

InSpark Group Inc.
Organizational Absurdity Research Program
Field Paper Series - Paper 01

Absurdity Signals:

Early Detection of Organizational Compression

*A diagnostic framework for early signal detection
in complex organizations.*

Charleen Johnson
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Field Paper Series

Paper 01

Absurdity Signals: Early Detection of Organizational Compression

Organizational Absurdity Research Program
InSpark Group Inc.

About the Field Paper Series

The Organizational Absurdity Research Program publishes the Field Paper Series to explore early signals of systemic pressure in complex organizational environments. These papers present emerging frameworks, observational findings, and conceptual models that contribute to the study of organizational absurdity, signal emergence, and compression dynamics. Future papers will explore structural contradictions, recurring absurdity patterns, and the system dynamics through which organizations move from early signal emergence toward compression and potential capacity freeze.

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Field papers represent ongoing research and are released to encourage discussion and further investigation.

Abstract

Organizations rarely experience systemic breakdown suddenly. Long before formal metrics deteriorate or operational failures become visible, early interpretive signals appear in how people describe, sense, and adapt to their work environments. This research focuses specifically on human interpretive signals that emerge through narrative, embodied, and behavioural channels as people attempt to interpret unresolved structural contradictions within complex systems. Humor, irony, sarcasm, and satire frequently emerge as people try to make sense of these tensions. These expressions are often dismissed as disengagement or cultural cynicism. This paper proposes a different interpretation: absurdity inside organizations functions as an early diagnostic signal of systems under compression.

Keywords

organizational sensemaking, absurdity signals, narrative diagnostics, structural contradictions, orientation capacity, organizational compression

Executive Summary

Long before performance metrics decline or operational failures become visible, early signals often appear in how people describe, interpret, and respond to their work environments. These signals should not be confused with performance indicators or employee behaviour problems. This research focuses specifically on early human interpretive signals that emerge through narrative expressions, embodied reactions, and informal behavioural adaptations as people attempt to interpret tensions within the system.

These signals often manifest through humor, irony, satire, metaphor, or subtle behavioural cues that reveal contradictions between official narratives and lived operational reality.

Most organizations do not interpret these expressions as diagnostic information. Instead, they are dismissed as cynicism, disengagement, or cultural resistance. As a result, systems often detect instability only after structural pressure has accumulated and decision processes begin to break down.

This paper forms part of the ***Organizational Absurdity Research Program***, an ongoing research initiative examining how organizations detect early signals of systemic pressure in complex environments. The program is currently hosted by InSpark Group and was originally developed through observational research

documented via the Behaving Badly HQ investigative platform and the findings of the 2026 Workplace Absurdities Report.

The research views organizations as signal-processing systems in which people continuously interpret information, reconcile competing priorities, and coordinate action under changing conditions. Within this ecosystem, structural contradictions generate signals that appear across narrative, behavioural, and embodied channels. These signals influence collective sensemaking, orientation capacity, and ultimately the coherence of organizational decision-making.

Field Paper 01 focuses on the signal ecology layer of the broader research ecosystem. It introduces absurdity signals as early indicators of systemic pressure and explains how humor, irony, and metaphor often emerge as people attempt to reconcile contradictions before formal breakdown is visible.

1. The Broader Research Ecosystem

The research program investigates how organizations detect and interpret early signals of systemic pressure in complex environments. The work examines how structural conditions generate observable signals long before performance failures, strategic breakdowns, or operational crises become visible.

Rather than viewing organizations primarily as execution systems, this research approaches them as **signal-processing environments**. People continuously interpret emerging information, reconcile competing priorities, and coordinate action across multiple actors. When this interpretive capacity functions well, organizations maintain coherence between strategy, narrative, and operational reality. When the interpretive process begins to degrade, subtle signals often appear within everyday language, behaviour, and interaction.

To understand how these dynamics unfold, the research examines organizations through **five interacting layers within an organizational signal ecosystem**.

1. Environmental Conditions: The broader context in which organizations operate, including accelerating change, increasing interdependence, and tightly coupled decision environments.

2. Structural Contradictions: Tensions embedded in organizational design that create incompatible expectations, priorities, or incentives.

3. Signal Ecology: The layer in which early signals appear as people encounter and attempt to reconcile these contradictions. Signals may emerge through embodied reactions, narrative fragments, humor or satire, and behavioural adaptations.

4. Pattern Formation: Recurring configurations through which structural contradictions and behavioural responses stabilize into recognizable organizational patterns.

5. System Trajectories: The longer-term dynamics that emerge as signals accumulate, potentially leading to organizational compression, coordination breakdown, or capacity freeze. Together these layers form an **organizational signal ecosystem** through which systems continuously interpret changing conditions and coordinate action.

Figure 1. Organizational Signal Ecosystem

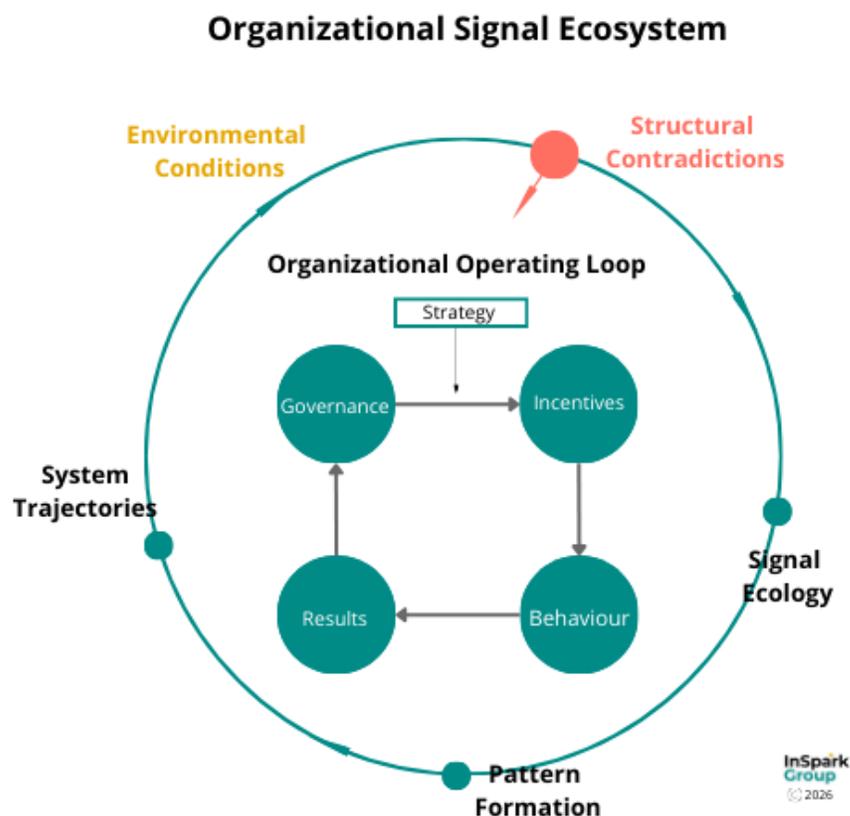


Figure 1. Organizational Signal Ecosystem

Organizations operate within dynamic signal environments where structural conditions continuously generate observable indicators of systemic pressure. Environmental conditions shape the broader operating context in which structural contradictions emerge. These contradictions produce signals across multiple channels, including embodied reactions, narrative expressions, behavioural adaptations, and expressions of absurdity, as people try to reconcile competing priorities. As signals accumulate, recurring behavioural patterns begin to form, influencing how coordination, decision-making, and strategy execution unfold across the system. Over time, these patterns contribute to broader system trajectories that shape the organization's adaptive capacity and ability to respond to changing conditions.

2. The Problem: Late Detection of Organizational Instability

Organizations rarely collapse without warning. However, most detection systems identify problems only after performance decline or operational failure becomes visible. Traditional organizational monitoring focuses on measurable outputs: financial results, operational incidents, compliance failures, and employee engagement scores.

While these indicators are important, they typically appear after instability has already developed. In complex systems, structural tensions accumulate gradually before producing visible breakdown.

One of the earliest indicators of these tensions often appears not in metrics but in narrative. Employees begin joking about initiatives, translating corporate language into operational reality, or using humor to describe contradictions between strategy and execution.

Examples frequently heard inside organizations include:

- “Everything is priority one.”
- “Another transformation initiative.”
- “We launched this last year.”

These expressions are commonly dismissed as cultural cynicism or resistance. However, when similar forms of humor appear repeatedly across organizations and industries, they suggest something more systematic. They represent early attempts by people to interpret contradictions embedded within the system.

3. Why Traditional Detection Systems Miss Early Signals

Traditional management systems prioritize quantitative measurement and formal reporting structures. While these systems are useful for monitoring outcomes, they are less effective at detecting early-stage systemic pressure.

Several factors contribute to this detection gap:

First, organizations often privilege measurable indicators over narrative signals. Informal conversations, humor, and metaphor are rarely treated as legitimate sources of diagnostic information.

Second, cultural norms frequently discourage dissent or ironic commentary, leading organizations to suppress signals that might otherwise reveal structural contradictions.

Third, initiative overload and information saturation make it difficult for leaders to interpret emerging patterns across different parts of the organization.

The result is a signal detection gap: early indicators of systemic pressure are present, but they are not interpreted as meaningful information.

4. The Proposed Solution: Absurdity as Diagnostic Signal

This paper proposes a different interpretation of humor and irony in organizational settings. Rather than viewing these expressions as noise, they can be understood as diagnostic signals produced by people attempting to make sense of contradictions.

Absurdity signals rarely appear randomly. They tend to emerge when structural contradictions create tension between official narratives and operational reality. Under these conditions people often attempt to interpret competing demands, shifting priorities, or unclear decision logic. Humor, satire, and metaphor provide socially acceptable ways of surfacing these tensions while maintaining coordination within the system.

Absurdity signals emerge when people encounter gaps between official narratives and operational reality. Humor, satire, and metaphor provide indirect ways of expressing tensions that may be difficult to address directly.

For example, when strategic initiatives multiply faster than operational capacity, people often describe the situation humorously as “everything being a priority.”

Such expressions reveal structural tensions that may not yet appear in formal reporting systems.

Recognizing absurdity as signal allows organizations to detect systemic pressure earlier and respond before instability escalates.

5. Diagnostic Framework

The research framework integrates four key elements for interpreting absurdity signals within organizations: structural contradictions, orientation capacity, signal patterns, and systemic compression.

Structural contradictions arise when organizational structures generate incompatible expectations. These tensions may appear between strategic ambition and operational capacity, between measurement systems and meaningful work, or between centralized authority and distributed accountability. Such contradictions create conditions in which people must continually reconcile competing demands.

Orientation capacity refers to the system's ability to maintain a shared understanding of reality and coordinate action under changing conditions. In complex environments, organizations must continually interpret emerging signals, update their understanding of evolving conditions, and adjust decisions accordingly. When orientation capacity is strong, people can recognize early signals and adapt coordination practices before tensions escalate. When this capacity weakens, contradictions accumulate faster than they can be interpreted, increasing the likelihood of organizational compression and coordination strain.

Estuary as a Metaphor

Signal emergence can be understood through the metaphor of an estuary. In natural environments, estuaries form where river currents meet tidal flows, creating turbulent mixing zones in which multiple forces interact.

Organizational systems display similar dynamics. Strategic intentions, operational constraints, external pressures, and human interpretation converge to form interpretive mixing zones where competing demands intersect. These environments often produce turbulence as people attempt to reconcile contradictions between official narratives and operational reality.

Within these zones, early interpretive signals frequently appear through narrative expressions such as humor, irony, metaphor, or satire as individuals attempt to make sense of tensions that have not yet been formally acknowledged.

These signals originate in structural contradictions embedded in system design, where organizational structures generate incompatible expectations such as competing priorities, conflicting incentives, or misalignment between strategic ambition and operational capacity. The research has identified five recurring structural contradiction archetypes.

As signals accumulate faster than the system can interpret and respond to them, recognizable signal patterns begin to emerge. The process through which structural contradictions generate observable signals within interpretive mixing zones is illustrated in the model below.

Figure 2. Structural Contradictions and Orientation Capacity

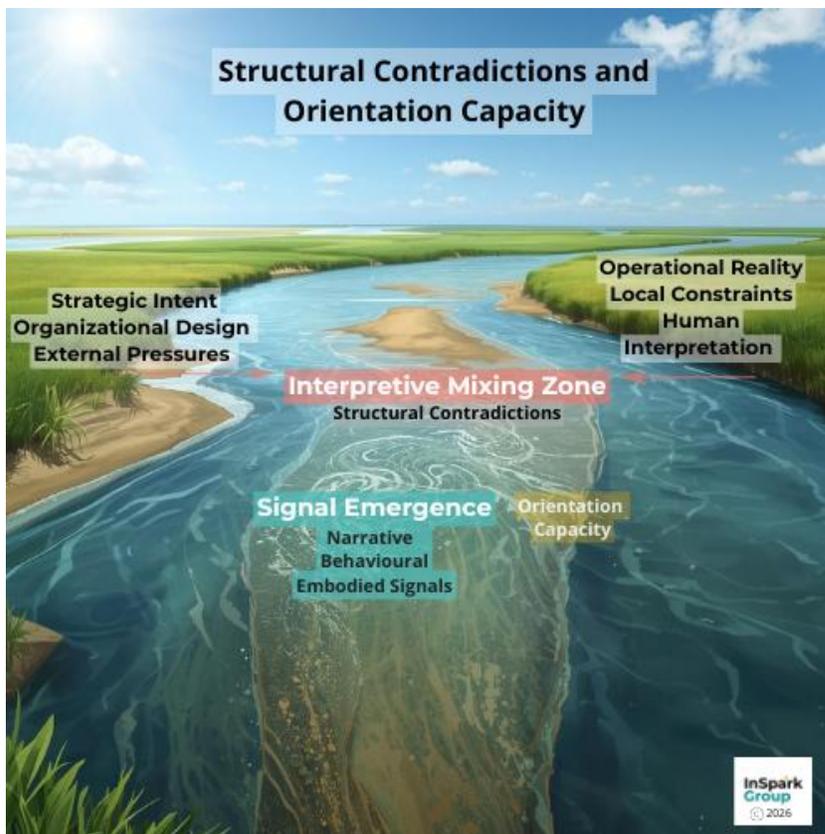


Figure 2. Structural Contradictions and Orientation Capacity

Organizational systems function as interpretive environments in which multiple forces converge. Strategic intent, operational constraints, external pressures, and human interpretation interact within interpretive mixing zones similar to natural estuaries, where currents meet and turbulence emerges. Structural contradictions arising within these zones generate observable signals across multiple interpretive channels. When orientation capacity is strong, people can recognize and interpret these signals, allowing the system to adjust and coordinate adaptive responses. When orientation capacity weakens, signals accumulate faster than they can be interpreted, increasing the risk of organizational compression and reduced adaptive capacity.

While the estuary metaphor explains how signals accumulate within organizational environments, organizations must still interpret these signals and regain shared orientation in order to coordinate effective action. The broader process linking signal emergence to organizational response is illustrated below.

Figure 3. Organizational Signal and Navigation Model

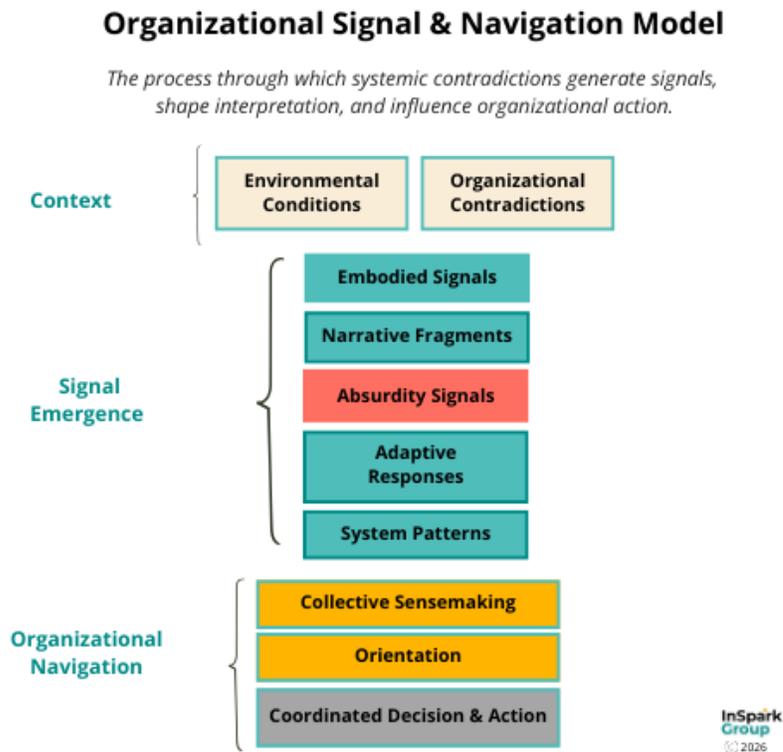


Figure 3. Organizational Signal and Navigation Model

Systemic contradictions generate signals that surface through language and behavior. Through collective sensemaking and orientation, organizations can interpret these signals and coordinate effective action.

6. Types of Signal Channels

The research framework identifies several types of channels that often appear during the early stages of systemic pressure. These signals emerge across embodied, narrative, and behavioural channels as people attempt to interpret contradictions within the system.

While organizations generate many forms of operational and performance data, this research focuses specifically on early human interpretive signals that appear before formal indicators of system stress become visible.

Signal Channel	Description	Examples
Embodied	Physical or affective reactions indicating tension	hesitation, discomfort, tone shifts
Narrative	Language fragments used to interpret contradictions	metaphors, sarcasm, antenarratives
Behavioural	Operational adaptations that reveal unresolved pressures	workarounds, shadow processes

Embodied Signals

Embodied signals frequently appear first. These include physical or emotional reactions such as hesitation, sighs, silence, eye-rolling, or visible discomfort during discussions. People may pause, hesitate, or show tension when discussing priorities or decisions.

These signals often appear before individuals are able to articulate the source of the tension verbally. In this sense, embodied reactions can be understood as early indicators that people are sensing contradictions within the system, even before they can fully explain them.

Narrative Signals

Narrative signals emerge when people begin attempting to express or interpret emerging contradictions through language. These signals often appear as fragments of explanation rather than fully developed narratives.

Early narrative expressions may include partial interpretations, speculation, or attempts to translate organizational language into operational reality. In narrative theory, early fragments are sometimes described as **antenarratives**, pre-narrative expressions that appear before coherent stories about events have formed.

As tensions become more socially visible, narrative signals frequently take the form of humor, satire, sarcasm, or metaphor. These expressions allow people to communicate contradictions indirectly when direct confrontation may be difficult.

Examples frequently heard in organizations include:

- “Everything is priority one.”
- “Another transformation initiative.”
- “We launched this strategy last year.”

Such expressions often represent collective attempts to interpret gaps between official narratives and lived operational reality.

Behavioural Signals

Behavioural signals appear when systemic pressure begins influencing patterns of action across the organization. These signals become visible through observable shifts in coordination, decision processes, or operational routines. Examples may include meeting proliferation, initiative overload, delayed decisions, or repeated planning cycles that produce limited operational change.

Behavioural signals indicate that structural contradictions are no longer expressed only through narrative interpretation but are beginning to shape how the system actually functions.

7. Signal Emergence Under Increasing Structural Pressure

Complex organizational systems rarely evolve through strictly linear stages. However, systems experiencing increasing structural pressure often display recognizable patterns in how signals become visible across different interpretive channels. The sequence described below reflects a commonly observed progression across multiple organizational contexts rather than a fixed or deterministic pathway.

These signals should not be interpreted as the system state itself. Instead, they function as early indicators of deeper structural dynamics, including orientation

drift, organizational compression, and the possible emergence of stabilized system patterns or attractor states.

Stage 0: Embodied Detection

At the earliest stage, people begin sensing tension or contradiction before they are able to articulate it clearly. Signals appear primarily through embodied reactions such as hesitation, discomfort, subtle emotional responses, shifts in tone, or changes in body language during discussions.

These signals often emerge before people consciously recognize the source of the tension, reflecting an early disruption in the coherence between formal strategy and operational experience.

Stage 1: Orientation Drift

As tension increases, people begin experiencing uncertainty about priorities, decision logic, or the coherence of strategic direction. Individuals attempt to interpret what is happening through partial explanations, narrative fragments, and antenarrative expressions.

At this stage, signals remain ambiguous and fragmented. People may sense that something is misaligned but struggle to articulate the underlying structural contradictions producing the drift.

Stage 2: Absurdity Signals

As contradictions become more visible, humor, satire, sarcasm, and metaphor often emerge as socially acceptable ways of expressing systemic tension. These absurdity signals highlight gaps between official narratives and operational reality.

Absurdity frequently marks a **recognition threshold**, where contradictions that were previously sensed or partially articulated become collectively visible within the organization.

Stage 3: Organizational Compression

As structural contradictions persist, the system begins to experience organizational compression. Initiatives multiply, coordination slows, and decision processes

become increasingly strained. Leaders frequently call for alignment while people struggle to reconcile competing priorities.

Under these conditions, people begin adapting behaviour in order to maintain operational functioning. Informal workarounds, shadow processes, and alternative coordination practices emerge as individuals attempt to navigate increasing structural pressure.

Behavioural adaptations at this stage are not merely individual responses but early indicators that the formal operating structures of the organization are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

Stage 4: System Pattern Formation

Over time, repeated behavioural adaptations may stabilize into recurring patterns that shape how work is actually coordinated and executed within the system. What initially begins as temporary adjustments or informal workarounds can gradually become embedded as persistent operating practices.

These stabilized patterns influence system trajectories and may produce different structural outcomes depending on how tensions evolve. In some cases, systems may settle into rigid coordination patterns that reduce adaptive capacity. In other cases, patterns may reorganize into new configurations that restore coherence.

Within complexity science, such stabilized behavioural configurations are often described as **attractor states or attractor landscapes**, where system dynamics settle into recurring modes of operation.

Examples of these outcomes may include conditions such as **capacity freeze, systemic regression, or adaptive reconfiguration**, depending on how the system responds to ongoing structural pressures. The sequence described here represents one common pathway through which structural contradictions within the broader organizational signal ecosystem become visible to people over time.

Figure 4. Signal Emergence Pattern Under Structural Pressure

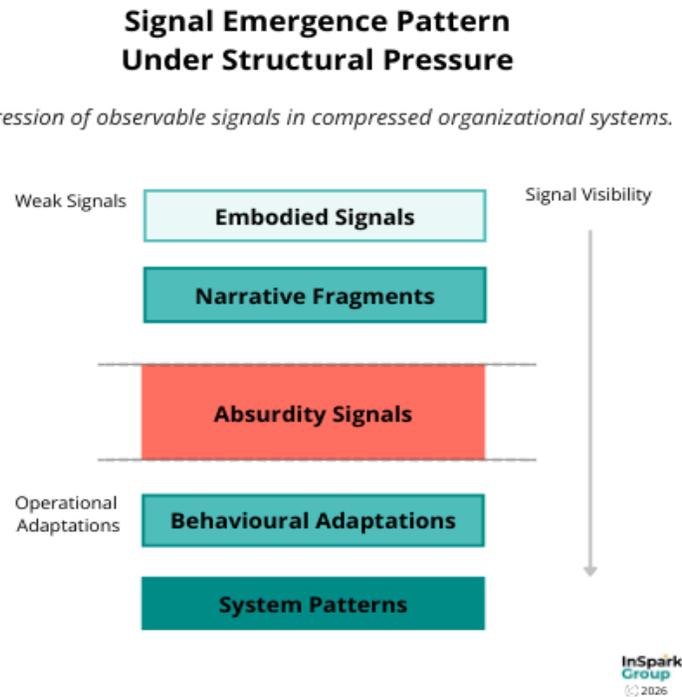


Figure 3. Signal Emergence Pattern Under Structural Pressure

Signals of systemic pressure emerge gradually through multiple channels before structural breakdown becomes visible. Early signals can appear as embodied reactions and fragmented narratives as people attempt to interpret emerging contradictions. As pressures accumulate, absurdity signals surface through humor, sarcasm, and metaphor, making contradictions socially visible. Under conditions of organizational compression, people begin adapting behaviour through workarounds and alternative coordination practices. Over time, adaptations may stabilize into recurring system patterns that shape organizational trajectories.

8. Absurdity Pattern Library

The Absurdity Pattern Library identifies recurring patterns through which absurdity signals manifest. In this research, a pattern refers to a recurring configuration of structural contradiction, behavioural adaptation, operator language, and metaphoric signals observed across multiple organizational contexts.

The library currently identifies five archetype families:

- Structural Compression Patterns
- Coordination Collapse Patterns
- Narrative Distortion Patterns
- Authority and Agency Breakdown Patterns
- Incentive Distortion Patterns

For example, the pattern known as Metric Fixation occurs when measurement systems become disconnected from meaningful operational outcomes. People often describe this condition using language such as “managing the spreadsheet instead of the system.” By mapping these patterns, the library allows practitioners to interpret narrative signals as indicators of deeper systemic conditions. The library currently identifies 15 recurring absurdity patterns organized across the above five structural contradiction archetype families.

Figure 5. Structure of the Absurdity Pattern Library

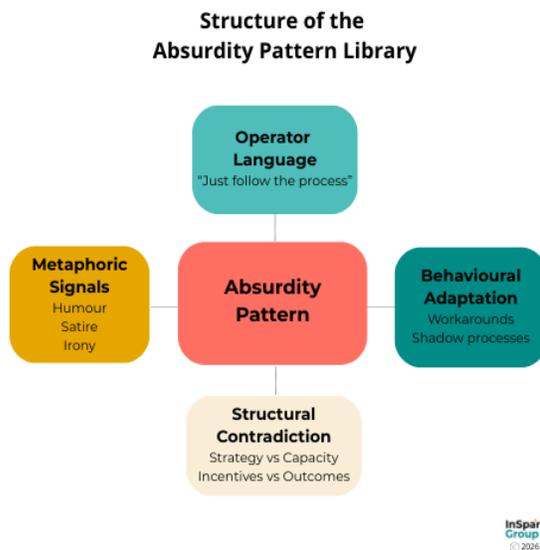


Figure 4. Structure of the Absurdity Pattern Library

The Absurdity Pattern Library organizes recurring organizational contradictions by examining four observable elements. These diagnostic lenses help identify how systemic tensions appear in everyday practice and how people interpret and respond to them within complex organizational environments.

9. Implications for Leaders and Practitioners

Treating absurdity signals as diagnostic information changes how leaders interpret everyday organizational behaviour inside complex systems. Rather than suppressing humor or dismissing ironic commentary as negativity, leaders can use these signals to identify emerging contradictions earlier.

Leaders and practitioners can improve early detection by:

- Listening carefully to recurring humor or metaphors
- Identifying patterns across different teams or departments
- Mapping narrative signals to underlying structural contradictions
- Addressing contradictions before compression escalates

Treating these signals as meaningful information allows organizations to intervene earlier and preserve orientation capacity. From a complexity perspective, absurdity expressions can be understood as weak signals of systemic tension, often appearing well before formal narratives of failure or crisis emerge.

10. Conclusion

Organizations often assume that instability appears suddenly. In reality, systems produce signals long before organizational instability becomes visible.

Humor, satire, and metaphor frequently represent the earliest expressions of these signals. By interpreting absurdity signals within the broader ecosystem of structural contradictions and orientation capacity, organizations can detect systemic pressure earlier and respond more effectively.

This field paper introduces the upstream signal layer of the research framework. Future papers in the series will expand on the Absurdity Pattern Library, structural contradiction dynamics, and the practices required to restore orientation capacity in complex organizational systems.