

Improving Organizational Effectiveness by Reducing Hidden Friction

Talent Stratify

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Executive summary

Leaders can usually feel when an organization is adding friction faster than it is adding value. Calendars fill up. Approvals multiply. Projects move in small increments and then snap back for rework. People stay busy but the business does not get faster.

Org effectiveness is not about making the organization quieter. It is about making it easier to execute. That means clear choices, clean handoffs, and an operating rhythm that lets teams move from debate to action without burning out.

This playbook focuses on the kind of friction that hides in plain sight. Duplicate work. Unclear ownership. Meetings that substitute for decisions. Processes that were built for risk control and now slow everything down. Left alone, these issues harden into a tax on every initiative, including digital and AI transformation.

Inside, you will find a diagnostic approach and a set of fixes designed for speed. The aim is visible movement in the first 90 days and the governance that keeps the gains from slipping away.

Talent Stratify point of view

The fastest path to better performance is rarely another reorg. It is getting specific about where work stalls, who owns the decision, and which interactions can be removed without creating new risk.

The real problem is the work behind the work

Hidden friction shows up as work that feels necessary in the moment but does not move a customer outcome, a product outcome, or a decision outcome. It is the extra reporting created to soothe uncertainty. It is the recurring meeting that exists because no one trusts the handoff. It is the extra review layer that was added after a mistake and never removed.

Most organizations do not choose this on purpose. Friction accumulates through growth, acquisitions, new leaders, and well intentioned controls. Every addition looks reasonable in isolation. Over time, the combined effect is an operating model that asks people to do two jobs at once: their real job and the job of navigating the organization.

That is why the most common signal of org effectiveness problems is not a lack of effort. It is exhaustion paired with under delivery.

A familiar pattern

A team agrees on a product decision in a meeting. The next week the same decision reopens because another group was not consulted, or because accountability is unclear. The cost is not only time. It is the credibility of the process and the confidence of the people doing the work.

How to spot friction before it shows up in results

Projects drift even when priorities are clear

If initiatives repeatedly slip for reasons that sound like coordination, not capability, you are seeing friction. The same work is restarted, repackaged, or resocialized across groups. Teams spend time explaining what they are doing instead of delivering what they promised.

Routine decisions require senior escalation

When simple tradeoffs cannot be made at the right level, the organization is signaling that decision rights are unclear. Escalation becomes the default risk management tool, and executives become a shared inbox.

Meeting volume grows faster than output

A rising meeting load is not always a culture problem. It is often a structural one. When roles overlap and interfaces are unclear, people invite more stakeholders as insurance. The calendar becomes the operating system.

People build shadow processes to get work done

When the formal process is too slow, teams create their own shortcuts: parallel trackers, duplicate dashboards, side approvals, and informal escalation paths. Shadow work can keep delivery alive in the short term, but it also hides the true cost of the operating model.

Employees describe their work as bureaucracy

Language matters. When employees talk about getting stuck, needing to chase approvals, or rewriting the same story for different audiences, you are hearing where friction lives. These are not complaints about hard work. They are complaints about avoidable work.

Four friction patterns that keep organizations busy and slow

Friction shows up in many forms, but most cases trace back to a small set of patterns. Treat these as lenses. They help you name what is happening, measure it, and choose an intervention that matches the cause instead of the symptom.

1. Duplicate work and shadow work

Duplicate work appears when two teams solve the same problem in parallel, often because interfaces are unclear or trust is low. Shadow work appears when people rebuild a process outside the formal system because the official path is too slow. Both patterns consume capacity and create inconsistent answers. The organization then spends even more time reconciling and socializing.

2. Role ambiguity and decision ambiguity

When ownership is unclear, every decision becomes a negotiation. People invite extra stakeholders to reduce personal risk, then the group struggles to close. Decisions that do get made are revisited because the decision maker was not clear, or because the decision was not recorded in a way that holds. Organizational health research treats decision making as part of how leaders run the place, not as a side process. [1]

3. Coordination overload and coordination debt

Coordination debt is the accumulated effort required to align across teams, forums, and systems. It grows quietly until every initiative requires a long chain of meetings, messages, and approvals. Some coordination is the price of scale. Debt is what you pay when the operating model forces unnecessary interactions. [5]

4. Process sprawl and control creep

Many processes start as a sensible safeguard. Over time they pick up extra steps, extra reviewers, and extra documentation. Each addition is a local fix. Together they create a system that is optimized for avoiding blame instead of serving customers. The result is slow cycle time, reduced learning, and higher burnout.

Not all friction is bad. Healthy challenge, debate, and review can prevent expensive mistakes. The goal is to remove friction that produces no learning and no risk reduction, while keeping the friction that improves quality. [4]

Where org effectiveness efforts go wrong

Most failures are predictable. They happen when leaders confuse activity with change, or when they treat org effectiveness as a communications exercise rather than an operating model edit.

Reorg first, diagnosis later

A new structure can look decisive, but without clarity on workflows and decision rights, the same friction simply moves to a new set of interfaces.

Adding governance to solve governance

When a decision is stuck, the reflex is to add a steering committee. This often adds a new layer of coordination without removing the root cause.

Measuring everything, improving nothing

Teams can build extensive scorecards and still avoid the hard choices. Pick a few measures that capture cycle time, coordination load, and accountability, then act.

Treating role clarity as a document

Role clarity becomes real when it changes who decides, who owns the outcome, and what happens when priorities conflict. Job descriptions alone do not do that.

Bain's research highlights a common gap after redesigns: leaders feel confident, while employees remain uncertain because the day to day work and routines have not changed enough. The lesson is to live the operating model through decisions, workflows, and forums. [2]

Diagnose before you redesign

Org effectiveness work fails when it starts with structure. A chart only changes performance when it changes work. Diagnosis gives you the map: where the work stalls, which interactions create delay, and which fixes will free the most capacity with the least disruption.

A strong diagnostic blends employee voice, operational data, and direct observation. It is fast enough to keep urgency and rigorous enough to withstand executive scrutiny.

A practical diagnostic sequence

Most organizations can generate a reliable picture of friction in two to four weeks by following a simple sequence: listen, map, measure, and decide.

Step	What you do	What you produce
Listen	Targeted survey and structured interviews across levels and functions	A ranked list of friction hot spots, in the words of employees
Map	Decision inventory, role clarity review, and workflow walk throughs on priority work	A clear view of who owns what, where handoffs happen, and where decisions loop
Measure	Calendar and meeting analysis, cycle time data, rework signals, and collaboration patterns	Leading indicators that quantify coordination load and delay
Decide	Executive review that selects a small set of changes for the next 90 days	A focused backlog of fixes with accountable owners and success measures

A short interview guide

If you are starting from scratch, use questions that surface where work slows and why. Focus on priority work, not opinions about the whole company.

Domain	Questions that expose friction
Decisions	Which decisions are slow, and what happens while you wait? Who should decide, and who actually decides?
Interfaces	Where do handoffs break down? Which teams do you depend on most, and where do you lose time?
Meetings	Which recurring meetings would you keep if you had to cut your calendar by 25 percent? Which meetings exist because a decision is unclear?
Processes	What is the most painful approval or review path in your work? What risk is it meant to reduce, and does it still reduce that risk?
Tools and data	Where do you copy and paste information between systems? What information is missing when decisions are made?

Fixes that change the experience of work

Once friction is visible, the best fixes are rarely exotic. They are disciplined edits to how work moves through the organization. The goal is speed with control: remove steps that add no value, clarify accountability so choices stick, and create forums that resolve issues rather than circulate them.

Fix 1: Simplify priority workflows

Start with a small number of workflows that matter to revenue, customer experience, or risk. Map the work as it is actually done, not as it is described. Then remove steps that exist only because the process has never been questioned. The test is simple: if a step does not reduce risk, improve quality, or change the decision, it is a candidate for removal.

Make the new workflow visible. Publish a one page version of the process that includes the owner, the required inputs, and the service level expectation. Most process improvements fail because the new path is not clear enough to follow on a busy day.

Fix 2: Clarify ownership and decision rights

Role clarity is not an HR exercise. It is a performance lever. For each critical decision, name one accountable owner and define who provides input. Then redesign the forum so the decision can be made with the evidence available. Deloitte describes decision rights as the explicit who, what, and how of decision making, including the forums and procedures that support it. [3]

McKinsey's definition of organizational health includes how leaders make decisions, allocate resources, and operate day to day. If those mechanisms are slow or ambiguous, health and performance suffer. [1]

Fix 3: Redesign forums and operating rhythm

Many organizations suffer from two problems at once: too many meetings and too few useful meetings. The remedy is not a blanket meeting purge. It is a redesign of forums so that each forum has a purpose, an owner, the right attendees, and a decision output.

A practical move is to create a weekly decision forum for the few cross functional issues that repeatedly stall. Move them out of endless threads and into a single place where they can be resolved. Another move is to cap recurring meeting hours by team and force a tradeoff when a new meeting is proposed.

What a 90 day sprint can achieve

The fastest wins usually come from removing an approval layer, canceling obsolete reporting, clarifying who decides, and resetting a handful of forums. These changes do not require a full reorg. They require leadership attention and follow through.

A useful rule

If you cannot name the decision owner, you do not have a decision process. You have a conversation loop.

Sustaining org effectiveness

Short term fixes can unlock capacity quickly. Sustained effectiveness requires alignment. Strategy, structure, processes, people, and rewards need to reinforce the same choices, otherwise the organization drifts back to old habits. [6]

One practical way to test alignment is to look for misfits. Does the work require fast decisions but the governance rewards consensus? Does the structure split accountability across functions while the customer experience depends on a single owner? The congruence model frames effectiveness as the degree of fit between work, people, formal organization, and informal norms. [7]

This is where AI transformation can help, but only when the basics are in place. Automating a broken process scales the frustration. When roles are clear and the workflow is clean, automation and AI can remove administrative drag and improve decision quality by bringing better data into the forum at the right moment.

Measuring progress without measuring noise

Org effectiveness work is easiest to sustain when leaders track a small set of measures that reflect how work moves. The best measures are leading indicators, the things that change before financial results do.

What to measure	Why it matters	Examples
Decision velocity	Shows whether accountability and forums are working	Time from issue raised to decision recorded, number of decision reversals
Coordination load	Signals coordination debt and meeting inflation	Meeting hours per person per week, average attendees for recurring forums
Process efficiency	Highlights control creep and slow handoffs	Number of approvals for routine items, cycle time for a key workflow
Employee experience of getting work done	Captures friction that data alone can miss	Pulse question: It is easy to get the right decisions made in my work
Customer impact	Connects internal changes to external value	Response time to customer requests, on time delivery, time to launch

Why this matters to business performance

Org effectiveness is often treated as a soft topic until the numbers arrive. Research on organizational health suggests the opposite: how the organization runs is a leading indicator of sustained performance. McKinsey reports that, over the long term, healthy organizations deliver higher shareholder returns and that improvements in health are associated with meaningful EBITDA gains within a year. [1]

The mechanism is practical. When friction drops, the organization reallocates time from internal navigation to customer value. Cycle time shortens. Errors surface sooner. Good people stay longer because their effort produces visible results.

A credibility check for leaders

If your transformation plan assumes faster delivery without changing how decisions are made, how work moves, and how teams coordinate, the plan is relying on effort as the primary lever. Effort saturates quickly. Design does not.

Closing

Hidden friction is not a culture problem and it is not a motivation problem. It is a design problem. The good news is that design can be diagnosed, edited, and improved without freezing the business.

The organizations that win are not the ones with the most meetings or the most controls. They are the ones that can make clear choices, execute quickly, and learn fast. Org effectiveness is the discipline of building that capability.



Work with Talent Stratify

Talent Stratify helps leaders elevate their workforce by connecting org design, strategic workforce planning, and AI transformation. If your organization is feeling the drag, we can run a rapid org effectiveness diagnostic and deliver a focused 90 day action plan that targets the friction that matters most.

To start, ask for a diagnostic conversation and we will help you define the scope, the measures that matter, and the fastest path to visible improvement.

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