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The alignment illusion: a relational theory of misalignment and the gaps that form in organizations

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores how organizations become misaligned across strategy, execution and culture and how gaps form in the relational spaces between these domains. The Organizational Gap Framework (OGF) is proposed as a diagnostic framework for leaders to identify relational misalignment and break through the Alignment Illusion.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper utilizes a qualitative research design and theory building approach, drawing on systematic analysis of 12 in-depth executive interviews across varied leadership roles and industries. Empirical evidence from the interview data, and the literature on organizational alignment, strategy, execution and culture was then used as the theoretical grounding for the OGF.

Findings – The OGF identifies that misalignment lives in the gaps between Strategy-Execution, Execution-Culture and Culture-Strategy. Two structural mechanisms drive the Alignment Illusion, actively masking misalignment as it forms. This paper also proposes spillover dynamics that may cause gaps to propagate to the third domain, meaning the visible misalignment symptom may be one domain removed from the root cause.

Practical implications – Leaders cannot address gaps they do not see. The OGF gives leaders a diagnostic vocabulary for naming problems they have likely sensed but struggled to articulate, to better understand and diagnose root causes and facilitate corrective action.

Originality/value – The OGF makes three contributions. First, it theorizes and names the Alignment Illusion as a perceptual condition that masks relational misalignment. Second, the OGF moves beyond single-domain thinking toward relational diagnosis through a system-level integration of existing constructs. Third, it proposes that gaps are dynamic and interconnected, producing spillover effects in adjacent domains.

Keywords Organizational culture, Strategy execution, Strategic alignment, Organizational alignment, Alignment illusion, Organizational Gap Framework

Paper type Research paper

The alignment illusion

A relational theory of misalignment and the gaps that form in organizations

"How did you go bankrupt? Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly." This was the quote from Hemingway's (1926) *The Sun Also Rises* that a senior technology executive referenced to describe a recent experience. He noted there were "little signs that things were not going well but not enough to feel like the effort was off track. Then all of a sudden, I find myself in a

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meeting and realize, holy smoke, we are actually really disconnected here." This is just one example of an Alignment Illusion – a pattern that accumulates below the surface of conscious recognition, seeping through the gaps in the organization. Not necessarily gaps that are acute or episodic, but gaps that form as the gears of the organization grind through the everyday reality of work. This pattern does not always announce itself as an organizational crisis, but as an initiative that stalls, a project that loses momentum or a strategy that never quite takes hold. These gaps, which live in the space between strategy, execution and culture, share one dangerous feature: they stay invisible until they surface as a later stage crisis.

When alignment is off track, or organizations fail, these challenges are often diagnosed in isolation, or at best two domains reviewed together. While each body of work provides in-depth domain-level insight, they have largely assessed organizational health within the domain rather than examining how misalignment forms between their relationships. Strategy-execution research has documented this pattern extensively (Hrebiniak, 2006; Sull, Homkes, & Sull, 2015), as has the research on organizational culture (Schein, 2010), but each has largely treated their domain as the primary unit of analysis (Venkatraman & Camillus, 1984). More critically, these works have not explained why leaders fail to perceive misalignment as it forms (Weick, 1995), and how relational misalignment between domains infiltrates the adjacent domains. What this approach misses is that misalignment is not a single domain phenomenon; it is a function of how strategy, execution and culture relate with each other.

This paper explores how misalignment forms in the relational spaces, or gaps, between strategy, execution and culture, and why leaders fail to perceive it. Treating these gaps as a unified system is a new approach that helps explain why they tend to co-occur, why they go undetected and how misalignment in one domain relationship may create conditions that spill over into adjacent domains. The three-gap taxonomy and directional spillover propositions derived from the relational gaps are this paper's primary theoretical contribution. They give practitioners a diagnostic vocabulary for problems that prior frameworks have primarily addressed in isolation. The structural mechanisms of the Alignment Illusion explain why organizational gaps can remain hidden and accumulate before becoming visible, and why the diagnostic framework we propose is necessary in the first place.

The reality for leaders is that organizations are dynamic, and one of the core roles of a leader is to persist in a shifting environment, assess progress and feel their way through complex interpersonal dynamics. It is this complexity, not strategic incompetence, that obscures the view until it becomes undeniable. The strategy may be clear, but embedded organizational thinking or processes get in the way. Alignment may be drifting, but there is hesitancy to speak up to not offend or rock the boat (Edmondson, 1999). Formal frameworks like the Balanced Scorecard and McKinsey's 7S (Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Waterman, Peters, & Phillips, 1980) focus on understanding and linking strategy with actions across the organization, but they don't diagnose the relational cause when organizational alignment breaks down. This results in leaders looking in the wrong place – assessing the quality of their strategy, the capability to execute or the health of their culture – while the real misalignment accumulates, unnoticed, in the spaces between all three. Leaders navigating these challenges have no shared vocabulary for what they are experiencing and no structured way to name the relational rifts before they become crises. The framework this paper introduces is designed to provide that.

Theoretical grounding and methods

This paper introduces the Organizational Gap Framework (OGF), a relational theory of organizational misalignment built on evidence from 12 executive interviews conducted with senior leaders across a range of industries, roles and organization types (Table 1). Participants were selected and recruited from the researcher's professional network using criterion-based

Table 1. Interview participant summary

	Participants				Constructs					Illusion dynamics		
ID	Role/title	Industry/sector	Organization type	Organization size(s)	AI	S-E	E-C	C-S	Spill	HF	PC	TA
IP01	VP, Sr. Director	Retail/logistics/consumer services	Public/private	LG/MED/SM	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
IP02	CEO, EVP, head of operations	Quick serve restaurant/ consumer services	Public/private	LG/MED/SM	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
IP03	EVP, COO, div president	Quick serve restaurant/ consumer services	Public/private	LG	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
IP04	VP, Sr. Director	Consumer services	Public/private	LG	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
IP05	Sr. Director	Consulting	Consulting firm	LG	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
IP06	Higher Ed leadership, non-profit board member	Higher Ed/international nonprofit	Nonprofit	MED/SM	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
IP07	VP, Sr. Director	Manufacturing/higher Ed	Public/private/nonprofit	LG/MED	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
IP08	CFO, VP	Consumer services/ lifestyle	Public/private	LG/MED	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
IP09	VP, Sr. Director	Ed tech/retail/client support	Public/private	LG	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
IP10	Sr. Director	Consulting	Consulting firm	LG	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
IP11	CEO, president, Sr. Director	Consumer services	Private	LG/MED	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
IP12	EVP, chief legal officer	Financial services/ industrial mfg.	Public	LG	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
N (of 12)					*12*	*12*	*11*	*11*	*12*	*7*	*7*	*9*

Note(s): All participants held or had held senior leadership positions at the time of the interview. Many drew on organizational experiences from multiple roles in their career. Organization size: Large (LG) = >1,000 employees; Medium (MED) = 100–1,000 employees; Small (SM) = <100 employees. Constructs reflects the primary constructs: Alignment Illusion (AI), Strategy-Execution Gap (S-E), Execution-Culture Gap (E-C), Culture-Strategy Gap (C-S), Spillover (Spill) that emerged in each interview. Illusion Dynamics reflect the underlying mechanisms of the Alignment Illusion: Hierarchical Filtering (HF) and Performative Compliance (PC), and the amplifying condition of Temporal Accumulation (TA). Participant evidence counts reflect the number of interviews in which each construct or dynamic emerged purposive sampling, targeting executives who held senior leadership roles and had direct experience navigating strategy, execution and culture in various contexts. The participants were intentionally diverse in both industry and senior leadership role to support within-method triangulation, and breadth was prioritized to explore the cross-context relevance of the framework, with deeper context-specific validation taken up in future work. These leaders shared their experiences in current and past roles through semi-structured interviews with follow-up probing. Interviews occurred virtually for approximately 30–60 min. Participants were asked open-ended questions, with the sensitizing concept that structural factors may be obscuring the gaps, designed to prompt reflections on alignment, strategy, execution and culture.

The three gap types, Strategy-Execution, Execution-Culture and Culture-Strategy, along with the spillover hypothesis were theorized prior to data collection and grounded in practitioner experience and the alignment literature. This served as the theoretical basis for the study (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Interviews were analyzed using a two-stage coding process, then aggregated (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), with the primary investigator as the primary coder and the secondary researcher reviewing for consistency. The first-order codes captured interviewees' framing in their own words, which were then developed into second-order themes and organized using the theoretical constructs aligned with the OGF. The Alignment Illusion and its underlying mechanisms emerged as themes from the coding process, were cross-referenced with the existing literature and organized into named mechanisms.

Theoretical saturation was reached iteratively, with no new first-order codes or second-order themes emerging in the final interviews, providing sufficient grounding for theory-building purposes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Evidence of the Alignment Illusion, S-E Gap and Spillover Effects was present across all 12 interviews; E-C Gap and C-S Gap were present in 11 of 12 interviews. Participant evidence by construct is summarized in Table 1. A working draft of the framework was shared with all study participants after the initial analysis for member checking purposes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Responses were uniformly affirmative with no substantive corrections to the theoretical constructs or their descriptions. The interview data serve as theory-building evidence rather than confirmatory evidence (Jaakkola, 2020; Whetten, 1989).

At its core is the Alignment Illusion, the perceptual condition that keeps organizational gaps hidden from the leaders who need to see them. The framework maps three relational constructs through which the illusion operates: the Strategy-Execution Gap, the Execution-Culture Gap and the Culture-Strategy Gap. These gaps are where structural misalignment occurs. The Alignment Illusion is the perceptual condition that masks them and allows them to persist undetected. The sections that follow examine what these gaps look like in practice, how gaps may cascade and compound through spillover effects and how leaders can diagnose the relational rifts before they surface.

The alignment illusion

The appearance of alignment and its reality are not always the same thing. This is the Alignment Illusion, a state where leaders perceive meaningful alignment when material misalignment exists. Argyris & Schön (1978) observed the gap between espoused theory and theory-in-use, and more recently BC & Simpson (2026) demonstrate empirically that top management and employees often operate with fundamentally different perceptions of the organization's culture. These perceived differences are what we conceptualize as the Alignment Illusion – a perceptual condition sustained by mechanisms that are identifiable and embed themselves systematically in organizations. These underlying mechanisms are already documented in the literature; the OGF theorizes the relational integration and structural framing of these mechanisms collectively. This illusion is not primarily a problem of leaders being poorly informed – it is structural. The way information moves, or fails to move, through organizations systematically produces a gap between reality and what leaders perceive. Two core mechanisms, derived inductively from the interview data, drive this illusion: hierarchical filtering, and performative compliance. Both showed convergence across participants (HF 7/12, PC 7/12) and are summarized in Table 2. Temporal accumulation (TA 9/12) intensifies these effects over time, functioning as an amplifying condition that causes unaddressed gaps to compound before becoming visible. Any combination of these mechanisms can create an illusion; in most organizations, some combination operates simultaneously.

Mechanism 1: hierarchical filtering

"If you're the leader of the firm, I'm not sure that feedback comes back to you as quickly […] you're sort of flying blind sometimes because people aren't going to challenge you as hard." This perspective of an executive in the financial services industry is felt by many organizational leaders. It is a natural structural barrier that executives and leaders have always tried to remove, yet it persists. Reflecting on a similar experience, a former executive in consumer services put it more directly, "why didn't anybody tell me this […] we've wasted so much money." The frustration is real, but the barrier is not interpersonal. It is not that the leader is unapproachable or that people are dishonest. The challenge is hierarchies create asymmetries of information that are difficult to overcome through goodwill alone. This organizational phenomenon is what Morrison & Milliken (2000) called organizational silence, a stream of research that continues to develop (Lotfi Dehkharghani, Paul, Maharati, & Menzies, 2023). These dynamics also align with what Argyris (1990) called "defensive routines," organizational behaviors employed to avoid embarrassment or threat that become self-reinforcing and difficult to correct from within. The result is that leaders are not simply missing information, they are actively constructing plausible accounts of organizational alignment from signals that have been shaped before they arrive (Weick, 1995). The picture may feel coherent, but it lacks accuracy. The commonly used phrase of "my door is always open" does nothing to break the routine. That phrase, when not accompanied with meaningful action, only deepens the illusion.

Mechanism 2: performative compliance

When your doctor asks you how often you work out, the response that you give is what is called performative compliance: the tendency to say what the other party wants to hear. This concept was echoed by a manufacturing executive despite his concerted effort to change practice. He said, "people do what they either directly hear, or infer what is wanted […] what the boss or leadership wants to hear." This parallels Argyris & Schön (1978) distinction between espoused theory and theory-in-use. They further argued that such discrepancies do not remain at the individual level but can become collectively enacted organizational patterns. These individual acts of apparent agreement accumulate into organizational norms and allow the collective pattern to be sustained, making deviation costly and correction unlikely. This plays out in organizations in different forms: nods in meetings, completed forms or verbal agreement, not to be intentionally deceptive, but to avoid risk. The appearance of alignment carries less risk, and oftentimes is rewarded (Simons, 1994). At the executive level, Dhar (2026) conceptualized this as the false alignment trap that causes change initiatives to fail. As one senior consultant described the gap between when an initiative is launched and how the team feels months later: "Come back in two months and take a peek, that'll tell you whether or not it was something people actually bought into."

Table 2. The alignment illusion dynamics and leadership actions

Illusion dynamic	How it operates	Signs it is active	Leadership actions
Hierarchical filtering	Organizational hierarchies create information asymmetries causing misalignment signals to be softened or withheld as they travel through layers of the organization	Leaders are regularly surprised by frontline realities. A reliance on issues surfacing through open door policy vs. intentionally seeking feedback. Problems surface as crises, not in regular communication	• Create structured bypass mechanisms like skip-level conversations or anonymous feedback channels that bypass the hierarchy • Regularly visit frontline operations directly • Distinguish between what is heard in meetings and what is observed in practice • Ask: what would the frontline tell me if I asked directly?
Performative compliance	People signal agreement to reduce the risk of disagreement. This produces visible alignment: nods, completed forms, verbal commitment, masking misalignment beneath the surface	Meetings produce consensus yet behavior does not change. Strategic priorities are verbally affirmed but not reflected in day-to-day decisions. Follow-up later reveals a different story than initial buy-in suggested	• Observe behavior, not just responses • Create low-risk channels for disagreement • Ask not “do you understand?” but “what would get in the way of making this work?"
Temporal accumulation	Small misalignments compound over time and go unrecognized. Individual deviations appear manageable but collectively they erode strategic coherence until the gap breaks the surface	Leaders feel gradually off track without a clear triggering event. Deadlines shift. Early anomalies are treated as exceptions rather than signals	• Build regular review cadences that surface drift before it accumulates • Treat anomalies as early signals, not exceptions • Ask: what are we carrying forward from last period that should have been resolved?

The result is leaders receive signals that appear to be clear, but are filled with noise, even though the noise may be smiling and nodding.

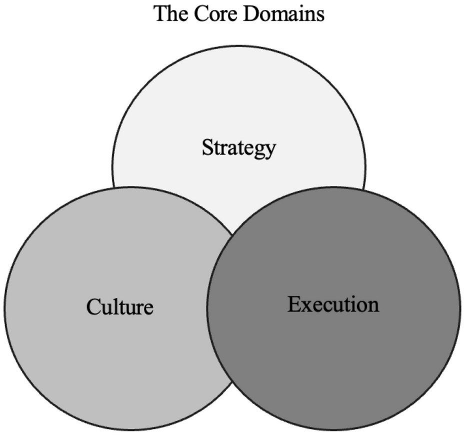
Temporal accumulation: an amplifying condition

The challenges of filtering and compliance are not experienced in isolation – they accumulate beneath the surface, over time, until intention begins to slip. Temporal accumulation does not generate the Alignment Illusion independently; it intensifies and sustains misalignment into entrenched drift. One CEO described the drift this way: “Gosh, I’m not following up as much as I said I would on this specifically and you start to slip here and there and see things running away from your control.” There isn’t necessarily an intentional effort to be off track, but the noise, pressure and everyday work start to nudge things off course. Weick & Sutcliffe (2001) argue that the organizations that are most vulnerable to this accumulation cascading into failure are those that treat early anomalies as exceptions until correction is no longer an option. If left unchecked, accumulation does more than create misalignment – it consumes resources. One former division president framed it as: “You lose that most precious resource, which is time. You take year one things you didn’t accomplish and roll that into year two.” This is how strategy gets off course, not through a single bad decision but through drift. Mintzberg & Waters (1985) assert that most realized strategy is a pattern of accumulated decisions, and that drift from intent is not necessarily an exception, but a structural norm. The strategic drift in this mechanism is not adaptive opportunism; it is the undetected erosion of strategic intent that leads to unintended misalignment. Strategy rarely fails all at once; it drifts as the accumulation of small execution decisions gradually displaces what was once deliberate intent with the new emergent reality.

The Organizational Gap Framework

Do we have the right strategy? Are we hitting our metrics? How does our team feel? These types of common questions are used to diagnose strategy, execution and culture. In conversations with leaders across industries and organization types, perspectives were consistent – how these domains relate is where success or failure happens. As one CFO of a lifestyle brand put it: “We can develop a wonderful strategy. We can have the people to execute it, but if you don’t introduce elements of enablement, the execution will never happen.” A senior executive in the financial services industry put it, “Most companies don’t appreciate that if they focus more on culture, they can drive strategy and execution.” Similarly, the president of a consumer services company put it, “Get the culture moving, put the strategy behind it, and that culture will pull everything along.” What do these examples mean? Beyond any individual domain, what matters is the coherence and relationship between them. We define organizational alignment as the degree of relational coherence among strategy, execution and culture, such that strategic direction, organizational actions and shared norms and assumptions reinforce rather than contradict one another. Figure 1 outlines the core domains and their relationships.

The OGF proposes that the relationship between domains is filled with signal distortion, and complicated by the reality of day-to-day work. That distortion can obscure gaps as they form, masking misalignment. Prior research has established that alignment matters for organizational performance (Hartnell, Ou, & Kinicki, 2011). Alignment frameworks focused on fit have asked whether organizational elements are configured optimally, assessing how well strategy, structure and environment match at a given point in time (Venkatraman & Camillus, 1984). These frameworks have not explained why leaders fail to perceive misalignment as it forms, or how misalignment in one domain relationship may propagate to adjacent domains. The OGF addresses two questions prior frameworks leave unanswered:



Note: The core domains are illustrative of domain interactions, the relative size or impact of each domain will be empirically calibrated in the future quantitative phase of this research.

Figure 1. The three core domains of organizational alignment

why gaps remain hidden from the leaders who need to see them, and how misalignment in one relationship spills over to the adjacent domain.

Strategy, execution, and culture

Across all three domains, we adopt a perceptual framing where each domain is understood through the interpretations of organizational leaders and members rather than an objective condition. This is intentional: the OGF's diagnostic purpose is to surface where member experience diverges from leadership assumptions. The coherence of strategy, execution and culture may vary at different levels in the organization. That divergence, not the objective quality of any given domain, is where gaps form.

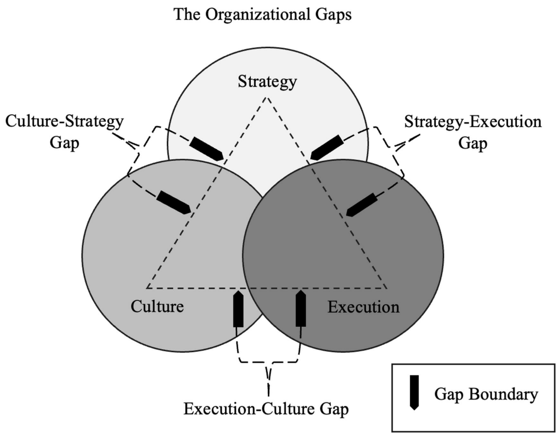
Nag, Hambrick, & Chen (2007) summarized the definition of strategy as “the major intended and emergent initiatives taken by general managers on behalf of owners, involving the utilization of resources, to enhance firm performance in their external environments.” This definition highlights the importance of both strategic intent (directed strategy) and emergent strategy. Action, performance and environment play a role in strategy realization, aligning with the overall view of strategy established by Mintzberg (1978). We define the core domain of Strategy as the perceived clarity and coherence of strategic direction and priorities.

Execution is an extension of strategy in the sense that execution is how strategy comes to life. Persistent failures in strategy implementation are well documented: Hrebiniak (2006) noted that making strategy work is more difficult than making strategy itself. Execution includes informal and formal mechanisms used to enact strategy including leadership behaviors, feedback loops, organizational structure and accountability processes that help reinforce strategic priorities over time. Organizations often underestimate the execution demands that strategy requires, and perhaps more importantly, that execution is carried out by individuals and teams that make up the organization and culture. Bossidy, Charan, & Burck (2009) contend that not enough emphasis has been put on the discipline of execution, and that effective execution cannot happen without incorporating strategy, people and operations. We define the core domain of Execution as the perceived reliability and capability of execution systems, including accountability, coordination and resourcing.

Culture, as used here, refers to organizational culture, which is also a well-developed area of management research. Culture has been defined in many different ways, but to summarize Schein's (2010) definition we use – a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group. Cameron & Quinn (2011) expand this definition to shared beliefs, assumptions, values and norms which shape the workplace. More importantly they highlight that an effective culture is dependent on how values are emphasized and aligned with organizational demands. This draws a direct link between culture and organizational effectiveness through people. Their role in both implementing (execution) and enabling (or constraining) strategy highlights the interconnected nature of strategy, execution and culture, and the gaps that form at the intersections. Though more detailed culture definitions exist, like Schein's (2010) three levels: artifacts, espoused values and underlying assumptions, the focus in this paper is on how culture relates to strategy and execution, not on culture's internal architecture. Schein's three levels represent a productive extension of the OGF as potential moderators of gap formation. Gaps at the artifact level may be more visible and correctable than those embedded at the level of underlying assumptions. We define Culture as the perceived shared norms and assumptions that support behavior consistency, coordination and learning.

The organizational gaps

Organizational failures are not necessarily the result of poor strategy, weak execution or dysfunctional culture. Failures stem from something harder to see: the gaps that form between domains, creating misalignment. The gaps don't show up on slide decks – they show up when the CEO leaves the meeting, as one finance executive put it, "There was alignment in the room when the strategy was developed, but when it leaves the room […] everyone's biases play through, and perspectives change." To diagnose misalignment, we introduce the concept of organizational gaps between the core domains of strategy, execution and culture (Figure 2). These gaps are the spaces where tension forms and misalignment occurs. We define an organizational gap as a zone of structural misalignment between two domains, not a deficit within either one. We adopt a



Note: Gap boundaries are illustrative representations of the relational space between domains. Precise boundary positioning and gap magnitude will be empirically calibrated in the quantitative phase of this research.

Figure 2. Organizational gaps between strategy, execution and culture

perceptual framing intentionally: organizational gaps, like organizational culture itself, exist through interpretations of organizational leaders and members (Schein, 2010; Weick, 1995). The gap is real in its consequences whether leaders recognize it. Though the gaps often occur simultaneously, they each operate through a different mechanism, surface differently and point to a different place to look.

Strategy-Execution gap

The Strategy-Execution Gap (S-E) is observable when intent (Strategy) is misaligned with action (Execution), often characterized as strategic drift. Gaps between Strategy and Execution have primarily been documented from the strategic lens. Sull et al. (2015) argue that strategy execution is where organizations fall short, not strategy formulation. Mankins & Steele (2005) highlight that organizations only achieve 60% of the financial performance that their strategies promise. This performance shortfall is conceptualized as a strategy-performance gap that can be addressed by improved execution. While prior research has looked at this performance shortfall as an execution discipline issue, it has not viewed it as a relational problem (misfit). As one manufacturing executive put it, “We’re not too bad at putting a strategy together, just not very good at executing it,” adding that “the boss quit asking about it, so people quit worrying about it.” We define the Strategy-Execution Gap as the perceived misalignment, experienced by organizational leaders and members, between strategic intent and actual priorities and behaviors.

Execution-Culture gap

The Execution-Culture gap (E-C) is experienced when there is inconsistency between how work is managed and how we say we want to behave. Simons, (2002) work on Behavioral Integrity identifies the integrity gap as a phenomenon that forms when there is a lack of alignment between managers’ words and deeds. When execution systems reward behaviors that contradict organizational values, misalignment forms, creating cynicism and disengagement. At the organizational level, this is the expression of Argyris & Schön (1978) espoused theory and theory-in-use where the values the organization claims are contradicted by the execution systems it operates through. Treviño, Brown, & Hartman (2003) suggest that it is not enough for the executive to perceive their actions as ethical, the employees must also perceive those actions the same way. Control systems function both systematically and symbolically (Simons, 1994), and misalignment between them breeds disengagement. The president of a consumer services company described this as “drag, when you’re not moving fast enough because regional management doesn’t think it’s a value add, and it’s going to make their jobs harder.” We define the Execution-Culture Gap as the perceived inconsistency, experienced by organizational leaders and members, between how execution is managed and what the organization claims to value.

Culture-Strategy gap

The Culture-Strategy gap (C-S) is perceived when there is misfit between who we are and where we are going as an organization. This misfit also emerges when strategic change threatens core assumptions about how the organization succeeds, and the organization’s identity. Gioia, Schultz, & Corley (2000) highlight the two major identity perspectives, enduring and dynamic, that can lead to adaptive instability. This adaptive instability creates gaps. When strategy requires a culture change, culture is often slow moving and leaders often underestimate cultural resistance leading to what Schein (1996) described as unrealized constraints. Even if the culture is “good,” it can fail to connect to strategy, as an international non-profit board member put it: “We have a strong culture, we know who we are, and how we do things […] but practically, we just don’t know where we’re going because we don’t have a strategy." We define the Culture-Strategy Gap as the perceived misfit, experienced by organizational leaders and members, between organizational identity and assumptions and the strategic direction of the organization. The following section examines what makes each gap distinct, how practitioners have recognized them and what each gap reveals about the space between domains.

The three gaps in practice

Alignment is difficult to confront directly. As participants put it, "No one wants to call the baby ugly," and "Once it's on a slide deck, it's been manipulated." These are just some of the phrases used by these executives to describe their views on why addressing gaps is challenging for leaders in day-to-day work. This section explores how the three gaps show up in practice, how they are observed by practitioners, and what characteristics push them to the surface of perception.

The Strategy-Execution gap (S-E gap)

"Ask anybody in your organization, 'what are your organization's strategic priorities?' and they can cite them. Then ask one more question, 'what's your role in accomplishing that?' that's where you can have breakdowns." This is how one executive explained his experience with the challenge of ensuring that strategy and execution are connected. The S-E Gap is one of the most recognizable in organizational life. It shows up due to the process of strategy-making involving less time and fewer people and execution taking more time with significantly more people. As strategy makes its way through the organization it degrades as it is distributed across departments, people and time (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007). This was echoed by a senior consultant when he said, "Silos are the death of strategy. Every single company is made up of pretty smart people. I have a hard time believing that if they were talking to each other, they couldn't have come up with an answer."

In the same way that hierarchical filtering obscures gap perceptions, how strategy filters its way through the organization creates similar challenges. As the former president of a consumer services company put it: "I think that clear strategy was articulated from the very top. I think that execution at the level just beneath senior leadership clearly understood, but I would say one to two levels down, things started to look different." This is why perceiving gaps is hard; breakdowns are rarely acute; they structurally erode across the layers of the organization. As one executive put it, "people were doing their best to make the strategy real but were running into real challenges, and felt the strategy was disconnected from the day-to-day reality." The calculus and tradeoffs that happen at the execution level contribute to this erosion, where verbal agreement turns into rhetorical alignment.

The real test is the frontline workers. As one executive put it: "What kept me up at night was how do I actually change [frontline behavior]? Because none of this actually matters if I can't get them to change how they price, how they sell, and how they actually perform the service." Similarly, another executive described: "The breakdown is where [leaders] become blind to what the people who have to execute the strategy are saying about that initiative." Skipping this frontline check runs the risk of mistaking middle management alignment with organizational alignment. The belief in the strategy needs to be strong at the top, but not so strong that it ignores the feedback from the field. Then the real risk occurs when people voice concerns, and they are ignored, the signal goes away or as one executive put it, "Whatever data you get, you have to act on the data, otherwise you'll stop getting the data." This becomes critical for leaders because hierarchical filtering gets in the way of feedback from traveling upward. Leaders who choose to ignore upward feedback are applying a different filter.

The Execution-Culture gap (E-C gap)

"Culture is always emphasized until the business is not executing, and then all of a sudden, culture gets put on the back burner to focus on actually executing," was the reality that one senior consultant observed. The E-C Gap is less visible than the S-E Gap but equally consequential. People do the work, and when pressure is applied, culture is often the first casualty. This pattern shows up in organizations, especially under pressure, where culture gets sacrificed when it is most needed. One executive described this pattern as the difference between being led by the numbers versus letting the numbers prompt conversations. If leaders focus too much on just the number, as he put it, "People just think: OK, you just want the number and I'm really not that important. I'm just a means to help you get the number." This is an example where an execution system (accountability to the numbers) doesn't just fail to fit the culture, it actively dismantles it.

Schein (2010) emphasizes that what leaders systematically pay attention to, through rewards and consequences, is one of the most powerful mechanisms for communicating what they believe in. On one end, fixating on execution and achieving "the number" can negatively impact the culture. On the other end, as one senior executive observed, culture can be misapplied to the point where leaders avoid accountability conversations and the processes and structures needed to execute, resulting in culture sometimes getting in the way of execution. The push and pull of trying to drive execution, and results, while balancing team and culture is the everyday reality leaders face. It is this tension, magnified by situational pressure and time, that may give rise to gaps forming.

It remains the leaders' responsibility to balance how the system is applied. Push too hard, and you run the risk of only caring about "the numbers." Push too little and it impacts execution, as one senior executive put it: "when execution is not strong, either revenue or profit is impacted. When that happens, programs designed to support employees are impacted too." These signals appear subtly, as one senior consultant explained, it could be as subtle as the difference between "that's not my department" and "I don't work on that, but I think Tony can help you out with that." The effort is identical; the culture determines the outcome.

The Culture-Strategy gap (C-S gap)

"That's what broke [the company], because [the decision] happened in a vacuum […] we were going public and we got to [change the company values], but nobody really asked the question, what does this actually mean?" This was how one senior executive described the cultural backlash of changing the company values statement in a large organization. Unlike the S-E Gap, the C-S Gap moves more slowly and shows up when the embedded culture conflicts with where strategy needs to go, acting as a veto. In the opening example, the senior leadership seemed to have a legitimate reason for the change (going public). However, how the message was received produced not only immediate backlash but fractures that remain over 15 years later, according to the executive.

How strategy is communicated and brought to life with the people of the organization is critical, but it is not enough to just communicate it clearly. What makes sense with a small group must be received more broadly, what Gioia & Chittipeddi (1991) defined as sensegiving and sensemaking. When there is divergence between strategic intent and interpretation, culture pulls in a different direction creating a gap. Weick (1995) identified organizational identity (who we are) as the anchor of sensemaking, which surfaces when people encounter ambiguity. When strategic change challenges that anchor, the organization's capacity to make sense of a new direction breaks down before the change can take hold. The structural underpinnings of this divergence rest in what Gioia et al. (2000) later described as the tension between the organizational identity's (culture) need to maintain continuity, and its need for flexibility to respond to environmental change. As one CFO put it, "If your vision and strategy are so fundamentally different for the future than what made it successful, it's really hard for people to envision something new." This tension is amplified when external disruption forces strategic change, and organizations face pressure to move faster than their cultures can follow (Hatch, 1993).

If the S-E gap is a translation failure, and the E-C gap is a fit failure, the C-S gap is fundamentally a conflict of identity. As one senior executive put it, "Our firm has been so successful that we don't know how to adjust when we are not." Past success can become a cultural anchor that resists strategic change (Schein, 2010). What determines whether a gap forms is not whether strategic change is worth pursuing, but whether the change can be understood and activated across the organization. Leaders should watch out for when people stop asking "where are we going?" and start asking "who are we now?" What creates the opportunity to bridge the gap is connecting the existing identity with the new direction. This gives people a way to view change not as a rejection of what came before, but as a continuation of it. As one senior consultant put it, "I've seen people accept the new path more readily when the previous vision is acknowledged." What is often forgotten is the old vision and strategy was once the new one that the team needed to buy into.

Spillover – why gaps don't stay contained

These gaps between the core domains are not only distinct, but they are also dynamic and can spill over into other domains (Sant'Anna & Reis, 2026). They can narrow or widen, but the interconnected nature of the core domains means gaps are not confined to the relationship where they form. A wide gap between two domains can impact the third domain, compounding the Alignment Illusion through visible symptoms that are one domain removed from the actual root cause. This redirects diagnostic attention away from where the misalignment originates. When a gap forms between strategy and execution, if not addressed, it can impact culture. Miller's (1987) work on configuration logic establishes that organizational elements are tightly coupled, and that disruption extends along the structural lines of configuration, not randomly across the system. The OGF extends this insight: because the three domains are relationally structured, a gap does not produce generalized disruption but should follow a specific path to the third domain (Figure 3). Gap formation and spillover are sequential; a gap must form and be present before it can spill over. When the magnitude of one of the gaps starts to impact the third domain, we call that a spillover effect. The magnitude threshold is a theoretical proposition, to be calibrated in a future quantitative phase. The following spillover propositions are derived from the internal logic of the OGF Framework and grounded in the participant accounts. Each identifies a pathway through which a gap in one domain relationship may produce misalignment in the third domain. These propositions offer practitioners a prospective framework for diagnosis and are positioned for empirical validation in the planned quantitative study.

The S-E gap spillover

Culture is important, but it is not a singular prescription to the challenges organizations face. As one director at a non-profit put it when describing the president of the organization, "He's just super relational, but now we're big enough that we need strategy, systems, processes and he just does not understand that stuff at all and we're super frustrated." He described this leader as being great with culture, but the gap in strategy and execution was starting to impact the organization. When there is misalignment between strategy and execution, participant accounts suggest it negatively impacts credibility and leads to cynicism. This was highlighted by one CFO when describing how easily frustration occurs when execution

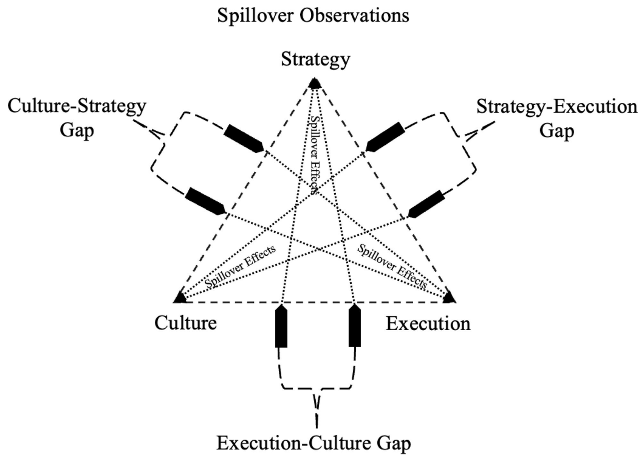


Figure 3. Potential directional spillover effects across the three gap types

falters, he said: "You're going to make your culture sour them toward a strategy." These frustrations, brought on by misalignment, accumulate and if left unchecked, may start to embed themselves in the culture. The risk for leaders is not just that a gap between strategy and execution hinders performance outcomes, but the data suggest that gap may propagate into the culture of the organization. This extends Hrebiniak's (2006) assertion that strategy and execution are interdependent, to also include cultural interdependence. When there is sustained execution failure it erodes the sense of shared progress, limiting organizational commitment (Kotter, 1996). We propose that the S-E Gap reaches culture through a specific path: sustained strategy-execution misfit erodes trust in the organization and the shared belief in leadership that culture depends on. This embeds cynicism where commitment once existed. When culture begins to erode without a clear cultural cause, leaders should examine whether the driver is actually a persistent gap between strategy and execution:

P1. A persistent strategy-execution gap, left unaddressed, creates conditions for misalignment to develop in the culture domain through the erosion of organizational commitment and shared trust.

The E-C gap spillover

"She applied the speed before there was buy in and gel of her leadership team […] we were moving at 100 mph, but the [organization] was moving at 10 mph." This was how one executive described his experience with a new CEO. The gap between execution and culture had formed between how things had been done in the past versus how they were being done under the new leadership regime. These "anchors" of the business, as the executive described them, are embedded in the organization, providing stability, able to ride out storms, but when a new course is charted, they need to detach from the thing they have been embedded to. The opening example speaks to the challenge of changing strategic direction, and execution-culture misalignment can be a limiting factor. Even when strategic success is achieved, conflicting systems and values make it difficult to sustain. We propose that the E-C Gap reaches strategy through implementation incapacity. When cultural values and execution systems pull in opposite directions, the organization cannot deliver on strategic commitments coherently. When strategic underperformance is due to poor adaptability, leaders should examine this as a signal of a misalignment that runs deeper into the E-C Gap:

P2. A persistent execution-culture gap creates the conditions for strategic underperformance through the inability of conflicting execution systems and cultural values to coherently deliver on strategic commitments.

The C-S gap spillover

When strategy and culture are closely aligned, the output is stronger discretionary effort. One manufacturing executive described recent communications around a merger in his organization as "People here just kind of yawned and said, well, OK, that was interesting," and then just went back to their day to day. The strategic direction was not resonating with the culture of the organization. This passive resistance may lead to the withholding of discretionary effort, slower adoption, ultimately impacting execution. We propose that the C-S Gap reaches execution through the withdrawal of discretionary effort (Pfeffer, 1998). When people cannot reconcile strategic direction with their own organizational identity, compliance without commitment follows. This leads to execution suffering not from incapacity but from motivational absence. One executive described a forced timeline to lay-off team members, and how the perception was that culture was what was sacrificed. This sacrifice impacted the culture for years because it broke the trust within the organization. When execution falters, despite clear role level accountability, leaders should examine whether a persistent gap between strategy and culture is the actual driver:

P3. A persistent culture-strategy gap creates conditions for execution failure through the withdrawal of discretionary effort, as organizational leaders and members who experience cultural identity-strategy conflict default to compliance without commitment.

These spillover dynamics, where operative, create a diagnostic logic that allows the leader to better understand the root cause of issues that are surfacing. This structure, when combined with the organizational gaps between strategy, execution and culture, gives leaders a lens to critically assess and diagnose their organizations. The OGF does not introduce new problems. It proposes directional insights for where to look, breaking through the illusion toward effective diagnosis.

Implications for practice – diagnosing your organization's gaps

These examples are likely familiar to organizational leaders – experiences felt, if not yet named. Naming them helps to break through the Alignment Illusion and is a precondition for diagnosis. The OGF (Figure 4) provides not a formal assessment, but a lens for leaders to think about organizational problems and move from informal to deliberate diagnosis. The Alignment Illusion prevents misalignment from surfacing clearly, allowing existing gaps to persist and accumulate. Most organizations likely have more than one gap at any given time, and the magnitudes may vary. Identifying gaps in your own organization does not require structured appraisals. It starts with asking questions. What follows are three diagnostic anchors that leaders can use as a framework for thinking about where to look first.

S-E gap

Do the people who need to execute the strategy clearly understand their specific role in bringing it to life? This needs to go beyond reciting what was conveyed in a slide deck but often asking that deeper question is uncomfortable. But if it isn't asked, success becomes a moving target. A practical starting point is testing translation one layer at a time. Start by

Figure 4. The Organizational Gap Framework: gap formation and spillover dynamics

asking the frontline team members to connect their current priority back to a specific strategic commitment. This identifies the layer where the connection breaks down and where the gap has likely formed, directing the leader where to focus. The uncertainty of, “am I doing what I am supposed to,” points the focus inward – on survival. As one financial services executive put it, “My experience with some of the bad cultures is that people don’t know how to succeed.” This appears to produce a spillover effect and the cultural consequences of strategy-execution misfit. When the focus turns inward, the signals that start to surface are frustration and cynicism about whether the strategy can be executed.

E-C gap

One way this misalignment shows up is the difference between “that’s not my department” and “I don’t work on that, but Tony can help,” as the senior consultant put it. Leaders should also ask, are we measuring and rewarding what is important? And do those outcomes align with our culture? How the result was achieved matters as much as the result itself. When execution and culture are pulling away from each other, it can start to impact strategy, causing it to falter. The challenge for the leader, when strategy falters, is to understand whether the issue was with the strategy itself, or the people who need to execute it. Signals that a gap is forming between execution and culture: First, when accountability conversations happen, and behavior doesn’t shift, this means execution and culture are pulling in different directions. Second, do people know how to be successful, and is there coherence between what is measured and what is rewarded? When these signals appear, the entry point is not a culture initiative – it is a reflection of what behaviors are being reinforced by the current system. Changing what gets measured and rewarded, even if incremental, is more informative than any engagement survey.

C-S Gap

The strategy may land well when announced but then fade away over time. This is the figurative “yawning” that the manufacturing executive described. Not necessarily active resistance, but disengagement. When strategy and culture aren’t connected, people do what is required but not what is possible. To address this, leaders should explicitly acknowledge the legacy identity before asking people to embrace the new direction. This recognition allows people to move toward a new identity more readily by reflecting what came before rather than just discarding it. Slower adoption in the execution domain, may not be an execution problem; it may be because there is a gap between culture and strategy. Signals leaders should look out for: First, listen for informal conversations that are referencing legacy identity versus new direction, “we’ve never done it that way,” or “that’s not who we are.” Second, observe the gap between how strategy is discussed in leadership meetings, and then observe those same conversations 2–3 levels down in the organization. If there is a significant shift in framing, a C-S gap is likely present.

Understanding gap dynamics

Identifying and naming these gaps, and their effects, are the necessary steps that enable leaders to begin to address them. Within each gap, the tension between the two connected domains is not static. There is push and pull at the relational seams, and the relative strength or weakness of one domain’s influence on the other could help inform what specific dynamics need to be addressed. We provide a prospective way of thinking about the gap dynamics within the S-E, E-C and C-S Gaps, with exploratory insights, questions and leadership responses provided in Table 3.

When a gap is identified between strategy and execution, leaders should consider the existing strategy and execution practices. On the strategy practice side, understanding the degree to which strategy is translated into actionable priorities, expectations and role-level commitments can help determine the relative strength or weakness on one side of the gap. On the execution side, leaders should consider how execution generates feedback, review and corrective adaptation that re-anchors strategy over time. When a gap exists between execution and culture, leaders should seek to understand the execution side of the gap by examining the extent to which incentives, controls and decision-making reinforce the desired behaviors and values. From the culture side of the gap, leaders should determine the extent to which norms and values enable coordination and reliable execution. Finally, when a gap is identified between culture and strategy, leaders should look at both sides of the gap. On the culture side of the gap, leaders should seek to understand the extent to which culture expands or narrows perceived strategic options. From the strategy side of the gap, leaders should seek to understand the degree to which strategic meaning and commitment are built through communication and involvement.

These questions are entry points into a structured diagnosis, not a sequential checklist. They also serve as the theoretical bridge to developing an empirically validated diagnostic instrument in a planned quantitative study. Once a gap is identified, determining which side of the gap is driving the misalignment allows the leader to focus the intervention. An S-E gap that is rooted in poor translation and role clarity requires a different response than one driven by inconsistent review cadence. The value of the OGF is not just in bringing gaps to the surface, but in giving leaders a way to name what has been informally felt and a framework to locate them with enough precision to act. The directional dynamics within each gap relationship, and their relative strength or weakness, are what we take up in subsequent work.

Conclusion

Organizations or initiatives rarely fail all at once. They start to fail where alignment is perceived, but not understood, until the leader asks, “how did we get here?” We introduced the OGF as a way to break through the Alignment Illusion. The OGF advances three contributions. First, it theorizes and names the Alignment Illusion as the perceptual condition

Table 3. Practitioner reference

Gap	Signs to watch for	Diagnostic questions	Spillover risk	Leadership response
Strategy-Execution (S-E)	People can recite the strategy but cannot connect it to their role. Middle management reports alignment, but frontline tells a different story. Upward feedback has slowed or stopped	• Can your people describe their specific role in executing the strategy, beyond what the strategy is? • When execution issues surface, do they trigger learning and adjustment? • Are you acting on feedback when it reaches you?	*Culture.* Sustained execution failure erodes organizational trust. Cynicism embeds in the culture, replacing shared commitment with frustration and disengagement	*Strategy side:* Translate strategy into role-level commitments; clarify what teams should stop doing *Execution side:* Establish review cadences; create adaptive feedback loops
Execution-Culture (E-C)	Execution behaviors revert to old norms after initial buy-in. Accountability conversations happen but the behavior does not change. “that’s not my department” is heard more than “let me connect you”	• Are your incentives reinforcing the values you claim? • Is what is measured consistent with what is rewarded? • Is accountability applied in a way that builds or erodes your culture?	*Strategy.* Misaligned systems and values undermine the organization’s capacity to deliver on strategic commitments, causing strategy to falter from the inside	*Execution side:* Audit and realign incentives, controls, and decision rights against stated values *Culture side:* Identify norms blocking coordination; reinforce cultural enablers of execution
Culture-Strategy (C-S)	Strategy lands well in leadership meetings but disappears Two levels down. Disengagement rather than resistance: the organizational “yawn” people reference legacy identity: “we’ve never done it that way”	• Are people engaging with the strategy or just complying with it? • Is how strategy is discussed in leadership meetings consistent with how it is discussed on the frontline? • Does strategy communication build commitment, or just awareness?	*Execution.* When people cannot reconcile strategic direction with organizational identity, discretionary effort is withheld. Execution suffers not from incapacity but from lack of motivation	*Culture side:* Surface assumptions limiting strategic options; engage people in sensemaking *Strategy side:* Build commitment through involvement, not just communication

Note(s): Diagnostic questions are entry points for structured diagnosis, not a sequential checklist. The future quantitative phase will establish which boundary is driving the gap, enabling more precise intervention targeting. Once a gap is identified, determining which side of the gap is driving the misalignment allows the leader to focus the intervention, e.g., an S-E Gap rooted in poor translation and role clarity requires a different response than One driven by inconsistent review cadence

that keeps organizational gaps hidden from the leaders who need to see them. Second, it moves beyond single-domain thinking toward relational diagnosis by introducing a three-gap taxonomy. Third, it offers theoretical propositions that gaps are interconnected and dynamic, where misalignment in one relationship may produce spillover effects in adjacent domains – propositions that are grounded in the framework’s internal logic and participant accounts, and positioned for empirical testing in subsequent work.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. The 12 executive interviews are appropriate for the theory-building phase (Gioia et al., 2013), but are not representative or generalizable. Additionally, the participants in the study came from a broad range of industries, senior leadership roles and contexts. This was an intentional trade-off to explore relevance across contexts rather than develop depth within a single industry or organizational setting. The participants were recruited from the researcher's professional network, which may introduce contextual assumptions that were not accounted for in the design. The professional relationship with participants may also introduce response bias where individuals who know the researcher may frame their experiences in ways that are more affirming of the framework. This risk is acknowledged directly. The same trust that creates this risk also enables candid access to accounts of organizational failure and leadership vulnerability that senior executives rarely share with strangers. This is a methodological precondition for frank disclosure in sensitive organizational contexts. Structured coding, secondary coder review and member checking provided additional guardrails against researcher-directed framing. The OGF emerged in part from lived experience navigating organizational alignment challenges. The primary researcher's dual role as a practitioner and theorist represents a potential source of confirmation bias, addressed through the same mitigations noted above.

These limitations present the opportunity to extend this work into a clear research agenda. The OGF constructs and propositions are grounded in theory-building evidence and well positioned for empirical testing through a planned quantitative study. That work will allow for validation of the proposed constructs, assessment of gap magnitude and the directional dynamics that set the gap boundaries and drive misalignment – a question this study intentionally left open. The aim of this study was not to determine how gaps vary in importance, magnitude or manifestation across industries, organization sizes or stages of development, but to develop a set of testable propositions regarding relational misalignment, gap dynamics and proposed spillover effects, providing a foundation for continued empirical research. Extending the research into specific contexts will allow for calibration of the framework within different organization types and industries. The OGF presents a theoretical vocabulary and a relational diagnostic structure to help practitioners navigate the gaps in their organizations. It also offers researchers a set of testable propositions that have not been previously formalized in the alignment literature, providing the foundation for a sustained empirical research program.

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