ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

The Friction Audit

Why does a decision that should take an hour sometimes take a week? Often, no single policy is to blame. A senior leader holds onto a decision that could be delegated. A manager responds to one mistake by adding another checkpoint. A team keeps seeking consensus because no one wants to make an unpopular call.



Each response may seem cautious or responsible. But when these behaviours become routine, their effects multiply. Decisions slow down, accountability becomes unclear, and employees spend more energy navigating the organization than moving work forward. Customers eventually feel the impact through delayed responses, inconsistent service and missed opportunities. What began as individual behaviour becomes a system-level problem.

Stanford professors Robert Sutton, an organizational psychologist, and Huggy Rao, an organizational sociologist, call this "addition sickness."[1] It is closely related to addition bias, our tendency to solve problems by adding rules, approvals or requirements before considering what could be removed. Drawing on her work with more than 300 leaders over two decades, executive coach Muriel Wilkins also identified hidden beliefs such as "I need to be involved" or "I cannot make a mistake" that can reinforce friction. [2]



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TO SPOT THIS EARLY, PAUSE AND ASK FOUR SIMPLE QUESTIONS:

Where are we getting stuck?

- Look for delays, repeated approvals and reopened decisions.

Why are we getting stuck?

- Consider fear, low trust, perfectionism or difficulty delegating.

Is the friction worth it?

- Does it manage real risk, or mainly add effort?

What should we try next?

- Delegate, remove, clarify or invite concerns earlier.

Often, the most useful place to begin is simpler than we think, start with ourselves. Choose one recurring decision and ask: Where, Why, Worth and What next? Each unnecessary step removed and each habitual response reconsidered creates more room for people to contribute, take ownership and move good work forward. Small improvements can build the momentum for wider organizational change.





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References

1. Sutton, R. I., & Rao, H. (2024). "Rid Your Organization of Obstacles That Infuriate Everyone." *Harvard Business Review.*
2. Wilkins, M. M. (2025). "The Hidden Beliefs That Hold Leaders Back." *Harvard Business Review.*

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