

# Acceptability Drift

Why systems stop noticing what should never have become normal

*By Mario Aiello*

Organizations rarely fail through sudden collapse. They drift — quietly, progressively, and almost always invisibly from the inside. What begins as a small concession to an absurd demand becomes, over time, a new standard. Not because it was justified. Because it was tolerated, once, and then again, and nobody was keeping score.

The real risk was never compliance itself. It's the loss of friction sensitivity that compliance can produce. Organizations don't fail when a principle gets broken. They fail when the broken principle becomes normal enough that nobody notices it as broken anymore.

## What Acceptability Drift Is

Call it Acceptability Drift: the progressive normalization of misfit through unexamined deviations from principle, until the system loses the capacity to detect its own incoherence. It sits inside the Adaptive Signal Field, upstream of anything that would show up on the Friction-Fitness Map — which is what makes it dangerous. By the time misfit is visible as friction, Acceptability Drift has usually already been running for a while, quietly converting exceptions into defaults.

The mechanism isn't a single event. It's a loop: a deviation appears, it gets repeated, repetition becomes normalization, normalization gets justified after the fact, and justification reinforces the whole cycle for the next deviation in line. None of this looks like failure while it's happening. It looks like the system learning, optimizing, stabilizing — which it is. It's adapting in the wrong direction, around the misfit rather than away from it. What was once questioned becomes expected. That's the moment drift turns into structure.

## The Path Signal Takes Before Anyone Can Name It

Misfit doesn't arrive fully formed as a problem statement. It evolves through stages of increasing visibility, and most organizational diagnosis starts far too late in that sequence to matter. It begins as latent disturbance — something off, but not yet perceptible to anyone. It surfaces next as weak signals: small delays, minor inconsistencies, hesitation nobody can quite account for. From there it becomes narrative fragment — "something feels off," "we keep saying one thing and doing another" — the first human attempt to put words to a disturbance that doesn't have a name yet.

Then comes absurdity: the moment contradiction becomes socially visible, usually through humor, irony, or a workaround nobody bothers to justify anymore because everybody already

knows why it exists. This makes no sense, but we do it anyway. Absurdity is what misfit feels like before it has a name — and it's the pivot point. Past this stage, the misfit becomes operationally costly as friction: delays, approval loops, coordination breakdowns, the quiet fatigue of a system pushing back against its own design. Only then, usually, does anyone attempt formal diagnosis — an articulated fitness gap, arrived at long after the system had every opportunity to notice sooner.

Most interventions land at the friction stage or later. The absurdity stage is where systems still have a choice — the last point in the sequence where the deviation is still visible as strange, before repetition finishes normalizing it.

## **Drift Is Not Adaptation**

Not all deviation is a problem. Systems have to adapt, and confusing Acceptability Drift with healthy adaptation is its own failure mode — one that produces over-correction, rigid governance, and the suppression of exactly the flexibility an organization needs. The distinction is not subtle once it's named. Healthy adaptation is explicit: chosen on purpose, reviewed, and reversible if it turns out wrong. Acceptability Drift is implicit: it persists without ever being examined, and it justifies itself after the fact rather than being decided on before the fact. Adaptation is conscious deviation. Drift is unconscious persistence.

Drift persists because, from inside any single instance of it, tolerating the deviation is the locally rational move. Incentives reward short-term delivery over raising a flag. Governance filters out weak signals because they don't yet meet the evidence bar. Escalation is politically costly, especially for whoever is closest to the problem and least protected if they're wrong about it. None of this requires bad faith. It only requires that a signal get noticed individually, by someone, and never get held collectively by anyone — which produces a specific kind of organizational silence: not suppression, just the absence of a place for the signal to land.

## **Compliance Was Never the Problem**

It's worth correcting a common shorthand here. Compliance is not what makes drift dangerous. Compliance without sensing is. A system can comply with everything it's asked to comply with and still be blind — not broken, blind — because the capacity that would have caught the drift was the first thing the drift quietly disabled. Run the Four Questions for Fitness against this directly: Fit for Purpose asks why the organization is doing this at all; Fit for Context asks whether it still reflects reality; Fit for Execution asks whether it's being done effectively or merely obediently; Fit for Improvement asks the question that actually matters here — can the system still detect its own misfit. When Fit for Improvement collapses, drift stops being visible even in principle. That is the real failure mode, and it has nothing to do with whether anyone followed the rules.

## **What This Asks of a Leader**

Absurdity isn't measured. It's noticed — and noticing it is a leadership discipline, not a diagnostic instrument. The early indicators are informal by nature: polite contradictions that never quite get resolved, workarounds that have been repeated so often nobody remembers they were ever exceptions, sarcastic humor about a process everyone still runs anyway, energy that drops in specific, recurring conversations. If none of these are visible from where a leader sits, that's not evidence the organization is fine. It's evidence of distance — either from the reality on the ground, or from whatever filtering the system does on its way up.

Noticing isn't the hard part, though. Acknowledgment is — admitting that the system is producing outcomes that don't make sense, and that the leader asking the question is already part of the system that produced them. Most leaders don't normalize absurdity through incompetence. They do it through well-intended behavior: translating contradiction into something that sounds coherent, protecting the room from discomfort, rewarding the clean narrative over the honest one, fixing locally to preserve momentum. Leaders define what a system is allowed to treat as normal, whether or not they mean to.

Consider a directive like "increase productivity by one hundred percent" — no operational definition, no measurable baseline, no realistic mechanism attached to it. It survives not because anyone believes it, but because nobody has shared evaluation criteria to hold it against, because power asymmetry makes it costly to say so, and because the layers between the directive and the work will quietly reinterpret it into something survivable. What comes out the other side is local reinterpretation, metric manipulation, and reporting that describes a reality that isn't quite the one anybody is living in.

The right response to something like this is neither rejection nor compliance. It's exposing the contradiction without resolving it too quickly: naming it plainly — help me understand how this actually works in practice — and then holding that question open instead of rushing to fix it, add process to it, or reason it away. Tracing it back to what's actually being optimized for, and which fitness dimension is the one actually breaking, does more than any immediate fix would. Most leaders either collapse the tension too early or let it run too long. Both responses reinforce the drift; neither confronts it.

## **What Continues to Function Is Not the Same as What Is Fit**

Organizational collapse, when it happens, rarely announces itself. It's the moment a system can no longer sustain the narrative it had been telling about itself — which means collapse isn't really the failure. It's the moment the system finally notices what it had already normalized, sometimes years earlier. The danger was never that systems fail. It's that they keep functioning, smoothly, while quietly losing the coherence that made them worth trusting in the first place.

Fitness is proven, not presumed. Acceptability Drift is what happens in the space where nobody is doing the proving anymore — where presumption is left standing long enough, unchallenged enough, that it starts to look exactly like fact.