Navigating Systemic Misalignment: In Search of a Human-Centred Response

Why awareness has not become practice, and what it will take to do better

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Foreword

This paper is offered as an invitation rather than a prescription. It reflects three decades of practice and learning across industries and asks a specific question with complex implications: if we accept the language of systems thinking, why do our organisations still struggle to act systemically when it matters most?

Contents

Executive summary

For more than three decades, I have worked with leading consultancies and global organisations across industries such as finance, travel, and pharmaceuticals on complex transformation programmes, and across geographies, sectors, and organisation types the same pattern recurs.

The initiatives on which I have worked were triggered by factors including shifting market expectations, new management frameworks, regulatory change, the start-up culture of the dot-com era, and recurring excitement over emerging technologies, and whatever their origins they followed a familiar arc in which early optimism and heavy investment gave way to friction, fatigue, and under-delivery.

Evidence of failure

Extensive research confirms what practice has long revealed: of the tens of thousands of transformation programmes worldwide, only around one-third achieve their intended benefits[1], a figure that has remained stubbornly static despite decades of investment.

Both research and practical experience point to a common root cause: systemic misalignment, a pervasive, multi-dimensional misfit that undermines even well-designed efforts, such that when outcomes continue to fall short despite greater investment, knowledge, and effort, the issue is not leadership or tooling alone but the way the system itself works against transformation.

The root cause of failure: systemic misalignment

Systemic misalignment cuts across the elements that must combine for a global enterprise to function effectively. It manifests across people, policies, processes, strategy, structure, culture, capabilities, technology, incentives, objectives, and governance.

When these elements pull against each other through conflicting priorities, mismatched incentives, or unclear decision-making, they create reinforcing cycles of friction and dysfunction that can derail even carefully designed programmes.

Contributing factors

Methods and frameworks
Over the last four decades, organisations have tried to address these challenges through structured methodologies such as User-Centred Design, Business Process Reengineering, Lean, Six Sigma, Agile, Design Thinking, and digital maturity models[2], each of which has delivered value while systemic barriers repeatedly cause efforts to fragment or stall.

Technology hype cycles
Technologies such as ERP, e-business, cloud analytics, automation, and generative AI are powerful enablers, but technology adoption is not transformation[3], as Gartner's Hype Cycle illustrates through the familiar curve of inflated expectations, disillusionment, and delayed productivity, where innovation teams outpace legacy functions, compliance slows adoption, global ambition collides with local reality, and treating technology as the destination rather than as an enabler within the wider system perpetuates misalignment.

Traditional barriers through a systemic lens

Familiar failure factors such as leadership gaps, role ambiguity, team churn, communication breakdowns, and policy friction may appear isolated, but more often they are interconnected symptoms of misaligned objectives and incentives[4] that, left unresolved, erode trust and create feedback loops that undermine progress.

The role of consultancies and partners

Consultancies play an important role in navigating complexity by bringing expertise and frameworks, yet they are influenced by the same systemic misalignments as their clients[5], as conflicting objectives, rigid methodologies, incentive models, or pressure for rapid results can unintentionally reinforce fragmentation even as they seek to resolve it, and viewed together these patterns reveal a consistent underlying condition that both research and practice increasingly identify as systemic misalignment.

A call to action

True transformation is not dependent on the adoption of the latest framework or technology but begins with rigorous reflection that examines the history of transformation failure through a systemic lens rather than recycling familiar explanations.

It also requires acknowledgement that the barriers to success are systemic, living in the tensions between intent and action, structure and culture, and policy and practice, and that responding to them calls for navigation through a shared commitment from leaders, practitioners, and partners to confront tensions openly and work through them collaboratively.

This is not an academic exercise but an invitation to reflect on what truly limits transformation, as evidence and experience consistently point to systemic misalignment as a recurring, often invisible barrier whose consequences are familiar, with energy dissipating, credibility eroding, and benefits falling short.

The solution is not to work harder or to double down on process discipline, as success depends on surfacing misalignment, addressing the tensions it creates, and navigating them together so that transformation can begin to deliver on its promise.

Introduction

Markets shift with unprecedented speed, technologies evolve rapidly, and stakeholder expectations continue to rise, with the result that transformation has never been more necessary, nor more complex.

Despite decades of effort, significant investment, and a growing arsenal of methods, most large-scale initiatives still fail to deliver their promised benefits[1], and while traditional explanations such as leadership gaps, cultural barriers, communication failures, or technology shortcomings capture part of the picture, they do not explain either the persistence or the scale of underperformance, as common approaches often address symptoms while overlooking deeper systemic misalignments that shape outcomes[6].

Without honest, evidence-based dialogue and a willingness to navigate tensions at the heart of organisations, leaders and partners risk repeating familiar patterns of underperformance, regardless of the methodology employed.

In the three decades that I have worked alongside global organisations and leading consultancies, I have seen this pattern unfold repeatedly, as initiatives begin with optimism and heavy investment only to give way over time to friction, fatigue, and disappointing results in a cycle many practitioners will recognise.

This white paper draws on lived practice and research to ask a simple but important question:

Why do transformation programmes continue to underperform despite extensive experience, expertise, and investment?

My intention is not to offer a silver bullet, but to invite those with a vested interest in seeing transformation succeed to reflect more honestly on the conditions that shape outcomes and to explore how systemic tensions might be navigated rather than ignored.

What practitioners know

Transformation leaders can readily list familiar explanations for failure, including leadership gaps, communication breakdowns, unclear accountability, or slow technology adoption, each of which contains an element of truth, yet none explains why failure persists even in well-led programmes[7].

Those who have lived through major transformations know that success is rarely undone by a single flaw but is more often the cumulative effect of misalignments between people, purpose, incentives, and structures.

From inside organisations, several patterns become clear as leadership intent, vision, and communication frequently collide with human realities, including bias, competing interpretations of what "good" looks like, and uneven understanding of priorities, while individuals often act with positive intent yet make decisions that, taken together, undermine agreed strategy, and teams pull in different directions as innovation competes with compliance, global ambition clashes with local reality, and short-term delivery is prioritised over long-term capability.

Over time, turnover, competing agendas, and uneven experience erode trust, while external partners bring valuable expertise yet operate with incentives or frameworks that may not always align cleanly with client needs, and although best practices provide structure they can also mask deeper misalignments, many of them human as much as structural, such that progress depends less on eliminating conflict than on surfacing it and working with it as people, priorities, and conditions change.

Transformation is not a linear project, but a contested, human journey shaped as much by behaviour and belief as by vision and planning[8].

Why awareness has not become systemic practice

The language of systems thinking and organisational learning is now widely familiar, and from *The Fifth Discipline*[9] to more recent research on organisational cognition[10] the case for systemic action is well established in theory, yet the challenge lies in operationalising that thinking under real-world conditions shaped by incentives, conflicting objectives, and power dynamics.

Transformation programmes rarely sustain genuine systemic alignment, as organisations adopt the vocabulary of systems thinking but struggle to embed it into governance, decision-making, and everyday practice, and when deadlines tighten, budgets contract, or priorities shift, silos re-emerge, incentives diverge, and established habits reassert themselves.

As a result, systems thinking often remains conceptual rather than operational, with its promise recognised but its practice deferred by the very dynamics it seeks to address[11].

Navigating this paper

The sections that follow are organised to help readers examine evidence, recognise recurring patterns, and consider how systemic misalignment might be addressed more effectively:

1. **Origins of misalignment**, how systemic misalignment arises and persists.
2. **Methods and technology**, how misalignment interacts with transformation frameworks and hype cycles.
3. **Limits of conventional remedies**, why traditional fixes often fall short.
4. **Towards systemic realignment**, reflections and practical considerations for navigating misalignment more effectively.

The goal is not to prescribe a formula, but to open an evidence-based dialogue about the real barriers to transformation and what it takes to succeed in complex organisational environments.

Why this matters

This paper does not assign blame or dismiss established methods, as many tools including User-Centred Design, Lean, Agile, Design Thinking, and Scaled Agile have delivered genuine local benefits, yet without systemic alignment even well-intentioned frameworks fragment and fatigue[12].

By combining rigorous research, practical learning, and a shared commitment to navigating complexity, organisations and their partners can begin to break the cycle of costly, underperforming transformation.

Origins and persistence of systemic misalignment

Despite widespread familiarity with systems thinking, the patterns that undermine transformation remain consistent, as the organisations referenced here were not naïve but worked with experienced partners, adopted structured frameworks, and invested in formal governance, while awareness alone did not prevent misalignment from taking hold.

Across three decades of work in finance, pharmaceuticals, and travel, the same tensions repeatedly surfaced, as strategy became disconnected from structure, culture pulled against incentives, and leadership intent diverged from lived experience, not because organisations lacked technical capability but because coordination across strategy, structure, culture, incentives, and technology proved fragile and difficult to sustain.

When misalignment takes hold, a set of familiar dynamics begins to appear, as senior sponsorship weakens when priorities shift, accountability becomes diffuse, local optimisation replaces enterprise coherence, governance fragments, frameworks are interpreted inconsistently, methods are unevenly understood, and innovation drifts away from core operations, patterns that are not confined to a single sector or geography and help explain why even well-funded programmes struggle to deliver enterprise-wide transformation[13].

Systemic misalignment rarely arrives fully formed, developing gradually through small, often overlooked tensions as strategy, structure, and incentives fail to move together, while beneath formal structures sit human dynamics including conflict, turnover, and competing agendas that give misalignment both momentum and persistence.

How misalignment persists

Misalignment operates simultaneously at multiple levels, as individual bias shapes decisions, teams compete for resources and recognition, functions protect local priorities, objectives remain ambiguous, leadership turnover disrupts continuity, and incentives reward behaviours that undermine stated intent, with these forces interacting over time in reinforcing feedback loops that steadily erode transformation capacity.

This is not a one-off failure that can be corrected through renewed effort but an evolving condition that, unless acknowledged and addressed as a systemic issue, continues to destabilise even well-intentioned transformation programmes.

Methods and frameworks

Over the past four decades, organisations have adopted successive methodologies, including User-Centred Design, Business Process Reengineering, Agile, Lean Six Sigma, Design Thinking, and digital maturity models, in an effort to improve transformation outcomes, and while each has delivered genuine local value, few have achieved sustained enterprise-wide impact[14].

Success rates have barely shifted because the underlying condition persists in the form of systemic misalignment, as the organisational systems into which these frameworks are introduced absorb and distort them, turning structured approaches into fragmented practices, with methods themselves becoming subject over time to the same misalignments they were intended to resolve.

A more detailed examination of how a human-centred, structured approach can be used to navigate these conditions appears later in the paper.

Frameworks as victims of systemic misalignment

Most transformation methods were conceived to address visible organisational dysfunctions, including unclear accountability, weak customer understanding, slow delivery, or waste, but in practice many became constrained by the same systemic tensions they were intended to resolve, as they were adopted with enthusiasm and then reshaped, diluted, or abandoned when competing priorities and misaligned incentives reasserted themselves.

These methods did not fail because they were poorly designed but because they were introduced into systems unwilling or unable to align around their underlying intent.

User-Centred Design (UCD)

UCD, formalised by Norman and Draper[15], sought to align business, technology, and user needs through the iterative involvement of people across development, with early adoption encouraging shared understanding and collaboration across disciplines before commercial pressures and siloed governance gradually reframed UCD as a specialist design function.

Techniques such as personas and journey maps were retained while the systemic intent was not, as what began as a cross-disciplinary approach to development narrowed into a focus on interface refinement, a shift that illustrates misalignment at work as a framework designed to create coherence was reshaped by structures and incentives that pulled it apart.

Agile

Agile emerged in 2001 with the *Manifesto for Agile Software Development*[16], promoting iterative delivery, learning, and team-level autonomy, but in practice it often collided with governance structures and funding models that demanded predictability and control.

Research and discovery were compressed, outputs were prioritised over outcomes, and success was increasingly measured through proxies such as velocity rather than alignment, with Agile often delivering local improvements while struggling to achieve systemic impact when leadership attention remained focused on metrics rather than coherence.

Lean Six Sigma

Lean Six Sigma combines Lean's emphasis on efficiency with Six Sigma's focus on variation and control and, while in theory it offered rigour and discipline, in practice its impact was uneven as inconsistent leadership commitment, local optimisation, and incentives misaligned with long-term improvement frequently undermined its application, with global surveys reporting project discontinuation rates of between 50 and 70 per cent and citing cultural and leadership factors more often than methodological shortcomings[17].

Digital maturity models

Digital maturity models were developed to assess and guide organisational readiness for digital change and, while they provide useful benchmarks, they are often mistaken for transformation itself, as high scores in process or technology capability can coexist with low trust, fragmented accountability, and unresolved tensions, and many digital transformations fail to meet their objectives not because of inadequate tools but because underlying systemic barriers remain unaddressed[18].

Methods as mirrors of misalignment

Even well-conceived methods struggle when introduced into misaligned systems, as over time frameworks begin to reflect organisational reality rather than reshape it, with fragmented governance, short-term incentives, and cultural disconnects shaping how methods are interpreted and applied.

These outcomes are symptoms of systemic conditions that no methodology can overcome on its own, and until organisations confront misalignment across leadership, incentives, and structure transformation efforts will continue to underperform regardless of the frameworks employed[19].

Navigating systemic misalignment: reframing the challenge

If every major transformation framework ultimately struggles for similar reasons, the challenge is not methodological but systemic, as misalignment cannot be resolved once and for all through tighter process discipline or new governance structures but persists as a condition of complex organisations, re-emerging wherever objectives, incentives, and interpretations fail to move together.

To navigate misalignment is to accept that tension is normal rather than pathological, as organisations are made up of people who bring different experiences, motivations, and constraints to their work, and the aim is not to eliminate friction but to surface it, understand how it arises, and create conditions in which alignment can be revisited as circumstances change.

Transformation succeeds not when coherence is imposed, but when organisations learn to work with their systemic reality rather than against it, which requires more than awareness and instead depends on the capability to hold multiple perspectives at once, to question assumptions as conditions shift, and to connect operational decisions back to strategic intent[20].

This work also demands restraint, as no framework, however elegant, can substitute for sustained dialogue and responsible leadership, and the task is not to identify a perfect model but to develop organisational capacity to see, interpret, and respond to systemic conditions as they unfold.

Beyond the semantics of "user"

Before considering what a structured, human-centred approach might offer, it is necessary to clarify a persistent misunderstanding about the term *user*.

Since the 1980s, recurring debate has questioned whether "user" is too narrow and should be replaced with terms such as "human-centred", "customer-centric", or "experience-driven"[21], and while often well-intentioned these debates miss the original intent, as in its foundational conception User-Centred Design was never concerned with end-users alone but with aligning systems around human realities.

These realities include employees, customers, partners, regulators, and others whose experiences reveal how the organisation functions, and to focus narrowly on external customers is to reproduce the very fragmentation that systemic thinking seeks to address, as in this sense the "user" represents the human dimension of the system and the lived experience through which strategy, culture, and operations intersect.

Viewed this way, user-centred practice is not a design specialism but a lens for coherence that makes the system visible to itself by revealing how decisions are experienced in practice, and when organisations reduce "user" to a surface design concern they lose an opportunity to connect business intent, technology, and human experience, making the reclamation of this broader perspective central to navigating misalignment[22].

The case for a human-centred structured methodology

Am Among structured approaches to transformation, User-Centred Design, understood in its original systemic sense, offered a distinctive bridge by combining disciplined structure with close attention to human experience and linking strategic intent to technological possibility and lived reality.

Applied as intended, it enabled multidisciplinary teams to work together across the transformation lifecycle from discovery through delivery, with decisions anchored in evidence about how systems affect people and how people in turn shape systems[23].

Its value lay not in empathy alone but in structure, as iterative cycles of research, synthesis, design, and evaluation required collaboration across organisational boundaries and surfaced misalignment early by exposing contradictions between stated strategy and operational behaviour while there was still time to respond, with UCD functioning when practised well as a navigational discipline that helped organisations see where friction was emerging and adjust before patterns hardened.

Few organisations sustained this intent, as commercial pressures and political dynamics reframed UCD as a specialist design activity detached from strategy and governance, with its systemic function lost along with the opportunity to align purpose, incentives, and delivery around shared human outcomes[24].

Re-engaging with a structured, human-centred approach does not imply a return to the past but involves recovering a way of working that was always capable of integrating complexity, had it been allowed to operate as intended.

A structured human-centred methodology does not offer a solution but provides a scaffold that creates space for alignment through shared evidence, cross-functional dialogue, and iterative learning, not by removing tension but by enabling organisations to see it, work with it, and respond more coherently over time, which is the role that Human-Centred Transformation seeks to play at organisational scale.

Navigating tensions, not eliminating them

Systemic navigation depends on recognising that misalignment is dynamic and operates at multiple levels, as tensions arise between functions and hierarchies and often within individuals when professional values, performance expectations, and lived experience pull in different directions.

Successful navigation does not remove these tensions but depends on a small number of interlocking practices that make them visible and workable, including surfacing contradictions early through structured dialogue and user-centred inquiry so that misaligned incentives, roles, and objectives can be addressed before they harden into failure, establishing feedback loops that connect local learning to system-level understanding through research, retrospectives, and after-action reviews, maintaining shared language and artefacts such as service blueprints, experience maps, and system models that help teams visualise complexity and make the system discussable, and adapting governance so that it moves beyond control to function as an enabling structure that sustains coherence while allowing evolution as conditions change.

Sustained leadership presence underpins all of this, as effective systemic navigation depends on leaders who remain visible and engaged over time, attend to feedback, and provide continuity of intent as priorities shift, with the emphasis less on personal style than on maintaining coherence through periods of uncertainty.

Together, these practices transform tension from a source of frustration into a source of intelligence by making systemic misalignment visible and therefore navigable, while acknowledging that none of this is easy and that it reflects the reality of complex systems in which alignment is not an end-state to be achieved but a continuous negotiation that must be revisited as conditions evolve[25].

The human practice of systemic navigation

Navigating systemic misalignment is less about process and more about practice, as it depends on behaviours and disciplines that no framework can guarantee, including curiosity, patience, and a willingness to recognise one's own place within the system's patterns.

Progress rarely comes through heroic programmes but emerges through small, deliberate acts of alignment, such as a team clarifying outcomes, a leader acknowledging uncertainty, or a function choosing collaboration over competition, with these moments accumulating over time to create conditions in which systemic coherence can begin to take hold.

This work is demanding precisely because it is human, as the system organisations seek to change is not external to them but includes the same biases, incentives, and constraints that shape individual behaviour, and recognising this shifts transformation from something done to an organisation to something practised within it.

There are no silver bullets and no method that guarantees success, but instead a path built on evidence, dialogue, and sustained attention to how systems behave under pressure, with a structured, human-centred approach offering a way of walking that path not by eliminating misalignment but by making it visible and workable.

From awareness to capability

Awareness of systemic issues is now widespread, but capability is not, and when priorities shift or pressure mounts organisations often revert to short-term fixes that redistribute familiar problems through new initiatives.

Capability develops when misalignment is treated not as an irritation to be managed away but as an enduring condition to be understood and navigated, which requires attention to the human realities that formal structures often obscure, including preferences, fears, incentives, and unspoken trade-offs that shape collective behaviour.

The cost of speed

Human-centred, structured approaches are often criticised as too slow or costly, but in practice this objection is rarely about time or money and is more often about discomfort, as slowing down to question assumptions or surface misalignment exposes power, bias, and uncertainty.

Avoiding that discomfort carries a higher cost, because rushed decisions and unexamined assumptions compound into cycles of rework and under-delivery, while time invested in early alignment reduces the far greater costs of rework, reputational damage, and unrealised benefits later[26].

What this paper argues

If transformation failure were purely technical, decades of frameworks would have resolved it, yet the persistence of failure despite sustained investment points to a deeper issue in the form of organisational resistance to examining how systems behave under pressure.

Systemic misalignment endures because it is uncomfortable to confront, as it challenges authority, incentives, and established ways of working, and until organisations are willing to face that discomfort and develop the capability to work through it transformation will continue to generate activity without renewal.

This paper proposes no formula but offers a perspective grounded in practice and research, namely that navigating systemic misalignment is both the central challenge and the primary opportunity in transformation.

Closing

Transformation succeeds or fails not in the design of its methods but in the alignment of people, systems, and intent over time, as no single framework or technology can overcome misalignment on its own and what ultimately matters is how organisations recognise, engage with, and continually navigate the tensions it creates.

The opportunity lies in reclaiming transformation as a collective, human endeavour grounded in shared understanding, disciplined practice, and the willingness to work systemically together, and this paper is offered in that spirit as an invitation to reflection, dialogue, and shared learning among those who believe transformation can, and must, do better.

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