

7 SIGNS YOUR ORGANISATION ISN'T FUTURE PROOFED

Good people shouldn't have to
compensate for broken systems

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WHY I WROTE THIS GUIDE

Years ago, I was introduced to the thinking behind the Toyota Production System. I was working in human services, not manufacturing, and I had no interest in turning care into a production line.

What changed my thinking wasn't Toyota's ability to build cars. It was the philosophy underneath how the organisation worked.

Respect people.

Get close to the work.

Understand problems before solving them.

Make problems visible.

Build quality into the system rather than relying on good people to catch problems.

Keep learning and improving.

I became convinced that these principles weren't about manufacturing at all. They were about how good organisations work. And perhaps they matter even more in human services.

WHEN THE WORK INVOLVES PEOPLE, THE SYSTEM MATTERS

When the work involves people — their safety, care, dignity and lives — we cannot afford systems that depend on heroic individuals constantly compensating for poor processes.

Yet I have repeatedly seen exactly that.

Good people working incredibly hard inside systems that make good work harder than it needs to be. Workarounds become normal. Problems are fixed repeatedly rather than solved. Strategy sits above the work rather than connecting to it. Risk becomes something to manage after the event rather than something the system helps us see.

Over the years, I've learnt to look for certain signs.

These seven don't tell you everything about an organisation. But they are useful places to start.

Because future proofing isn't about predicting what happens next.

It's about building an organisation capable of responding when it does.

01

YOUR SYSTEMS RELY TOO HEAVILY ON INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE

Human services organisations are often built on the commitment and experience of good people who know how to make things work.

As organisations grow, that can become a risk.

When critical knowledge lives in people's heads rather than in clear, consistent processes, the organisation becomes dependent on who is working that day. New staff learn through word of mouth, different teams develop different ways of doing the same work, and workarounds gradually become normal practice.

The result is **variation, inefficiency and greater opportunity for error.**

Future-proofed organisations don't remove people from the equation. They do the opposite: **they build systems that support good people to do good work consistently.**

ASK YOURSELF

If one of your most experienced people left tomorrow, what would leave with them?

02

YOUR BEST PEOPLE ARE WORKING AROUND BROKEN SYSTEMS

No one comes to work wanting to do a bad job. Yet capable and committed people often spend enormous energy compensating for systems that make good work harder than it needs to be.

They create spreadsheets because the system doesn't give them what they need. They develop workarounds, chase information, duplicate tasks, fix recurring errors and rely on personal relationships to get things done.

And because good people are remarkably resourceful, **the organisation keeps functioning.**

That's the danger.

Workarounds hide the underlying problems, while frustration, workload and risk continue to grow. Eventually, the people holding the system together become exhausted — or leave — taking capability and knowledge with them.

A future-proofed organisation doesn't rely on people working harder to overcome poor systems. **It fixes the system.**

ASK YOURSELF

How much of your organisation's success depends on people going above and beyond just to make things work?

03

RISK AND HARM HAVE BECOME NORMALISED

When incidents, errors or near misses happen often enough, organisations can start to see them as an inevitable part of delivering complex human services.

They aren't.

Complexity creates risk, but it should never become an excuse for accepting preventable harm. When the same types of incidents keep occurring, the question shouldn't be *"Who made the mistake?"* It should be **"What is it about our system that allows this to keep happening?"**

Normalisation happens gradually. Workarounds become accepted. Recurring incidents stop surprising us. *"We're under-resourced"* or *"that's just the nature of the work"* becomes part of the organisational narrative.

Over time, **the threshold for what feels acceptable quietly shifts.**

Future-proofed organisations stay curious about harm. They make risk visible, learn from incidents and near misses, and strengthen systems before the next event occurs.

The goal isn't to pretend all risk can be eliminated. It's to refuse to accept preventable harm as inevitable.

ASK YOURSELF

What happens regularly in your organisation today that would have concerned you five years ago?

04

STRATEGY EXISTS, BUT EXECUTION DOESN'T

Most organisations are not short of strategy. They invest considerable time developing strategic plans, defining priorities and articulating where they want to be in three or five years.

The gap is often in how they get there.

Strategy only creates value when it translates into clear priorities, decisions and actions throughout the organisation. If people delivering services cannot see how their day-to-day work connects to the broader direction, the strategy remains something discussed at leadership and board level rather than something lived in the organisation.

This is where organisations can become incredibly busy without necessarily moving forward. Projects multiply, priorities compete and teams work hard — but the connection between effort and strategic purpose becomes difficult to see.

Future-proofed organisations build the bridge between strategy and execution. **People understand what matters, what their part is, and how progress will be measured.**

The *'why'* and the *'what'* matter. **But the hard work is building the *'how'*.**

ASK YOURSELF

If you asked people across your organisation how their work contributes to the strategy, would they be able to tell you?

EXPERTISE IS VALUED MORE THAN CURIOSITY

Organisations need expertise. But expertise becomes a problem when knowing the answer replaces understanding the problem.

It's tempting to bring in a subject matter expert, adopt a model that worked somewhere else, or reach for a solution that has been successful before. But human services organisations are complex. Their people, customers, communities and operating environments are different. **A solution cannot simply be lifted from one organisation and dropped into another.**

Learning organisations resist the urge to jump straight to the answer. Leaders get closer to the work. They listen to the people delivering the service and, critically, to the people receiving it. **They seek to understand the context before deciding what needs to change.**

Future-proofed organisations value expertise, **but they value curiosity first.** They create leaders who are willing to observe, listen and challenge their own assumptions.

Sometimes the most powerful leadership question is also the simplest:

"How do you know?"

ASK YOURSELF

When faced with a problem, does your organisation genuinely seek to understand it — or does it rush to implement the answer?

06

FUNCTIONS WORK WELL – BUT THE ORGANISATION DOESN'T FLOW

Functional expertise matters. Finance, People, Operations, Quality, Risk and other teams all have important roles to play. But customers don't experience an organisation in functions — **they experience the whole system.**

When teams operate in silos, each function can be doing its job well while the overall experience remains fragmented. Information gets lost at handovers. Decisions are made without understanding their impact elsewhere. Teams optimise their own part of the process while unintentionally creating work, delay or risk for another.

Future-proofed organisations create connection across functions. People understand not only **“my part”**, but how their work contributes to the bigger picture. Leaders build shared purpose, shared accountability and a clear understanding of the customer everyone ultimately serves.

The strength of an organisation isn't found in how well each individual function performs. It's found in how well those functions work together to deliver value.

ASK YOURSELF

Where does work get harder in your organisation simply because it has to cross a functional boundary?

07

YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM ISN'T TRULY ALIGNED

Alignment is more than agreeing in a meeting.

A leadership team can contain highly capable individuals and still struggle to operate as a team. Priorities compete, decisions are revisited, functions pull in different directions and difficult conversations happen outside the room rather than inside it.

Alignment has to be built. It requires trust, clarity and a shared commitment to the organisation's purpose – not just individual portfolios or professional perspectives.

Future-proofed organisations invest in leadership teams that can challenge each other, make decisions together and remain collectively accountable once those decisions are made. Leaders know their people, understand their strengths and create the conditions for them to succeed.

This doesn't mean everyone has to agree. **Healthy disagreement strengthens a team.** Misalignment happens when individual agendas become more important than the collective outcome.

ASK YOURSELF

When your leadership team leaves the room, are they genuinely carrying the same decision forward?

WHAT NOW?

HOW FUTURE-PROOFED IS YOUR ORGANISATION?

You don't need to fix everything at once. But you do need to know where to start.

The seven signs in this guide are not a checklist for a perfect organisation. No organisation is perfect.

They are prompts to help you notice where systems may be making good work harder than it needs to be.

The opportunity is to get closer to the work, make the problems visible and start improving the system – one problem at a time.

Not sure where to start?

I work with human services organisations to understand what's really happening beneath the surface – across systems, risk, operations, governance and the way the work actually gets done.

Sometimes the first step is simply a conversation.

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