

The Organisation Cannot Read Itself

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Semantic Foundry

There is a question that should make every senior leader in a large organisation pause.

Not a trick question. Not a philosophical one. A practical one.

If someone asked you to produce a complete, accurate, current account of how your organisation delivers value to its customers — the capabilities, the rules, the decisions that govern daily operations — how long would it take?

Not a strategy deck. Not an org chart. The actual picture. How the work gets done. What governs it. Why it works the way it works.

For most organisations, the honest answer is: months. And even then, it would be incomplete.

That is not a failure of effort or intelligence. It is a structural condition. And it is so common that most people who work in large organisations have simply stopped noticing it.

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The knowledge exists. That is the first thing to understand.

Every organisation that has been running for more than a decade has accumulated an enormous amount of knowledge about how it operates. It lives in the people who have been there long enough to understand why things work the way they do. It lives in the processes that have evolved through years of practical experience. It lives in the systems that were built to automate decisions someone made a long time ago.

The knowledge is real. It is hard-won. It represents decades of investment — in people, in programmes, in the accumulated wisdom of everyone who ever made a decision about how this organisation should work.

The problem is not that the knowledge doesn't exist.

The problem is that nobody can read it.

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Ask the person who has been running a domain for fifteen years how it works. They will tell you. They will tell you things that are not written down anywhere, that have never been formally documented, that exist only in their pattern recognition built through years of doing the work. They are, in the most literal sense, the operating model. Not a description of it. The thing itself.

Now ask what happens when that person retires.

The organisation will run knowledge transfer sessions. They will ask the person to document what they know. They will record workshops. They will try to capture, in a few weeks of structured sessions, what took fifteen years to accumulate.

It will be incomplete. Not because the person didn't try. Because the knowledge that actually matters — the tacit knowledge, the judgment calls, the understanding of why the exception exists and what happens if you remove it — cannot be transferred that way. It can only be demonstrated, over time, in context.

The person leaves. The knowledge goes with them. The organisation carries on, slightly less legible than it was before. The next significant incident will find the gap.

This is not unusual. This is the normal condition of every large regulated organisation in the world.

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There is a related problem that shows up differently but has the same cause.

Every few years, the organisation commissions a transformation programme. A new system. A modernised platform. A strategic capability that the current implementation can no longer support.

And every time, the programme begins the same way.

A team arrives. Business analysts. Architects. Consultants. They start interviewing people. They map processes. They reverse-engineer what the existing systems actually do. They spend months — sometimes the better part of a year — reconstructing an understanding of how the organisation works before they can begin building anything new.

This is called the discovery phase. It is budgeted for, planned for, accepted as the cost of doing this kind of work.

Nobody asks why it has to happen.

The answer, if anyone did ask, would be uncomfortable. The discovery phase exists because the organisation does not have an authoritative account of what it does. The knowledge has to be reconstructed because it was never made explicit in a form that survived the people and programmes that produced it.

The organisation has already paid for that knowledge, many times over. It just cannot find it.

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The same pattern repeats in smaller ways, every day.

A new team member joins a domain and spends their first several months finding the right people to ask, because there is no reliable place to look. A product manager builds a roadmap by interviewing stakeholders, because there is no governed picture of what the capabilities actually are. A regulatory change requires weeks of analysis to understand which rules it affects, because those rules exist in a dozen places and are expressed differently in each.

In each case, the organisation contains the knowledge. The problem is the form it takes. Distributed across people and systems and documents in ways that cannot be assembled into a coherent, current, trustworthy picture.

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This is worth sitting with, because the implication is significant.

Every difficulty the organisation experiences in responding to change — the slow programmes, the expensive discoveries, the strategies that never quite land in the operations — traces back to this condition. The knowledge is buried. Before anything can change, the knowledge must be excavated. That excavation is slow, expensive, and produces results that are already at risk of becoming buried again before the next programme needs them.

The cycle continues not because organisations are badly run or poorly resourced. It continues because the artefact that would break the cycle — an explicit, governed account of what the organisation actually does, owned by the business, persistent across the people and programmes that currently carry it — has never been built.

The organisation contains the knowledge.

The problem is that nobody can read it.

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