

Systemic Misalignment: A Persistent Structural Condition Often Misread as Delivery Failure

Author: Ernest Reid

Organisation: Independent

Published January 2026

Despite widespread awareness, human-centred language, and sustained investment, transformation outcomes continue to fall short. This article explores why insight so rarely translates into practice, and how systemic misalignment is normalised, reproduced, and misread as delivery failure rather than recognised as a structural condition.

Transformation practitioners do not struggle to recognise what is undermining their work; they encounter the same patterns of decisions and behaviours across organisations, sectors, geographies, programmes, and projects. They know, often long before formal reviews or benefit realisation cycles confirm it, that desired outcomes will fall short.

All too often, decisions are distributed across functions, partners, and hierarchies in ways that fracture intent. Expectations assume coherence that does not exist in practice, while accountability is pushed downward and authority, prioritisation, and trade-offs remain dispersed or opaque. Over time, these conditions are absorbed into everyday language and explained away as scale, complexity, or organisational reality rather than examined as a systemic problem.

What this reveals is a persistent condition of systemic misalignment that is widely experienced but seldom recognised or acknowledged. Not because it is hidden, but because it does not present itself as a single, bounded issue. Instead, it is encountered through the accumulated tensions between strategy and structure, policy and practice, ambition and constraint, gradually normalised through governance models and operating assumptions that are treated as fixed.

Against this backdrop, the widespread adoption of human-centred language has had limited effect. Awareness has undoubtedly increased, and intent is often genuine, with capability frequently present across organisations. However, these qualities rarely combine into coherent action because the organisational conditions needed to align them remain largely unchanged.

The consequence is that transformation failure continues to be framed as a matter of execution, leadership, or adoption, while the systemic conditions that undermine practice remain largely unexamined. Under-delivery is therefore treated as a performance issue, rather than as a failure to recognise misalignment for what it is and to acknowledge its structural role in shaping outcomes.

Why awareness has not become practice.

One of the more persistent beliefs in transformation work is that shared understanding will, in time, translate into shared action. As organisations adopt the language of systems thinking and human-centred practice, there is often an expectation that practice will follow. Awareness alone rarely alters how decisions are made, how priorities are set, or how trade-offs are negotiated.

Human-centred concepts are frequently introduced as overlays rather than as structural commitments, shaping intent statements, principles, and narratives while leaving the underlying operating conditions intact. Decision rights remain fragmented, incentives misaligned, and governance continues to privilege local optimisation over systemic coherence, with the result that awareness is absorbed without consequence. It changes how people speak about the work, but not how the work is organised, authorised, or executed.

For practitioners, this creates a familiar and uncomfortable tension. They are asked to work in ways that acknowledge complexity, interdependence, and human experience, while being held to delivery models that continue to assume linearity, stability, and control. As the language of transformation evolves without a corresponding shift in the conditions of practice, practitioners are left to reconcile these contradictions locally, often through workarounds that enable progress in the short term while reinforcing misalignment in the longer term.

Over time, this gap between awareness and practice becomes self-reinforcing. When human-centred approaches fail to deliver the expected benefits, the conclusion is rarely that the system constrained their application. Instead, the methods are judged to have been applied incorrectly, too selectively, or without sufficient discipline. Responsibility is again placed on individuals and teams, rather than on the organisational conditions that shaped what was possible.

The consequence is not resistance to change, but adaptation to constraint. Practitioners learn how far they can push before encountering structural limits and calibrate their efforts accordingly. Awareness remains high, intent remains sincere, but practice is continually pulled back into patterns that feel safer, more legible, and more easily governed. In this way, awareness does not fail to spread; it fails to transform.

What this produces in practice

When systemic misalignment remains unrecognised, its effects can be immediate and disruptive, particularly in large-scale, multi-market transformation efforts. Confusion over authority, competing interpretations of intent, and fragmented decision-making can surface as delay, conflict, and cost escalation almost from the outset. At the same time, these effects are just as often normalised over time as friction, complexity, or the unavoidable cost of scale, rather than examined as evidence of a deeper structural condition.

In response, practitioners adapt quickly, narrowing effort towards areas where authority is clearest and exposure is lowest, even when this comes at the expense of coherence. Local delivery becomes the safest route to progress, while systemic consequences remain diffuse and difficult to trace, meaning that what appears as success within one part of the organisation often creates new constraints elsewhere and reinforces fragmentation rather than resolving it.

This dynamic also reshapes how progress is judged, with delivery becoming the dominant lens because it is measurable and governable, even when it is poorly aligned to the outcome's transformation initiatives claim to pursue. Work that navigates interdependencies, resolves tension, or prevents downstream failure stays largely invisible, while activity that fits existing reporting and assurance structures is rewarded, distorting priorities and subtly redefining what "good" transformation practice looks like.

The cumulative effect is erosion rather than simple failure, with confidence diminishing not only in specific initiatives but in the possibility of transformation itself. Practitioners become more cautious in how they frame ambition, more selective in how they apply human-centred approaches, and more pragmatic about what can realistically be changed, responses that are often misread as lack of commitment or capability rather than understood as rational adaptations to structural constraint.

In this way, systemic misalignment reproduces itself, not by preventing transformation from starting, but by steadily absorbing it and redirecting effort towards what the system can tolerate rather than what the organisation requires. The gap between intent and outcome widens even as experience deepens and language matures.

Where this leaves us

The patterns described here are familiar to many practitioners precisely because they are not exceptional, recurring across programmes, organisations, and sectors despite good intent, capable people, and sustained effort. What distinguishes them is not a lack of commitment or understanding, but the absence of conditions that allow insight to translate into aligned action.

Systemic misalignment persists precisely because it is rarely addressed as such, with its effects absorbed into everyday explanations of complexity, scale, and organisational reality, while responsibility for outcomes continues to be localised and personalised. In this environment, transformation work becomes an exercise in navigation rather than change, as practitioners adapt continuously to constraints that stay largely unquestioned.

This article has focused on naming that condition and legitimising its impact on practice, without trying to resolve it. The accompanying white paper, *Navigating Systemic Misalignment: In Search of a Human-Centred Response*, develops this argument in depth, drawing on research and practice to examine why awareness has not become practice and what it would take to respond more honestly and coherently.

The intention is not to offer another framework or method, but to create the conditions for a different conversation, one that treats systemic misalignment as a structural reality to be confronted rather than a delivery problem to be worked around. Only from that starting point does genuine human-centred transformation become a possibility.