

# SOLVE ONCE

*Eliminating Recurring Problems to Build Scalable Organizations*

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## **Selected Pages**

Chapter 1 (complete) · Chapter 2 (opening) · Chapter 15 (opening) · Chapter 19 (opening)

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## CHAPTER 1

# Where Are You?

## *Pre-Framework Diagnostic*

Before you apply anything in this book, you need to know where you are.

That sounds obvious. It is not as easy as it sounds. Most leaders who pick up a framework book believe they already understand their problem. They have lived inside it for months or years. They have named it. They have briefed their boards on it. They have tried to fix it more than once.

What they usually have is a symptom, not a diagnosis. Recurring friction. Talented people producing inconsistent results. A leadership calendar that never clears, no matter how many things get resolved. These are real signals. They are not specific enough to act on.

This chapter is a diagnostic. Work through it before reading the framework chapters that follow. The questions are not designed to confirm what you already suspect. They are designed to surface what you may not yet see clearly. Set aside thirty minutes; answer based on what is true in your organization today.

### **Part One: Establishing the Pattern**

Start by identifying the recurring problems that are consuming leadership's attention right now. Do not filter for severity or importance. List everything that has appeared on your leadership agenda more than twice in the past twelve months.

For each item, answer three questions.

How many times has this required active leadership intervention in the past year? Count escalations, crisis responses, war rooms convened, and executive time spent on direct resolution. Not routine reviews or status updates. Active interventions in which something broke and a senior leader had to respond.

Has the same root cause been identified more than once? If postmortems or root cause analyses have been conducted, check whether they identified the same underlying cause across multiple incidents. If yes, the structure is producing the problem. If each incident had a different root cause, you may be dealing with execution variability rather than systemic failure.

Have previous fixes held for more than six months? A fix that holds for three months and then fails is not a fix. It is a patch. If the same problem category has recurred despite previous interventions, mark it as structural.

Any item that scores three out of three is a systemic problem. It does not matter how it has been classified before, who has owned it, or how many times it has been discussed. If it recurs, if the root cause repeats, and if previous fixes have not held, the structure is producing it.

Write down every item that qualifies. This is your structural problem inventory. Everything that follows is designed to help you understand what kind of structural problem each item represents, and which lever is most likely to eliminate it.

## **Part Two: Locating the Lever**

Every structural problem has a dominant lever: the policy, platform, process, or structure that is producing the outcome. Identifying the correct lever determines what must change. Misidentifying it is one of the most common reasons organizations spend money on fixes that accomplish nothing.

For each item in your structural problem inventory, work through these questions in order. Stop at the first one that clearly applies.

*Is the problem caused by a rule that should not exist, or a rule that is missing?*

Policy problems surface when people are blocked or forced to escalate unnecessarily because of how a rule is written, or when they are working around a gap where a clear rule should exist. The diagnostic signal is approval chains that involve more people than the decision requires, escalation paths that exist because no one has authority to decide at the right level, and workarounds that bypass the official process because it is too slow or too rigid.

If the problem traces back to who is allowed to decide what, the dominant lever is policy. The fix involves rewriting the rule, not improving its execution.

*Is the problem caused by how information moves—or fails to move—between systems?*

Platform problems surface when work requires manual effort to transfer between systems, when data must be re-entered at handoffs, when reports pull from different sources and produce different answers, or when teams maintain shadow spreadsheets because the official system cannot support the actual workflow. The diagnostic signal is that the problem would disappear if you imagined a single integrated system, and reappears whenever that integration breaks down.

If the problem traces back to how data moves through your technology stack, the dominant lever is platform. The fix involves integration, automation, or system redesign, not better process documentation.

*Is the problem caused by the sequence or structure of work itself?*

Process problems surface when work loops backward, when handoffs create delays because the receiving team was not involved at the right moment, or when quality issues surface late because review happens after commitment. The diagnostic signal is that the problem would disappear if the order of activities were different, not if the people or systems were replaced.

If the problem traces back to when things happen relative to each other, the dominant lever is process. The fix involves redesigning the sequence and the handoffs.

*Is the problem caused by unclear or misaligned ownership?*

Structural problems surface when decisions stall because no one has clear authority, when cross-functional problems linger between departments, or when competent people are held responsible for outcomes they cannot influence. The diagnostic signal is that the problem would disappear if one person owned it with real authority, and reappears whenever that ownership is diluted or unclear. If so, the dominant lever is structure.

**Part Three: Scoring Your Organization**

The table below is a rapid scoring tool. Select the description that most accurately reflects your organization today. Score what is true, not what you intend.

| Dimension      | Healthy                                                    | Early Warning                                               | Pattern Active                                                      |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Recurrence     | Same problem appears once, is fixed, does not return       | Same problem returns occasionally despite fixes             | Same problem or category returns every quarter                      |
| Workarounds    | Official processes are used as designed                    | Some teams have informal shortcuts for specific steps       | Shadow systems and bypass channels are standard practice            |
| Escalation     | Issues are resolved at the level where they occur          | Some issues escalate beyond their natural owner regularly   | Senior leaders spend significant time on routine problem resolution |
| Ownership      | Every major outcome has a clear, empowered owner           | Ownership is clear within functions but blurs at boundaries | Cross-functional problems have no clear owner and accumulate        |
| Fix durability | Fixes hold for more than a year without active maintenance | Fixes hold one to two quarters, then require attention      | Fixes require ongoing management or regress within weeks            |
| Talent signal  | Strong performers are engaged and building                 | Some report frustration with recurring friction             | Strong performers are leaving or disengaging due to dysfunction     |

Count your scores. Mostly Healthy: the pattern is not yet active, but read Chapter 2 carefully, as the early warning signs are easier to address than the full pattern. Mostly Early Warning: the pattern is forming. You have a window. Mostly Pattern Active: the structure is producing recurring problems at scale. The cost is real and growing. The framework in this book is designed for exactly this condition.

**Part Four: Your Highest-Leverage Starting Point**

From your inventory and lever assessment, you now have enough to identify where to start. The highest-leverage problem to address first is not necessarily the most painful or the most visible. It is the one that meets three criteria.

It has a clear dominant lever. You can identify whether the fix requires a policy change, a platform integration, a process redesign, or a structural realignment. Problems with multiple unclear levers are harder to frame and harder to verify. Start with the one where the lever is clear.

The owner of that lever is identifiable. You can name a specific person who controls the policy, platform, process, or structure producing the outcome. If ownership is diffuse or contested, that is itself a structural problem to resolve first.

The cost of inaction is quantifiable. You can estimate the annual cost of this problem in direct time, opportunity cost, or attrition risk. Problems that cannot be quantified are harder to bring to a decision forum. Chapter 3 provides the methodology if you need it.

The problem that meets all three criteria is your starting point. It is where you apply the cycle. It is the problem you bring to your first governance forum. This proof of concept shows your organization that structural elimination is possible.

The goal of the first fix is not just to eliminate one problem. It is to demonstrate that problems can be permanently eliminated. That demonstration changes what your organization believes is possible.

### **A Note on Honest Scoring**

The most common failure mode in a diagnostic like this is charitable scoring. Leaders who care about their organizations tend to rate them slightly better than the evidence warrants. They remember the good quarters. They give credit for intent. They assume the problems they are aware of are the full set.

I once gave this diagnostic to a CEO who scored every dimension as Early Warning. His VP of Operations, completing the same exercise independently, scored four of the six as Pattern Active. The CEO was not dishonest. He was evaluating from a distance, seeing the organization as he expected it to be rather than as it was experienced by the people working inside it. The VP's scores were more accurate. They usually are.

Two practices help close this gap. First, score the past twelve months, not the past quarter. The pattern reveals itself over time, and recent improvements can obscure a deeper recurring tendency. Second, ask a direct report or a peer who works within the organization to complete the same scoring and compare the results independently. The gaps between your score and theirs are usually more instructive than either score alone.

The point of this diagnostic is not to produce a grade. It is to give you a starting point specific enough to act on. A vague awareness that something is wrong produces ill-defined interventions. A specific diagnosis produces specific fixes. And specific fixes are the only kind that last.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Pattern

The same problem appears. The team fixes it. Three weeks later, it reappears. They fix it again. Nothing fundamentally changes.

This pattern occurs inside most growing organizations. It repeats across industries, company sizes, and leadership teams. A database migration cascades into three systems. The strongest engineer works the weekend to contain it. Praise follows. Six weeks pass. Another critical issue emerges: different symptoms, same structural fragility. Again, mobilization. Again, a hero saves the day. Again, the underlying system stays unchanged.

Over time, this creates an addiction to heroics. Firefighting becomes a source of recognition. Escalation becomes normal. Crisis response becomes proof of competence. The organization keeps moving. It does not fundamentally improve.

Most organizations unintentionally reward visible rescue over quiet prevention. The person who designs the system so that the crisis never occurs receives no recognition because there is nothing to recognize.

W. Edwards Deming estimated that 94 percent of problems in organizations are systemic: produced by the design of the system rather than by the failings of individuals working within it. When you reward heroic response to the same problem quarter after quarter, you are celebrating the 6 percent while ignoring the 94 percent.

### The Pattern in Action

Consider Sarah Murray, VP of Operations at a mid-market SaaS company. She was promoted two years ago with a mandate to scale from 150 to 500 people. By most external measures, she succeeded. Revenue grew 160 percent. The engineering team doubled. Customer acquisition accelerated.

Sarah had not slept a full night in eighteen months. In Month Three, a major customer reported missing data in its analytics dashboard. Sarah spent thirty-six hours with her engineering lead tracing queries through a broken aggregation layer. They fixed it. The customer was retained. Sarah was praised for her decisiveness. She had solved a crisis.

By Month Eight, similar data issues were appearing with other customers. The aggregation layer had been patched but never redesigned. By Month Fourteen, data issues had become routine: Sarah's calendar was filled with escalations, three customers were threatening to leave, and the engineering team was spending 40 percent of its capacity on incident response rather than feature development. She canceled a vacation she had planned for six months. She would cancel the next one, too.

What Sarah did not see was that she was compensating for a structural failure rather than solving it. The aggregation layer needed a complete rebuild: a senior engineer, a project plan, and eight dedicated weeks. Instead, the organization had built a system where Sarah's expertise was the bottleneck, her personal intervention was the solution, and the underlying architecture continued to degrade.

By Month Twenty-two, the pattern had solidified. Critical decisions waited for her input. Difficult customers asked for her directly. Her key engineers had begun to leave. She realized she could not name one structural improvement she had made in eighteen months, and every hour had gone to containment.

This is not a story about Sarah's failure. She was exceptional at what she was asked to do. The failure was organizational. The company had structured its rewards, its escalation paths, and its definition of leadership around her ability to rescue. That structure kept the organization moving. But it had made the organization dependent on Sarah's capacity rather than invested in structural capacity.

## **The Core Recognition**

Once you see this pattern, a simple rule follows. A problem appears once: fix it directly. The same problem appears again despite the fix: stop and investigate. The same problem appears a third time: the system is failing you. Not the people. Not the effort. The system.

Recurrence is the signal. Not the severity of any single incident, not the cost of any one failure, but the fact that the organization keeps producing the same outcome despite competent people trying to prevent it.

Sarah's data issue appeared once. She fixed it appropriately. It appeared again at Month Eight. By Month Fourteen, it recurred routinely. By Month Twenty-two, the pattern had been visible for over a year. The organization's structure was producing the problem, and no amount of skilled intervention would change that until the structure itself changed.

Most organizations miss this signal entirely. Problems surface. People respond. The response works temporarily. The problem returns. No one tracks the recurrence. No one asks: How many times has this happened, and what does that pattern tell us about how we are organized?

*Chapter continues*

## CHAPTER 15

# The Pattern by Industry

The Solve Once framework applies universally. The pattern of recurring problems produced by structural weakness appears in every industry I have worked in, at every scale, with the same underlying mechanics. What differs is how the pattern presents: the specific form the dysfunction takes, the language used to explain it away, and the lever most likely to eliminate it.

This chapter maps the most common recurring problem types across five industries where I have spent significant time: professional services, high-growth SaaS, manufacturing, healthcare, and financial services. For each, I identify the dominant structural weakness, the disguise the pattern typically wears, and the fastest path to a decision-ready diagnosis.

Before going through them, one thing is worth noting: the symptom descriptions will feel uncomfortably familiar if you work in any of these industries. That familiarity is not a coincidence. The pattern is not unique to bad organizations or weak leadership teams. It is endemic. It exists in organizations that are growing, profitable, and staffed with genuinely capable people. That is the whole point of this book.

### Professional Services

In professional services—consulting, law, accounting, staffing, managed services—the pattern almost always presents as delivery inconsistency. Structurally similar engagements can produce wildly different outcomes depending on who runs them. Some client relationships are smooth and expanding. Others are perpetually in recovery mode. Margins vary more than they should across comparable work. The best people are constantly pulled into problem engagements while average engagements drift.

The standard explanation is talent variability. The senior partner who delivers consistently is better than the one who struggles. The account that keeps escalating has a difficult client. The engagement that lost margin was scoped incorrectly from the start. These explanations are sometimes partially true. They are seldom the complete story.

The dominant structural problem in professional services is ownership diffusion. Work flows through specialized functions: origination, scoping, delivery, quality review, and client management. Each function optimizes for its own metrics. Origination is measured by revenue signed. Delivery is measured by utilization. Quality review is measured by findings. Client management is measured by satisfaction scores. No one is measured on the coherence of the experience across all of them.

I have sat in on dozens of post-engagement reviews at professional services firms where every function could demonstrate it had performed well by its own metrics, yet the client still had a poor

experience. Nobody was wrong about their piece. Nobody owned the whole.

The dominant lever is structure. The fix requires assigning a single engagement owner with authority over the entire client relationship, not as a coordinator, but as a decision-maker accountable for the outcome and for the resources required to deliver it. The fastest path to diagnosis: take the last ten engagements that missed margin or required senior escalation and ask at which handoff the problem originated. If the answer varies across engagements, the problem is not in any single function. It is in the absence of ownership across all of them.

## **High-Growth SaaS**

In high-growth SaaS, the pattern presents as velocity loss. A company that moved quickly with 50 people cannot move at the same speed with 200. Product releases that used to take six weeks now take sixteen. Customer onboarding that used to take two weeks now takes six. Decisions that used to be made in a Slack thread now require a meeting, then a follow-up meeting, then an escalation. The founders describe this as getting slower. They attribute it to process bureaucracy, communication overhead, or the difficulty of maintaining culture at scale.

These descriptions are accurate symptoms. They are not accurate diagnoses.

The dominant structural problem in high-growth SaaS is architectural debt that compounds faster than the organization can recognize. The systems, processes, and decision frameworks that worked for 50 people were not designed to scale. They were designed to be fast. At 50 people, “fast” and “scalable” are often the same thing. At 200, they diverge sharply. The deployment process that worked when two engineers could coordinate verbally breaks down when six teams are deploying simultaneously. The product prioritization framework that worked when the CEO had direct context on every feature fails when the CEO is three levels removed from the engineers building the product.

The pattern is not that the organization has introduced bureaucracy. The structural foundations were built for a scale the organization has outgrown, and they have not been redesigned as the organization has grown. The velocity loss is not due to new friction. It is the compounding of friction that was always there but invisible at a smaller scale.

The fastest path to diagnosis in a high-growth SaaS company is to pick the single workflow that feels slowest and trace every step from initiation to completion. Document who touches it, how long each stage takes, and where it waits. The wait time is typically the longest part of the elapsed time. That wait time consistently traces to a single structural bottleneck that no one has been assigned to fix.

The dominant lever is usually platform or process, depending on where velocity loss is concentrated. Deployment slowdowns trace to platform architecture. Onboarding slowdowns trace to process architecture. Prioritization slowdowns trace to structure: unclear decision rights about what gets built and who can say so.

*Chapter continues*

## CHAPTER 19

# Metrics and Measurement

This chapter consolidates the measurement indicators referenced throughout the book. It serves two purposes: establishing a baseline before you begin applying the Solve Once discipline, and tracking progress as structural problems are eliminated.

A note before getting into the specifics. I have seen organizations spend more time designing their measurement framework than eliminating problems. Do not do that. The metrics here are a means to an end. The end is problems disappearing. If you find yourself debating the precise definition of a metric rather than using it to identify where to start, you have gotten the priorities backward.

The metrics are organized into four categories. Signal indicators reveal whether the pattern is active. Capacity indicators measure the cost of structural dysfunction on leadership and team time. Structural health indicators assess the quality of the organization's decision architecture. Progress indicators track improvement over time as fixes are implemented. For each metric, the framework provides a collection method, a healthy benchmark, an early warning threshold, and a dysfunctional threshold. The benchmarks are directional, not precise. Your specific context will affect what constitutes a meaningful deviation.

### How to Use This Framework

Before starting the 90-day playbook, complete a baseline measurement for each metric in the Signal and Capacity categories. You do not need precise numbers. Estimates based on direct observation and conversations with your team are sufficient. What matters is that the baseline is recorded so progress can be measured against something real.

After each verified structural fix, update the relevant metrics. The goal is not to optimize each metric individually but to observe the direction of movement across the set. An organization genuinely eliminating structural dysfunction will see improvements across multiple categories simultaneously, because structural problems do not produce isolated symptoms. They produce correlated ones.

The absence of measurable improvement after three months of implementation is itself a signal. It means either that the fixes being implemented are not addressing the dominant structural causes or that the measurement baseline was inaccurate. Either way, it is information worth having before another quarter passes.

## Signal Indicators

Signal indicators answer the question: Is the organization producing recurring structural problems, and how severe is the pattern?

| <b>Metric</b>                | <b>How to Measure</b>                                                                                                                               | <b>Healthy</b>                       | <b>Early Warning</b>                                         | <b>Dysfunctional</b>                                               |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Recurrence rate              | Count issues requiring active leadership intervention more than once in a rolling 12-month period. Divide by total issues addressed.                | Below 15% of issues recur            | 15–30% recur despite previous fixes                          | Over 30% recur; same categories appear every quarter               |
| Workaround prevalence        | Ask each team lead: What unofficial processes or shadow systems does your team use regularly? Count distinct workarounds per 50 employees.          | Fewer than 2 per 50 employees        | 2–5 per 50 employees; informal channels normalized           | Over 5 per 50 employees; workarounds are standard practice         |
| Fix durability               | For the last 10 structural fixes implemented, how many held for more than 6 months without requiring active maintenance or returning to the agenda? | 8 or more of 10 hold for 6+ months   | 5–7 of 10 hold; some regression after 3–4 months             | Fewer than 5 hold; fixes routinely require rework within a quarter |
| Cross-boundary problem count | Count problems on the leadership agenda requiring coordination across more than two functions to resolve. Track monthly.                            | Stable or declining month over month | Slowly increasing; 1–2 new cross-boundary issues per quarter | Rapidly increasing; cross-boundary issues dominate the agenda      |

*Chapter continues*