



Organizational Intentionality

Why do organizations become something nobody intended to build?

Category	Organizational Design
Primary Audience	Executive Leaders
Companion Framework	Organizational Coherence, Organizational Maturity, & Integrative Leadership
Edition	Launch Edition • v1.0



Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE QUESTION

Why do organizations with capable leaders and good intentions gradually become something nobody deliberately designed?

Why Organizational Intentionality Matters

Organizations are rarely designed all at once.

Instead, they evolve through thousands of decisions made over months and years. New processes are introduced. Reporting relationships change. Teams grow. Priorities shift. Exceptions become permanent practices. Each decision may appear reasonable when viewed independently.

Yet organizations are not shaped by isolated decisions alone.

They are shaped by the patterns those decisions collectively create. Over time, structures, behaviours, incentives, governance, and operating practices begin reinforcing one another, gradually producing an organization that nobody consciously intended to build.

Organizational intentionality is the discipline of continually asking whether today's decisions are strengthening the organization we are trying to create or quietly moving it in another direction.

Intentional organizations recognize that every decision contributes not only to today's outcome, but to tomorrow's operating model.

CORE PROPOSITION

Organizations are not defined solely by the decisions they make, but by the organizational patterns those decisions gradually reinforce over time.



Understanding Organizational Intentionality

Definition

Organizational intentionality is the discipline of ensuring that the countless decisions made across an organization collectively move it toward the organization it is deliberately trying to build. No single decision determines an organization's future.

Instead, hiring decisions, governance choices, operating practices, incentives, priorities, structures, investments, and everyday behaviours gradually reinforce one another. Over time, these accumulated decisions shape the organization's identity far more than any single strategic initiative.

Organizations are therefore designed continuously - not only through formal redesigns, but through the ordinary decisions made every day.

What Organizational Intentionality Is Not

Organizational intentionality should not be confused with rigid planning, centralized control, or resisting change. Intentional organizations adapt constantly.

What distinguishes them is not that they avoid change, but that they continually ask whether each change strengthens or weakens the organization they are trying to create.

Likewise, organizational intentionality does not imply that every decision will prove correct. Leaders make decisions with incomplete information, evolving constraints, and competing priorities.

The objective is not perfect decisions. It is ensuring that decisions remain connected to organizational purpose, while being willing to revisit them as understanding improves and circumstances change.

CORE PROPOSITION

Organizations are continuously redesigned through the accumulation of everyday decisions. Organizational intentionality is the discipline of ensuring those decisions reinforce the organization we intend to build.



The Drift Between Intention and Reality

Organizations rarely become something different overnight. More often, they drift through thousands of everyday decisions that individually appear reasonable but collectively reshape the organization over time.



The successive silhouettes represent the cumulative effect of everyday organizational decisions. Individually, these choices may seem insignificant. Together, they can gradually move the organization away from what it originally intended to build.

CORE PROPOSITION

Organizational intentionality is the discipline of continually noticing and correcting organizational drift before it becomes organizational identity.



Where Are We Drifting?

Organizational drift is rarely obvious while it is occurring. Individual decisions may remain reasonable even as their cumulative effect gradually moves the organization away from what it intends to build.

The questions below are intended to help leaders examine where everyday organizational choices may be reinforcing the intended organization and where they may be quietly reshaping it into something else.

Area of Organizational Design	Questions for Reflection
Priorities	What do our everyday choices suggest we actually prioritize, regardless of what we say is important?
Decision-Making	What patterns are our recurring decisions gradually creating or reinforcing?
Governance	Have governance practices evolved with the organization, or are we preserving structures designed for an earlier reality?
Incentives	What behaviours are our formal and informal incentives actually encouraging?
People	What do our hiring, promotion, and leadership choices gradually make more, or less, true about this organization?
Operating Practices	Which workarounds, exceptions, or temporary practices have quietly become part of how the organization operates?
Technology & Structure	Are our systems and structures still serving organizational intent, or has the organization begun adapting itself around them?
Time	Which decisions were appropriate when they were made but may no longer fit the organization we are becoming?

CORE PROPOSITION

Organizational drift becomes visible when leaders examine not only individual decisions, but the organizational patterns those decisions are accumulating over time.



Closing Reflection

Organizations are never static. People adapt. Priorities change. New constraints emerge. Workarounds become routines. Decisions that were appropriate in one context remain long after that context has changed.

Some degree of organizational drift is therefore inevitable.

The objective of organizational intentionality is not to preserve an organization exactly as it was originally designed. Nor is every departure from the original design something that should be corrected. Sometimes what emerges through experience is better suited to the organization than what was originally intended.

The leadership challenge is to notice the difference.

Intentional organizations periodically examine what their accumulated decisions are creating. They ask what should be preserved, what should be reinforced, what should be reconsidered, and what no longer serves the organization they are trying to build.

Organizational intentionality is therefore not a destination. It is an ongoing discipline of noticing, choosing, and revisiting as the organization evolves.

A QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

If your organization continues making the kinds of everyday decisions it makes today, what organization is it gradually becoming?

A CLOSING REFLECTION

Organizations will evolve whether leaders intend them to or not. Organizational intentionality is the discipline of noticing what is being built and deciding deliberately whether to continue building it.