WHITE PAPER

Cohesion by Design

From Fragmentation to Flow

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Introduction

Watching the Perseverance Rover make its way around Mars in 2021 collecting samples and examining them for signs of current or former life, inspired awe in the analyst and designer in all of us as we witnessed what humans can make possible if they put their minds to it. Not just in the surface operations, but the years of visioning, planning, construction, and testing that preceded it, along with the precision needed to land on that tiny dot exactly as envisioned, all speak to the scale of what human coordination and intent can achieve. Everything flowed. The impressive thing is how everything and everyone worked together as one to achieve the aim of the program. If we consider the thousands of individual components and actions involved, we can appreciate that many of these individually could have jeopardized the success or led to utter and total failure. The interdependence of what was critical is mind boggling, but everything worked in complete harmony – cohesively aligned towards the purpose of the mission.

For most of our customers or constituents, an organization's internal structure is irrelevant; what matters is whether the interactions that they experience work together seamlessly to deliver the results that they care about. Fragmentation is immediately apparent when service representatives transfer customers repeatedly, technology fails, or information and context are lost. In contrast, cohesion often goes unnoticed when everything operates as a unified whole as it is supposed to.

We are witnessing the beginning of a knowledge revolution. All the knowledge we need can be accessed, but it must work together for its value to be realized. This requires rethinking how we design organizations, our work, and the enabling capabilities to be seamless. Moreover, business leaders, architects, designers, analysts, and decision makers must not only think about individual components or their departments, but about how those components fit together as a holistic system.

As businesses become larger and more complex, they suffer the pathology of bureaucracy. The "management tax" is estimated to be $3 trillion per year in the United States alone.[1] This is not only an economic issue, but also a moral one. We are literally wasting people's lives expecting them to perform work that does not matter or create value for the world.

At the same time, we are at a crossroads with technology. The convergence of new technologies, especially AI, creates enormous pressure and complexity for organizations but has the potential to simplify work, remove layers of hierarchy, and empower people.

In this white paper, we make the case for organizational cohesion and articulate a vision for what a truly cohesive enterprise can achieve, to drive performance today and be ready to thrive in the future with agility and impact. We outline an actionable path to get there, along with key accelerators and practical steps to begin the journey. This white paper is intended to be a starting point – an invitation to envision what is possible and begin

[1] Based on the work Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini, for example, see: https://www.garyhamel.com/sites/default/files/uploads/three-trillion-dollars.pdf.

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meaningful dialog, exploration, and action toward greater organizational cohesion. It is part of a broader and evolving body of thought, with future perspectives and practical guidance on *how* to achieve cohesion to follow.

How We Got Here: Growth, Scale, and the Rise of Fragmentation

The Rise of Fragmentation

Organizations have thrived over the past century, expanding with new products, markets, and acquisitions, creating value for customers and fulfilling their purposes. They were built on an industrial era paradigm of *organization as machine*, where hierarchies, clear roles, and standardized processes at scale, delivered efficiency, and predictable results.

With growth, often through acquisition, organizations have evolved into highly complex, siloed structures, where priorities, decision-making, and even basic work processes have become disconnected and fragmented from one another. We have become aware that despite the best intentions, optimizing the parts does not automatically lead to a most effective whole. These industrial age organizations have now collided with a digitally connected world, where business ecosystems are increasingly interdependent, customer expectations are rising, and the pace of change is relentless.

What once drove success is no longer enough. Today, complexity, interdependence, and fragmentation pose as great a threat as competition.

Fragmentation also has deep roots in legacy organizational design and incentives: divide and conquer. Research supports the widely held view that people are neurologically wired to seek, acquire, and retain power[2], and longstanding command-and-control structures often reinforce this tendency. Departments are measured and motivated to design for themselves, driven by functional priorities, while the end-to-end flow of work to the customer is rarely designed at all. Customers, meanwhile, could care less about a company's organization chart and only about the value they receive.

In addition, leaders are often measured on competing outcomes across functions. For example, sales may be measured on volume, customer service on satisfaction, and supply chains on efficiency, but no one other than the CEO is truly accountable for the outcomes and value ultimately delivered to the customer and the optimal use of scarce resources to do so. Furthermore, cross-functional management is rarely taught or valued in management education, leaving most leaders without the perspective or skills to view and manage the organization as a cohesive system, and without a shared view across it.

The Cost of Fragmentation

What does it cost to *not* be cohesive? What is the true price of fragmentation?

The answer is both visible and hidden. Many consequences of fragmentation are harder to quantify yet deeply felt. Fragmentation leads to rework and duplication, avoidable expenses, and misalignment among actions,

[2] From the book *The Winner Effect* by neuroscientist Ian Robertson.

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investments, and strategic decisions. It slows execution, delays time to market, and erodes the value organizations aim to deliver. Initiatives take longer than expected, require more resources than planned, and fail to achieve their intended outcomes in the timeframes envisioned if at all. Activity becomes a proxy for real business performance, with teams measured by output rather than meaningful results or outcomes of value to the recipients.

Above all, fragmentation impacts the customer directly. Disconnected processes and systems produce disconnected, inconsistent experiences. In the worst cases, this friction can lead to customer frustration and attrition. Employees are affected as well, becoming frustrated as they navigate the inefficiencies of a fragmented system, which can lead to disengagement and increased turnover.

Bureaucracy is a major source of the cost associated with fragmentation, as noted earlier in relation to the management tax. Layers of coordination, approval, and oversight are required to manage complexity, but often add little value if any. Instead, they slow decision-making, dilute accountability, and create friction across and outside the organization.

Organizations squander human potential and create frustration by asking people to navigate unnecessary complexity and perform work that does not contribute meaningful value. Time, energy, and talent are consumed by managing the organization itself rather than advancing its purpose.

The Imperative for Cohesion

The imperative is clear.

To deliver today and to be ready for the future, organizations must move beyond fragmented ways of working and intentionally design for cohesion. Our customers will expect nothing less.

Addressing this challenge is no longer optional; it is essential for performance, relevance, and long-term success.

Aspiring towards cohesion is how organizations address the effects and costs of fragmentation. It connects work across functions, aligns priorities and decisions, and enables the organization to operate together as a whole, with effort focused on meaningful outcomes rather than adding more wasteful internal coordination.

Cohesion not only improves day-to-day operations but is also essential for effective strategy execution. Organizations typically do not fail because they lack strategy, but because they cannot turn it into action quickly or effectively while it is still relevant, unconstrained by organizational inertia. Without successful execution even the best strategy has little value. Cohesion ensures that strategy, design, execution, and operations are not treated as separate activities, but as parts of a continuous, integrated flow. Achieving this requires a broad, holistic view of all elements of the organization and the ability to design them together to deliver intended outcomes. With teams aligned and working in concert, organizations can continuously turn ideas into action efficiently and at speed.

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Cohesive organizations operate differently. They align resources more effectively, avoid and reduce rework, and deliver value with greater consistency. They can complete transformations more efficiently, bring offerings to market sooner, and realize value while it is still relevant.

Cohesion also prepares organizations to succeed with the knowledge revolution. Since organizations already possess or have access to much of the knowledge they need, the challenge is to now make it work together as part of a cohesive system.

This requires a shift in how we view organizations – from seeing them as collections of separate units to understanding them as* living organisms *that operate with a unified purpose.

Technology innovation has further amplified this imperative. Without cohesion, organizations cannot sense, learn, or respond as a unified system, making true intelligence impossible.

By creating these conditions, cohesion lays the foundation for organizations to become adaptive and intelligent to unlock the full potential of emerging technologies, including AI, to drive consistent business results.

What is Cohesion?

Defining the Cohesive Enterprise

A cohesive enterprise performs like a finely tuned orchestra. The score, like a strategy, provides purpose and direction, while every individual, from the musicians to the conductor, contributes their expertise within the ensemble. Each player is a professional performing their part, yet no music is possible with only one instrument or with all of them playing at once without coordination. Feedback from the conductor, section mates, and the ensemble ensure alignment, harmony, and responsiveness. In the same way, a cohesive enterprise creates "music" from the organization

A cohesive enterprise is one where purpose, strategy, design, build, and operations move in concert — where every decision, process, asset, and interaction contributes to a shared vision of value for all stakeholders.

Cohesion is not a static state; it is an ongoing aspiration that is always being challenged. A cohesive organization continuously strives for a new state of being that evolves intentionally and proactively, not through reactive change or a one-time project, but through continuous, deliberate alignment between what it aspires to achieve, the choices it makes, and how it operates every day. The journey never ends.

In a cohesive enterprise, purpose and strategy serve as the north star. Business design is dynamic, planning is unified, and operations flow seamlessly across boundaries even outside the organization itself with partners when collaboration with them is required.

The result is a business that learns, adapts, and performs as one like a living, adaptive system — resilient, clear, and purpose-driven regardless of the organization structure.

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Characteristics of a Cohesive Enterprise

How do we recognize a cohesive enterprise? What would we observe in how it operates, how people behave, and the outcomes it produces? ***Cohesive organizations see, think, and act as one enterprise.*** The result is improved performance and the ability to consistently deliver meaningful outcomes for customers, the business, and its people, while adapting to change.

First, cohesive organizations see the enterprise as an interconnected system operationally and developmentally.

They maintain a holistic view of how the organization works as a whole and bring together those responsible for different parts around a shared vision, common outcomes, and aligned motivations. Each part of the organization is aware of and in synch with the others.

To enable this, cohesive organizations develop and use one shared representation and semantic framework of the whole enterprise so that everyone can see and understand the same reality. In today's digital and connected world, enterprises do not operate in isolation; they work within business ecosystems of partners and external entities that jointly deliver value. This representation therefore extends beyond the organization itself, becoming a blueprint for connecting the dots across the organization and its ecosystem, ensuring that no part operates in isolation.

An organization's business blueprint is actively used to inform decisions with full awareness of impacts and implications, to shape and refine processes and experiences across boundaries, and to align supporting structures. In more mature organizations, this representation evolves into a living model connected with operational data (a "digital twin of an organization"), providing a real-time view of how the organization is performing and enabling more informed, timely decisions about change.

Second, cohesive organizations think as one enterprise.

Cohesion is a mindset as much as anything. People think strategically, holistically, and systemically about the organization, its external stakeholders, and the outcomes. Decisions and investments are made in ways that advance enterprise-level value, not just internally focused priorities or initiatives.

This is evident in how organizations balance functional needs with what is best for the enterprise as a whole. Planning, prioritization, and resource allocation reflect a broader perspective, where advancing the enterprise ultimately serves customers and external stakeholders more effectively. Individuals are focused on purpose and outcomes, not just on completing their tasks. Delivering isolated outputs that do not contribute to meaningful results is not good enough in a cohesive organization. There is a strong outside-in orientation, with decisions grounded in delivering value.

Third, cohesive organizations act as one enterprise.

Cohesion is visible in how work gets done, both in day-to-day operations and in efforts to change and improve the business. Strategy, transformation, execution, and operations are connected in a continuous never-ending cycle rather than separate domains that require continual translation and reinterpretation between them.

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Cohesive organizations demonstrate clarity of direction, well-defined responsibilities and accountabilities, and effective decision-making that is often made close to where the work happens. Every role, function, and discipline works together in a coordinated way, and each person is aware of and knows their place in delivering value, much like the members of an orchestra contributing to a unified, inspired performance.

Executing as an enterprise is not automatic though; it requires shared intent. Cohesive organizations intentionally design the flow of work and the structure of the organization to be continuously adaptable and agile. ***While constant change might seem to undermine cohesion, the opposite is true: adaptability is created from clarity, alignment, and a holistic understanding of how the various aspects of the organization operate.*** Without this foundation, responding effectively to change becomes significantly more difficult and cohesion quickly evaporates and the quest is abandoned due to urgency

The results of cohesion are both tangible and human.

Cohesive organizations deliver better outcomes for customers and better results for the business. These organizations operate efficiently, with minimal wasted effort, friction, or unnecessary complexity. They are also more adaptable, able to respond to change with speed and confidence because their systems are designed to evolve.

Equally important, cohesion supports human thriving. Employees are more engaged, purpose-driven, and build trust and camaraderie as they work together toward shared goals that they take pride in striving for. Customers benefit from more consistent and positive experiences, leading to greater satisfaction and loyalty.

Cohesion enables organizations not only to deliver on strategy and outcomes, but also to create an environment where people can contribute meaningfully and perform at their best.

The Promise of Cohesion

Considering the level of complexity and change, along with the convergence of new technologies, organizations have an unprecedented opportunity to rethink value and how work and organizations are structured. The question is whether we will use advanced technologies like AI to double down on bureaucracy and try to coordinate more layers of management, or whether we will use it to augment human effort and give people more agency, autonomy, and the ability to be creative and innovate. Choosing cohesion determines which path is taken. Without it, technology often reinforces organizational fragmentation. With it, technology becomes a force multiplier for performance and adaptability.

The potential is that AI can act as an augmenting agent to automate and optimize workflows. If leveraged properly, Generative AI brings enriched knowledge to workers and Agentic AI can help flatten organizations by connecting processes and people from left to right cross-functionally, rather than top to bottom hierarchically.

AI can free people to focus on higher-value work that requires judgment, creativity, and cross-functional problem solving, while making low-hierarchy, self-managing ways of working within organizations a real possibility. ***Self-management approaches and AI-driven automation can reduce reliance on the layers of***

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coordination and control that often add little value, and in doing so have the potential to reduce or remove outdated power structures and enable organizations to be organized around the work itself rather than functional hierarchies. Of course, the human tendency to seek power still poses a challenge. It remains to be seen whether AI will be deployed in a way that solidifies the hierarchy of power more than ever before, or whether it will be used to create a more human-centered approach that helps break down barriers. The choice is ours.

The Path to Cohesion

Cohesion Must Be Designed In

People are generally well-intentioned and want to do the right thing, but the work of organizations is often disconnected. Processes need to work, the right technical and human competencies and business capabilities must be in place, and data must have integrity from end to end. This may seem like common sense, but organizations often fail because they are fragmented, not intentional and diligent.

We design cities with curated city plans, buildings with architectural and engineering models, and products with specifications and design plans. Each of these represents a structured, aligned, and intentional approach. Why not organizations?

The following excerpt from the book *Designed for Digital*, by Jeanne W. Ross, Cynthia M. Beath, and Martin Mocker, highlights the critical importance of designing an organization – not just structuring it – and the central role leaders play in making cohesion real.

> "You need to deliberately configure all three organizational design elements—people, processes, and technology—so they deliver on your value proposition…
>
> You might think that CEOs, CIOs, and other C-suite leaders have always assumed responsibility for business design. Think again. Rather than design their companies, most business leaders structure them. They create high level structures that relegate to lower organizational levels the responsibility for figuring out how to get things done. In other words, they divide and conquer.
>
> In doing so, they not only divide responsibility for getting work done; they divide responsibility for much of the people design (e.g., roles, skills), as well as most process and technology design.
>
> As a result, there is no organization-wide design; only organization-wide structures…[business design] is a senior executive responsibility…"

Continuous, adaptive cohesion happens by design, not by accident. It must be intentionally built into the organization, and enterprise design is the responsibility of its leaders.

Understanding the Cohesion Continuum

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The Cohesion Continuum shown in Figure 1 defines the progression toward the aspiration of enterprise cohesion. Its purpose is to help leaders envision the path towards a fully cohesive enterprise, assess their organization's current state, and set targets for the next steps on that journey. Exploring the progression also broadens leaders' perspective of what is possible and highlights the positive impact of greater levels of cohesion.

The continuum highlights five states: Coexistence, Cooperation, Coordination, Collaboration, and Cohesion. Each state is defined by observable characteristics and behaviors that describe how the organization typically functions at that stage. While the continuum presents a natural progression, organizations are not required to move one state at a time and can advance quicker in some aspects when conditions, resources, and leadership alignment allow.

Ultimately, the Cohesion Continuum serves as both an assessment tool and a source of inspiration. It helps organizations identify gaps, prioritize actions, and chart a practical yet aspirational path toward operating as a unified enterprise.

States of Organizational Cohesion

Each of the five states of organizational cohesion are described below to provide a practical view of how organizations function and behave at each stage. Coexistence represents the lowest degree of cohesion, and Cohesion represents the highest and most aspirational state.

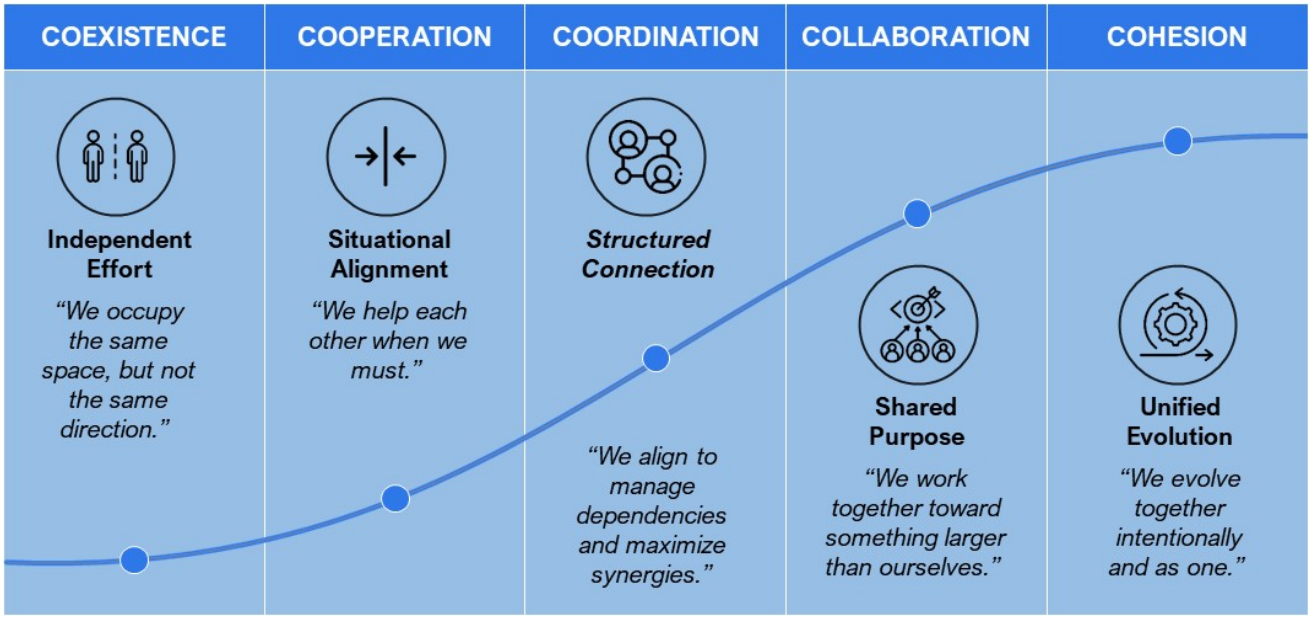

Figure 1: The Cohesion Continuum

Coexistence: Independent Effort

The organization operates in silos. Functions and teams coexist within the same enterprise but act largely independently. There is little shared understanding or shared purpose and often little shared interest outside the

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local purview. Alignment happens only by coincidence. Teams focus on local tasks with local motivation rather than enterprise-level outcomes. Clarity of organizational direction may be lacking.

Enterprise characteristics: Minimal Cohesion – each part of the organization sees and acts in isolation.

Observable results: Strategic outcomes are inconsistent, efficiency is low due to duplicated and disconnected effort, adaptability is limited, and people are often constrained by friction and frustration.

"We occupy the same space, but not the same direction."

Cooperation: Situational Alignment

Teams begin to interact around some specific shared needs or problems. Cooperation occurs, when necessary, often driven by external pressures and/or immediate priorities or goals. Processes remain localized, but the desire for mutual support is emerging. Some dependencies are recognized, and teams occasionally adjust work to minimize conflict or maximize convenience.

Enterprise characteristics: Partial Cohesion – some awareness of other teams' peripheral work, but not of the full enterprise context.

Observable results: Outcomes improve in targeted areas, efficiency and adaptability are slightly better, and people benefit from occasional collaboration.

"We help each other when we must."

Coordination: Structured Connection

The enterprise introduces systems, rudimentary but broader governance, and processes to align transformational activities across disparate functions. Planning and communication become more deliberate, but the focus remains more on necessity rather than shared purpose. Work begins to be connected across boundaries and efforts are made to manage dependencies and leverage synergies, where essential.

Enterprise characteristics: Moderate Cohesion – teams have a clearer view of how their work depends on and impacts others and the enterprise as a whole.

Observable results: Outcomes are delivered more consistently, efficiency improves, adaptability is supported by structured processes and known interfaces, and people are more effective, benefiting from clarity and reduced friction.

"We align our efforts to manage dependencies and maximize essential synergies."

Collaboration: Shared Purpose

True partnership develops across the enterprise. Teams co-create, share accountability, and design together, guided by shared principles, and work together towards common outcomes and ways of working. Strategy and

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execution begin to integrate, culture starts to unify, and the organization consistently balances local priorities with enterprise-wide objectives.

Enterprise characteristics: High Cohesion – teams actively consider enterprise impacts in decisions and investments, and they think systemically and strategically, A near real-time view of how the organization operates is emerging supported by operational performance data. There is the ability to run *what if* scenarios of future possibilities before committing to design changes through the use of a digital twin for the organization which becomes a realistic option at this level.

Observable results: Outcomes consistently deliver value, efficiency is higher as duplication and friction are reduced, adaptability is enhanced through proactive design and planning, and people benefit from greater trust, engagement, and shared purpose.

"We work together toward something larger than ourselves."

Cohesion: Unified Evolution

The enterprise operates as one cohesive, continuously adaptive system. Strategy, design, execution, and operations move in concert. Decisions are guided by shared intent, and the organization evolves continuously with clarity and purpose. Work flows seamlessly across roles and functions, and adaptability is built into the design of the organization.

Enterprise characteristics: Full Cohesion – the organization continuously monitors the enterprise and its ecosystem, thinks holistically, and acts to advance shared purpose and enterprise-wide objectives.

Observable results: Outcomes are consistently realized, efficiency is maximized with minimal wasted effort, adaptability is inherent, and people are collaborative, fully engaged, and empowered.

"We evolve together — intentionally and as one."

Accelerating Cohesion: Seeing the Enterprise

The Parts and the Whole

A fascinating thing to watch is young children and their engagement with LEGO™ as they grow. The kits for younger kids have fewer blocks and a smaller variety of block types. This helps engage them in their quest to be challenged and learn some key concepts that will serve them well as they grow. As kids get older and more able, the variety of block types expands, and the number of blocks in the kit increases, challenging their growing competency to build something that inspires both themselves and others around them. At the older age-group level, the expanded variety of block types are enhanced by more specialized pieces that may be used less frequently but are critical to completing advanced challenges such as the Hogwarts Castle or Millenium Falcon kits.

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The analogy works well for businesses when considering the levels of cohesion within which an enterprise currently operates and to which it aspires, particularly when compared to the evolution of its business blueprint. In the early stages, organizations typically include fewer component types than those at more advanced levels of maturity. As enterprise maturity grows towards cohesion, more perspectives are typically represented and integrated as they become helpful to support additional decision making.

Collecting the Dots

As described earlier, cohesive organizations see the enterprise as an interconnected system of knowledge and share a holistic view of how the organization works. There are a lot of possible perspectives or "dots" that could be helpful to include in this view depending on the industry, the enterprise's vision for its position in that industry, and the readiness of the senior leadership to pursue the journey towards cohesion. In some advanced industries, survival and competitiveness can only happen if the business is extremely mature. In others less so. For example, delivering pizza does not require the same rigor as operating a nuclear power plant. The world will not melt down if the pizza is late.

The following are some of the perspectives or building blocks that support more informed decision making. Each organization has to decide what is needed for its own situation.

- Industry Pressures
- External Stakeholders
- Strategic Intent – Vision and Mission
- Strategy
- Performance Indicators and Targets
- Products and Services
- Regulations, Policies, and Rules
- Value Streams and Processes
- Information Technologies
- Data and Information
- Organization Structure and Roles
- Human Competencies
- Culture
- Facilities and Physical Assets
- Initiatives

Different organizations may choose to start with a subset of these perspectives since it may prove impractical to start with all of them. As enterprise cohesion grows, like children building with LEGOs, more areas will naturally be brought in. Since no two companies will make the same choices based on their own strategy, even in the same industry, other points of view and business knowledge areas will weave in along the way until a comprehensive set is established relevant to a particular enterprise. Careful selection and a well-considered plan of attack are therefore essential.

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Connecting the Dots

The value of a cohesive approach starts with having knowledge of the relevant sets of dots, but real breakthrough is possible only when we know how they interplay with one another since, operationally, none can stand alone. Understanding these connections is essential for impact assessment, so the effects of a change in one dot on the others can be understood and unintended consequences avoided. For example, if an organization changes the flow of work enabled by the synergistic capabilities made possible by a technology innovation, then new data and new skills will likely be required. These must all be in synch from the design through implementation to avoid fragmentation and surprises. This is *Cohesion by Design*.

Enabling Tools

It is not possible to get on or stay on the journey to cohesion without appropriate tools. Knowledge Repositories, Digital Twins, Generative AI, Agentic AI are all helpful – almost mandatory today.

A dynamic repository of the knowledge to be captured across all the domains of interest is essential due to the intricate connections within each of the domains, such as process relationships with other processes and the dependency of one data item on another. Likewise, the connections across domains such as capability, process, and technology are paramount. Being able to query the knowledge base regarding the impact of potential changes of connected instances is essential.

Creating a digital twin of the enterprise or some of its value streams requires knowledge of the factors that impact upon performance. This ability gives organizations the ability to track progress and to anticipate potential performance implications of possible scenarios before implementing solutions for them.

Generative AI technologies become very helpful in more rapidly defining the potential content within each domain and the possible interactions among them. Agentic AI technologies hold the potential of automating various aspects of the knowledge to be designed into operations. These AI tools accelerate the knowledge journey. Watch this space.

Accelerating Cohesion: Thinking and Acting as an Enterprise

Enterprise Mindset and Capability

Shifting towards cohesion is as much a human journey as an analytical or technological one. This requires a unified vision, skills and experience, and aligned measurement and motivation, supported by an enterprise mindset and culture. Without an inclusive way of looking at what needs to be done, organizations will continue doing what they have in the past: siloed thinking that focuses narrowly on one area while excluding other dependent aspects of the business operations, creating incomplete understanding, suboptimal outcomes, and unnecessary risk.

What is the mindset required for cohesion?

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Regardless of one's position in the organization chart, every individual needs to embody an enterprise mindset, taking a holistic view of the organization and acting as an enterprise steward, grounded in the belief that success is collective.

Those who embody an enterprise mindset can easily switch from seeing the big picture to ensuring that the details fit together. They are disciplined but naturally curious and voracious learners. They are always driven by delivering business outcomes and value and are not easily fooled by what may look good on the surface. They listen and are open-minded but are not afraid to be proactive and challenge status quo. They crave integrity and want to know how all the parts are connected, eager to understand how a change in one thing affects the others. They connect people and ideas. They do not like unanticipated surprises, so they seek clarity on the impacts of change. They always think outside-in, starting from what creates value for the customer, and maintain traceability from all elements back to what matters most. They are not easily distracted but are flexible. They are influential without having to be authoritative – they lead from any position. Uncertainty does not bother them, but they seek to reduce it. They can connect the disparate dots towards the *why*. They love sorting through complexity – it's what they do.

Addressing the Mindset Challenge

Attaining the mindset necessary for enterprise cohesion is not easy. It is why many organizations find themselves stuck in the state of Situational Alignment. It is easier to fight for one's functional imperative than work together for the greater good of the value-creating end-to-end work of the enterprise. This is a natural impediment to the adoption of cohesion. Since we also know that people are wired to seek, acquire, and retain power,[3] we need to overcome these constraining dynamics through the right incentives, measurements, and culture. The vehicle through which we implement change in an organization is culture. Culture is our collective, tacit understanding which guides behavior in organizations. Culture is the net sum of how individuals behave, each with their own motivations that must be considered.

One place to start creating cohesion and managing the significant complexity within an organization is to focus on core principles as well as shared participation and outcomes. Morning Star, the largest tomato processor in the world, and one without a management hierarchy, is governed by two core principles: don't use force and keep commitments. The principle of not using force removes command authority as an organizing and control mechanism. Work can then be accomplished through request and response, and no one has the authority to tell someone else what to do. True collaboration results for the benefit of the enterprise. The simplicity of these principles keeps the focus and is essential to govern great complexity.

In addition, by organizing around value creation, it is possible to design organizations as networks of competence rather than hierarchies of power. At Morning Star, peers working in self-managed teams continuously negotiate agreements on roles and responsibilities as autonomous agents striving for the same outcomes. People who are organized around clear principles with a clear mission and desire to serve the customer can operate in this networked way. Networks are a vision for the cohesive future that more people are migrating toward, and visionary leaders are seeing their potential. Bayer AG, the pharmaceutical giant with

[3] Refer to the book *The Winner Effect* by neuroscientist Ian Robertson.

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roughly 100,000 employees, is another example of an organization that is organizing around self-managed teams. If we step outside of our current Industrial Revolution paradigms, this organic approach just makes sense and ultimately creates more adaptability for organizations and is better for the people working within them in many ways.[4]

Future publications in this evolving body of thought will further explore the organizational, cultural, and leadership dimensions required to successfully operationalize cohesion in practice.

Making Cohesion Real: Practical Steps on a Transformative Journey

The Journey Toward Cohesion

Cohesion is an aspirational, perhaps unreachable, state of being, operating, and performing. It is mindset – a distinct way of thinking and working. It is important to recognize that it may be unrealistic to expect that an enterprise will arrive at this elusive state all at once. Being on the journey is what counts.

The secret is to continually strive towards Cohesion.

In physics, a physical object with mass can absorb infinite energy but will never reach the speed of light – it always approaches but never achieves this. Similarly, an organization's inertia and shifting marketplace make absolute cohesion unlikely. Even if an organization comes close, the cost of reaching perfection may outweigh the benefits, especially in a world of scarce resources. Cohesion can still serve as a guiding beacon, allowing organizations to approach it incrementally. At any point, leaders must deliberately decide how close to aim, where to focus effort, and how far to go, balancing aspiration with practicality.

The Cohesion Journey Step by Step

Addressing cohesion starts with recognizing the fragmentation that exists within an organization and then intentionally rethinking how the organization could work as a whole. ***The key is to start moving into action with strong leadership and practical steps.***

Figure 2 shows the stages of the cohesion journey: Awareness, Intent, Design, Integration, and finally Cohesion.

[4] Culture references and self-management concepts and case studies are from Doug Kirkpatrick and his book *The No Limits Enterprise: Organizational Self-Management in the New World of Work*.

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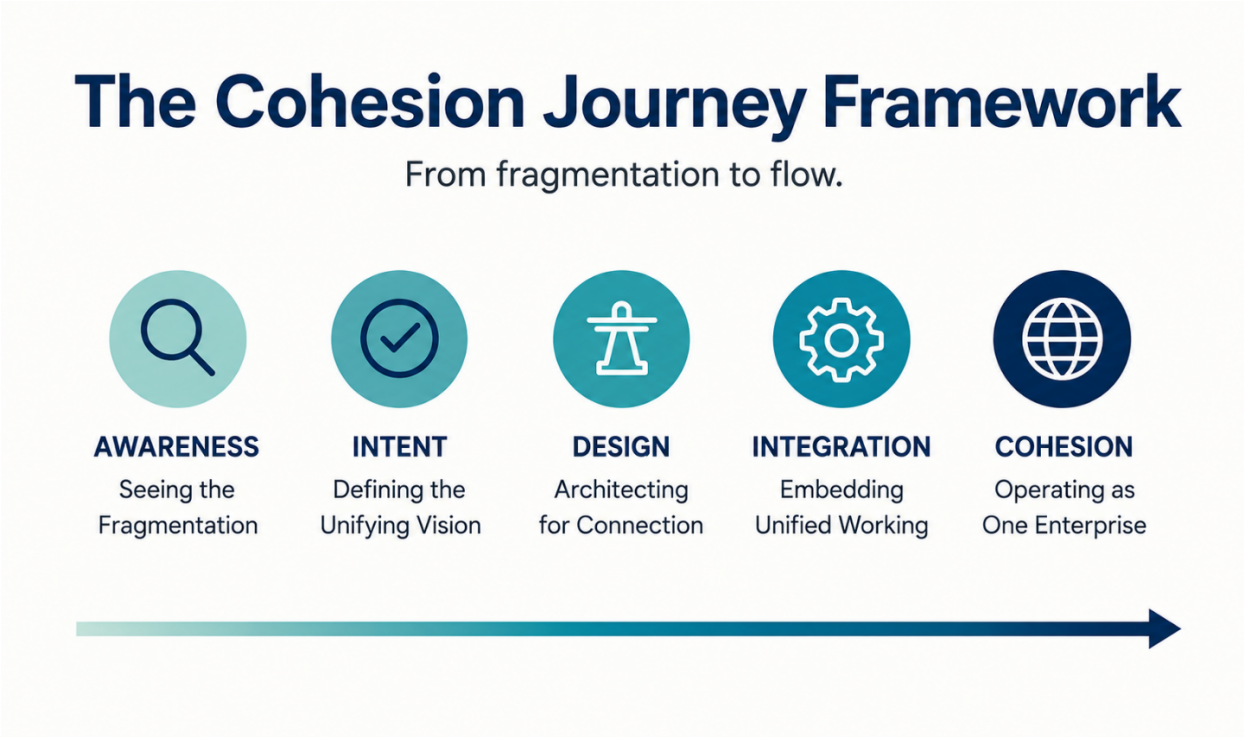

Figure 2: The Cohesion Journey from Fragmentation to Flow

Awareness Stage

The organization begins to see the fragmentation and its cost and develops a desire to address it. Misalignment may be recognized in disconnected planning, competing priorities, or inefficiencies between strategy and operations. The focus of this stage is on acknowledging complexity and developing a shared language for change, often by making what was previously hidden more visible through surfacing overlaps, gaps, dependencies, and points of friction across teams, processes, and experiences.

***As understanding grows, so does a collective recognition that these issues are not isolated, but systemic, prompting a shift in mindset from* we need to fix processes *to* we need to work as one system.**

Intent Stage

Leadership establishes a clear, shared purpose that defines what cohesion means for the enterprise and why it matters. The future vision ties strategic goals, design principles, and operational realities together across the enterprise. This is not easy and requires leadership.

This not only provides a unifying direction across the organization but also focuses on shifting the culture and mindset toward an enterprise-wide perspective.

This vision is not created in isolation but is co-created and communicated in a way that invites participation, ownership, and alignment across leaders, teams, and key influencers. For large organizations, this approach sets cohesion in motion. It is not enough to just announce a transformation although that is often good timing for

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people to be actively involved in shaping and running experiments. Formal transformation programs can serve as vehicles for these experiments, tapping into the real power of the network and its collective intelligence.

Throughout the Intent stage, the mindset shifts from a focus on *individual business area* success to a broader commitment to *enterprise success*.

Design Stage

The organization begins to design for connection and translate intent into tangible ways of working.

This involves rethinking and aligning processes, roles, structures, and technology so they support outcomes and flow across boundaries rather than reinforcing silos.

Strategy, enabling structures, and operating models are integrated, and the way work is coordinated, and decisions are made across the organization shifts from fragmented design choices toward a more coherent and integrated approach with a strong outcome orientation. As this stage unfolds, the mindset shifts from *reactive change* toward *intentional evolution*.

The Design stage also recognizes that structural change alone is not enough; how people are measured and incentivized in their day-to-day work must also evolve. Because individuals are often accustomed to hierarchical ways of working, support such as coaching and new collaboration practices may be needed to help teams work effectively across boundaries.

Integration Stage

Teams, tools, and decision-making begin to operate through collaboration.

Planning, business design, and operational management become part of a unified cadence.

Cross-functional collaboration becomes the norm, supported by shared ways of working and more integrated mechanisms for coordination. Leadership reinforces shared accountability, encouraging continuous learning and adaptation as part of everyday work. As integration takes hold, the mindset shifts from *coordination* to true *collaboration and co-creation*. Individuals begin to think of themselves as enterprise stewards.

Cohesion Stage

The enterprise operates as one, with clarity, adaptability, and unity of purpose. Strategy, design, and operations are no longer separate activities but continuously inform one another, creating an organization that *evolves by design*.

Change is no longer treated as a series of disruptions, but as an ongoing and natural part of how the organization operates.

As a result, the mindset shifts from *viewing change as disruption* to *embracing change as evolution*.

Building Enterprise Cohesion from the Bottom Up

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Not all organizations have the conditions, alignment, or the leadership mandate to drive cohesion through a top-down approach. However, cohesion can still emerge through intentional action, even when it is not initiated from the top.

By aligning on shared practices, such as how work is planned, prioritized, and executed, and by focusing on synergies and dependencies across teams and functions, organizations can uncover opportunities to reuse and connect efforts. This creates a habit for greater sharing and coordination, reduces duplication, and enables resources to be leveraged most effectively. Over time, this kind of grassroots alignment builds momentum, starting with increased visibility and understanding, and evolving into shared practice. While it may be slower and less formal, this path can still lead to meaningful cohesion when there is a sustained commitment to working in more connected and coordinated ways.

Establishing Cohesion: Full or Partial Enterprise Scope?

A challenge of attaining cohesion across an enterprise is to gain agreement on the scope of the effort. An organization may be comprised of multiple legal entities and lines of business, so decisions need to be made around what is in play. In multi-business enterprises, this is a much more difficult consideration than it may appear on the surface. In large conglomerate businesses, some lines may be ready to adopt a more holistic approach than others and expecting all lines to move as one may be impractical due to the disparate nature of the businesses for a move together or of the political readiness to do so. Careful consideration for the scope of focus is essential from the get-go.

Another consideration is whether to concentrate on only one part of the business. This could be a shared service that deals with internal customers. Units such as Human Resources and Information Technology may be seen as standalone entities with internal customers and may therefore be better positioned to mature their own cohesion practices before others are ready to start. Lastly, the scope could cover a consortium of suppliers and customers who work closely with the organization to deliver products or services. All must be exhibit total synchronicity.

Crafting these boundaries is essential for clarity and resourcing – there is no right or wrong choice, but it must be clear to all involved and one that is supported by leadership.

Getting Started

Getting started on the journey of cohesion is something you can do right now. It begins with practical steps that help build awareness, create shared understanding, and generate early momentum that can move the organization through the Awareness stage and into the Intent stage. These actions also deliver immediate learning and value along the way.

The following steps are good places to start and are not sequentially rigid, but rather they reinforce one another and can be taken in parallel to build momentum.

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- **Start from the outside-in** – Segment the work and priorities along the lines of complete value creation end-to-end for recipients of your services. Deliver measurable results across all relevant aspects of cohesion. Prove and promote success.
- **Recognize and surface fragmentation in everyday work** – Identify where misalignment, delays, duplication, and friction occur, and understand their impact on business outcomes and performance. Business blueprints focused on performance and stakeholder outcomes can be valuable to help identify this fragmentation and uncover the deeper systemic issues and patterns.
- **Make the invisible visible** – Surface how decisions are made, how priorities are set, and how work actually flows across the organization all the way to the customer. Highlight where these do not serve the outcomes of value and do not benefit from shared decision criteria. This builds a shared understanding of the current ways of working and highlights challenges that are often otherwise unseen.
- **Assess cohesion** – Leveraging the Cohesion Continuum in Figure 1, reflect on your organization's current state of cohesion to establish a shared baseline and create a starting point for meaningful dialog and action. This should be an ongoing conversation.
- **Build the case for change** – Synthesize insights based on your fragmentation findings and assessment to clearly articulate why cohesion matters now. Base the case on performance data whenever possible to seize opportunities and ROI. This step creates urgency, builds alignment, and creates intolerance for the status quo by connecting current gaps and challenges to future business outcomes and organizational adaptability.
- **Start leadership conversations and define an aspiration for cohesion** – Bring leaders together to agree on the need for greater cohesion, recognizing it as a strategic investment to improve business outcomes, strengthen execution, and enable future adaptability.
- **Establish a guiding mindset, principles, or imperatives** – Define the core beliefs and directional principles that define how the organization thinks, acts, and makes decisions as it moves toward greater cohesion. Continually promote these broadly.
- **Identify synergies and dependencies across work** – Review initiatives, teams, and planning cycles to uncover overlaps, redundancies, interdependencies, and opportunities for greater alignment, coordination, and reuse.
- **Apply cohesion for initial applications** – Test new ways of coordinating and collaborating through smaller scale applications, ensuring they are meaningful demonstrations of cohesion (e.g., spanning teams or departments). These initial applications help to build credibility, improve alignment, generate learning, and build momentum for broader change.

Conclusion

No matter where you are on the journey to cohesion, it is elusive and never ending – it becomes a way of operating – part of the culture. There is always more to do. A new vision for the future is possible and there is a growing sense that it is already emerging.

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There are encouraging signs of momentum. Business schools are showing greater openness to shifting from Fragmentation to Flow, and are adopting more holistic approaches to processes, systems, culture, and design rather that treating them as insular challenges. At the same time, business leaders are increasingly recognizing that networked ways of working represent the future, and visionary leaders are beginning to see their potential for both better performance and business resilience. This creates real opportunities, both for higher education to light the way and for introducing these ideas to executives who can envision a state that harnesses cohesion, networked structures, and collective intelligence can bring.

We can design a different future for ourselves, and there is growing momentum behind it. Those who ignore it risk being left behind. Technology also offers an unprecedented opportunity to accelerate this shift and make cohesion not just an aspiration, but an achievable and sustainable reality that enables better outcomes for organizations, people, and society.

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Roger is recognized as a world leader in transforming companies and agencies from traditional hierarchical organizations to agile and cross-functionally managed ones whose performance is driven by customer value and results.

• Worked with over two hundred leading organizations to implement new business and operating models, architectures, and strategies
• Developed and delivered the first Business Process and Business Architecture management classes in the world in 1991, certified and delivered today by universities in North America, Europe, Australia and South America.

- Author of the best-selling book 'Business Process Management: Profiting from Process' in 2001 and 'Business Process Manifesto' in 2014 (now in 16 languages) as well as the Business Agility Manifesto in 2018 and the book Business Architecture: Collecting, Connecting and Correcting the Dots released in 2022.
- Professor at University of Toronto in Industrial Engineering since 2019

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Whynde is recognized globally as a pioneer, thought leader, educator, and advisor in strategy execution, transformation, and the intentional and sustainable design of organizations and business ecosystems, enabled by business architecture. She has worked with an extensive array of organizations to build their capacity for end-to-end strategy execution, including Fortune 500 and global enterprises, governmental and non-profit organizations, social enterprises, startups, and multi-stakeholder initiatives. As the founder and managing director of the global management consulting practice S2E Transformation, she helps clients connect strategy to execution at the enterprise level and catalyze new ways of thinking and doing business.

Whynde founded the online learning community Biz Arch Mastery, co-founded the Business Architecture Guild, co-founded Women In Architecture, is a fellow with the Institute for Digital Transformation, and a member of the Women in Management Global Leadership Committee. She is the author of *Strategy to Reality* and co-author of *The Execution Challenge*. Whynde was honored as a WIM Top50 Global Award Winner in 2025 for Global Excellence in Digital Transformation and Strategy Execution as well as voted the Top Architecture Leader in Europe in 2026 by the Chief Architect Network.

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Additional Reading

Visit Cohesion by Design to start the journey and join the conversation:
www.cohesionbydesign.com

Business Architecture: Collecting, Connecting, and Correcting the Dots by Roger Burlton (available widely and see also https://technicspub.com/BusinessArchitecture/)

Strategy to Reality: Making the Impossible Possible for Business Architects, Change Makers, and Strategy Execution Leaders by Whynde Kuehn (available widely and see also https://strategyintoreality.com/book-orders/)

The Execution Challenge: Delivering Great Strategy at Scale by Brian H. Cameron and Whynde Kuehn (available widely)

The No Limits Enterprise: Organizational Self-Management in the New World of Work by Doug Kirkpatrick (available widely)

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