

# 2026 Workplace Absurdities Report

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Why Work Feels Busy, Unclear,  
and Harder to Navigate Than It Should

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A research report from InSpark Group

*In collaboration with Behaving Badly HQ*

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## A Letter from Charleen

Work has changed faster than our ways of making sense of it. People are navigating more ambiguity, more interdependence, and more pressure to adapt than ever before. Most are doing so with skill, care, and commitment. And yet, many describe a growing sense that work feels harder to navigate than it used to, even when progress appears visible on the surface.

This report grew out of our curiosity about that experience. For years, we have been observing how people respond when conditions remain unresolved. What we noticed was not failure or disengagement, but ingenuity. People stretch, compensate, smooth over gaps, and carry forward. These adaptations often keep things functioning. Over time, however, they can also create patterns that feel strangely familiar across very different organizations.

We call these patterns workplace absurdities. Not as a critique of individuals or institutions, but as a way of naming what happens when complexity is carried locally rather than supported by shared structures.

Drawing on global research, organizational analysis, and our own field observations, this report identifies recurring conditions shaping modern work. It looks at how uncertainty, speed, and structural ambiguity shift effort and risk downward, where they are held through attention, judgment, and identity. It explores why well-intentioned initiatives often struggle to get momentum.

At the center of this work is orientation – the ability to locate ourselves accurately in what is happening, to distinguish signal from noise, and to make choices that align with what conditions actually allow. When orientation weakens, effort increases but movement gets harder to sustain. When orientation is restored, even small, coherent moves can compound again.

This report is designed to be used, not consumed. It can support clearer conversations, better judgment, and more grounded decisions about where to intervene and where not to. We offer it as part of an ongoing inquiry into what it now takes to do work that is both effective and human.

This is not the end of the conversation. It's the beginning of a better one. I'm glad you're here for it.

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Charleen Johnson  
Lead Researcher

## 1. Introduction

Robert Kegan once warned that modern life was leaving many people “in over their heads.” His concern was not individual inadequacy, but environments that placed increasing demands on meaning-making, judgment, and emotional regulation without developing the capacities required to meet them.

Around the same time, Peter Vaill observed that work was no longer unfolding in stable conditions punctuated by change. Organizations were operating in what he called permanent whitewater: continuous turbulence without a return to calm. Those insights remain relevant. What this report suggests is that the challenge has since intensified and shifted.

Today’s organizations operate inside complex, adaptive systems shaped by speed, interdependence, delayed consequences, and persistent uncertainty. Yet much of how work is structured, governed, and changed still assumes predictability, control, and linear improvement. This mismatch does not stop work. Performance continues. Adaptation succeeds.

What changes is how strain is interpreted and carried. Over time, structural strain is treated as a performance or capability issue. Adaptation compensates for unresolved structural limits. Effectiveness stalls. Renewal slows. Capacity does not disappear. It freezes.

This report investigates a central question:

**Why does work feel increasingly busy, unclear, and harder to navigate than it should, even when capable people, teams, and organizations are performing, adapting, and continuing to deliver?**

The analysis that follows explores how this experience emerges, how it becomes normalized, and why it persists. It focuses not on individual failure, but on the conditions that shape judgment, sensemaking, and orientation inside modern work.

This Orientation Guide is a high-level introduction to the the full **2026 Workplace Absurdities Report (70+ pages)**. The report is written for leaders, practitioners, and designers of work systems operating under sustained uncertainty. The brief is designed to help readers quickly understand the core patterns, logic, and implications of the research. Those looking for deeper analysis, extended evidence, application questions ideas, are invited to explore the full report.

## 2. Approach and Methodology

This report draws on a mixed-methods approach combining global workplace research, cross-sector analysis, and field observations gathered in collaboration with Behaving Badly HQ. The aim was to surface the conditions shaping how modern work is actually being lived and navigated, not to forecast trends or optimize performance.

We drew on a wide range of contemporary workplace research, including major consulting and institutional sources such as Deloitte, McKinsey, Gartner, the World Economic Forum, and Gallup, alongside independent scholarship and practitioner research. A full list of sources appears in the References section.

To interpret these patterns, the report applies three complementary lenses:

- A **complexity lens**, to understand how systems behave under constraint and why pressure does not resolve through force or optimization.
- A **systems lens**, to trace where strain migrates when structures no longer hold ambiguity, coordination, or risk.
- An **integral lens**, to examine how these dynamics unfold simultaneously across individual, relational, and organizational levels.

## 3. Findings

The findings in this report are not isolated problems or trends to address individually. They are recurring signals appearing together across roles, organizations, and industries, even as language, tools, and initiatives change.

Two distinct but interrelated types of findings emerged:

- **Five TRIMs** (Trends Revealing Internal Mechanics)– Signals describing how strain accumulates and is experienced across modern work systems.
- **Five Leadership Capacity Findings** – Patterns showing how those same conditions are being carried, absorbed, and navigated in leadership roles

Each finding is supported by field-level absurdity examples, and qualitative evidence drawn from observation organizations, and contemporary workplace research, including major consulting and institutional sources.

Across these findings, a consistent absence became visible: the lack of shared structural scaffolding to hold judgment, decision-making, pacing, sensemaking, authority, and relational risk collectively.

As formal structures for prioritization, integration, and protection thin, these demands are absorbed by individuals and roles instead. What shows up as leadership load, emotional labor, or resilience demand is often the system compensating for missing architecture.

## **The Five TRIMs Findings**

### **1. Leader Confidence Erosion Under Complexity**

Decision-making slows because the conditions surrounding judgment have become riskier, more exposed, and harder to hold.

### **2. Fragmentation of Worker Identity and Role Clarity**

People adapt across shifting expectations and contexts, but the effort of holding multiple versions of themselves takes a toll on clarity and meaning.

### **3. Escalating Role Overload and Cognitive Strain**

Responsibilities accumulate faster than they are shed, leaving people mentally crowded, reactive, and short on thinking space.

### **4. Stability Treated as Temporary**

Even when work appears stable on the surface, people act as if conditions could shift any moment, shaping decisions toward caution and containment.

### **5. Breakdown of Trust, Shared Context, and Relational Bandwidth**

Communication increases while shared understanding thins, forcing more effort into alignment, documentation, and clarification.

**Figure Note:** Like any credible workplace analysis, included is a structured visual summary that translates lived strain into reassuring organizational language. This figure illustrates how observable system conditions under sustained pressure are commonly reframed into a dominant continuity narrative, allowing work to continue without triggering redesign.

**Figure 3A: Organizational Continuity Sensemaking Overlay™**  
Observed conditions and the dominant continuity narrative under sustained strain

Observed Conditions in the System	Dominant Continuity Narrative
• Work continues to function despite persistent ambiguity	→ Current operating model demonstrates resilience under dynamic conditions
• Interpretive, emotional, and coordination load shifts to individuals	→ High levels of employee adaptability and discretionary effort observed
• Effort increases without corresponding structural redesign	→ Teams are demonstrating ownership, flexibility, and local problem-solving
• Issues recur across roles, organizations, and sectors	→ Patterns appear context-specific and manageable at present scale
• Relief does not arrive through correction or redesign	→ No immediate intervention required at this time

## The Five Leadership Capacity Findings

These leadership capacity findings show how the conditions surfaced in the TRIMs are being carried, absorbed, and navigated in leadership roles. What follows are five recurring patterns describing how leadership effort, confidence, and capability are being reshaped under current conditions.

### 1. Leaders Are Navigating Without a Reliable Compass

Leaders are expected to act decisively without stable reference points for what matters, who decides, or how trade-offs should be held.

### 2. Leaders Are Asked to Make Sense Faster Than Sense Can Form

Pace and pressure compress reflection time, forcing decisions before meaning can stabilize.

### 3. Leaders Carry Emotional Load Without Structural Support

Leaders absorb tension, uncertainty, and conflict personally in the absence of structures (scaffolding) that can hold emotional and relational risk, prioritization, sensemaking collectively.

#### 4. Leadership Development Improves the Leaders, Not the System

Development efforts focus on individual capability while leaving the conditions shaping behavior largely unchanged.

#### 5. Leaders Adapt to the System Instead of Shaping It

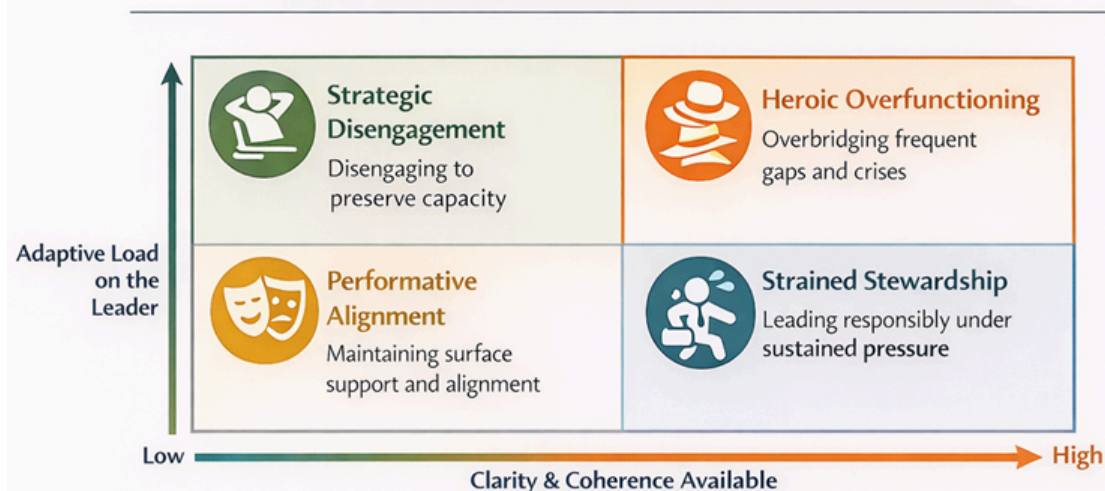
Leadership effort is increasingly spent compensating for constraints rather than redesigning them.

**Figure Note:** As with any serious workplace report, a matrix is required to depict what we just presented. Like many matrices before it, the clarity offers directional thoughts rather than resolving.

This figure uses a familiar consulting format to summarize observed leadership postures under sustained pressure. It does not describe personalities or styles, but situational responses that emerge when clarity is constrained and adaptive load is carried by individuals rather than supported structurally. The value lies not in categorizing leaders, but in making visible how different versions of “effective leadership” can arise from the same conditions, even as coherence becomes harder to sustain.

Figure 3B: Leadership Adaptive Load Distribution Matrix

*Observed leadership postures under sustained pressure and limited coherence*



## Cross-Cutting Finding: The Relational Erosion Signal

Across both the TRIMs and leadership capacity findings, one cross-cutting signal remains constant: relational capacity is thinning. As structural supports erode and adaptation becomes the default response, relational work migrates into individuals and informal relationships. Coordination, trust, emotional regulation, and sensemaking are handled locally rather than collectively.

What appears as interpersonal friction, disengagement, or exhaustion is often the downstream effect of systems that no longer hold relational work by design. This relational erosion intensifies every other finding in the report. It accelerates confidence erosion, magnifies cognitive strain, weakens shared context, and makes navigation feel increasingly personal and fragile.

### What These Findings Make Visible

Together, these findings point to a central constraint in modern work. The challenge is not motivation, intelligence, or effort. It is the **growing difficulty of sustaining clarity, judgment, and coherence under continuous pressure.**

Modern work pushes judgment, coordination, emotional regulation, and sensemaking into people because existing structures no longer hold those functions collectively under sustained pressure.

The findings are not random or episodic. They form a coherent system pattern outlined in the analysis.

This pattern reflects how systems adapt when conditions outpace the scaffolding that once held work collectively.

Up to this point, the report has stayed close to lived experience. In the section that follows, the analysis shifts perspective to examine why these patterns persist, how they reinforce one another, and how orientation space and time have narrowed under sustained pressure.

## 4. Analysis: Why These Patterns Persist

To understand why these dynamics persist even when leaders are capable and well-intentioned, the analysis shifts to system behavior. What is evident is that a paradox creates strain, a blind spot misreads it, continuity becomes the organizing logic, squeeze conditions form, people adapt through squeeze plays, loops stabilize the system, capacity freezes, and orientation is the thing that's missing throughout.

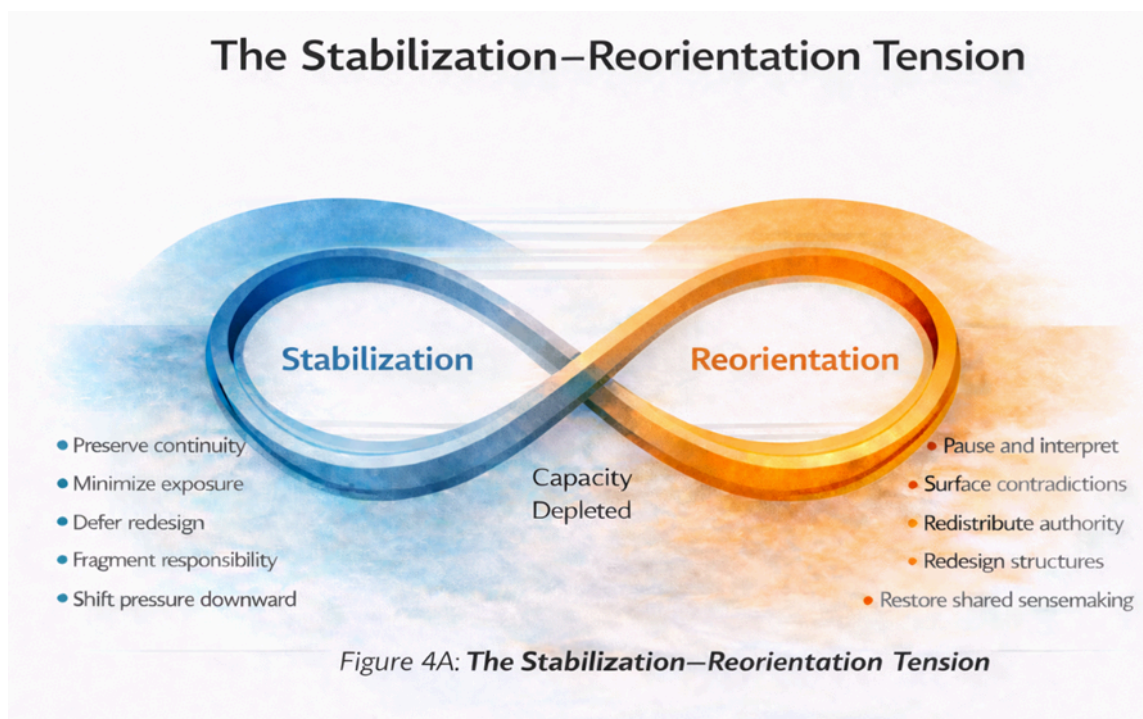
### The Central Paradox of Modern Work

At the heart of the analysis is a simple but consequential paradox:

**The very adaptations that keep work functioning under strain are the same adaptations that prevent the conditions of work from changing.**

When priorities conflict, authority is unclear, or direction keeps shifting, work does not stop. People compensate. They translate ambiguity into action. They absorb risk so outcomes can be delivered. From the system's perspective, things appear functional. From the human perspective, everything feels harder to navigate. Performance persists. Clarity and coherence thins.

This paradox explains why performance can persist even as clarity, confidence, and coherence decline. It also explains why work can look functional from the outside while feeling increasingly difficult to inhabit from the inside.



## Operational Blind Spot: How We Experience Work vs How it Works

Modern work systems believe they are managing volatility. In practice, volatility is shaping what actions are possible.

This creates an operational blind spot: **a gap between how people experience themselves managing work and how work actually operates as a living system.** We make decisions based on how we believe work should respond to intent, planning, and effort, while overlooking how it is adapting in real time to pressure, urgency, and interaction patterns.

As a result, strain is misread as a performance issue rather than a systemic one. Leaders and teams experience themselves as making responsible choices to stabilize, pace change, and keep work moving, without seeing how urgency and continuity requirements limit space for reorientation and sense-making.

This blind spot matters because it directs attention to behavior and execution while leaving the underlying dynamics untouched. Effort increases, coordination intensifies, and adaptation becomes the default response, even as clarity and orientation fail to accumulate.

As identified in the conclusions of this brief and explored more fully in the full report, this is not simply an execution issue. It is an **epistemic one.** How organizations understand what is happening shapes how they act, what they attempt to fix, and what remains persistently unresolved.

## The Continuity Logic at Work

Once this blind spot is in place, a single operating logic quietly takes over: **continuity.** It is protective. It prioritizes delivery, predictability, and short-term stability in environments already under strain. When uncertainty persists, preserving near-term stability becomes the primary definition of success.

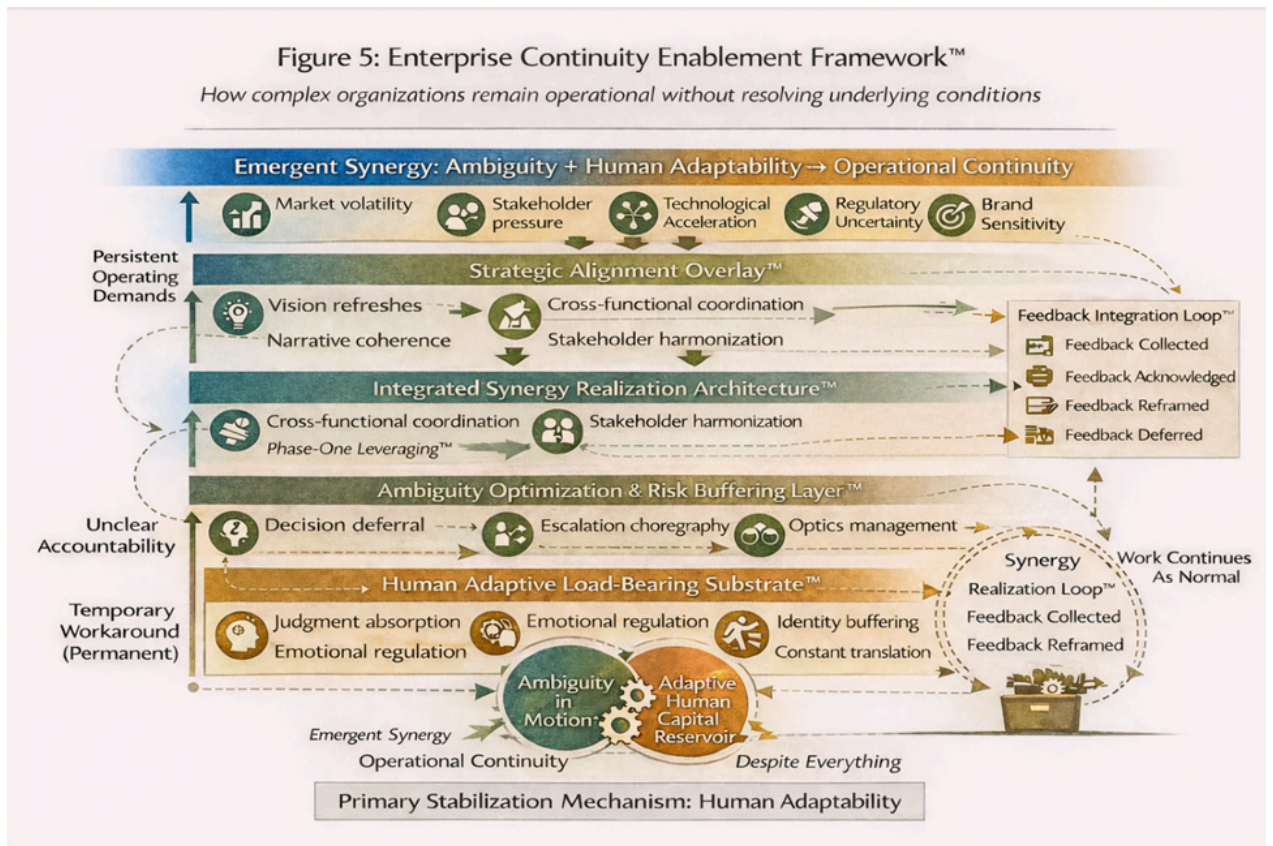
Over time, continuity stops being a background priority and becomes the dominant logic. Anything that threatens near-term stability feels risky. Structural change is deferred. Adaptation is rewarded.

This logic favors escalation over clarification, effort over orientation, and heroics over redesign. The system remains operational, but at increasing human cost. This is where the logic begins to feel absurd.

As with any serious analysis, this is the moment where a framework appears.

**Figure Note:** Below is a deliberately over-articulated consulting model. It illustrates how organizations maintain continuity by converting unresolved ambiguity into alignment initiatives, coordination effort, and human adaptability, all while appearing strategically in control. The dense terminology and layered logic are intentional. They mirror how systems manage strain without resolving it.

The model makes visible how continuity is preserved through increasing human effort rather than structural clarity, and why attention, relational capacity, and orientation quietly become limiting factors over time.



## Squeeze Conditions, Squeeze Plays

When continuity is now the organizing logic, what does daily work look like for people inside the system?

It creates **squeeze conditions**.

Squeeze conditions arise when unresolved contradictions persist over time. Decisions stall. Priorities conflict. Accountability is unclear. Expectations multiply without reconciliation. Work does not pause under these conditions. Pressure accumulates.

Inside squeeze conditions, people adapt.

**Squeeze plays** are the local, intelligible responses people use to keep work moving. Translating between functions. Buffering conflict. Working around unclear authority. Performing alignment. These responses are often skilled, socially reinforced, and rewarded. They may be conscious or unconscious, intentional or improvised, enacted by individuals, teams, or leaders.

Squeeze plays are not signs of failure. They are how work remains operational inside unresolved conditions.

### A Missing Pause Before Action

What is often absent inside squeeze conditions is not effort or commitment, but orientation. Under sustained pressure, work rarely pauses to ask **what kind of situation is actually present**. Action proceeds as if clarity exists, as if contradictions can be resolved locally, or as if continued adaptation will eventually stabilize the system.

This missing pause matters. When people do not have space to orient to the nature of the situation they are in, familiar responses are replayed. Finite solutions are applied inside conditions that require learning, experimentation, or re-interpretation. Adaptation becomes automatic rather than deliberate. Squeeze plays emerge and repeat not because people misunderstand the system, but because the system does not slow down long enough for sensemaking to occur. Over time, these responses become the system's operating logic.

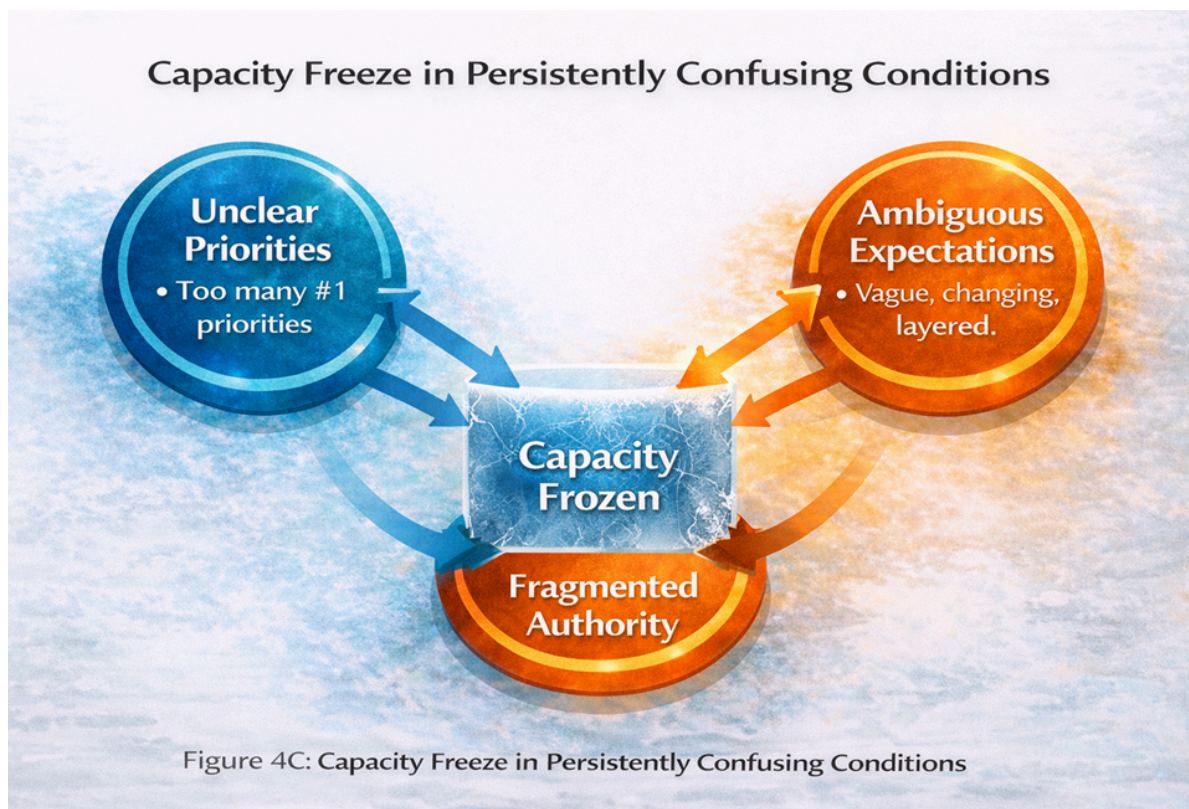
## Capacity Freeze: Stability Without Movement

As squeeze plays become the default way work gets done, they do more than keep work moving. They stabilize the system around unresolved conditions. Over time, a predictable system state can emerge: capacity freeze.

Capacity freeze occurs even as activity remains high. Calendars stay full. Decisions continue to be made. What freezes is not work itself, but the capacity required for judgment, reorientation, and change.

Human energy is increasingly used to hold things together rather than to generate new options, surface alternatives, or reset direction. Capacity freeze explains why organizations can feel simultaneously busy and stuck.

**Figure Note:** Under sustained uncertainty, adaptive effort is redirected from judgement, discernment, and movement into stabilization. Capacity freezes from continuous absorption of unresolved demands.



## The Three Reinforcing Loops

Once capacity freeze takes hold, three reinforcing loops stabilize the system and make correction increasingly difficult.

**Loop 1: Groundhog Day Work** – People solve the same problems repeatedly because underlying conditions never change. Learning does not compound. Each cycle feels new, even though the pattern is familiar.

**Loop 2: The Adaptation Treadmill** – Because work continues to get done, the system does not receive strong signals that redesign is needed. Short-term adaptation spreads strain quietly, weakening the feedback that would otherwise force change.

**Loop 3: The Fix-the-People Loop** – Leadership development and capability building improve individual skill without changing the conditions that require constant adaptation. Leaders become more capable carriers of strain, further stabilizing the system.

***Figure Note:** This shows how local adaptation, dampened feedback, and people-focused development interact to stabilize the system under strain. Together, the reinforcing loops preserve short-term continuity while preventing structural correction, making capacity freeze increasingly durable over time.*



## Attention and Orientation, And What the Analysis Makes Clear

Attention plays a central role in the ability to get one's bearings, orient, and make sense of work. It is not a personal productivity issue. Attention is a finite system resource required for judgment, orientation, and deliberate choice.

Under sustained pressure, attention fragments. People spend more time tracking urgency, managing signals, and repeatedly reorienting themselves than making sense of what matters. As pace increases, signals move faster than they can be integrated. Decisions are made before criteria are clarified. Responsiveness rises while discernment compresses.

This is why adaptation without restored orientation does not resolve complexity. It intensifies it.

What this analysis makes clear is a consistent pattern: **logic creates conditions. Conditions shape behavior. Behavior stabilizes the system. Over time, capacity freezes. Orientation is what is missing throughout.**

Orientation does not fail because people are inattentive or incapable. In this analysis, scaffolding refers to the concrete structural and relational elements that shape what happens after people act. These are not prescriptions for organizational redesign, but the conditions that determine whether judgment and sensemaking can be held collectively rather than absorbed by individuals. This includes how decision rights are distributed, how authority and risk are allocated, how pace and priorities are set, what kinds of work are visible or invisible, and how dissent, error, and judgment are treated in practice. It also includes time structures that protect sensemaking, relational load expectations that are acknowledged or ignored, and recovery mechanisms that determine whether missteps lead to learning or reputational damage.

They do not determine whether people care, contribute, or act with integrity. They shape whether those efforts are supported, drawn upon, or quietly depleted over time. Where scaffolding is absent, eroded, or misaligned, orientation erodes gradually as judgment, coherence, and sensemaking are carried locally rather than sustained collectively.

The dynamics described here are not failures of leadership or effort. They are predictable system responses under sustained complexity. Taken together, these findings show how modern work remains operational by shifting coherence, judgment, and sensemaking into people in the absence of shared scaffolding.

## 5. Workplace Absurdities Patterns

The analysis above explains why modern work remains difficult to navigate. The absurdities make visible how that logic is lived.

Across this report, two related forms of absurdity emerged: operating absurdities and workplace absurdities. Together, they describe the everyday experience of operating inside systems shaped by sustained squeeze conditions and ongoing adaptation.

### Operating Absurdities

*How the system preserves continuity*

Operating absurdities describe the system-level dynamics that allow work to continue under strain. They are not dysfunctions. They are predictable responses to unresolved conditions.

Across organizations, five operating absurdities consistently appeared:

#### 1. Capability Becomes a Liability

The more capable someone is, the more ambiguity, responsibility, and risk they could hold.

#### 2. Stability Is Mistaken for Health

As long as outputs are delivered, underlying strain remains invisible.

#### 3. Change Intensifies the Conditions It Aims to Resolve

New initiatives add coordination and urgency without relocating authority or reducing contradiction.

#### 4. Escalation Feels Like Safety

Responsibility concentrates upward as autonomy erodes and decision latency grows.

#### 5. Cost Disappears Because It Is Distributed

Strain is spread across attention, emotion, relationships, and identity, preventing correction.

## Workplace Absurdities

These absurdities describe what it feels like to live inside systems held together by ongoing adaptation and capacity freeze. They are not edge cases or exaggerations. They are common experiences across roles and industries.

### **1. Everything Is Urgent. Nothing Makes Sense.**

Work rarely pauses long enough for orientation to settle. Sensemaking resets repeatedly instead of accumulating, leaving people constantly asking what matters now and what they are actually responsible for.

### **2. Judgment Required. Discernment Not Supported.**

Capability remains high, but discernment becomes load-bearing. People are expected to make complex trade-offs under uncertainty without the time, authority, or shared context required to do so well.

### **3. On the Hook. Not in Charge.**

Responsibility increases while authority and protection remain fragmented. People carry risk, integration, and emotional fallout without being fully empowered to resolve underlying issues.

### **4. Bring Your Whole Self. Edit Constantly.**

Authenticity is encouraged, but safety is conditional. People adapt how they show up across shifting contexts, turning identity into something to manage rather than inhabit.

### **5. Work Keeps Moving. Meaning Keeps Slipping.**

Outputs increase while purpose blurs. Effort disconnects from visible impact, and meaning erodes quietly as goals shift and sensemaking is deferred.

## From Absurdity to Insight

These absurdities are the human expression of systems that preserve continuity by shifting coherence, judgment, and sensemaking to people. Taken together, they point to a central issue: modern work does not suffer from a lack of capability or motivation. It suffers from a loss of orientation under sustained pressure. When orientation is thin, adaptation keeps work moving but delays renewal. Acceleration magnifies confusion rather than resolving it.

## 6. Conclusion

This report began with a simple question: **why does work remain so difficult to navigate even when capable people and organizations continue to perform, adapt, and deliver?** The findings suggest the issue is not skill, engagement, or willingness to change. It is that the assumptions underpinning how work is organized have not kept pace with the conditions work now unfolds within.

Today's work operates in fast-moving, interdependent, and continuously shifting environments. Yet much of how work is structured, led, and changed still reflects expectations of stability, predictability, and control. This creates a persistent blind spot. Systems remain operational, but the conditions required for clarity, coherence, and renewal are increasingly strained.

### The Central Blind Spot

The central blind spot identified in this report is epistemic in nature. Signals of strain are interpreted through outdated lenses, leading what is fundamentally an orientation challenge to be framed as a performance, capability, or behavioral issue. As a result, strain is misread, and responses often intensify the very dynamics they aim to resolve.

Orientation, judgment, and sensemaking are now required continuously for work to function. Yet the shared supports that once helped hold these functions — such as decision logic, pacing, authority, interpretive space, and relational protection — have thinned or no longer hold under sustained pressure.

Across the findings, a consistent pattern emerges. When conditions change faster than existing supports can accommodate, coordination, judgment, and sensemaking migrate into people. Humans become the integration layer, carrying priorities, trade-offs, and continuity through individual effort. Work continues, but the cost shifts. Attention fragments, emotional load increases, and capacity becomes the limiting factor. This is not a failure of leadership or intent. It is a predictable system response to structural lag.

## Six Conclusions from the Findings

*These conclusions reflect the completed synthesis of the field evidence as of January 28, 2026.*

The findings in this report lead to six clear conclusions.

**#1: Modern work systems preserve continuity by relying on human adaptation to carry unresolved conditions.**

When ambiguity, contradiction, and risk are not held structurally, they migrate into people. Adaptation becomes the primary mechanism that keeps work moving.

**#2: Attention is a critical system resource that increasingly limits sensemaking, judgment, and orientation.**

Attention is not a personal productivity issue. It is the finite capacity required for discernment, interpretation, and deliberate choice. Under sustained pressure, it fragments.

**#3: Coherence is increasingly produced through individual effort rather than being held structurally or collectively.**

What was once supported by shared context, decision logic, and relational infrastructure is now assembled manually through human effort.

**#4: The difficulty of navigating work is primarily a structural lag problem, not a behavioral or performance issue.**

Strain reflects a mismatch between current conditions and available structural support more than insufficient skill, motivation, or leadership intent.

**#5: Human adaptation has become a stabilizing mechanism that masks structural strain and delays structural reconsideration.**

Because work continues, the system receives weak signals that change is needed. Adaptation stabilizes performance while preventing timely correction.

**#6: An epistemic blind spot rooted in outdated structural assumptions constrains how organizations analyze strain and respond to complexity.**

When outdated assumptions shape interpretation, even well-intentioned responses intensify pressure rather than relieve it.

## The Relational Undercurrent

Running beneath these conclusions is a consistent dynamic: relational capacity is eroding at the same time it is being asked to carry more. This is not due to failure of care or commitment. It is a capacity signal. When relational infrastructure weakens, every other strain intensifies. As cognitive, emotional, and coordination demands rise, relational bandwidth thins. Trust, shared context, and psychological safety quietly degrade. In response, organizations lean on documentation, alignment rituals, escalation, or technology to compensate. Increasingly, AI becomes the most stable interpretive partner in the system.

## 7. From Insight to Action

### What Becomes Possible When Orientation Is Restored

When orientation is restored, work becomes more intentional.

At the **individual level**, judgment feels safer and less exposed. People spend less energy second-guessing, buffering ambiguity, or managing risk privately, and more energy on meaningful contribution.

At the **team level**, sensemaking accumulates instead of resetting. Trade-offs are surfaced earlier, conflict becomes easier to hold, and coordination requires less translation and rework.

At the **organizational level**, effort begins to align with impact. Change no longer intensifies strain by default. Capacity previously consumed by adaptation becomes available for learning, renewal, and deliberate movement.

Restoring orientation is not about adding more process. It is about rebuilding the scaffolding that allows judgment, sensemaking, and relational risk to be held collectively rather than privately.

### From Insight to Action: Restoring Orientation by Level

This section offers practical entry points for applying the insights in this report. The questions and scaffolding examples offered here are meant to support discernment, pacing, and restraint. Small, coherent adjustments often restore more capacity than large initiatives. The work needs to be ongoing, situational, and design-led.

Across individuals, teams, and organizations, restoring capacity begins with a simple but often skipped step: pausing long enough to understand what kind of situation is actually present, before deciding how to respond.

### **For Individuals: Restoring Personal Orientation**

For individuals, this report helps distinguish between what belongs to you and what you may be carrying on behalf of the system.

A practical starting point is the ***Squeeze Conditions Assessment***, developed in collaboration with Behaving Badly HQ, which surfaces where unresolved demands, role ambiguity, or decision friction are shaping your experience. A helpful orienting question at the individual level is: What kind of situation am I actually in right now? Is this something that can be resolved through effort and execution, or something that requires learning, negotiation, or upstream change? Without this pause, personal adaptation can quietly become the default response to systemic tension.

### **For Teams: Making Sense Together Again**

Teams can use this report as a shared sensemaking tool rather than a diagnostic exercise. The aim is recognition, not immediate problem-solving. Before moving into action, teams benefit from asking: What kind of challenge are we dealing with together? Are we responding to a coordination issue, an unresolved structural decision, or an unfolding situation that requires experimentation rather than alignment? Others include: where are we spending disproportionate effort just to coordinate or align, what are we compensating for that should be addressed structurally, and which issues do we keep circling without resolution? The ***Squeeze Conditions Assessment*** can also be used as a team conversation tool.

### **For Organizations: Strengthening Conditions for Capacity**

At the organizational level, this report invites a shift from optimizing people to strengthening conditions. At this level, restored orientation depends on leaders being willing to pause and ask: What kind of situation are we repeatedly responding to as if it were solvable through execution alone? Capacity freezes when this question is never surfaced. Three questions matter most: where is human adaptability being used as infrastructure, which decisions or trade-offs remain structurally unresolved, and what scaffolding has thinned or failed to keep as pace and complexity increased? This isn't a call for organizational design, but restoring conditions allow judgement, coordination, and sensemaking to be held collectively.

## Shaping the Conditions for Orientation

When orientation is taken seriously as a leadership responsibility, certain shifts consistently become possible:

**Sensemaking scaffolding:** These scaffolding practices are not solutions, but supports that allow orientation to accumulate. Creating regular forums explicitly dedicated to interpretation rather than status updates. Pausing after major shifts to re-orient before executing. Developing shared language for naming uncertainty and tension without needing immediate resolution.

**Decision and pacing scaffolding:** Clarifying decision boundaries and escalation paths. Making trade-offs explicit. Establishing rhythms that distinguish between moments for speed and moments for deliberation.

**Authority and protection scaffolding:** Pairing responsibility with visible backing. Making it clear who carries consequence when judgment calls don't resolve as expected. Reducing the personal risk of acting under uncertainty.

**Relational and emotional load scaffolding:** Providing shared spaces where conflict, ambiguity, and strain can be surfaced without penalty. Treating relational capacity as a collective system resource rather than an individual resilience issue.

These practices do not eliminate uncertainty. They preserve the capacity to respond intelligently within it, without relying on continual human compensation.

## Other Practice Examples

As noted in the Practice Examples section of the full report, early signals suggest that across sectors and roles, people are already experimenting with ways to restore orientation and sensemaking under sustained pressure. These are not best practices or finished models. They are directional signals of how capacity begins to thaw inside complex systems.

### Individuals

- Rebuilding internal navigation through purpose clarity, boundaries around attention, and reflective practices that reduce over-adaptation.

### Teams

- Creating micro-coherence through simple norms, rituals, and tighter sensemaking loops that lower interpretive load.

### **Leaders**

- Questioning inherited operating logic, naming uncertainty more openly, and shifting from performative certainty to discernment.

### **Organizations**

- Experimenting at the edges with role simplification, clearer decision rights, and small structural pilots rather than large redesigns.

### **Technology (AI)**

- Using AI to reduce administrative load and support exploration, while discovering that judgment becomes more—not less—consequential.

These signals suggest that renewal begins not with transformation programs, but with protecting the conditions that allow orientation to form. The full report documents these patterns in depth and examines where they succeed, stall, or deepen strain.

## **Closing**

### **From Permanent Whitewater to Collective Orientation**

Work has not become harder because people are less capable or less committed. It has become harder because the conditions of work have changed faster than the structures that once helped people stay oriented inside them. What previously held judgment, coordination, and meaning collectively now asks individuals to carry those demands on their own.

When Robert Kegan warned that modern life was leaving people “in over their heads,” the challenge was developmental. When Peter Vaill described permanent whitewater, the challenge was environmental. What this report shows is that those challenges have converged. Organizations remain productive and work continues, but the work of holding priorities, trade-offs, and meaning together is increasingly carried privately rather than collectively. Adaptation succeeds just enough to keep things moving, while quietly shifting the cost into human capacity.

Permanent whitewater has intensified. Work now unfolds in faster currents, with fewer stable reference points and longer consequence chains. Under these conditions, sensemaking, judgment, and orientation are no longer episodic leadership activities. They are continuous system capacities. When those capacities are not supported structurally and relationally, they are absorbed by individuals, at significant personal and collective cost. People are not failing to keep up with work.

Work has outpaced the conditions that allow people to stay oriented together. Renewal will not come from more effort, motivation, or speed. It begins with restoring the structural and relational conditions that allow orientation, judgment, and sensemaking to be held collectively inside permanent whitewater, rather than survived alone.

That is the orientation challenge of modern work.

Work has outpaced the way it is designed to support humans inside it.

We are still in over our heads.

**And increasingly, we are in over our design assumptions.**

So before acting, we must ask: **“What kind of situation are we actually in right now?”**

Renewal will not come from more effort, motivation, or speed. It begins with restoring the structural and relational conditions that allow people to orient together inside permanent whitewater, rather than surviving it alone.

That is the orientation challenge of modern work.

## Evidence & Sources Referenced in This Report

This report draws on a multi-source evidence base, including:

- Global workforce and leadership research
- World Economic Forum, Microsoft Work Trend Index, McKinsey, Deloitte, Korn Ferry
- Organizational sentiment and lived-experience data
- Glassdoor, LinkedIn workforce insights, employee engagement and exit data
- Complexity, sensemaking, and systems theory
- Research and practice-informed work by Dave Snowden, Amy Edmondson, Karl Weick
- Developmental and adult learning theory
- Robert Kegan, Lisa Lahey, Peter Vaill
- Contemporary organizational and leadership research
- Psychological safety, relational coordination, decision-making under uncertainty, and adaptive leadership
- Field observations and the Squeeze Conditions Assessment, contributed in collaboration with Behaving Badly HQ.

A complete reference list is provided in the full Workplace Absurdities Report.

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## About the Author

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Charleen Johnson is the founder of InSpark Group and lead researcher behind the Workplace Absurdities Report. Her work examines how organizations lose contact with reality while continuing to appear aligned, productive, and in control. She brings more than twenty years of experience across organizational development, change, leadership, learning, and culture, with work spanning public, private, and global organizations in Canada, the United States, and New Zealand. Her current research focuses on organizational absurdity, orientation, sensemaking, and the conditions that help people and systems regain contact with what is actually happening. Her research, writing, and social commentary explore what everyday absurdity reveals about work, leadership, institutions, culture, and life in the Age of Absurdity.

## About InSpark Group

InSpark Group is a research and advisory practice focused on how organizations navigate complexity, contradiction, and change. It is the research home of the Workplace Absurdities Report and the broader Organizational Absurdity Research Program.

## About Behaving Badly HQ

Behaving Badly HQ is the public-facing publication and inquiry space for exploring workplace absurdity as a signal of our times. BBHQ uses satire, field observation, and systems-informed commentary to name patterns people recognize but often struggle to say out loud.

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