevance.

The framework and its interpretation

Organizational drift—the natural tendency of people within a human system to grow apart over time—is the report's central theoretical proposition. It draws on research showing how connection and coordination require renewal as people, organizations, and conditions change. Establishing how drift develops, how quickly it changes, and which conditions influence it is part of the research agenda.

Research on trust, psychological safety, organizational commitment, shared mental models, relational coordination, performance psychology, and operations theory informs the four force pairs. These foundations support aspects of the framework; testing how the forces interact as an integrated model remains ahead. Related constructs also require careful distinction: Hope includes ideas informed by collective efficacy, for example, but the two are not interchangeable.

The spiral diagram illustrates relative distance and cohesion. The pair-count example illustrates how the number of possible relationships grows with headcount. Both help explain the framework rather than measure an organization's condition.

The practices in Parts III and IV translate the framework and related research into proposals leaders can use and examine. Their effectiveness as a combined approach has yet to be evaluated. The Pronoun Tell and Drift Self-Audit are conversation guides: examples and differing perspectives are more useful than assigning a score. Interpretation should account for workload, resources, necessary controls, technical limitations, and legitimate disagreement alongside possible failures of connection.

Executive interviews

Seven interviews with chief executives and senior operating executives were conducted in 2026. Participants discussed growth, coordination, leadership, and organizational distance through examples from their operating experience. They formed a purposive convenience sample drawn largely from the author's professional network.^{58,50,14,43,13,27,59}

The interviews provide experience-based illustrations and questions for further investigation. They do not establish how frequently particular conditions occur across organizations. Accounts represent participants’ recollections and perspectives; descriptions of colleagues’ words or behavior were not independently verified with those colleagues.

Problem-oriented examples are presented anonymously. Public source entries identify interview records while the underlying materials remain confidential.

Assessment pilots

Two convenience-sample administrations provide preliminary descriptive results. One involved 22 respondents at a mid-sized construction company. The other involved 27 participants recruited through a regional higher-education HR association, each assessing their own workplace team. The association sample therefore combines perspectives on different teams rather than measuring cohesion within the association.

The table reports respondent-level dimension summaries supplied for the two pilots.

PILOT SAMPLE	N	HOPE	MUTUALITY	COMMITMENT	SYNCHRONY	MEAN TOTAL	MEDIAN TOTAL	TOTAL RANGE
Mid-sized construction company	22	21.5	19.4	21.1	18.8	80.8	82	62–100
Workplace teams rated by HR-association respondents	27	19.1	17.6	20.6	18.3	75.6	77	60–96

Dimension values and mean totals are arithmetic means reported to one decimal place. Totals use the reported 100-point scale. Observed individual dimension totals ranged from 11 to 25 across the two datasets.

Mutuality and Synchrony were the lower-scoring pair in both samples; Hope and Commitment were the higher pair. The complete order differed: Synchrony was lowest in the construction sample, while Mutuality was lowest in the association sample. Hope was highest in the former and Commitment in the latter. This shared pair-level pattern offers a question for further study.

These results describe the participating respondents. The supplied data included dimension summaries but lacked a response-rate denominator, item-level responses, and a full administration protocol. They cannot

establish population norms, meaningful differences between the samples, or justified organization-level scores. The association results, in particular, should not be interpreted as one team’s cohesion score.

Omega (Ω) is the cohesion construct the Center’s developing assessment is designed to measure. Establishing the assessment’s reliability, construct validity, sensitivity to change, and comparability across administrations will require broader sampling and more complete data. Neither pilot measured Corrective Effort.

Corrective Effort and economic interpretation

The report proposes a working effort model: **Available Effort = Beneficial Effort + Corrective Effort ($A = B + C$).**

Applying this model requires a defined group, time period, and boundary, along with operational definitions that distinguish progress from avoidable repair. Necessary planning, learning, constructive disagreement, and relationship building can move work forward. Available Effort can also change with staffing, tools, capability, recovery, and working conditions.

The third-party cost studies help illustrate organizational friction, but they measure different activities in different populations. Their estimates should be interpreted separately. Bain's organizational drag, Asana's duplicated work and unnecessary meetings, Atlassian's information search, and McKinsey's management-process burden are not equivalent measures of Corrective Effort. Some include useful or necessary activity.^{5,6,7,8}

Developing a credible economic estimate will require independent measures of repair effort and its consequences. Time made available for other work must also be distinguished from cash savings actually realized.

Source populations and interpretation

Several prominent findings require specific context:

- **AI adoption.**⁹ WalkMe's 2026 online survey covered 3,750 senior leaders and office/hybrid workers in 14 countries at employers with 1,000 or more employees. The publisher release does not specify fieldwork dates or detailed weighting. Reported AI bypassing identifies a behavior; understanding the reasons requires further investigation.
- **Engagement.**¹ Gallup's 2026 publication reports engagement measured in 2025. The employee-engagement comparison is "lowest since 2020."
- **Manager workload.**¹⁰ The findings concern U.S. managers and report median time spent on individual-contributor responsibilities.

- **Hybrid work.**¹¹ The randomized study tested a particular hybrid arrangement at one Chinese technology company. Its findings should be interpreted in that setting.
- **Return-to-office intentions.**¹² Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel survey was fielded in October 2024 and published in January 2025. The 46 percent finding concerns U.S. employees working remotely at least some of the time, excluding the self-employed. It measures stated likelihood of staying if working from home ended. The broader analysis included 2,315 adults with remote-capable jobs; that is not the denominator for every finding.

Commercial research providers and sponsorship are identified in the Endnotes. Their interests, research designs, and reporting choices should inform interpretation. The Center's original evidence consists of the executive interviews and assessment pilots.

Research development and independence

Part V sets out questions for future investigation. Progress will require consistent administration, broader participation, longitudinal data, and independent outcome measures. Tracking cohesion alongside Corrective Effort could help establish whether stronger connection is associated with less repair and greater capacity for productive work. Studying recovery will require observing how organizational distance and the effort to reduce it change over time.

Measures of cohesion must distinguish the capacity to work together from the outcomes used to evaluate that capacity. Comparisons across organizational levels, work arrangements, or time periods also require compatible measures and attention to differences in work and context.

The Center for Organizational Drift and Tight Loops™ share the founder's leadership and commercial interests. The framework and public practices are openly taught; assessment items and scoring remain proprietary. Arrangements for appropriate independent methodological scrutiny remain to be specified. Client experience can inform the research, while independent evaluation is needed to assess the framework's measurement properties and effectiveness.

This report provides a research-informed framework, practical ways to investigate recurring problems, and preliminary original evidence. Establishing the prevalence of drift, testing relationships among its forces, validating measures, and estimating its economic consequences are the work ahead.

About the Center, Access, and Attribution

The Center for Organizational Drift was founded in 2026 by Matt Poepsel, PhD, its Founder and Executive Director, to study the growing distance that is negatively impacting human systems broadly. Through research, measurement, and public teaching, the Center helps leaders recognize organizational distance and strengthen the mechanical, relational, and intentional connections on which shared work depends.

Tight Loops™ is Dr. Poepsel's applied framework and practice for speaking, workshops, consulting, and advisory work. The Center investigates; Tight Loops applies. The relationship and its implications for research independence are disclosed in Methodology and Limitations.

The publication approach is **open teaching; proprietary instrument**. Readers can learn the force pairs, examine the reasoning, and use the public practices and conversation guide. Assessment items and scoring

remain protected. Identifiable responses, private client observations, and other confidential material require separate handling and appropriate permission.

The Endnotes provide the references needed to explore the research discussed in this report.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Endnotes

These numbered source notes support the citations in the report. Sources are numbered in order of first citation; repeated citations use the same number. COD identifiers preserve the connection to the Center’s cumulative Evidence Register. Commercial sponsorship is noted where applicable. Interview records and pilot data are confidential original research materials.

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- Higher-education HR-association pilot: Working-group experience survey dimension-summary data, 2026. Twenty-seven respondents assessing their own workplace teams; confidential original data supplied to the Center.