

2026 Workplace Absurdities Report

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

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Charleen Johnson
BBHQ Founder, & Chief Investigator



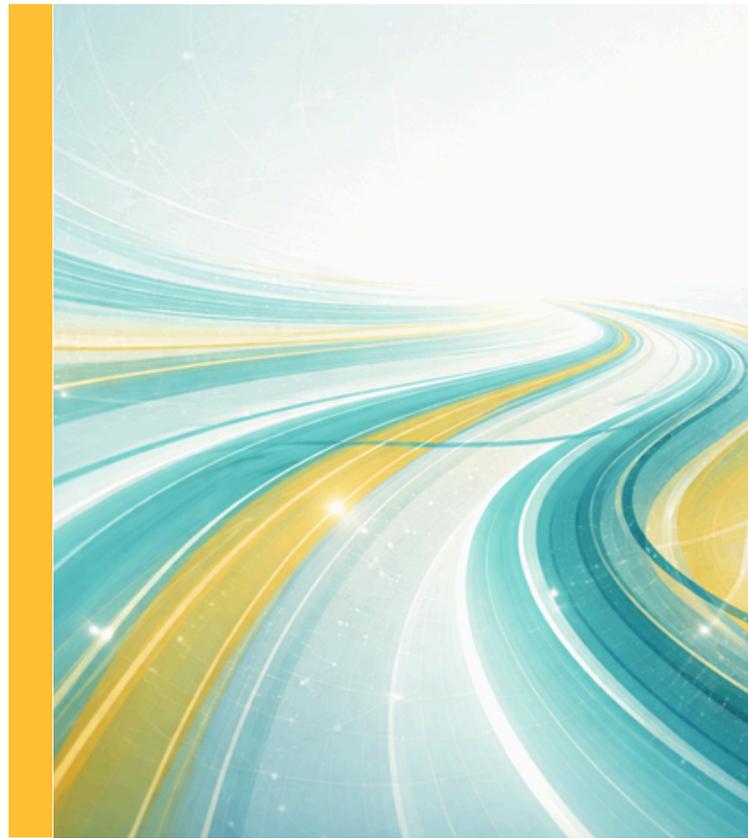


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A Letter from BBHQ

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 navigating work feels harder 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 humans are asked to absorb complexity that systems no longer hold collectively under sustained pressure.”

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.

Executive Summary

This report examines a simple but persistent question:

Why does work remain so difficult to navigate, even when capable people and organizations are performing, adapting, and continuing to deliver?

Based on field observations, organizational analysis, and cross-industry research, the report explores how modern work systems remain operational under sustained uncertainty, and what this reveals about the assumptions shaping how work currently operates.

The central finding is clear: **The primary challenge facing modern work is not performance. It is orientation.**

Work today unfolds in fast-moving, interdependent, and continuously shifting environments. Yet many organizational structures, decision models, and change approaches still assume stability, predictability, and control. This mismatch between assumptions and conditions creates a persistent blind spot. Systems remain functional, but the effort required to navigate work increases steadily, even when outward indicators appear strong.

How the Pattern Forms

Across the analysis, a consistent logic emerges.

Under sustained uncertainty, organizations prioritize continuity. When unresolved conditions persist, this creates **squeeze conditions**: stalled decisions, conflicting priorities, unclear authority, and rising coordination demands. People respond through **squeeze plays** — the local, adaptive responses that keep work moving inside those conditions. These adaptations are intelligible, skilled, and often socially reinforced.

As adaptation becomes the default response, a predictable system state emerges: capacity freeze. Activity remains high, but the capacity for judgment, learning, and reorientation degrades. Work continues, yet movement becomes harder to sustain.

Why the System Stabilizes

Once capacity freeze takes hold, three reinforcing dynamics stabilize the system:

- **Groundhog Day Work**, where problems recur without learning accumulating
- **The Adaptation Treadmill**, where continued performance dampens signals that conditions need to be reconsidered
- **The Fix-the-People Loop**, where strain is repeatedly addressed through individual development rather than addressing upstream conditions

These loops do not cause absurdity. They preserve it.

Two Types of Absurdity

From this logic, two related forms of absurdity emerge.

Operating absurdities describe how systems preserve continuity under strain. Across organizations, these include patterns such as capability becoming a liability, stability being mistaken for health, escalation feeling safer than judgment, and costs disappearing because they are distributed.

Workplace absurdities describe how that same logic is experienced by people. Across roles and industries, individuals report constant urgency without meaning settling, judgment being required without discernment being supported, responsibility without authority, and the quiet erosion of identity and purpose.

Operating absurdities drive workplace absurdities. Together, they make visible how systems remain functional by shifting coordination, judgment, and sensemaking into human effort.

The absurdities are not the problem. They are the system speaking.

The Central Blind Spot

At the heart of these dynamics is an **epistemic blind spot**.

Signals of strain are interpreted through outdated lenses. What is fundamentally an orientation challenge rooted in structural lag is repeatedly framed as a performance, capability, or behavioral issue. As a result, responses intensify the very dynamics they are meant to resolve.

Orientation, judgment, and sensemaking are now required everywhere for work to function day to day. Yet the shared structures that should support these functions collectively (e.g., decision logic, pacing, authority, interpretive space, and relational protection) have thinned or no longer hold under sustained pressure. Under pressure, systems tend to default by shifting coordination, judgment, and sensemaking into individuals.

Work continues. Human capacity quietly becomes the limiting factor under sustained pressure.

What the Findings Make Clear

Taken together, the findings lead to six conclusions:

1. Modern work systems preserve continuity by relying on human adaptation to carry unresolved conditions.
2. Attention has become a critical system resource that increasingly limits judgment and sensemaking.
3. Coherence is produced through individual effort rather than being held structurally.
4. The difficulty of navigating work is primarily a structural lag issue, not a performance problem.
5. Adaptation stabilizes systems while delaying timely renewal.
6. An epistemic blind spot constrains how organizations interpret and respond to complexity.

Running beneath all of these conclusions is a relational undercurrent. As demands increase, relational capacity erodes at the same time it is being asked to carry more. This is not a failure of care or commitment. It is a capacity signal.

From Insight to Action

This report does not offer prescriptive solutions or a single model to implement. Instead, it introduces a practice pathway for developing the capacity to orient and make sense of work, both individually and collectively, under real conditions.

The Reclaim pathway supports people in strengthening their own ability to locate themselves in what is happening: to discern what matters, understand trade-offs, and act with judgment under uncertainty. Individual orientation is not a problem to eliminate. It is a critical capability to develop. What has changed is that many people are now required to carry this work privately, without sufficient time, space, or shared support.

The final section translates the analysis into practical prompts and structural considerations at the individual, team, and organizational levels. These are not instructions, but invitations to notice where orientation is being carried personally, where it needs to be shared, and where shifts in structural and relational conditions could better support sensemaking, judgment, pacing, authority, and relational load.

To support this work, the report introduces the **Squeeze Conditions Assessment** as a practical way for individuals and teams to get oriented to their own working conditions. The assessment helps surface where unresolved demands, role ambiguity, or decision friction are shaping experience, and where adaptive responses may be compensating for structural support that no longer holds under sustained pressure.

The report also includes examples of how organizations are beginning to rework conditions so orientation, judgment, and coordination can be held more collectively removing the need for individual discernment. Renewal does not begin with more effort or faster change. It begins with clearer orientation and better design.

People are not failing to keep up with work. Work has outpaced the assumptions shaping how it supports humans inside it.

Section 1: Introduction

In Over Our Heads, Again and Now at Scale

More than three decades ago, Robert Kegan warned that modern life was leaving many people in over their heads – facing demands that exceeded the mental, emotional, and meaning-making capacities required to meet them. His argument was that the complexity of modern life was outpacing the capacities that most environments were structured to support.

Around the same time, Peter Vaill described a related shift at the organizational level. He argued that work was no longer unfolding in stable conditions punctuated by change, but in permanent whitewater: environments characterized by continuous turbulence, uncertainty, and motion, where learning and judgment must occur while moving.

Those conditions have only intensified. Artificial intelligence has accelerated a workplace already shaped by compressed time, rising interdependence, shifting expectations, and persistent uncertainty; the current was already fast, but its scale has changed.

The Report Question

This research began with a simple question:

Why does work remain so difficult to navigate even when capable people and organizations are performing, adapting, and continuing to deliver?

As the research progressed, several related questions surfaced repeatedly across roles, industries, and organizational contexts:

- Why does adaptation increasingly feel exhausting rather than enabling?
- Why do systems stabilize in ways that seem to block correction?
- Where is the work of coherence, judgment, and sensemaking occurring?
- Why do individuals, teams, and leaders lose orientation ?
- Why do change efforts so often intensify the strain they aim to relieve?

How This Report Is Organized

The report unfolds in four parts. It begins by identifying seven TRIMs (Trend Indicators of Modern Work) capturing present-day signals already visible across organizations and industries. It then examines why these patterns persist, drawing on systems, complexity, and integral perspectives. From there, it shifts into how these dynamics are lived in day-to-day work. The final sections draw together the implications of these findings and what they suggest for navigating modern work going forward.

How to Read this Report

This report is presented as a light parody of the traditional consulting trends report. You will see familiar structures, models, and diagrams, sometimes rendered with intentional density. That density reflects the reality many organizations are navigating: layers of frameworks, coordination rituals, and performance language that create motion without addressing conditions.

The satire is directed at system logic, not people. Beneath it is a serious intent: to make visible what has become normalized and to provide clearer orientation for understanding modern work as it is currently lived.

In this report, we use the term “**absurdities**” to describe how reasonable, well-intended actions make sense locally yet create confusion and strain over time, naming the lived experience of systemic patterns rather than failures of competence or intent.

To ground the conditions described in this report, consider a simple image.

Imagine walking alongside a wide, steady river. The current moves, but its direction is familiar. You can orient yourself by landmarks along the way. Now imagine the temperature slowly dropping. The river doesn't stop suddenly. It freezes gradually.

From the surface, everything still looks stable and movement continues, but the cues that once helped you judge direction, depth, and momentum begin to disappear.

This report examines what happens inside organizations when work continues under these conditions, when flow is replaced by effort, and people lose their bearings without the system ever fully stopping.

Section 2: Approach

How This Report Was Developed

Like any serious workplace report, this one is grounded in a clear methodology. This report draws on a mixed-methods approach combining global workplace research, cross-sector analysis, and sustained BBHQ field observation. The aim was to surface the conditions shaping how modern work is actually being lived and navigated, not to forecast trends or optimize performance.

The work began with observation. We tracked recurring behaviors, tensions, and patterns appearing across roles, organizations, and industries. We focused on what kept repeating, even as language, context, or strategy shifted. Signals were gathered first and examined for structure and pattern only after they had clearly emerged.

Data Sources

To ground these observations, 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.

In parallel, we drew on BBHQ field material, including workplace observations from public discourse, leadership conversations, practitioner exchanges, and real organizational contexts. This allowed us to compare how work is described with how it is actually experienced day to day. A full list of sources appears in the References section.

Signal Collection and Pattern Synthesis

Signals included recurring behaviors, language shifts, leadership challenges, and experiential patterns that appeared consistently across research and field observation. These signals were clustered based on recurrence, scope, and consistency across sources.

Section 2: Approach

Through this process, we identified a set of TRIMs (Trend Indicators of Modern Work). TRIMs are present-day indicators of how work is being experienced across roles, organizations, and industries. They are descriptive, not predictive. Once these patterns were established, analysis focused on how the TRIMs interact, reinforce one another, and persist over time.

Analytic Lenses

To interpret these dynamics, we applied multiple lenses, including systems thinking, adult development perspectives, organizational behavior research, and BBHQ's field-based sensemaking practice. These lenses were used to examine patterns after they emerged, helping explain why effort can increase without relief, why performance can persist while judgment and orientation decline, and why systems struggle to correct themselves under sustained strain. The deeper dynamics and feedback loops that emerged from this analysis are explored in Section 4.

Why This Method Matters

Modern work cannot be understood through a single framework. Human experience, system structure, and organizational behavior are tightly interwoven. This approach was designed to hold that complexity without collapsing it, allowing patterns to be seen clearly without oversimplification.

Section 3: Findings

3.1 What Is Showing Up Across Modern Work

The findings that follow are not isolated problems or trends to address individually. They are recurring signals observed across roles, organizations, and industries, even as language, tools, and initiatives change.

Across BBHQ field observations and supporting research, no single dominant failure emerged. Instead, two distinct but related sets of findings consistently appeared together in day-to-day work.

One set of findings describes what is repeating at the system level. These patterns show up as persistent conditions that shape how work unfolds.

The second set of findings describes what leadership is increasingly being asked to carry as a result of those conditions. These patterns reveal how judgment, sensemaking, emotional regulation, and orientation are being transferred into human effort when structures no longer absorb them. Together, these findings show how strain accumulates and is lived inside modern work systems operating under sustained pressure.

This report presents these findings in two parts:

- **The TRIMs:** five recurring system-level patterns that reveal how modern work remains operational under strain
- **Leadership Capacity Findings:** five patterns describing how leadership effort, confidence, and capability are being reshaped under those same conditions

3.2 The Five TRIMs

1. Leader Confidence Erosion Under Complexity

Decision-making slows not because leaders lack skill or care, but because the conditions surrounding judgment have become riskier, 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 quiet toll.

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 at any moment, shaping decisions toward caution.

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

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

TRIM 1: Leader Confidence Erosion Under Complexity

(Direction feels unclear when it matters most.)

BBHQ Field Observations

Across organizations, leaders are increasingly described as hesitant, cautious, or prone to second-guessing decisions they once made with confidence. This shows up in longer decision cycles, expanded alignment requirements, and a growing sense that judgment itself feels exposed.

Leaders report operating with delayed feedback, unclear decision authority, and high visibility. Consequences feel asymmetric. When outcomes are uncertain and accountability is concentrated, the perceived cost of getting it wrong outweighs waiting. In response, leaders rely heavily on process, documentation, and visibility to create reassurance. These controls are often expected rather than imposed. Trust remains explicit in language, while proof, presence, and monitoring expand in practice. What appears as control is better understood as a stabilizing response in environments where judgment feels exposed.

In faster-moving, data-rich contexts, this dynamic intensifies. Leaders are asked to decide more quickly, with more information, under tighter visibility, while responsibility for consequences remains unchanged. Inputs multiply, but clarity about what matters most does not. Decision windows compress. The personal cost of judgment errors rises. This pattern appears across experienced, capable, and well-trained leaders, not only those new to role.

Absurdity Examples

- A leader opens a town hall by saying, “I don’t have all the answers,” then clicks through 63 slides, five frameworks, and three future-state diagrams, before reassuring all clarity will “emerge over time”.
- A decision is delayed for weeks in the name of rigor, rushed through on a Friday afternoon, and retroactively labeled decisive leadership on Monday.
- A decision makes a full tour of the organization – the steering committee, working group, alignment session, executive sync, and back again, collecting comments like luggage tags. No one claims ownership of the call.

External Validation

- Gallup: Confidence in senior leadership continues to decline globally, with trust in leadership falling below 25 percent in multiple regions.
- Deloitte (2024): More than 60 percent of executives report persistent decision fatigue.
- Harvard Business Review: Decision confidence declines sharply when feedback loops are delayed or ambiguous, even in experienced leaders.
- Mercer: Senior leaders report rising cognitive load and declining confidence despite increased investment in development.
- Forbes / Center for Creative Leadership: A widening gap between leadership capability acquisition and felt confidence under sustained complexity.

TRIM 2: Fragmentation of Worker Identity and Role Clarity

(Holding it together at a cost.)

BBHQ Field Observations

Across roles and industries, workers report increasing difficulty articulating who they are in their role, what success looks like, and how their work connects to the broader system. This does not show up as a lack of skill or motivation. It shows up as uncertainty about which version of themselves is required in any given moment.

Rather than feeling incapable, many people describe being pulled across competing expectations throughout the day. Their role shifts depending on context, audience, and meeting. What is required in one conversation subtly changes in the next. The work continues, but the internal reference point does not always travel with it.

This fragmentation intensifies in environments where autonomy is conditional and visibility functions as a proxy for trust. Workers report managing not only their tasks, but how and when those tasks are seen. Presence, responsiveness, and availability quietly become part of role performance, even when outcomes are emphasized rhetorically.

The absurdity is not uncertainty. It is confidence being performed while judgment is deferred.

The result is not resistance. It is continuous self-monitoring. People adjust tone, timing, visibility, and priorities alongside their actual work, increasing the number of identities they must hold simultaneously.

As AI becomes embedded across planning, analysis, communication, and execution, role boundaries grow less stable. People report difficulty understanding what uniquely belongs to them versus what is now shared with systems. Strategic and delivery work increasingly collapse into the same role, while expectations adjust faster than role definitions. Contribution becomes harder to see. Self-definition becomes more contingent on context.

Common signals include:

- difficulty naming a stable role or contribution
- shifting priorities without clear resolution
- emotional detachment paired with sustained output
- a sense of being “on” at all times, without recovery

Over time, people report fatigue, reduced clarity, and a growing sense of internal fragmentation, even when performance remains intact.

Absurdity Examples:

- An employee introduces themselves as “strategic” in the morning leadership meeting, “hands-on” in the afternoon delivery review, and “just here to help” in the late-day Slack thread, then tries to remember which version gets credit if anything goes well.
- A role description that officially fits on one slide, but unofficially includes project manager, culture carrier, escalation buffer, therapist, meeting translator, and “whoever’s free right now,” depending on who’s asking.
- A high performer hits every deadline, answers every message, and shows up to every meeting, while privately fantasizing about a job where they only have to be one version of themselves at a time.

The absurdity is not flexibility. It is coherence being privately maintained while roles remain publicly undefined.

External Validation

- MIT Sloan: Identity fragmentation increases when role expectations shift faster than shared meaning can stabilize, particularly in hybrid and AI-augmented environments.
- Gallup: Global engagement remains near historic lows despite rising productivity expectations.
- Deloitte: Role ambiguity and identity strain rank among the top employee stressors.
- McKinsey: Burnout continues to rise even where output remains stable.
- Gartner: Hybrid and matrixed roles significantly increase identity fragmentation.

TRIM 3: Escalating Role Overload and Cognitive Strain

(Too much to hold, no time to think.)

BBHQ Field Observations

Across modern organizations, responsibilities expand without corresponding reductions elsewhere. Roles accumulate tasks, expectations, and decisions faster than they shed them. Constant task-switching, competing priorities, and compressed decision windows become normalized parts of daily work.

People describe feeling “full” before the day begins. Context carries over from meeting to meeting. Decisions stack without closure. Thinking time becomes scarce, even as responsibility continues to increase.

This overload is not episodic. It is experienced as a steady state.

Common signals include:

- roles that continue to expand without clear boundaries
- accountability increasing without matching authority
- decision volume rising without additional support
- little space to pause, reflect, or integrate what is being asked

Work keeps moving, but people report feeling mentally crowded, reactive, and stretched thin.

AI subtly reshapes this overload rather than removing it. While AI can reduce time spent on discrete tasks, people report being asked to oversee, validate, integrate, and explain AI-supported outputs across multiple domains.

Decision volume increases, expectations accelerate, and responsibility for interpretation remains human. The result is not less work to hold, but more judgment, context, and consequence concentrated into already full roles.

Absurdity Examples:

- A manager blocks two hours for “deep work,” defends it heroically on the calendar, and then spends the entire block approving requests, answering Slack, and hopping into a “very quick” meeting that lasts 47 minutes.
- A role quietly expands sideways every quarter. New expectations are added with enthusiasm. Authority, time, and decision rights remain exactly the same size they were five years ago.
- AI removes three tasks from a role and replaces them with eight new responsibilities: reviewing, validating, contextualizing, explaining, defending, and owning the consequences of outputs generated at machine speed.

External Validation

- Gartner: 75 percent of managers report their roles are too complex to perform effectively.
- McKinsey: Middle managers experience the highest levels of overload during transformation efforts.
- Center for Creative Leadership: Role overload strongly predicts burnout and disengagement.
- Mercer: Decision volume for managers has increased by more than 30 percent since 2020.
- OECD: Cognitive strain is rising across knowledge-intensive roles.
- Stanford: Cognitive load increases disproportionately when task-switching is combined with ambiguous authority and unclear decision rights.

TRIM 4: Stability Treated as Temporary

(Nothing settles long enough to move.)

BBHQ Field Observations

Across organizations, people report a persistent sense that stability cannot be assumed, even when roles remain intact, performance is strong, and workload is high.

This rarely shows up as overt fear, disengagement, or visible anxiety. Instead, it appears as caution, self-monitoring, and restrained movement inside everyday work. People describe operating as if conditions could change suddenly, even when no immediate disruption is visible.

What stands out is not constant disruption, but the anticipation of it. When stability is experienced as provisional:

- people protect position rather than explore possibility
- judgment narrows toward what feels safest rather vs feels appropriate
- movement slows even as effort and responsiveness remain high

Work continues. Output continues. Calendars stay full. But orientation quietly shifts from growth to preservation.

Absurdity Examples:

The “nothing’s wrong, but everything feels fragile” layer

- Employees quietly refresh their résumés during weeks that are, by every visible metric, completely normal. No crisis. No announcement. Just vibes.
- Teams responding to “no layoffs this quarter” with collective relief, as if stability is now something that must be re-earned every 90 days.
- People stay impeccably responsive. Calendars immaculate. Slack replies instant. Emotional investment quietly dialed down to a survivable level.

The “don’t move, don’t stand out, don’t risk it” layer

- Employees remaining in roles they’ve outgrown, not because they’re comfortable, but because uncertainty makes exploration feel irresponsible.
- Careers flattening gently over time, not from lack of ambition, but from a steady calculation that now is never quite the right moment to leave.

The absurdity is not caution. It is the amount of energy spent standing still.

External Validation

- World Economic Forum: Workforce anxiety remains elevated despite employment recovery.
- Glassdoor: Job security sentiment remains low across economic cycles.
- LinkedIn: Internal mobility rates declining even as lateral movement increases.
- Harvard Business Review / OECD: Persistent uncertainty reduces exploratory behavior even when formal opportunity structures remain unchanged.
- Mercer: Internal mobility slowing while role churn increases.
- Deloitte: Ongoing restructuring and cost optimization sustain uncertainty inside otherwise stable organizations.

TRIM 5: Breakdown of Trust, Shared Context, and Relational Bandwidth

(More communication, less understanding.)

This signal reflects not only a breakdown in trust, but a degradation of collective sensemaking capacity. Sensemaking is inherently relational. It requires shared time, shared context, and enough psychological safety to surface assumptions, interpret weak signals, and align judgment.

As pace accelerates and coordination demands rise, organizations increasingly prioritize execution over interpretation. The result is not fewer conversations, but fewer conversations that actually help people understand what's going on.

BBHQ Field Observations

Across organizations, teams report reduced shared understanding and thinning relational depth. Communication volume increases while meaning decreases. Misinterpretation rises even where intent is positive. This is not a communication failure. It is a capacity saturation signal. People stay connected, but no longer feel oriented together.

As systems demand more coordination without redesign, trust is replaced by documentation, meaning is replaced by volume and alignment becomes continuous but shallow.

Absurdity Examples:

- A single decision now requires a pre-meeting, the meeting, a follow-up meeting, a recap email, a Slack clarification, and a final meeting titled “Just to make sure we’re aligned.”
- Teams holding “alignment meetings” where no one is allowed to question assumptions because “we don’t have time to reopen that.”
- Trust quietly replaced with receipts. Conversations and Slack thread are followed by summaries, summaries by confirmations, and confirmations by screenshots, just in case.

The absurdity is not that people are talking more. It is how much talking is required to compensate for the loss of shared understanding.

External Validation

- Gallup: Trust and connection at work continue to decline.
- Microsoft Work Trend Index: Collaboration hours have increased by over 40% since 2020, while perceived effectiveness declines.
- Gartner: Collaboration fatigue rising across hybrid teams.
- Harvard research: Loss of relational bandwidth is linked to decision friction and misalignment.
- Weick: Sensemaking collapses when interpretation is privatized rather than held collectively.
- EY–Oxford: Transformation failure correlates strongly with loss of shared meaning, not lack of communication volume.

3.4 Reading the TRIMs Together

Across organizations, there is visibly less time, space, and tolerance for relational/collective sensemaking. Teams are not talking less. What is disappearing is the kind of conversation that helps people figure out what things actually mean.

What teams describe instead looks like this:

- conversations that are increasingly transactional and update-driven
- time once used for interpretation and reflection replaced by execution pressure
- shared understanding assumed rather than built
- sensemaking moved onto individuals rather than held relationally across the team

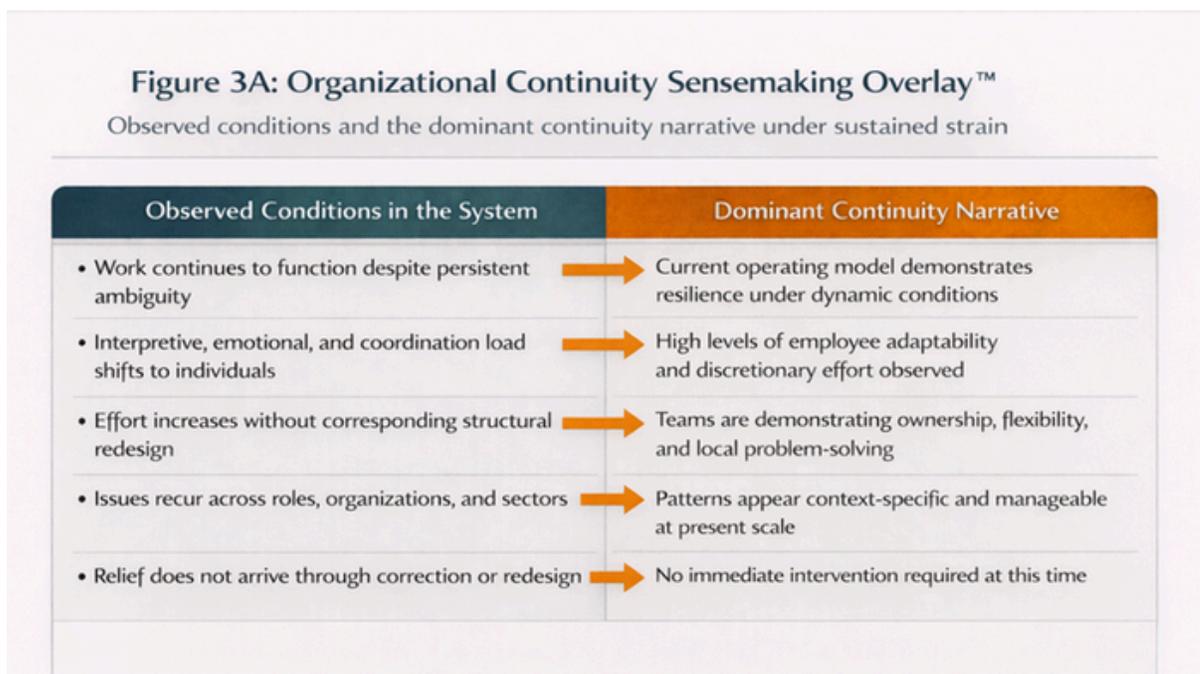
As a result, there are fewer opportunities for teams to pause and ask: What matters most right now? What trade-offs are we making, and why? Sensemaking does not stop. It fragments. Communication continues, often intensifying, but shared meaning does not consolidate. What is breaking down, then, is not communication itself. It is the relational conditions that allow people to make sense of complexity together.

AI subtly intensifies this dynamic. While AI systems accelerate execution and response, they do not absorb responsibility for interpretation, judgment, or consequence. Those still land with humans, even as shared understanding becomes harder to sustain across tools, time zones, and mediated outputs.

Read together, the five TRIMs suggest that modern work systems remain operational by shifting interpretive, emotional, and coordination load onto humans rather than redesigning structures to absorb it. These are not isolated issues. They appear together, repeatedly, across roles, organizations, and sectors. Each TRIM shows up differently in lived experience, but they point to the same underlying pattern: work continues to function while the effort required to hold it together increasingly sits with people.

Figure Note:

Like any credible workplace analysis, this report includes 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.



3.5 Leadership Capacity Under Load

What Leadership Is Being Asked to Carry Now

Alongside the TRIM findings, we examined a parallel body of leadership capacity and skills research published between 2023 and 2025. This included work from Deloitte, McKinsey, EY, BCG, Gartner, CCL, the World Economic Forum, SHRM, Harvard Business Review, Forbes, and contemporary leadership thinkers such as Kegan and Lahey, Edmondson, and others, alongside BBHQ field observations.

What emerged was not a separate story, but the same story seen from the leader's chair. Across research and lived experience, leadership is increasingly defined by sustained demands on judgment, sensemaking, adaptability, emotional regulation, and ethical navigation under uncertainty. At the same time, leaders report declining confidence, growing hesitation, and a shrinking sense of room to operate, even as expectations continue to rise.

What appears most constrained is not effort or competence. Leaders are working hard, caring deeply, and bringing significant experience to their roles. What is constrained are the conditions required for discernment: the ability to judge what matters, what can wait, and which consequences must be held by whom, in real time.

The leadership behaviors documented here should not be interpreted as capability gaps. Across data sources, leaders consistently demonstrate strong skills, experience, and technical competence. What is showing up instead is a constraint on capacity

What is being depleted here is not skill, motivation, or commitment. It is capacity. Capacity, in this context, refers to the human ability to hold complexity, contradiction, emotional load, and judgment simultaneously, without defaulting to defensive or compensatory behavior. It is the ability to stay oriented when signals conflict, authority is unclear, and consequences are delayed or opaque.

Across the patterns observed, leaders are being asked to carry more ambiguity, unresolved tension, more systemic contradiction than human attention and judgment can sustainably absorb. The result is not collapse, but quiet distortion. Decisions become reactive. Priorities blur. Sensemaking narrows. Action continues, but orientation weakens.

The 5 Leadership Capacity Findings

These leadership capacity findings do not replace the TRIMs. They show how the conditions surfaced in the TRIMs are being carried, absorbed, and navigated in leadership roles.

What follows are five recurring patterns showing how leadership effort, confidence, and capability are being reshaped under those same conditions.

- **Finding 1: Leaders Are Navigating Without a Reliable Compass**
- **Finding 2: Leaders Asked to Make Sense Faster Than It Can Form**
- **Finding 3: Leaders Carry Emotional Load Without Structural Support**
- **Finding 4: Leadership Development Improves the Leaders, Not the System**
- **Finding 5: Leaders Adapt to the System Instead of Shaping It**

Finding 1: Leaders Are Navigating Without a Reliable Compass

BBHQ Field Observations

BBHQ field observations capture lived leadership behavior inside real organizations including informal conversations, coaching engagements, public discourse, and workplace narratives shared across BBHQ channels. These observations are not anecdotal exceptions; they reflect recurring, patterned responses to sustained complexity.

Absurdity Examples:

- Leaders spending days preparing for a decision, assembling decks, scenarios, and contingencies, only to run out of time when the moment to actually decide arrives.
- Senior teams holding multiple meetings to align on how a decision should be made, carefully refining the process, governance, and criteria, while the decision itself quietly waits in the corner.
- Decision meetings that end with “let’s take this offline,” which everyone now recognizes as the most reliable outcome on the agenda.

External Validation

- Gartner (2024): 82% of managers feel unprepared to lead change.
- McKinsey (2023): Decision-making under ambiguity ranks high.
- CCL: Leaders increasingly lack readiness for complex systems leadership.
- Snowden & Boone: Traditional decision frameworks degrade in complex domains where cause and effect are only visible in retrospect.

Where This Shows Up in the TRIMs

- TRIM 1: Leader's Confidence Erosion Under Complexity
- TRIM 3: Escalating Role Overload and Cognitive Strain

Finding 2: Leaders Asked to Make Sense Faster Than It Can Form

BBHQ Field Observations

Our observations consistently show leaders surrounded by more data, tools, and updates than at any point in history, yet they have declining clarity about what matters most in the moment. This finding reflects individual sensemaking overload and loss of collective interpretive space.

Absurdity Examples:

- Leaders are surrounded by dashboards, trackers, and live metrics while still asking, "So... what actually matters here?"
- Meetings consumed by reviewing information that everyone already has, leaving no time to decide what it means or what should happen next.
- Decisions postponed in anticipation of one more data point, update, or forecast that promises certainty but never quite delivers it.
- Leaders spending more time explaining why a decision was made than actually making one, because meaning is reconstructed after the fact.

External Validation

- EY/Oxford: Leaders struggle to interpret/act on weak or conflicting signals.
- Deloitte: Decision fatigue and over-reliance on consensus has risen.
- HBR: Leaders increasingly default to process when judgment is required.

Where This Shows Up in the TRIMs

- TRIM 1: Leader's Confidence Erosion Under Complexity

Finding 3: Leaders Carry Emotional Load Without Structural Support

BBHQ Field Observations

Across organizations, leaders are increasingly absorbing emotional, relational, and interpretive strain that is not formally recognized as part of their role. BBHQ field observations show leaders spending significant time containing anxiety, smoothing conflict, translating contradictory expectations, and protecting teams from external pressure, often without authority, mandate, or structural backing to resolve the underlying conditions creating that strain.

Absurdity Examples:

- Leaders absorb team anxiety, organizational uncertainty, and external pressure all at once, then asked why they seem a little tired.
- Managers expected to “hold space” for others, create psychological safety, and stay emotionally available, while having no space themselves to process what they’re carrying.
- Emotional regulation quietly treated as a personal trait. Some leaders are just “better at it,” even as the conditions that require constant regulation remain untouched.
- Leaders managing morale, mood, and meaning alongside operational demands, then wondering why they feel depleted even when everything on paper appears to be working.

External Validation

- Gallup: Trust and psychological safety remain among the strongest predictors of performance.
- EY / Oxford: Emotional energy directly affects transformation outcomes.
- BCG: Leader disengagement correlates with system-wide drift.
- Kegan & Lahey: Adaptive capacity expands only when systems support meaning-making, not when individuals are left to self-regulate indefinitely.

Where This Shows Up in the TRIMs

- TRIM 2: Fragmentation of Worker Identity and Role Clarity
- TRIM 5: Breakdown of Trust, Shared Context, and Relational Bandwidth

Finding 4: Leadership Development Improves the Leaders, Not the System

BBHQ Field Observations

Leaders regularly report insight and motivation from development programs, followed by rapid erosion once they re-enter unchanged systems.

Absurdity Examples:

- Leaders leaving a development program energized and inspired on Friday, then spending Monday morning explaining why none of the ideas can be applied “given how things actually work here.”
- Leaders encouraged to “be adaptive,” and “step into uncertainty,” inside roles where authority, time, and decision rights give no room to do so.
- Learning happening in workshops, off-sites, and virtual sessions, carefully scheduled around the work, rather than embedded into the conditions where judgement is actually required.

External Validation

- Deloitte: Traditional leadership programs show weak or inconsistent ROI.
- McKinsey: Most programs emphasize competencies rather than integration.
- SHRM: Leaders report few opportunities to practice judgment under real conditions.
- HBR: Leadership development fails when learning is decoupled from system redesign.

Where This Shows Up in the TRIMs

- TRIM 3: Escalating Role Overload and Cognitive Strain
- TRIM 4: Stability Treated as Temporary

Finding 5: Leaders Adapt to the System Instead of Shaping It

BBHQ Field Observations

Across organizations, leadership behavior increasingly reflects adaptation to system constraints rather than intentional shaping of those systems. Leaders often demonstrate clear awareness of what is not working. They can name the inefficiencies, the misaligned incentives, and the processes that quietly undermine judgment and momentum. Yet when it comes time to act, many choose responses that preserve position, minimize exposure, or maintain alignment, rather than intervene at the level of structure, incentives, or operating logic.

What shows up is not confusion, but calculation. In practice, this pattern takes familiar forms like choosing the safest available option rather than the most appropriate one, deferring responsibility upward or outward instead of exercising judgment, or complying with ineffective processes yet privately acknowledging their limits. Also prioritizing optics, consensus, or approval over corrective action can occur and treating system dysfunction as a fixed condition to navigate rather than a responsibility to address

These behaviors are not driven by lack of insight or authority. They reflect adaptive self-protection under sustained uncertainty and risk. Over time, leadership capacity narrows because the perceived cost of acting begins to outweigh the perceived safety of compliance.

Absurdity Examples:

- Leaders openly agreeing in private that “this process doesn’t work,” then enforcing it in public because “now isn’t the moment to reopen that conversation.”
- Meetings where everyone knows the decision being made will create more problems later, but it’s still chosen because it’s the least likely to draw attention today.
- Innovation discussed enthusiastically in strategy sessions, while the first person to take a visible risk quietly pays for it afterward.
- Leaders framing bold ideas as “exploratory” or “for discussion only,” then shelving them once alignment becomes harder than compliance.
- Leaders adapting their behavior to survive the system, while privately wondering when shaping the system stopped being part of the job.

The absurdity is not caution. It is stewardship quietly replaced by survival.

External Validation

- WEF: Career risk-taking has declined globally.
- Labor market data: Voluntary mobility continues to slow.
- BBHQ field observations: Leaders increasingly optimize for safety and optics.
- Edmondson: Psychological safety declines when speaking up carries reputational or career risk, even among senior leaders.

Where This Shows Up in the TRIMs

- TRIM 1: Leader’s Confidence Erosion Under Complexity
- TRIM 2: Fragmentation of Worker Identity and Role Clarity
- TRIM 4: Stability Treated as Temporary

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.



A Cross-Cutting Signal: The Erosion of Relational Capacity

Across both sets of findings, one signal cuts through every pattern observed in this report: a steady erosion of relational capacity. This is not a standalone TRIM and not a separate leadership failure. It is a cross-cutting condition that intensifies every other dynamic identified.

Relationships have always been the invisible infrastructure of work. They shape how information flows, how conflict is resolved, how decisions land, and whether people feel safe enough to contribute judgment rather than compliance. What has changed is not the importance of relationships, but the system's ability to support them.

Under sustained complexity and overload, relational work becomes harder to sustain. Human-to-human bandwidth thins as cognitive load rises. Managers are expected to be more empathetic and available while operating with less time, authority, and structural backing. Emotional labor increases precisely as capacity to carry it declines.

As relational scaffolding weakens, coordination shifts into private effort. Alignment requires more meetings. Trust requires more reassurance. Feedback becomes riskier to give and easier to avoid. Shared context erodes, even as communication volume increases.

At the same time, many workers report turning to AI tools as stable, nonjudgmental partners for sensemaking, decision preparation, and emotional rehearsal. This is not a technology trend alone. It is a signal of unmet relational needs inside human systems.

This relational erosion accelerates the TRIMs and deepens the leadership capacity findings. It magnifies confidence erosion, role overload, fragmentation, and the reliance on adaptation to preserve continuity. What feels personal or interpersonal is often the downstream effect of systems that no longer hold relational work collectively.

Seen this way, many of the fractures described in this report are not failures of trust, empathy, or communication skill. They are capacity shortfalls produced by sustained pressure on relational infrastructure.

Section 4: Analysis

Why These Patterns Keep Appearing

By this point in the report, a central tension should be coming into focus. Across roles, organizations, and industries, capable people are working hard, adapting continuously, and delivering results. Yet work remains difficult to navigate. Clarity is fragile. Judgment feels heavier. Change efforts often add strain rather than relieve it. The same issues resurface even after sincere attempts to address them.

This section examines why these patterns persist. The core question guiding the analysis is simple: **Why does work remain so difficult to navigate even when capable people and organizations are performing, adapting, and continuing to deliver?**

To answer it, the analysis shifts attention away from individual behavior and surface-level explanations and toward the conditions shaping how modern work actually functions. The aim is not critique or blame, but understanding. What is happening beneath the surface that allows these patterns to repeat, even when people recognize them and want something better?

The analysis draws on the lenses introduced in Section 2, including complexity, systems, and integral perspectives. They make it possible to see modern work not as a set of isolated problems, but as an interconnected system responding to sustained uncertainty, competing demands, and constrained capacity.

From this vantage point, two concepts become central.

Squeeze conditions describe the unresolved contradictions people are working inside. These are conditions where priorities conflict, authority is unclear, pace outstrips integration, and decisions cannot fully settle. The system does not stabilize, but work must continue.

Squeeze plays are the adaptive responses people and organizations use to function inside those conditions. They are the intelligible, often skillful moves that keep work moving when the environment will not resolve. Buffering, translating, compensating, escalating, over-preparing, staying constantly available, and quietly absorbing risk are examples.

The challenge is not that squeeze plays exist. It is that, over time, they become the primary way the system holds together.

The analysis unfolds in five parts. First, it describes the conditions people are working inside. Second, it examines how systems respond under prolonged uncertainty. Third, it looks at why adaptation becomes the default response and how capacity begins to freeze. Fourth, it explores what makes system correction so difficult, even when problems are visible. Finally, it surfaces the deeper pattern connecting all five TRIMs. Together, these sections explain how work can remain operational while becoming progressively harder to navigate, and why performance can persist even as orientation, coherence, and confidence decline.

4.1 Conditions and System Response Under Uncertainty

Modern work no longer unfolds in stable or predictable environments. It operates inside conditions marked by continuous change, shifting priorities, compressed time horizons, and deep interdependence. Signals arrive faster than they can be interpreted. Cause and effect are rarely visible in real time.

In environments like this, work does not behave like a series of discrete problems to be solved one by one. It behaves more like a complex adaptive system: responsive, interdependent, and sensitive to pressure in ways that are often indirect. Small changes ripple. Local decisions generate unintended consequences elsewhere. Effort applied in one area frequently creates strain in another, even when intentions are sound.

Under these conditions, execution alone isn't enough. **What matters most is orientation:** the capacity for people to understand where they are, what matters now, and how their actions connect to the larger whole. Even when orientation weakens, people continue to respond, make decisions, and keep things moving. The difference is that adaptation quietly becomes the dominant mode of operating.

The Missing Orienting Pause

What is often absent under sustained uncertainty is not effort, capability, or intent, but a deliberate pause to understand the nature of the situation itself. As pressure increases, action accelerates. Work proceeds as if clarity exists, as if contradictions can be resolved locally, or as if continued adaptation will eventually stabilize the system. Work rarely slows long enough to ask what kind of situation is actually present and what kind of response it calls for.

When this orienting pause is skipped, familiar responses are replayed. Finite solutions are applied inside conditions that require learning, negotiation, or collective sensemaking. Adaptation becomes automatic rather than deliberate, reinforced by urgency, reward structures, and preserve continuity.

Over time, these repeated responses do more than address immediate demands. They shape how the system holds together. The absence of orientation becomes structural, not personal, and the burden of judgment shifts increasingly onto individuals and teams.

As uncertainty persists and is ongoing rather than episodic, system-level response patterns emerge. Actions that preserve continuity are reinforced, while actions that introduce disruption, even when improvement is needed, become harder to sustain. Time horizons shorten, tolerance for ambiguity narrows, and deviation feels risky as capacity thins.

These unresolved conditions are what we refer to as **squeeze conditions**.

They are not temporary challenges or isolated breakdowns. They are structural contradictions that do not settle and, as a result, require ongoing human interpretation just to keep work moving. Many people experience them less as a visible problem and more as a quiet, persistent sense that something is off, even while everything appears to be functioning.

Inside squeeze conditions, systems gradually shift what they optimize for. Protection begins to take precedence over learning. Risk is contained rather than resolved. Ambiguity is handled locally rather than held collectively. Decisions are deferred, buffered, or quietly absorbed to avoid destabilization. These patterns do not arise from a single choice or failure. They emerge over time through repeated interactions between roles, incentives, time pressure, and accountability structures.

As this pattern settles in, a critical shift occurs in where the work of judgment is carried.

Attention becomes the primary limiting resource. Not as a personal productivity issue, but as a finite system capacity. Attention is the raw material required for judgment, orientation, and deliberate choice. As pace accelerates and demands multiply, attention fragments. People spend increasing amounts of energy tracking signals, managing urgency, and constantly re-orienting themselves, often at the expense of making sense of what actually matters.

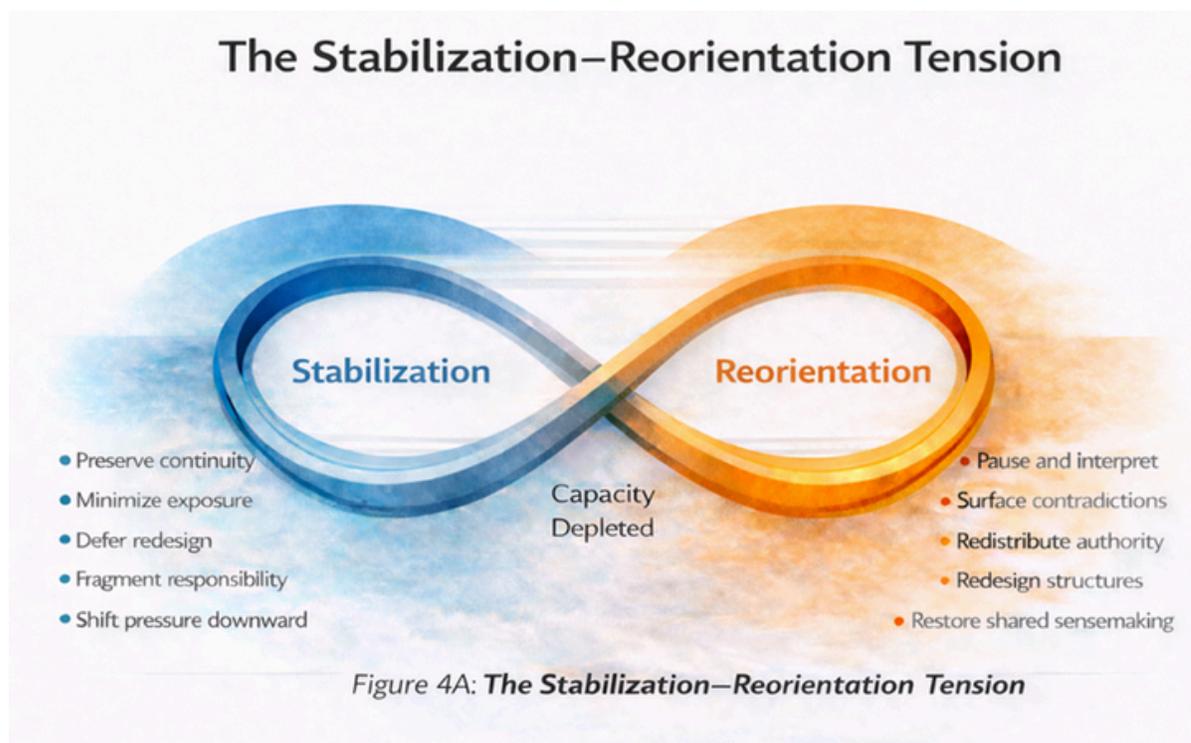
Judgment does not disappear under these conditions. It compresses. Decisions are made with less shared context, fewer stable reference points, and higher personal exposure. Discretion increases, but protection does not. Risk does not go away. It quietly migrates downward into individual judgment, relationships, and identity.

From the outside, the system appears busy, responsive, and functional. Work continues. Calendars stay full. From the inside, effort increases while clarity thins. Stability is maintained not through resolved conditions, but through sustained human attention applied to holding contradictions in place. This is the environment in which adaptation becomes not just likely, but necessary.

When adaptation becomes necessary, people do not experience this as a system response. They experience it as a personal and collective responsibility to hold things together. Effort shifts toward maintaining continuity while simultaneously searching for moments to regain direction. What emerges is not a clear choice between stabilizing and reorienting, but a persistent pull to do both at once under constrained conditions. This is where a critical disconnect appears between how the tension is experienced by people and how it is produced by the system.

Figure note: The Stabilization – Reorientation Disconnect

As systems prioritize continuity, reorientation becomes constrained by unresolved conditions. Stability is maintained through human effort, while shared clarity and direction advance unevenly.



Illuminating the Operational Blind Spot

What makes this pattern particularly difficult to interrupt is a persistent operational blind spot between lived experience and system behavior.

How Tension is Experienced From the Inside

From the inside, people experience the stabilization–reorientation tension as something that must be actively managed. They work to hold things steady while searching for moments to pause, reassess, and regain direction. It feels responsible and necessary.

Viewed through a complex adaptive systems lens, however, this tension is not something being managed or balanced. It is produced by unresolved conditions that constrain reorientation while rewarding continuity. **What feels like a choice to stabilize is often a response to system pressure rather than an act of deliberate control.**

Why The Blind Spot Persists

This disconnect between how work is experienced and how the system is structured and interpreted matters. When people interpret a system pattern as a personal or managerial responsibility, effort increases in the wrong place. Humans supply judgment, attention, and emotional labor to compensate for conditions that remain unchanged. Stability is sustained, but orientation does not advance. This blind spot helps explain why capable leaders and teams can be working harder, adapting continuously, and still feel increasingly stuck.

4.2 Why Adaptation Becomes the Default and Capacity Freezes

When squeeze conditions persist, work still needs to happen. Decisions must be made. External expectations do not pause. What changes is not the demand for performance, but where uncertainty is carried.

Rather than reworking existing structures to hold complexity explicitly, systems increasingly rely on human adaptability. Pressure migrates into roles, relationships, and individual judgment. People adjust how they work, how they decide, and how they show up. They fill gaps, translate ambiguity, absorb contradictions, and manage around unclear authority and shifting priorities.

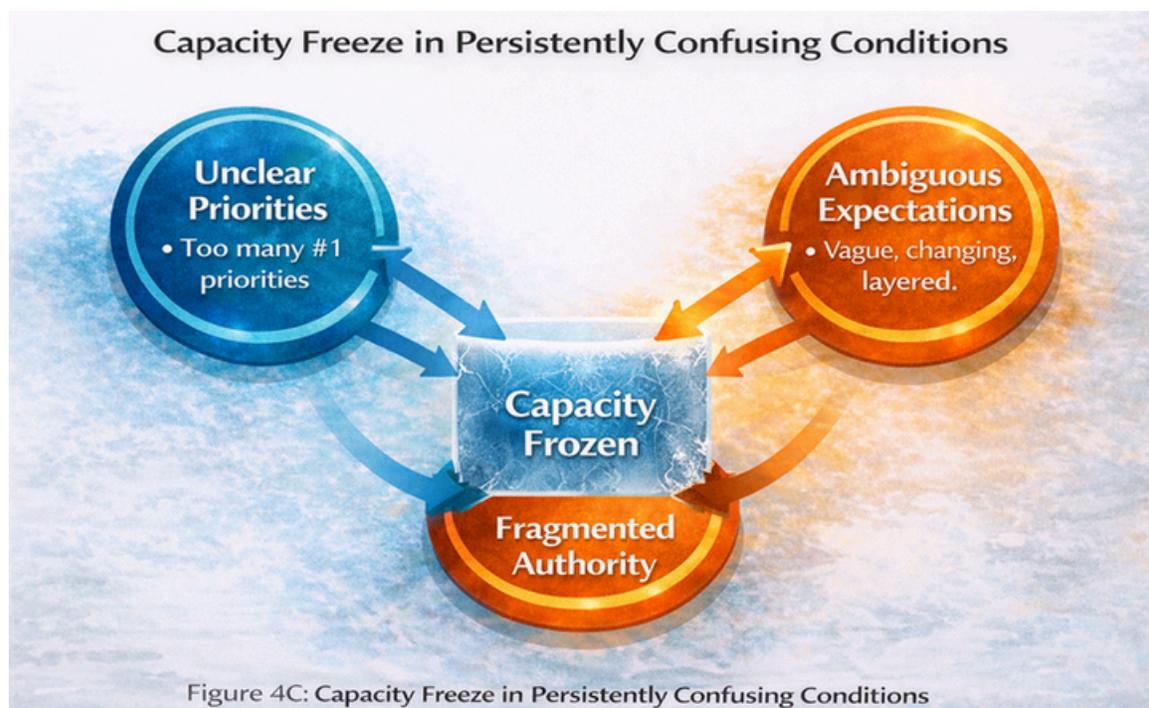
How Capacity Freezes Without Stopping Work

These adaptations are not passive or accidental. They are often skilled, intentional, and socially reinforced. People step in because something needs to be held. Leaders buffer because disruption feels risky. Teams compensate because stopping feels irresponsible. In some cases, individuals consciously accept these trade-offs in exchange for security, influence, or reward. In others, adaptation emerges gradually, without explicit choice, as the only viable way to remain effective inside the system.

At first, adaptation works. It preserves continuity. It protects outcomes. It allows performance to continue even when conditions remain unresolved. This is precisely why it becomes the default response. Over time, however, adaptation changes character. What begins as situational flexibility becomes a standing requirement. What was once a temporary response becomes a permanent operating condition. The cost of maintaining stability is gradually transferred to the humans inside the system.

As the transfer continues, a predictable system state occurs. This pattern culminates in what we describe as **capacity freeze**.

Figure Note: *What freezes is the ability to generate movement, surface alternatives, or reset direction. It is a protective state.*



When unresolved ambiguity persists, systems continue to function by shifting interpretive and coordination work into human effort. Activity remains high. Energy is sustained. Decisions are made and calendars stay full. What freezes is not work itself, but the capacity required for movement, judgment, and reorientation. Adaptive effort becomes increasingly consumed by stabilization rather than change. Human energy is used to hold things together rather than to generate new options, test alternatives, or reset direction.

Attention Becomes the Limiting Resource

Attention plays a central role in this shift. Attention is not a personal productivity issue. It is a finite system resource and the raw material required for judgment, orientation, and deliberate choice. Under sustained pressure, attention fragments. People spend more time tracking signals, managing urgency, and 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 increases while discernment compresses. Judgment does not disappear, but it narrows toward what feels safest and most defensible.

Where the Work of Navigating Complexity Goes

Adaptation without restored orientation does not resolve complexity. It redistributes it. Interpretive load migrates into individual cognition. Coordination work migrates into relationships. Risk management migrates into identity and self-monitoring. People experience this not as a sudden breakdown, but as a gradual narrowing: less room to think, less confidence in judgment, less shared understanding, less clarity about where to invest energy.

Importantly, adaptation also masks the problem it is responding to. Because work continues to get done, the system does not receive strong signals that underlying conditions need to be revisited. The very behaviors that stabilize performance dampen feedback. Strain becomes normalized. Absorption becomes invisible. From the human perspective, things appear functional everything feels heavier and harder to carry.

Capacity freeze is not a failure mode. It is a protective state that emerges when adaptation becomes constant rather than situational. The system remains operational, but its ability to restore orientation, generate movement, or correct itself weakens over time.

A Central Paradox

This dynamic explains a central paradox surfaced throughout this report: **performance can persist even as orientation, coherence, and confidence decline**. People keep compensating long after the conditions that required adaptation should have been addressed.

Adaptation, in this context, is neither a strength to celebrate nor a flaw to correct. It is a signal. It indicates that humans are carrying work the system's existing structures no longer adequately support under current conditions.

The next section examines how, once these dynamics take hold, they reinforce one another and make work feel persistently hard to navigate, even as effort and capability remain high.

4.3 When Scaffolding No Longer Holds

What is notably absent across these patterns is **scaffolding**: the structural supports that allow people to orient, prioritize, exercise judgment safely, and coordinate without becoming the integration layer themselves. Scaffolding is not about motivation or capability. It refers to the structural and relational supports that shape where ambiguity, tradeoffs, and decision risk are held.

Where Scaffolding Lives in Organizations

It shows up in organizational arrangements such as role clarity, decision rights, escalation paths, prioritization mechanisms, meeting and governance forums, policies, and work procedures. It also lives in cultural expectations about who decides, who absorbs risk, and who is expected to adapt when conditions conflict. In many organizations, these elements still exist, but they were designed for environments with slower pace, clearer authority, and more stable conditions.

When Existing Structures No Longer Carry the Load

As complexity increases, the existing structural supports no longer carries the load. Decision rights blur, priorities multiply, policies lag reality, and culture quietly rewards those who absorb ambiguity rather than surface it.

When scaffolding is present, ambiguity and coordination demands are carried collectively through shared structural and relational supports. When it is absent or outdated, they migrate into human effort.

How Adaptation Becomes Load Bearing

In the absence of scaffolding that can hold ambiguity, coordination, and judgment collectively, coherence is produced manually. People translate between functions, buffer conflicting demands, smooth over gaps, and absorb risk so work can continue.

This is how adaptation becomes load-bearing. Not because people adapt too much, but because adaptation becomes the primary way the system holds together under sustained pressure. Over time, the work of maintaining flow, alignment, and continuity shifts into human effort, delaying the restoration of shared structural support that would allow movement to emerge more naturally.

Adaptation succeeds just enough to keep work moving. But as it becomes the default response, it quietly takes on work it was never meant to carry indefinitely.

Why This Is a Structural Mismatch

What becomes clear through this analysis is that the strain people experience is not primarily a failure of skill, resilience, or leadership intent. Capable people are working hard and acting with care. The issue is a structural mismatch.

The supports shaping modern work have not kept pace with the conditions it now operates within. As pace accelerates, interdependence deepens, and uncertainty persists, existing structures struggle to hold the interpretive, relational, and judgment demands now required for work to function well. In response, people compensate. Judgment, coordination, and sensemaking migrate into individuals and informal relationships, where they are carried privately rather than collectively.

These patterns are reinforced through squeeze plays, the local adaptations people use to translate, buffer, and absorb strain when shared structural support no longer holds under pressure. Over time, these responses stabilize performance while deepening the conditions that make work harder to navigate.

4.4 Reinforcing Loops That Keep Work Feeling Hard to Navigate

The findings do not point to a single cause behind why work feels increasingly difficult to navigate. Instead, they reveal a set of reinforcing loops that cause the same patterns to reappear across roles, organizations, and industries, even as effort remains high and capability continues to grow.

These loops are not failures of leadership or motivation. They are predictable dynamics that emerge when humans operate inside complex, fast-moving environments without sufficient shared orientation, structural support, or collective sensemaking. Once established, they reinforce themselves, making work feel persistently hard even when people are trying to do the right things.

Three loops stand out.

Loop 1: Groundhog Day Work

Different roles. Same experience.

Across the findings, the same strain appears in different forms depending on where someone sits in the system. Leaders experience hesitation and exposure at moments of judgment. Managers experience overload and coordination drag. Employees experience ambiguity and fragmentation. The surface issues differ, but the lived experience feels strikingly similar.

This happens because complexity is no longer being held collectively. Instead, ambiguity is encountered locally. Each role absorbs its own version of it, adapts in place, and keeps moving. The result is a fractal pattern: the same navigational difficulty showing up everywhere, regardless of title or industry.

Work feels harder to interpret not because people lack intelligence or effort, but because shared orientation has eroded, forcing navigation to become primarily individual rather than collectively held, even though individual orientation remains necessary.

When people say “this feels hard,” they are rarely describing one broken process. They are describing the experience of Groundhog Day Work: different days, different meetings, the same underlying strain.

Loop 2: The Adaptation Treadmill

Working harder to stay operational.

As interpretation becomes harder and coordination more demanding, capable humans adapt. They prepare more, communicate more, align more carefully, and remain constantly responsive. In the short term, this works. Projects continue. Crises are contained. The system stays operational.

Over time, however, effort shifts from enabling progress to maintaining stabilization. Motion increases while momentum declines. Adaptation becomes continuous rather than situational. What was once a response to strain becomes the normal way of working.

This loop is especially powerful because it works so well. Human adaptability absorbs strain so effectively that the system does not experience enough pressure to change. Instead of surfacing limits in existing conditions, adaptation masks them. People remain busy, responsive, and committed, even as navigation grows more exhausting. The treadmill speeds up not because people are failing, but because resilience is being used as a substitute for shared support.

Loop 3: The Fix-the-People Loop

Upgrading humans inside unchanged systems.

As strain becomes more visible, organizations respond in familiar ways. They invest in leadership development, resilience programs, tools, and frameworks. These efforts often improve individual capability, awareness, and insight. What changes far less often are the conditions those individuals return to.

Decision authority remains unclear. Roles continue to expand without corresponding changes in shared support. Ambiguity is pushed downward rather than held collectively. Coordination depends on personal effort rather than structural scaffolding.

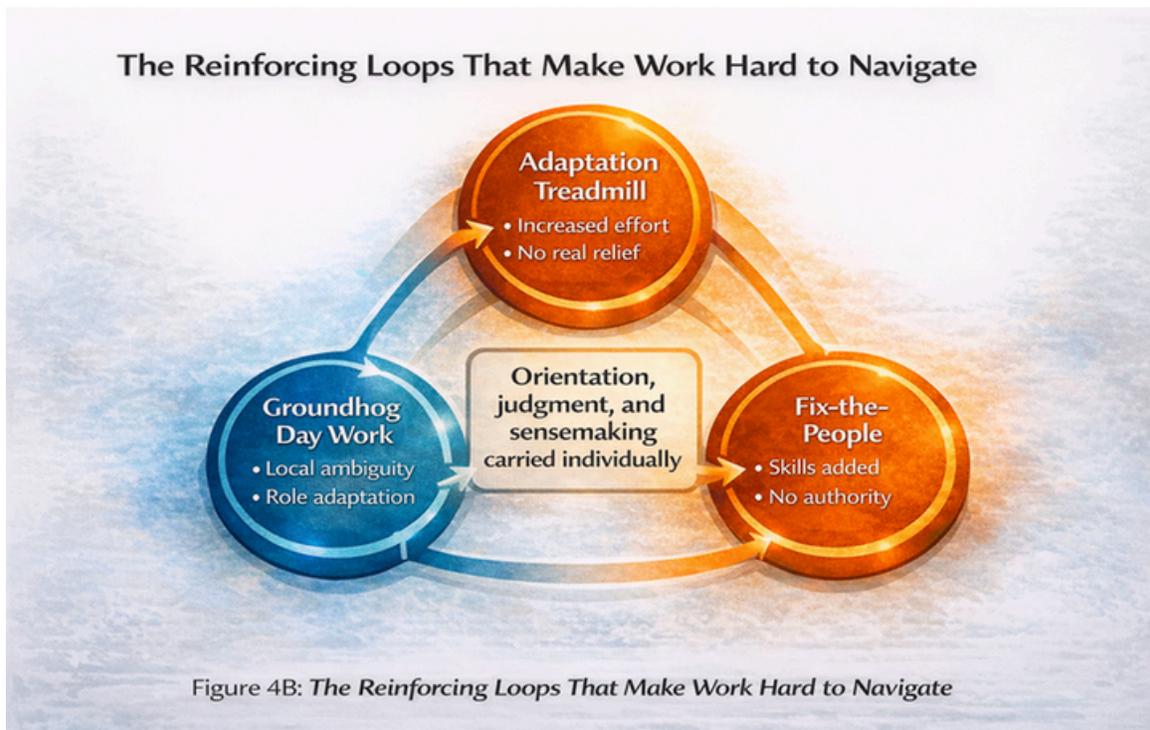
The result is a quiet but costly dynamic. Development raises awareness without increasing room to act, authority to decide, or safety to intervene. Judgment improves while exposure increases. Leaders become more capable while feeling less able to change conditions. The gap between capability and conditions widens, reinforcing the adaptation treadmill rather than relieving it.

How the Loops Reinforce One Another

These reinforcing loops emerge under sustained uncertainty when scaffolding thins or no longer holds under pressure outdated. Local adaptations and squeeze plays absorb ambiguity, coordination, and risk so work can continue. In the short term, this maintains continuity. Over time, it consumes attention, compresses judgment, and constrains opportunities for reorientation. The system remains active, but work becomes progressively harder to navigate.

Local adaptation becomes normal (Groundhog Day Work). Sustained effort keeps systems operational without correction (the Adaptation Treadmill). Development increases individual capability without changing the conditions that require constant adaptation (the Fix-the-People loop). Together, they stabilize the system and reinforce the conditions that make navigation difficult.

Across all three, the same shift occurs: the work of orientation, judgment, and sensemaking migrates out of structures and into people. What was once held collectively is now managed locally. Orientation fragments. Judgment narrows toward what feels safest and most defensible. Sensemaking persists, but it becomes individualized rather than shared.



4.5 What System Correction Stalls and the Pattern it Produces

A reasonable question follows. If these patterns are visible, and leaders are neither ignorant nor indifferent, why doesn't correction occur?

The answer is not lack of insight. It is the interaction between risk, protection, and capacity freeze.

Once a protective posture becomes the dominant organizational squeeze play, attempts at structural change are experienced as destabilizing in environments already under strain. Changes to roles, authority, pacing, and expectations register simultaneously. Even when improvement is needed, these shifts increase exposure before they produce relief.

At the same time, the cost of action feels immediate while the cost of inaction remains diffuse. Adaptation spreads strain quietly. Structural change is interpreted as producing visible disruption. When consequences are delayed or uneven, preserving stability feels safer than introducing change.

Why Adaptation Persists Instead

As coordination and risk migrate into individuals and roles, responsibility fragments. Strain is widely recognized, but no single place clearly holds the mandate or capacity to address underlying conditions. Correction also depends on shared sensemaking, and that capacity has already thinned under pressure. Under pressure, organizations default to execution. People move faster, but think together less.

None of this reflects poor intent. It reflects systems operating under sustained pressure, attempting to preserve continuity. The result is a quiet standoff. People adapt because redesign feels unsafe. Systems rely on adaptation because performance continues. Feedback weakens. Correction is deferred. Over time, this produces a stable but costly equilibrium.

How the Pattern Becomes Visible

When viewed together, the five TRIMs are not separate problems to solve. They are surface expressions of a single underlying pattern: modern work systems remain operational by shifting interpretive, emotional, and coordination load onto humans as the conditions that generate that load remain unresolved

.Leadership confidence erodes as judgment is exercised under exposure without support. Roles fragment as contradictory expectations go unreconciled. Cognitive load increases as coordination migrates into individual effort. Movement slows as temporary stability becomes the safest posture available. Trust and shared context thin as sensemaking is handled locally rather than collectively.

Across all five, the same dynamic appears. Work continues. Human effort increases. Correction does not occur. Not because people are unaware, but because adaptation masks the need for redesign. As long as capable humans keep compensating, feedback remains muted and conditions remain intact.

The Lived Experience of Stalled Correction

From the inside, these dynamics show up less as abstract forces and more as everyday contradictions. Work feels busy but unclear. Decisions move forward without settling anything. Capable people expend effort that does not seem to compound. Everyone tries to do the right thing, yet navigation remains difficult. This is the ordinary texture of modern work under sustained squeeze conditions. Not failure, but normal operation inside systems that preserve continuity by quietly transferring coherence, judgment, and sensemaking into human effort.

What the Findings & Analysis Make Clear

Taken together, the analysis follows a consistent logic. Under sustained uncertainty, systems prioritize continuity. Unresolved conditions create squeeze conditions that drive local adaptation. As adaptation becomes the default response, capacity freezes. Reinforcing loops stabilize the system while orientation erodes. The result is a system that remains operational while becoming progressively harder to navigate.

What the findings and analysis make clear is this: the primary challenge facing modern work is not performance. It is orientation.

Orientation becomes strained when the capacity to hold uncertainty, contradiction, and delayed consequence is exceeded. When that capacity thins, work does not stop. People simplify. They default to familiar signals. They rely on roles, metrics, narratives, or authority to reduce ambiguity. These responses are not irrational or careless. They are adaptive ways of coping with overload.

As reinforcing loops take hold, orientation narrows in specific ways:

- **Groundhog Day Work** collapses temporal orientation, preventing learning and insight from accumulating over time.
- **The Adaptation Treadmill** compresses cognitive orientation, leaving little space to sense, judge, or reset direction.
- **The Fix-the-People Loop** displaces moral and strategic orientation, shifting attention away from conditions and toward individual capability.

Over time, these responses stabilize into recognizable patterns. Judgment gives way to rule-following. Reflection is crowded out by pace. Shared understanding thins as alignment substitutes for sensemaking. The system continues to function, but its capacity to renew, correct, or reorient diminishes.

Orientation operates at both individual and collective levels. Individuals still work to situate themselves in what is happening. What is missing is sufficient shared structural support to hold orientation collectively rather than dispersing it into private effort. When people cannot reliably locate what matters, who decides, or how their actions connect to the whole, even high capability becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

SECTION 5: Workplace Absurdities Patterns

Up to this point, the report has focused on patterns, dynamics, and system behavior. It has examined why work keeps getting harder to navigate even as capable people adapt, perform, and deliver. This section shifts perspective. Instead of describing how the system functions, it names how we live within it.

When systems preserve continuity by transferring coherence, judgment, and sensemaking into human effort, the result is not dramatic failure. It is everyday contradiction. Work feels busy but unclear. Decisions move forward without settling anything. Capable people feel stretched in ways that are difficult to name.

Everyone is trying to do the right thing, yet effort does not seem to compound. These experiences are not isolated frustrations or individual breakdowns. They are the predictable human-level expressions of the operating logic examined throughout the report.

We call these experiences **workplace absurdities**.

In this report, we distinguish between two forms. **Operating absurdities** describe the internal logic that allows the system to continue functioning as it does. **Workplace absurdities** describe how that logic is experienced by humans inside the system.

They are not absurd because people are irrational or systems are broken. They are absurd because the conditions of modern work ask humans to resolve contradictions that no longer resolve structurally. Work continues to function, even as it becomes progressively harder to inhabit.

What follows are the most consistent absurdities observed across roles, organizations, and industries. They are not edge cases. They are what normal work feels like inside systems that rely on human adaptation to remain stable.

5.1 The Operating Absurdity of Modern Work

The operating absurdity of modern work is this:

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

When priorities conflict, roles blur, decisions stall, or direction keeps shifting, work does not pause. People adjust. They fill gaps. They translate ambiguity into action so things can continue. Over time, these responses stop being exceptional and become the operating logic of the system.

What the system does not resolve gets carried by people instead. No one designs this intentionally. It emerges from reasonable responses to real pressure. From the outside, it looks like resilience and commitment. Up close, it is stability being held together by human judgment, attention, emotional regulation, and identity. From the inside, work feels heavier, more fragile, and harder to inhabit.

As this logic takes hold, a set of predictable operating absurdities emerges. These are not the lived experiences themselves. They are the system-level dynamics that quietly hold modern work in place and give rise to the everyday absurdities that follow.

5.2 Operating Absurdities – How the System Holds Together

#1. Stability Is Mistaken for Health

As long as work continues and outputs are delivered, underlying strain remains invisible. The system appears functional because people are compensating, not because conditions are sound. Stability becomes the proxy for health, masking the cost paid in attention, judgment, and relational capacity.

#2. Capability is a Liability

The more capable someone is, the more ambiguity, responsibility, and risk they absorb. Competence attracts unresolved work, turning strength into a load-bearing requirement rather than a sustainable asset. Over time, the system comes to depend on its most capable people not just to perform, but to compensate for what structure no longer holds.

#3. Escalation Feels Like Safety

In unclear or risky conditions, deferring decisions upward becomes the safest option. Responsibility concentrates, decision latency grows, and autonomy erodes even as accountability rhetoric intensifies. Escalation protects individuals in the short term while narrowing the system's capacity to act.

#4. Change Increases the Problem It Aims to Solve

New initiatives add coordination, urgency, and interpretation work without relocating authority or reducing contradiction. Activity increases while orientation declines. Change is introduced on top of existing strain, intensifying the very conditions it was meant to relieve.

#5. Cost Disappears Because It Is Distributed

The strain of holding the system together is spread across calendars, cognition, emotion, and identity. Because no single place bears the full cost, the system never fully sees it. What is collectively expensive remains individually manageable, allowing strain to persist without triggering correction.

5.3 The Workplace Absurdities We're Living Inside

The operating absurdities described above are not failures to fix. They are signals of how modern work preserves continuity under pressure.

At a system level, these dynamics explain how work continues despite unresolved conditions. The workplace absurdities that follow describe how that same operating logic is lived, day to day, by the people inside the system.

These experiences are not separate problems to be solved in isolation. They are surface expressions of a deeper operating logic at work. Each one makes visible how coherence, judgment, and sensemaking are shifted into human effort so performance can continue. Treating the absurdities as a signal about the underlying conditions shaping how work holds together.

They are not failures of competence, motivation, or intent. They are the most common ways the system's logic becomes visible in everyday work, allowing stability to be maintained while making work progressively harder to inhabit.

These absurdities appear wherever: judgment is required but not protected, urgency crowds out sensemaking, responsibility exceeds authority, identity strain accumulates quietly, or movement continues while meaning erodes.

Taken together, they explain why work can remain productive on the surface yet become increasingly disorienting, exhausting, and fragile underneath. What follows is not a critique of people. It is a description of what normal work now feels like inside systems that rely on human adaptation to preserve continuity.

#1: Everything Urgent. Nothing Make Sense.

Modern work rarely pauses long enough for orientation to settle. People navigate continuous change, competing priorities, shifting roles, and accelerating technology. As a result, sensemaking resets repeatedly instead of accumulating over time.

The same questions resurface again and again: What's actually happening? What matters now? What am I responsible for?

Work keeps moving, but meaning must be rebuilt repeatedly. Alignment loops multiply. Decisions hesitate. Issues escalate. These are not failures of clarity. They are signals that nothing holds long enough for understanding to land.

#2. Judgment Required. Discernment Not Supported.

Across the findings, capability remains high. People are skilled. They care about their work. They know how to deliver. Yet judgment feels heavier, riskier, and more exposed than it used to. This is not because competence is lacking. It is because discernment has become load-bearing rather than situational. People are expected to determine what matters, filter conflicting signals, pace decisions appropriately, and hold trade-offs under uncertainty, often without the time, authority, shared context, or structural support required to do so well.

Judgment is demanded. Discernment is carried individually rather than supported collectively. Capability persists, but orientation does not.

#3. On the Hook. Not in Charge.

Organizations increasingly ask people to take ownership, use judgment, act autonomously, and move faster. At the same time, authority, protection, and consequence remain fragmented. As a result, people become the integration layer. They carry unresolved trade-offs, unclear decision rights, conflicting expectations, and emotional fallout. This is especially visible in leadership roles, where responsibility concentrates without the structural support required to exercise it safely. Judgment is demanded, while exposure remains personal and protection remains thin.

#4. Bring Your Whole Self. Edit Constantly.

Modern work celebrates flexibility, authenticity, and adaptability. At the same time, roles fragment, expectations collide, and acceptable expression shifts by context. People stretch across incompatible demands, translate between audiences, and adjust how they show up to stay safe. Identity becomes something to manage rather than inhabit. This is not disengagement. It is intelligent self-protection under identity strain.

Quiet questions accumulate: Which version of me works here? What part of me is risky? Who am I allowed to be today?

#5. Work Keeps Moving. Meaning Keeps Slipping.

Work accelerates. Outputs multiply. Tools improve. Yet many people struggle to answer a simple question: What is any of this for? Effort disconnects from visible impact. Contribution becomes abstract. Meaning does not vanish dramatically. It slips quietly as goals shift, outputs fragment, and sensemaking is repeatedly deferred.

From Absurdity to Insight

These workplace absurdities are not anomalies. They are the everyday human consequences of systems that preserve continuity by transferring coherence, judgment, and sensemaking into human effort.

Taken together, they point to a deeper issue. The challenge facing modern work is not a lack of capability, motivation, or technology. **It is a failure of orientation under sustained pressure.**

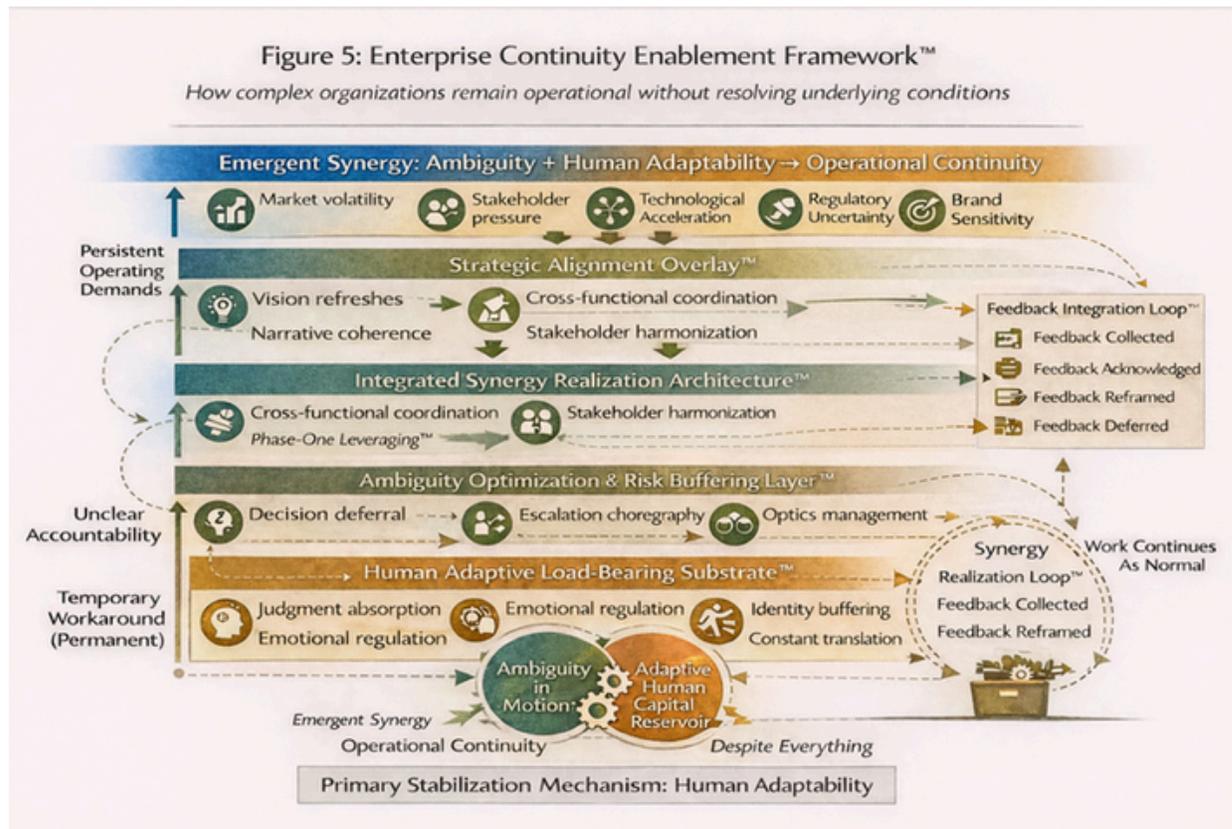
To move forward, we need a way to distinguish between activity and progress, between movement and meaning, and between adaptation that stabilizes and change that actually restores capacity.

Recent advances in artificial intelligence amplify the dynamics described in this section. AI does not remove the need for judgment. It concentrates it. Speed increases. Reflection compresses. The demand for sensemaking rises. Technology makes visible what was already present. Movement without shared meaning is not progress. When orientation is thin, acceleration magnifies confusion rather than resolving it.

In the absence of shared orientation frameworks, organizations default to change strategies that intensify the very dynamics they are trying to fix. Urgency reallocates already constrained attention toward maintenance and protection. New initiatives add coordination and interpretation work without reducing contradiction or relocating authority.

What looks like momentum often accelerates exhaustion while leaving underlying conditions untouched. To make this operating logic visible, we now step back and represent it in the figure below. Seen this way, many familiar change initiatives, governance mechanisms, and enablement efforts begin to look less like solutions and more like continuity strategies.

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 shared clarity, and why attention, relational capacity, and orientation quietly become limiting factors over time.



SECTION 6: Conclusions

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

Why does work remain so difficult to navigate even when capable people and organizations are performing, adapting, and continuing to deliver?

Work has not become harder because people are failing, resisting change, or lacking capability. Nor is it because organizations are broken or poorly led. Work has become harder because the ways modern organizations hold work together no longer match the conditions they now operate within.

Today's organizations function inside complex, fast-moving, and deeply interdependent environments shaped by delayed consequences and persistent uncertainty. Yet much of how work is structured, coordinated, and governed still assumes stability, predictability, and control. This creates a persistent blind spot. Systems remain operational, but the effort required to navigate work increases steadily beneath the surface.

Under these conditions, orientation and judgment are demanded constantly. Sensemaking becomes essential for performance. But the shared capacity to hold these functions collectively has thinned. Decision logic fragments. Pacing accelerates. Relational coordination becomes localized. The system continues by shifting coherence, judgment, and sensemaking into people. Humans become the integration layer. Judgment, attention, emotional regulation, and identity absorb what the system no longer holds. This keeps work moving. But over time, it quietly turns human capacity into the limiting factor.

This is the central irony of modern work. The very patterns that allow organizations to remain operational under sustained pressure now constrain their ability to renew, reorient, and adapt. Performance persists, but orientation erodes. Adaptation stabilizes the present while delaying meaningful correction.

What this report makes visible is not a failure of effort or intent, but a systemic condition. Work is being held together through continuous human compensation rather than shared orientation. As long as capable people continue to absorb the strain, the system receives weak signals that change is needed. People are not failing to keep up with work. Work has outpaced the conditions that allow people to orient together inside it.

What appears as individual strain is better understood as an **operating logic constraint**. The conclusions that follow name that constraint directly and clarify what must shift if work is to become more navigable again for people and for the organizations that depend on them.

Conclusion 1:

Modern work systems preserve continuity by relying on human adaptation to carry unresolved conditions.

Modern work systems increasingly remain operational by converting unresolved ambiguity into human effort. When priorities conflict, roles blur, decisions stall, or direction shifts, work does not pause. People adapt. They translate ambiguity into action, absorb contradictions, and keep things moving. Over time, this stops being an exception and becomes the default mode.

The central conclusion: *The behaviors that keep work functioning under strain are the same behaviors that prevent the conditions of work from changing.*

This is not intentional. It emerges from reasonable responses to sustained pressure. From the outside, it looks like resilience. From the inside, it feels like work becoming heavier, more fragile, and harder to inhabit.

Conclusion 2:

Attention is a critical system resource that increasingly limits sensemaking, orientation and judgment.

Under sustained complexity, attention becomes the *primary limiting capacity*.

Attention is not a personal productivity issue. It is a finite system resource required for judgment, orientation, sensemaking, meaning making and deliberate choice. As pace accelerates and demands multiply, attention fragments. People spend more time tracking signals, managing urgency, and reorienting themselves than making sense of what matters. As attention thins:

- judgment compresses rather than disappears
- decisions are made with less shared context
- risk is deferred rather than resolved

Systems appear stable not because they are coherent, but because human attention is continuously expended to hold them together.

Conclusion 3:

Coherence is increasingly produced through individual effort rather than being held structurally or collectively.

The deeper issue beneath modern work strain is not complexity itself. It is that coherence has been treated as an individual responsibility rather than a system capability.

What disappears first under sustained squeeze is not effort, but relational capacity. Shared sensemaking spaces shrink. Informal calibration erodes. Trust becomes procedural rather than lived. Coordination moves from conversation into documentation, meetings, and escalation paths. Coherence does not fail individually. It thins relationally before it fragments personally.

People are expected to:

- hold competing signals without collapse
- regulate effort under sustained demand
- exercise judgment without protection
- remain anchored in identity as roles blur

Orientation does not disappear under these conditions. It fragments. Work remains busy while becoming progressively harder to navigate. This explains how performance can persist even as long-term

Conclusion 4:

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

The strain described in this report is not primarily behavioral. It is structural in origin and human in expression. People adapt, compensate, and carry more not because they lack capability or commitment, but because the surrounding conditions no longer hold judgment, coordination, and consequence as they once did.

By structure, we do not mean org charts or formal redesign. We mean the shared holding capacity that allows work to remain navigable under pressure: where decisions settle, how sense is made together, how pace is regulated, how relational time is protected, and how contradiction is addressed rather than absorbed privately. When this shared holding capacity thins, people become the default integrators of work.

What is missing across these patterns is scaffolding. By scaffolding, we mean the shared structural supports that determine:

- where ambiguity is held
- how tradeoffs are resolved
- how judgment is protected
- how coordination occurs by default without becoming personal labor

Scaffolding is not about control or motivation. It is what allows judgment, sensemaking, and coordination to be carried collectively, rather than transferred into individual effort.

When scaffolding is absent or outdated, coherence is produced manually. People translate between functions, buffer conflicting demands, smooth over gaps, and absorb risk so work can continue. This is not a failure of skill, resilience, or leadership intent. It is the predictable result of operating under sustained pressure without sufficient shared holding capacity.

The structures that once held ambiguity, pacing, and consequence were built for more stable conditions. As those conditions changed, the demand for orientation increased, but the mechanisms for holding it did not. Coherence did not disappear. It migrated into human effort instead.

Conclusion 5

Human adaptation has become a stabilizing mechanism that masks structural strain and delays structural reconsideration.

Adaptation itself is not the problem. It is one of humanity's great strengths. The trap emerges when systems begin to select for, reward, and depend on adaptation as their primary stabilizer.

When adaptation becomes load-bearing:

- strain does not surface clearly
- feedback is dampened or delayed
- correction is deferred

Over time, this creates a stable but costly equilibrium:

- work continues without becoming clearer
- effort increases without restoring orientation
- adaptation becomes constant rather than situational

What appears as resilience is often the system postponing correction. Stability is preserved, but renewal is constrained. The system remains operational while becoming progressively harder to navigate.

Conclusion 6:

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

The conditions described in this report persist not because they are unseen, but because they are interpreted through a dominant logic that no longer fits the environment organizations now operate within. This is not primarily a performance problem. It is an epistemic one.

Much of modern organizational design still rests on assumptions formed under earlier conditions: that clarity precedes action, that authority can be cleanly located, that cause and effect are knowable, and that improvement follows from tighter control, clearer plans, and better execution. Under sustained complexity and constraint, these assumptions no longer hold.

This creates an epistemic blind spot.

Strain is interpreted as a performance gap rather than a capacity signal. Stabilization is mistaken for health. What appears to be individual or managerial responsibility is, in fact, a system-level response to unresolved conditions. The system works hard to remain functional, but the way it is designed now constrains its own effectiveness.

The blind spot is not the absence of structures, roles, policies, or culture. It is that these elements were designed for earlier conditions and are now silently failing under current ones. As a result, coherence, judgment, and sensemaking are pushed into people rather than held structurally.

This blind spot is experienced operationally as a disconnect between how work is lived and how the system is designed and interpreted. People feel compelled to stabilize, decide, and adapt as a personal or managerial responsibility, even as these pressures are produced by system-level conditions. Capable leaders and teams work harder, yet remain stuck.

To surface this blind spot, the findings in this report were examined through three complementary lenses. Together, they reveal why adaptation becomes compulsory, why correction stalls, and why effort no longer produces progress.

A **complexity lens** shows that the patterns in this report are not failures of execution, but emergent responses to unresolved conditions. In complex systems, pressure does not resolve through force or optimization. It relocates. What looks like resistance or inertia is often the system protecting itself from further destabilization.

A **systems lens** makes visible where that pressure goes. Strain does not disappear when ignored. It migrates into human effort, attention, emotion, and identity. When structures fail to hold ambiguity, people do. When coordination is underspecified, relationships compensate. When decision rights blur, judgment becomes personally risky.

An **integral lens** reveals how these dynamics unfold simultaneously across individual, relational, and organizational levels. What appears as burnout at the individual level, friction at the team level, or stalled change at the organizational level is not separate phenomena. It is the same pattern expressed at different scales.

Seen this way, the challenge facing modern work is not primarily one of motivation, capability, or compliance. It is a challenge of orientation and design. Without lenses that can hold complexity, surface load transfer, and account for human capacity across levels, organizations will continue to invest in change efforts that intensify the very conditions they aim to resolve.

Taken together, these lenses help consolidate the findings of this report and clarify why the patterns observed are persistent, intelligible, and difficult to interrupt.

The Relational Erosion Pattern

Across all of these conclusions, one cross-cutting signal remains constant. As structural supports thin and adaptation becomes the default, relational capacity quietly erodes. Coordination, trust, emotional regulation, and sensemaking migrate into relationships that are already under strain. What appears as interpersonal friction or disengagement is often the downstream effect of systems that no longer hold relational work collectively by design.

Conclusion Summary

This report set out to answer a simple but persistent question: why does work remain so difficult to navigate, even when capable people and organizations continue to perform, adapt, and deliver?

The findings make clear that the difficulty is not rooted in effort, motivation, or leadership intent. It emerges from a mismatch between the conditions modern work now operates within and the way work is still designed to function. Under sustained uncertainty, systems prioritize continuity. To remain operational, unresolved ambiguity, contradiction, and risk are increasingly carried through human judgment, coordination, and adaptation rather than held structurally.

This creates a central irony. The very responses that preserve short-term functionality gradually constrain orientation, shared sensemaking, and renewal. Performance continues, but navigation becomes harder. Strain is interpreted as a people problem rather than a design signal. Over time, relational capacity thins, feedback weakens, and adaptation stabilizes pressure instead of resolving it.

Taken together, these conclusions point to a fundamental implication: modern work does not need more effort or better coping strategies. It needs different conditions. Specifically, it needs structures that protect attention, support shared sensemaking, clarify authority and consequence, and allow orientation to be held collectively rather than carried privately.

The question that follows is no longer what is happening, but what becomes possible when work is designed to support orientation again. That is the focus of the section that follows.

SECTION 7: What Becomes Possible

The patterns described in this report are not inevitable. They persist because capable people have been compensating inside conditions that no longer support shared sensemaking, sound judgment, or coherent movement. When those conditions begin to change, different dynamics emerge. Not through urgency. Not through force. But through restored orientation.

This is the change logic that underpins **Reclaim**.

Reclaim is Behaving Badly HQ's practice development pathway for rebuilding orientation capacity across individuals, teams, and organizations operating under sustained uncertainty.

Reclaim begins from a simple premise: people are not failing. Systems are asking them to compensate for design assumptions that no longer hold. Rather than extracting more effort or accelerating change, Reclaim focuses on restoring the structural conditions that allow attention, sensemaking, and orientation to be held collectively again. When orientation returns, work becomes more navigable.

At the Individual Level: Capacity Regains Integrity

In frozen systems, individuals remain active but constrained. Effort stays high, while capacity is quietly consumed by protection, interpretation, and self-monitoring. When orientation stabilizes, movement begins with clarity.

People become better able to:

- distinguish real demands from inherited ones
- recognize which tensions belong to the system rather than the self
- locate where effort is required and where it is merely habitual
- act without carrying responsibility that was never theirs

As invisible load drops, **adaptive capacity regains integrity**. Judgment becomes lighter not because problems disappear, but because fewer constraints are being carried privately.

Figure Note. When Work Becomes Easier to Navigate

This figure illustrates what becomes possible when orientation is restored as a shared practice. As individual, team, and organizational capacities regain integrity, judgment lightens, sensemaking becomes collective, and responsibility shifts out of individual compensation and back into shared design.



At the Team Level: Sensemaking Becomes Shared Again

When individuals are no longer absorbing ambiguity alone, teams begin to function differently. Orientation shifts from a private activity to a shared practice. As sensemaking becomes collective again, coordination costs fall. Energy moves out of managing impressions and back into actual work.

Teams regain the ability to:

- interpret conditions together rather than align after the fact
- surface trade-offs without personal exposure
- coordinate without constant translation or over-preparation
- slow down just enough to prevent rework

At the Organizational Level: Capacity is Meant to Be Held Structurally

In frozen organizations, stability is maintained by quietly shifting load downward. Human adaptability becomes infrastructure. As conditions change, organizations regain:

- clearer boundaries of responsibility
- decision authority that matches accountability
- pacing that reflects real capacity rather than urgency signals
- feedback that can be acted on rather than absorbed

Coherence is no longer produced manually through human effort. It is supported structurally through shared design.

SECTION 8: From Insight to Action

From Orientation to Informed Action

This report is not meant to be read once and set aside. It is designed to be used as an orientation aid for navigating sustained complexity. In environments like the ones described here, the greatest risk is not hesitation. It is acting quickly on an incomplete or misdiagnosed understanding of what is happening.

Before strategies are revised, structures redesigned, or development programs launched, something more foundational is required: shared orientation. This section outlines how individuals, teams, and organizations can use this report to support clearer judgment and more grounded action.

Before strategies are revised, structures redesigned, or development programs launched, something more foundational is required: **shared orientation**.

In practice, this begins with a simple but often skipped question: What kind of situation are we actually in right now, and what kind of response does it call for? Acting without this pause is how well-intended effort turns into overextension, misapplied solutions, and continued reliance on human compensation. The guidance that follows is meant to be used only after this orienting step has been taken.

8.1 For Individuals: Restoring Personal Orientation

For individuals, this report can be used to distinguish between what belongs to you and what you have been carrying on behalf of the system. A practical starting point is the *Squeeze Conditions Assessment*, which helps surface where unresolved demands, role ambiguity, or decision friction are shaping your experience of work.

Before trying to improve performance or resilience individually, people can benefit from pausing to orient to the nature of the situation they are responding to. As you review the findings and assessment results, consider:

- Where am I compensating for unclear priorities, roles, or decisions?
- What effort feels necessary versus habitual?
- Which tensions belong to the system rather than to me?
- Where is constant adaptation affecting judgment, energy, or identity?

The goal is not withdrawal or disengagement. It is clearer self-location within the system. When people stop internalizing systemic strain, capacity becomes available again for meaningful contribution.

8.2 For Teams: Making Sense Together Again

Teams can use this report as a shared sensemaking resource rather than a diagnostic exercise. When teams review the findings together, the focus should be on recognition, not problem-solving. The most productive team conversations begin not with solutions, but with shared orientation about the kind of challenge the team is facing. Useful questions include:

- Where are we spending the most effort just to coordinate or align?
- What are we translating/compensating for because it is not being held structurally?
- Which issues do we keep circling without resolution?
- Where does work feel hardest to navigate, even when we perform well?

Using a shared assessment, such as the *Squeeze Conditions Assessment*, helps move these conversations out of opinion and into observable conditions. As sensemaking becomes collective again, coordination costs fall and unnecessary rework decreases.

8.3 For Organizations: Designing for Capacity

At the organizational level, restoring capacity depends on organizations taking responsibility for orientation before expecting alignment, execution, or change.

This report invites a shift from optimizing people to strengthening conditions work operates within. When reviewing culture initiatives, leadership development, or change efforts, consider:

- Where is human adaptability being used as infrastructure?
- Which decisions, accountabilities, or trade-offs are structurally unresolved?
- How are we currently interpreting strain: as a performance issue, a development gap, or a signal about system conditions and design?
- How is attention being fragmented by urgency, acceleration, or competing demands?
- What scaffolding has eroded as pace and complexity increased?
- Where has responsibility for orientation, pacing, and sensemaking quietly migrated into individuals or roles without being structurally supported?
- Where has coherence broken down across policies, HR initiatives, transformation efforts, leadership programs, work procedures, organizational design, or use of technology?

Capability is rarely the issue. Capacity is. Organizations regain effectiveness when judgment, pacing, and responsibility are held by design than privately.

Designing the Conditions for Orientation

Designing for orientation does not mean reducing uncertainty or increasing individual coping. It means deliberately shaping the organizational scaffolding that determines how uncertainty is held — including decision rights, authority and risk allocation, pacing and time structures, visibility of work, and how judgment and dissent are treated in practice are protected and acted on in practice.

Below are illustrative examples of the kinds of structural shifts in conditions that make restored orientation possible:

Sensemaking scaffolding: Creating regular forums explicitly dedicated to collective 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 where decisions are held including 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 explicit authority and visible backing. Making it clear who carries consequence when judgment calls fail. Reducing the personal risk of acting under uncertainty.

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

Using the Insights

This report names patterns many people already feel but rarely have shared language for. Used well, it supports clearer conversations, sounder judgment, and more humane design choices. Work becomes easier to navigate not because uncertainty disappears, but because people are no longer left to make sense of it alone.

Restoring orientation is not a single initiative. It is an ongoing organizational responsibility for shaping conditions. Movement resumes not through large transformations, but through small, deliberate adjustments that reduce unnecessary strain, clarify responsibility, and restore agency without requiring heroics.

Used this way, the report helps leaders and teams decide not only where action is needed, but where restraint, discernment, sequencing, or pause better protects judgement and capacity.

Closing

This report opened with an observation first articulated decades ago. Robert Kegan warned that modern life was leaving many people “in over their heads,” facing demands that exceeded the meaning-making capacities their environments helped them develop. His argument was not that people were failing, but that complexity was outpacing the supports available to navigate it.

That diagnosis still matters. But the findings here suggest the problem has shifted. Today, it is not primarily people who are overwhelmed. It is the way work is designed. As Peter Vaill observed, work no longer alternates between stability and change. It unfolds in permanent whitewater: continuous turbulence, delayed consequences, and constant adjustment. Under these conditions, sensemaking and orientation are no longer occasional leadership activities. They are essential, ongoing capacities.

What has not kept pace is how work is structurally supported under current conditions. Many roles, structures, and governance mechanisms were built for slower, more stable environments and now struggle to support judgment, sensemaking, and coordination under sustained uncertainty. When those assumptions fail, coherence does not disappear. It is transferred into human effort, consuming attention that would otherwise support shared orientation.

This is the epistemic design blind spot at the heart of modern work. Strain is routinely interpreted as a performance or capability issue, when it is often a signal that the system no longer preserves the conditions required for people to make sense together. People do not lack resilience. They compensate for environments that quietly exhaust the very capacities they depend on.

Artificial intelligence intensifies these dynamics. It does not remove the need for judgment or sensemaking. It concentrates it. As pace accelerates, acting on a misread of the situation becomes more consequential, not less. The challenge facing modern work is therefore not speed or capability, but whether organizations are structured to protect attention, support shared sensemaking, and hold orientation collectively rather than pushing it into individuals.

Renewal begins with a pause that is routinely skipped: asking what kind of situation is actually present before deciding how to respond. Execution or learning. Clarification or negotiation. Speed or discernment. Progress depends on restoring the structural conditions that allow sensemaking, orientation, and judgment to be held together, rather than carried privately under pressure.

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About the Author

Charleen Johnson

*Founder & Chief Investigator,
Behaving Badly HQ*

Charleen is a sensemaking practitioner and field-based researcher focused on how modern work actually functions under sustained complexity. For more than two decades, her work has explored how people navigate uncertainty, contradiction, and accelerating change inside organizations. She is the founder of Behaving Badly HQ (BBHQ). She is the creator of the Reclaim practice pathway, which supports the development of individual and collective orientation and sensemaking capacity. Her work helps leaders, teams, and organizations ask better questions before deciding where and how to act. www.behavingbadlyhq.com



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METHOD™**



About Behaving Badly HQ

Behaving Badly HQ (BBHQ) is a research and sensemaking practice focused on how modern work actually functions under sustained complexity. Through field observation, organizational analysis, and systems-informed inquiry, BBHQ examines the patterns, pressures, and design assumptions shaping how people experience work today. BBHQ uses the lens of workplace absurdity not as critique or comedy, but as a diagnostic signal. Absurdities surface where adaptation has become the default response to unresolved conditions, revealing how coherence, judgment, and sensemaking are increasingly carried by people rather than by structure. Its aim is to restore orientation: helping individuals, teams, and organizations see what is actually happening, name the forces at play, and redesign conditions so work becomes more navigable, coherent, and human. To explore support or upcoming programs: hello@behavingbadlyhq.com

Appendix: Examples in Practice

Activities that Restore Orientation and Sensemaking

Across the patterns documented in this report, capacity freeze has become a dominant operating condition. Yet even inside frozen systems, movement does not disappear entirely.

What is beginning to re-emerge is not stability, certainty, or control. It is orientation: the ability to locate oneself accurately, make sense of conditions, and choose responses without collapsing into urgency, avoidance, or over-adaptation.

Multiple data sources, including Deloitte, McKinsey, Gartner, Gallup, the World Economic Forum, and BBHQ's own field observations, point to early signals of reorganization across individuals, teams, leaders, and organizations. These are not solutions, best practices, or proven models. They are directional signals: evidence of how coherence begins to re-form inside complex environments under sustained strain.

What shifts first is not behavior. It is the questions being asked.

Less: How do we optimize performance? More: What conditions are shaping how people are thinking, deciding, and adapting right now?

This section documents where those shifts are already visible and what they reveal about how thaw begins.

Individuals Are Rebuilding Internal Navigation

Sources: Deloitte 2024 Human Capital Trends, Gallup Global Workplace Report 2024, BBHQ field signals.

Across global worker data, individuals are moving away from purely reactive survival behaviors toward more deliberate internal orientation.

Signals include:

- increased attention to purpose, values, and identity alignment
- growing investment in coaching, reflection, and meaning-making practices
- clearer boundaries around energy, attention, and availability
- more explicit naming of system incoherence as a source of strain

These moves are not lifestyle trends. They are protective adaptations.

Implication: Internal coherence is beginning to regrow where external coherence remains weak. This restores some agency, but it also reveals the cost of privatized orientation. When coherence lives primarily inside individuals, capacity becomes fragile, unevenly distributed, and effort-dependent. Individual reorientation helps people survive, but it cannot carry the system alone.

Teams Are Rebuilding Micro-Coherence

Sources: Gartner 2024 Hybrid Effectiveness Report, McKinsey State of Organizations 2024, BBHQ field signals

Under sustained pressure, many teams are quietly rebuilding shared orientation through small, repeatable relational practices.

Signals include:

- micro-norms that clarify communication and expectations
- smaller teams outperforming larger ones due to tighter sensemaking loops
- simple rituals that re-anchor connection in hybrid settings
- renewed emphasis on psychological safety in high-performing groups

These practices are rarely formalized. They emerge out of necessity.

Implication: Teams are constructing lightweight scaffolding to hold complexity locally. These micro-coherence practices work precisely because they reduce interpretive load. However, they remain limited in scale. Without organizational reinforcement, they depend heavily on trust, goodwill, and sustained effort.

Leaders Are Questioning Inherited Operating Logic

Sources: McKinsey 2024 Leadership in Turbulence, Deloitte Human Sustainability research, BBHQ field interviews

Leaders are increasingly questioning assumptions that once governed decision-making under stable conditions.

Signals include:

- greater transparency about uncertainty and constraint
- leaders naming complexity rather than masking it
- declining reliance on legacy performance-management scripts
- increased attention to discernment, presence, and judgment

This questioning does not signal confidence. It signals recognition.

Implication: Leadership coherence is beginning to shift from performative certainty toward grounded discernment. Insight is increasing faster than structural support. Without changes to pacing, authority, and protection, awareness alone often increases exposure rather than restoring capacity.

Organizations Are Experimenting With Structure

Sources: Gartner Organizational Redesign Insights, Deloitte Work Infrastructure Report, McKinsey Organizational Health Index, Corporate Rebels

Some organizations are testing new structural arrangements to better match lived work conditions.

Signals include:

- role simplification to reduce overload
- self managed teams, autonomous teams
- cross-functional pods replacing rigid hierarchies
- clearer decision rights to reduce cognitive drag
- outcome-based flexibility pilots
- early experimentation with AI that preserves human judgment

Implication: Structural coherence is re-emerging through experimentation rather than redesign. Most initiatives stall where underlying assumptions about pace, risk, and human elasticity remain unchanged. Architecture is shifting faster at the edges than at the core.

AI Is Forcing a Renegotiation of Human Judgment

Sources: WEF Future of Jobs, Gartner AI Adoption Study, BBHQ field observations

AI is intensifying strain while simultaneously revealing how judgment and interpretation are currently held.

Signals include:

- reductions in administrative load for some knowledge workers
- AI used for early-stage sensemaking before engaging others
- improved clarity when AI supports exploration rather than decision replacement
- leaders using AI to test scenarios and reduce emotional reactivity

Implication: AI is not resolving complexity. It concentrates judgment. Where it reduces unnecessary load, it supports thaw. Where it compresses reflection and accelerates pace, it deepens freeze. The difference is not technological. It is whether human orientation is actively protected.

Meaning and Purpose Are Becoming Orientation Anchors

Sources: Gallup Global Purpose Index, McKinsey Workforce Sentiment Analysis, BBHQ field signals

Meaning is re-emerging as a stabilizing force under volatile conditions.

Signals include:

- purpose alignment rising as a retention factor
- rejection of roles that fragment identity
- renewed attention to mission clarity
- individuals seeking coherence between values and work realities

Implication: Meaning is functioning less as motivation and more as orientation. It helps people stay intact where systems provide limited clarity. Meaning is not replacing structure. It is compensating for its absence.

Why These Signals Matter

Taken together, these signals suggest that coherence is attempting to re-form inside the system, often without permission, support, or shared language. They point to the earliest conditions under which frozen capacity begins to re-enter movement, not because people try harder, but because constraints start to shift.

- orientation restored
- constraint reduced
- judgment protected

They also reveal a widening gap:

- humans are adapting faster than structures
- teams are rebuilding coherence bottom-up
- leaders are questioning inherited logic
- organizations are experimenting cautiously
- AI is reshaping cognitive load
- meaning is carrying weight it was never meant to bear

These signals matter because they point to a shift away from compensatory adaptation and toward restored capacity.

The Reclaim Method developed by BBHQ, is designed to support this shift by rebuilding the human capacities required for coherent participation in complex systems. Rather than focusing on performance outcomes or behavioral compliance, it works at the level of orientation, attention, and judgment.

Central to this approach is the **Reclaim Capacity Index**. The Index does not measure intelligence in the traditional sense. It measures the capacity to hold. Specifically, it assesses the conditions that allow individuals and teams to remain oriented under pressure rather than defaulting to distortion, over-adaptation, or withdrawal.

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