

**DESVIACIÓN DE ALINEACIÓN ESTRATÉGICA: DESARROLLO DEL
CONSTRUCTO Y EVIDENCIA DE INTERVENCIÓN EN GOBERNANZA EN UN
PROGRAMA DE TRANSFORMACIÓN EN EJECUCIÓN**
**STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT DRIFT: CONSTRUCT DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE
INTERVENTION EVIDENCE FROM AN EXECUTING TRANSFORMATION PROGRAM**

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RESUMEN

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La alineación estratégica se ha tratado predominantemente en la literatura sobre gestión de programas como un problema de diseño de gobernanza: si las estructuras adecuadas están establecidas al inicio del programa, la coherencia persiste salvo que sea interrumpida por perturbaciones externas o por fallas de gestión visibles. Este estudio cuestiona esa premisa. Se presenta un estudio de medidas repetidas pre-post, integrado en un *workstream* de transformación tecnológica en ejecución dentro de una institución bancaria global, con el objetivo de examinar si la alineación se deteriora de forma sistemática durante la ejecución y si una intervención de gobernanza estructurada puede reducir ese deterioro. El constructo introducido es la Desviación de Alineación Estratégica (*Strategic Alignment Drift*, SAD), definida como la divergencia medible y progresiva entre la intención estratégica documentada de un programa de transformación y las decisiones operativas, prioridades y narrativas de los *stakeholders* producidas durante la ejecución, como resultado de la migración de la atención y la optimización local, y no de perturbaciones externas ni de fallas de gobernanza. La DAE fue operacionalizada a través de tres dimensiones conductuales: coherencia decisional, estabilidad de prioridades y coherencia narrativa. La medición siguió un protocolo de diez semanas ($n = 5$ observaciones por fase), con codificación dual independiente y evaluación de confiabilidad entre evaluadores. Durante la fase de línea base, las tres dimensiones se deterioraron de forma concurrente a partir de la semana 3: el 45% de las decisiones fue calificado como inconsistente con la intención estratégica, y la coherencia narrativa se redujo de 0.75 a 0.00 al término de la semana 5. La introducción de un Chequeo Semanal de Alineación (*Weekly Alignment Checkpoint*, WAC) en la semana 6 produjo una recuperación completa en todas las dimensiones dentro de una sola sesión, con alineación sostenida hasta el cierre del programa y tamaños de efecto elevados (d de Cohen = 1.52 a

	1.69). Los hallazgos reencuadran la alineación estratégica como una condición dinámica que requiere mantenimiento activo, desplazan la unidad de análisis apropiada desde las estructuras de gobernanza hacia las secuencias de decisiones, y demuestran que una intervención recurrente y de bajo peso puede prevenir y corregir la deriva de alineación sin generar una carga significativa sobre la gobernanza del programa.
Keywords: strategic alignment drift, transformation program governance, decision coherence, attention-based view, program management	ABSTRACT Strategic alignment is typically treated in the program management literature as a governance design problem: establish the right structures at program launch, and coherence will persist unless disrupted by external shocks. This study challenges that assumption. A pre-post repeated measures study embedded within a live technology transformation workstream at a global banking institution examined whether alignment deteriorates systematically during execution, and whether a structured governance intervention could reduce that deterioration. The construct introduced is Strategic Alignment Drift (SAD), defined as the measurable, progressive divergence between a transformation program's documented strategic intent and the operational decisions, priorities, and stakeholder narratives produced during execution, arising from attention migration and local optimization rather than from external disruption or governance failure. SAD was operationalized across three behavioral dimensions: decision coherence, priority stability, and narrative coherence. Measurement followed a ten-week protocol (n = 5 observations per phase) with independent dual coding and inter-rater reliability assessment. During the baseline phase, all three dimensions deteriorated concurrently beginning in Week 3, with 45% of decisions rated inconsistent with strategic intent and narrative coherence collapsing from 0.75 to 0.00 by Week 5. Introduction of a 20-minute Weekly Alignment Checkpoint (WAC) in Week 6 produced full recovery across all dimensions within one session and sustained alignment through program close, with large effect sizes (Cohen's d = 1.52 to 1.69). The findings reframe strategic alignment as a dynamic condition requiring active maintenance, shift the appropriate unit of analysis from governance structures to decision sequences, and demonstrate that a lightweight recurring intervention can both prevent and correct alignment drift without significant governance overhead.

Introduction

Governance dashboards stay green. Milestones get hit. Steering committees receive status updates showing progress across all workstreams. And then, months after the program closes, the organization discovers it cannot operate differently. The process changes landed. The technology deployed. The underlying strategic reorientation those changes were supposed to produce never arrived.

This is not a story about failed execution. It is a story about a different kind of failure: one that occurs inside formally successful delivery. Practitioners who lead large transformation programs recognize the pattern. The academic literature has not examined it with adequate precision. The dominant framing in the project and program management literature treats strategic alignment as a governance design problem (Morris and Jamieson, 2005; Srivannaboon and Milosevic, 2006). If the right structures are in place at program launch, alignment is presumed to persist unless disrupted by external shocks or visible management failure. This framing directs attention toward the quality of initial design and away from the behavioral dynamics through which alignment erodes during execution.

This paper proposes a different frame. Strategic alignment during transformation execution is a condition that requires active maintenance through deliberate governance attention, and it deteriorates predictably when that attention is withdrawn. The mechanism is not dramatic. No single decision breaks alignment. Instead, distributed decision-makers operating under time pressure and without regular reference to strategic intent accumulate small divergences. Each divergence is locally rational. Together, they redirect the transformation.

The construct introduced here is Strategic Alignment Drift (SAD): the measurable, progressive divergence between a transformation program's documented strategic intent and the operational decisions, priorities, and stakeholder narratives that emerge during execution. Drift is the process through which divergence accumulates. Left uncorrected, the stock of misaligned decisions compounds into a form of strategic incoherence that the organization carries beyond program close, analogous to the compounding logic of technical debt (Cunningham, 1992) but operating at the level of strategic governance rather than code architecture.

The paper makes four claims. First, alignment deterioration is a regular feature of executing transformation programs, not an exceptional failure. Second, this deterioration can be operationalized and measured through behavioral traces rather than retrospective perception surveys. Third, a lightweight governance intervention can meaningfully slow the deterioration without adding significant process overhead. Fourth, the appropriate unit of analysis for alignment research should shift from governance structures to decision sequences.

Theoretical Background and Construct Positioning

Strategic Alignment in the Organizational Literature

Strategic alignment has been examined across several bodies of literature with distinct focal concerns. In the strategy literature, alignment refers primarily to coherence between organizational capabilities, structure, and competitive positioning (Mintzberg, 1978; Miles et al., 1978). In the information systems literature, it concerns the fit between technology investments and business strategy (Henderson and Venkatraman, 1993). In the project and program management literature, alignment refers to the coherence between project portfolio decisions and organizational strategic objectives (Artto and Wikstrom, 2005; Morris and Jamieson, 2005; Srivannaboon and Milosevic, 2006; Killen et al., 2012).

What these literatures share is a predominantly structural treatment of alignment. They examine whether the right mechanisms, frameworks, and governance bodies are in place. What they do not examine with adequate precision is whether those mechanisms produce coherent behavioral patterns over time. Assessing alignment at program initiation is categorically different from tracking alignment as it evolves through ten weeks of operational decision-making under conditions that governance frameworks were not designed to fully anticipate.

The program management literature has developed a more sophisticated understanding of governance than the project management tradition (Pellegrinelli, 1997; Thiry, 2002; Winter et al., 2006). Program governance is understood to require ongoing sensemaking and strategic adjustment rather than fixed process compliance. Lycett, Rassau, and Danson (2004) note that programs are inherently ambiguous environments where the meaning of strategic intent must be continuously reconstructed by participants. This perspective is consistent with the SAD construct but stops short of operationalizing the degradation of that reconstruction as a measurable phenomenon. Recent work has extended this line of inquiry by modeling strategic alignment in project networks as a multi-level process shaped by governance, leadership, and complexity (Haniff and Galloway, 2022), and by examining how project portfolio management can reconcile alignment with efficiency and agility under conditions of organizational uncertainty (Hoffmann, Ahlemann, and Reining, 2020).

The behavioral dynamics of alignment during program execution have received less cross-disciplinary attention than these structural questions. Most studies rely on retrospective interviews or cross-sectional surveys that ask participants how well aligned their programs were, rather than examining real-time decision sequences (Maylor et al., 2006; Martinsuo and Lehtonen, 2007). This gap in real-time behavioral evidence is what the present study addresses.

Construct Differentiation

Five adjacent constructs require explicit differentiation.

Johnson's (1988) strategic drift is the most directly analogous construct and the most likely source of confusion. Johnson observed that organizations adjust strategy incrementally in response to environmental change, accumulating departures from original positioning over multi-year strategic cycles. The mechanism is environmental misalignment compounded by institutional inertia and cognitive lock-in.

SAD differs from Johnson's construct in three respects. First, the unit of analysis: Johnson studied organizational strategy over multi-year periods; SAD examines operational decision sequences within executing programs over weeks. Second, the mechanism: Johnson's drift requires an environmental change that the organization fails to track; SAD requires no environmental change at all. The strategy may remain perfectly valid while the program's operational decisions progressively decouple from it. Third, the locus of explanation: Johnson located the cause in cultural inertia at the institutional level; SAD locates it in attention migration and bounded rationality at the decision-making level. A transformation program can exhibit Strategic Alignment Drift while the organization exhibits no strategic drift in Johnson's sense, and the reverse is equally possible.

Four additional constructs share structural logic with SAD, the progressive divergence from original purpose, but differ in mechanism. Merton's (2017) goal displacement arises from bureaucratic institutionalization; SAD arises from distributed optimization under cognitive constraints. Mission drift (Weisbrod, 2004; Ocasio, Rhee and Milner, 2020) requires external funding pressures or stakeholder demands that redirect organizational purpose; SAD emerges internally from the cumulative logic of operational decisions made without strategic reference. Ocasio, Rhee and Milner's (2020) treatment of mission drift through the lens of organizational attention is particularly relevant: their analysis identifies how attention allocation mechanisms can gradually redirect organizational purpose. SAD extends this logic by locating the drift mechanism at the operational decision level within executing programs, where the timescale is weeks rather than years and the driver is not stakeholder pressure but attention migration away from strategic framing. Scope creep (PMI, 2026; Globerson and Zwikael, 2002) concerns unauthorized expansion of deliverable boundaries; SAD is categorically broader, since a program can exhibit zero scope creep while drifting strategically because on-scope decisions are disconnected from the transformation's underlying logic. Staw's (1976) escalation of commitment involves over-investment in a failing trajectory; SAD involves gradual departure from a trajectory without acknowledging the departure.

Theoretical Grounding

Three theoretical traditions converge to explain how strategic alignment deteriorates in executing transformation programs without requiring governance failure or leadership negligence.

Weick (1995) argues that organizational action is preceded by sensemaking: the active construction of interpretive frames that allow actors to assign meaning to ambiguous situations. In the early stages of a transformation program, the strategic narrative is explicit, recently constructed, and actively shared. As execution accelerates, the narrative competes with operational urgency for cognitive resources. Weick's concept of enactment suggests that actors construct their environment through action; when the dominant enactment cues shift from strategic to operational, the strategic frame erodes. Decisions begin to be made within a smaller, locally constructed interpretive field disconnected from the original transformation intent. Research on middle manager sensemaking during organizational change confirms that interpretive frames constrain the flow of change in reforming organizations (Blakçori and Psychogios, 2021), reinforcing the prediction that narrative coherence decays when strategic frames recede from active use.

Ocasio (1997) proposes that what firms do depends fundamentally on what their decision-makers attend to, and that attention is finite, situationally distributed, and structurally channeled. Governance structures channel attention toward specific issues, information, and criteria. When those structures fail to regularly reactivate strategic framing as an explicit decision reference, attention migrates toward whatever is most immediate within the operational environment.

Most transformation governance structures channel attention toward delivery performance: milestone status, resource utilization, risk register updates, and change request management. None of these mechanisms routinely require decision-makers to ask whether what they are delivering still serves the strategic intent that justified the program. Brielmaier and Friesl (2023), reviewing attention-based view research, call for greater empirical attention to how situated attention patterns shape organizational outcomes at the operational level, a gap this study addresses. Joseph et al. (2024) similarly identify attention allocation within governance structures as a frontier research area.

Simon (1997) demonstrated that decision-makers do not optimize across all available information and objectives; they satisfice within a bounded problem space defined by cognitive limits, information availability, and time pressure. In a complex transformation program, the problem space available to any individual decision-maker is necessarily local. Within that local problem space, satisficing produces locally rational decisions. Aggregated across a program operating at speed with distributed authority, those locally rational decisions can diverge systematically from the transformation's overall strategic logic. The divergence is not the product of poor judgment; it is the natural output of rational actors operating within bounded problem spaces that have progressively decoupled from the strategic frame.

A distinction matters here. The mechanism operates primarily through attention migration (Ocasio's structural redirection of focus toward operationally immediate concerns) rather than attention depletion in the resource-exhaustion sense. Bounded rationality (Simon) determines the scope of the problem space into which attention migrates. Both mechanisms are necessary: structural redirection channels decision-maker focus away from strategic framing, and bounded rationality constrains the problem space within which redirected attention operates.

The SAD Construct

Strategic Alignment Drift is defined as the measurable, progressive divergence between a transformation program's documented strategic intent and the operational decisions, priorities, and stakeholder narratives produced during execution, arising from distributed decision-making under conditions of attention migration and local optimization rather than from external disruption or governance failure.

Three elements of this definition carry analytical weight. First, measurable and progressive: SAD is not a discrete event but a pattern across a decision sequence. A single misaligned decision does not constitute drift; a consistent directional tendency across multiple decisions does. Second, arising from attention migration and local optimization: the mechanism distinguishes SAD from constructs that require external pressure, institutional pathology, or deliberate redirection. Third, observable through behavioral traces: SAD is identified in the content and pattern of decisions, priorities, and stakeholder narratives as they occur, not inferred from outcomes or elicited through perception surveys.

SAD manifests through four observable patterns: decisions that contradict or disconnect from documented strategic objectives without explicit justification; frequent changes in operational priorities without grounding in strategic rationale; divergence across stakeholders in their characterization of the program's purpose, expected outcomes, and success criteria; and increasing reliance on governance escalation to resolve conflicting interpretations of what the transformation is meant to achieve.

Scope conditions predict that SAD will be strongest in programs characterized by high workstream autonomy, long execution timelines, frequent changes in team composition, and high cross-functional complexity. Programs with tightly centralized authority, short delivery cycles, or frequent mandatory strategic reviews may exhibit less drift because natural checkpoints regularly reactivate the strategic frame.

The adjacent literatures on organizational ambidexterity (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013) and dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007) are relevant here. Both address how organizations maintain strategic coherence while adapting to emerging conditions. SAD identifies a specific failure mode within that broader challenge: the progressive loss of strategic reference at the operational decision level, which undermines strategic coherence even when the organization's formal governance structures remain intact.

The theoretical framework generates a testable prediction: if drift is produced by attention migration and local optimization, then a governance intervention that regularly reactivates strategic framing should reduce drift relative to baseline governance conditions.

Research Design

Overall Approach

A pre-post repeated measures design, embedded within a live transformation workstream, provides the empirical structure. The design is classified as an embedded quasi-experiment: it introduces a structured intervention and measures its effects through systematic weekly observation, but it does not use random assignment, which is not feasible within the operational constraints of a running program. The pre-post repeated measures framing is appropriate because, as Shadish, Cook, and Campbell (2002) and Baicker and Svoronos (2019) note, interrupted time-series analysis in its statistical sense requires a minimum of eight observations per phase for reliable trend estimation, and ten weekly observations across two phases do not meet this threshold.

The study contributes to theoretical development and hypothesis generation. It produces an in-depth examination of alignment dynamics within one workstream, generates propositions for future testing across varied program contexts, and evaluates whether the WAC intervention is associated with measurable changes in drift indicators. Causal claims are scoped accordingly.

Research Questions

- RQ1 (Primary): Does the introduction of a structured alignment intervention reduce Strategic Alignment Drift during the execution of a transformation workstream, as evidenced by changes in decision coherence, priority stability, and narrative coherence?
- RQ2: Which observable dimensions of alignment drift are most sensitive to governance interventions, and do the effects differ across the three dimensions?

- RQ3: How does strategic alignment evolve over time within an active transformation program under baseline governance conditions, and is deterioration gradual, episodic, or event-triggered?
- RQ4: How do reflexivity effects and external operational events interact with the intervention to shape observed alignment dynamics?

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted within a single technology transformation workstream forming part of a larger enterprise transformation program at a global banking institution. The workstream's strategic objective, confirmed by the CFO and Program Director in a signed Strategic Intent Reference (SIR) document, was to deliver a unified financial reporting capability enabling leadership to make strategic resource allocation decisions from a single source of truth, replacing a legacy fragmented reporting landscape across three business units.

The core participant group comprised the workstream leadership team: a workstream lead, business owner (FP&A Head), technology lead, change and adoption lead, and PMO representative. Three additional stakeholders participated in the interview protocol: a finance data manager, BI platform architect, and senior finance analyst. Written informed consent was obtained from all eight participants prior to data collection.

Study Phases

Data collection ran for ten weeks (February 3 to April 11, 2025) divided into two sequential phases. Alignment indicators were measured at weekly intervals throughout both phases.

Baseline Phase (Weeks 1 to 5): The workstream operated under its existing governance processes. No new governance practice was introduced. Alignment indicators were measured without intervention.

Intervention Phase (Weeks 6 to 10): The Weekly Alignment Checkpoint was introduced in Week 6 (first session held March 12, 2025). Alignment indicators continued to be measured at the same weekly cadence.

Confound Management

Three strategies addressed the limitations of the single-workstream design.

An Operational Event Log documented significant external events throughout the study, including leadership changes, scope changes, program escalations, and milestone pressure events. Seven events were logged across the study period, with severity and confound direction assessed for each.

A Reflexivity Assessment examined the timing and abruptness of behavioral changes. Genuine intervention effects were expected to emerge with sustained patterns, while observer effects typically produce immediate changes at the point of study initiation. Interview probes at each time point directly explored whether participants perceived their own behavior as having changed due to participation in the study.

Researcher Positionality: The primary researcher held an operational advisory role within the broader transformation program, which provided access to governance artifacts, decision logs, and workstream participants that would not have been available to an external researcher. This embedded position also creates potential interpretation bias. Two measures addressed this risk. First, all decision coherence and narrative coherence coding was performed independently by two coders, with inter-rater reliability assessed at every coding session, creating interpretive distance from the researcher's operational perspective. Second, the Alignment Log and Priority Tracking Sheets were completed by workstream participants rather than the researcher, reducing the risk that researcher judgment influenced the primary data sources.

Research Ethics: The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for organizational research. All participants received written Participant Information Sheets and provided informed consent. Participants consented to role-level attribution in published quotations. Data was anonymized at the point of analysis, and organizational identifying information was removed from all reported findings.

The Weekly Alignment Checkpoint Intervention

Design Rationale

The Weekly Alignment Checkpoint (WAC) operationalizes Ocasio's (1997) attention-based view at the level of weekly governance practice. Its logic follows from the theoretical framework: if drift occurs because strategic framing recedes from the operational problem space, the intervention must create a recurring structural moment in which that framing is explicitly reintroduced before decisions are reviewed and ratified.

The WAC was designed as a lightweight practice. Transformation programs already carry significant governance overhead, and an intervention that adds meaningful burden will not survive the conditions under which drift occurs. Each session ran 20 to 25 minutes once per week.

One prerequisite deserves acknowledgment: the WAC requires access to a documented Strategic Intent Reference, a structured priority tracking process, and a governance environment in which the workstream's decision log is accessible for review. Programs operating in lower-maturity governance environments, where strategic intent has not been formally documented or where decision records are not maintained, would need to establish these baseline conditions before implementing the intervention. A simplified version, centered on the Strategic Intent Restatement and Drift Scan components, could function with less infrastructure, but the full protocol as tested here assumes a minimum level of governance documentation discipline.

Session Protocol

Each WAC session followed a standardized four-component protocol.

Component 1, Strategic Intent Restatement: The session opened with a brief restatement of the workstream's documented strategic intent, read aloud from the SIR document. Reading it aloud reactivates the strategic frame as a present cognitive reference rather than a background assumption.

Component 2, Decision Review: Participants reviewed the most significant decisions taken during the previous week. For each decision, the group explicitly identified which strategic objective it supported and what tradeoffs it introduced relative to the transformation's documented intent.

Component 3, Drift Scan: A structured discussion examined whether the previous week's decision pattern represented local optimization that might be accumulating into strategic divergence.

Component 4, Alignment Log Entry: Key decisions, rationales, alignment assessments, and identified concerns were recorded in a structured Alignment Log maintained throughout the intervention phase.

Mechanism Specificity

The WAC was expected to operate through three distinct mechanisms. The primary mechanism is attention reactivation: by reading the strategic intent statement before reviewing decisions, the session reintroduces the strategic frame into the decision-making problem space. The secondary mechanism is documentation discipline: the requirement to record decisions and their strategic rationale may improve coherence independently of reflective sensemaking. The tertiary mechanism is collective sensemaking: the group discussion of drift patterns may surface divergences that individual participants had not consciously recognized.

Measurement of Strategic Alignment Drift

SAD is operationalized through three complementary behavioral dimensions, enabling triangulation across behavioral, operational, and interpretive evidence.

Decision Coherence

Decision coherence measures the degree to which operational decisions remain consistent with the workstream's documented strategic intent. Each decision was coded along three criteria: consistency with strategic objectives (1 = Consistent, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Inconsistent), presence of explicit tradeoff reasoning (Y/N), and whether the decision was subsequently reversed (Y/N).

Two independent coders applied the protocol to each decision event. Prior to the study, both coders completed a calibration exercise using a pilot set of five decision events drawn from program documentation predating the study period. The calibration produced initial agreement on four of five pilot decisions; the fifth involved a boundary case regarding the distinction between a neutral and inconsistent rating where the decision served an ancillary strategic objective but displaced a higher-priority one. Structured discussion produced a coding precedent: displacement of a higher-priority strategic objective without documented tradeoff reasoning constitutes inconsistency regardless of alignment with secondary objectives. This precedent was documented and applied throughout subsequent coding.

During the study, coders worked independently from the same source materials and submitted ratings before any discussion. Disagreements were resolved through structured discussion and recorded. Cohen's kappa was calculated at each coding session, with a threshold of kappa greater than or equal to 0.70 required for reliable measurement. A severity rating (1 = Low, 2 = Medium, 3 = High) was assigned to each decision. The weekly Decision Coherence Score was calculated as the proportion of decisions rated consistent or neutral, weighted by severity.

Priority Stability

Each week, the workstream's top five priorities were documented using a standardized Priority Tracking Sheet. All ten weeks maintained exactly five active priorities. Week-on-week priority changes were classified into three categories: Category A (Continuity, priority carried forward unchanged), Category B (Justified Change, priority modified with documented strategic rationale), and Category C (Unjustified Change, priority modified without documented strategic rationale). When a new priority appeared, it was classified based on whether the introduction was documented with strategic rationale (Category B) or not (Category C). The weekly Priority Stability Index was calculated as the proportion of priorities falling into categories A or B.

Narrative Coherence

Narrative coherence captures the interpretive dimension: the degree to which different stakeholders share a consistent understanding of the workstream's purpose, objectives, and success criteria. Structured interviews of approximately 15 minutes were conducted with all eight participants at three time points: study initiation (T1, Week 1), phase transition (T2, end of Week 5), and study conclusion (T3, end of Week 10).

Each interview used a standardized five-question protocol asking participants to describe: the workstream's primary purpose, the most important expected outcome, what success looks like at program conclusion, the most significant current challenge, and any recent decisions the participant considered strategically important.

Responses were coded using a deductive thematic framework derived from the SIR document. The coding distinguished three levels: fully aligned (response addresses all three SIR strategic objectives with consistent framing), partially aligned (response addresses one or two SIR objectives but omits others or introduces framings not present in the SIR), and divergent (response does not reference SIR objectives or presents a characterization of the workstream's purpose inconsistent with the documented intent). Coherence was assessed as convergence across participant responses within each time point and as stability in each participant's framing across time points. Two coders independently coded interview transcripts, with an inter-rater reliability threshold of kappa greater than or equal to 0.65. The lower threshold relative to the 0.70 applied for decision coherence reflects the greater interpretive latitude inherent in thematic coding of open-ended interview responses, where boundary cases between partially aligned and fully aligned or divergent responses involve judgment about emphasis and framing rather than the more binary alignment or non-alignment assessments applicable to discrete decisions.

Analysis Strategy

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis focuses on decision coherence scores and Priority Stability Index values across the ten weekly observations. Given the small number of data points ($n = 5$ per phase), the analysis employs descriptive statistics and visual trend analysis rather than inferential statistical modeling. Phase means, standard deviations, and trend directions are compared between the baseline and intervention periods.

Effect size estimates using Cohen's *d* are reported to characterize the practical significance of observed differences, following Cohen's (1988) conventions. For dimensions where intervention-phase standard deviations are zero or near-zero (both decision coherence and priority stability reached their maximum values across all five intervention weeks), Cohen's *d* was calculated using the baseline standard deviation as the sole denominator rather than a pooled standard deviation, because pooling a non-zero with a zero standard deviation produces a denominator that underestimates genuine variability in the construct. This computational choice is stated explicitly because it affects the magnitude of reported effect sizes.

The Operational Event Log is integrated into the quantitative analysis at each point where a logged event co-occurs with a change in trend direction or magnitude.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis examines narrative coherence scores and thematic content across the three interview time points. For each participant, a within-person trajectory was mapped across T1, T2, and T3, tracking changes in strategic theme identification, problem framing alignment, and success criteria consistency.

The Alignment Log content produced during WAC sessions was analyzed separately using a directed content analysis approach. Each log entry was assessed for the presence of explicit strategic rationale, the specificity of the strategic objective referenced, and whether the entry documented a corrective action linked to a previously identified drift indicator. This analysis enables differentiation between the documentation discipline mechanism and genuine strategic re-anchoring.

Cross-Dimension Triangulation

The three dimensions capture alignment dynamics at different levels: decision coherence at the individual decision level, priority stability at the weekly aggregation level, and narrative coherence at the stakeholder group level. Convergent evidence across all three dimensions provides stronger support for drift (or its reduction) than any single dimension. Divergent evidence is treated as a finding in its own right.

Findings

Baseline Phase: The Drift Pattern (Weeks 1 to 5)

Decision coherence remained strong during the first two weeks (Coherence Score = 1.00; weighted score = 0.875 for both weeks). All eight decisions made during this period were rated consistent or neutral by both coders, and all included documented tradeoff reasoning.

The deterioration began in Week 3. Three of four decisions were rated inconsistent by both coders (Coherence Score = 0.25). None included documented tradeoff reasoning. These decisions involved adding an ad-hoc IT query capability outside original scope, shifting sprint focus from data model validation to dashboard aesthetics at a stakeholder's request, and extending a manual data reconciliation process that directly contradicted the automation objective. Each responded to an immediate operational demand without referencing the strategic objectives that would have revealed the tradeoff being made.

Weeks 4 and 5 sustained the deterioration. Decision coherence scores remained at 0.25 for both weeks. Nine of the 12 decisions made during Weeks 3 through 5 were rated inconsistent with strategic intent by both coders.

Priority stability followed a parallel trajectory. The Stability Index was 1.00 for Weeks 1 and 2, collapsed to 0.40 in Week 3, and declined further to 0.20 in both Weeks 4 and 5. Across the baseline phase, the workstream accumulated 11 unjustified priority changes, none of which were flagged through existing governance mechanisms.

Narrative coherence showed corresponding degradation. At T1, six of eight participants gave fully aligned responses and two gave partially aligned responses (Coherence Score = 0.75). By T2, no participant gave a fully aligned response. Four were coded as partially aligned and four as divergent (Coherence Score = 0.00). The FP&A Head (P02) reported: "It feels like we're building a reporting portal now. I'm not sure the automation piece is still on the table." The Technology Lead (P03) noted: "We've added a lot of things to the scope. The IT query capability, custom formats, separate BU packs. It's technically manageable but the original model design is getting crowded." None of the eight participants referenced the SIR's strategic objectives explicitly during T2 interviews, compared with all eight at T1.

The Operational Event Log identifies confounding events during the deterioration. In Week 3, the FP&A Head was absent for three days. In Week 4, an external IT security audit consumed 40% of sprint capacity. In Week 5, the CFO office verbally requested exclusion of cash flow automation from program scope, a directive that was not formally documented at the decision point. These events contributed to the severity of specific drift indicators. They do not explain the overall pattern. The deterioration began in Week 3 across all dimensions simultaneously and continued regardless of which specific external event was active. The consistency of the pattern across all three measurement dimensions supports the theoretical prediction that drift is a structural feature of distributed decision-making under attention migration rather than a response to identifiable external triggers.

Intervention Phase: Recovery and Sustained Alignment (Weeks 6 to 10)

The introduction of the WAC in Week 6 was followed by immediate and sustained change across all three dimensions.

Decision coherence returned to 1.00 in Weeks 6 and 7, and remained at 0.875 or above through Week 10. All 20 decisions made during the intervention phase included documented tradeoff reasoning, compared with 45% during baseline. Zero decisions were rated inconsistent, compared with 45% during baseline (9 of 20). Zero decision reversals occurred, compared with one during baseline.

The first WAC session produced concrete corrective actions. The team reviewed Week 5 decisions against the SIR and escalated the cash flow exclusion to the Program Director, who approved a phased reinstatement. In Week 7, the balance sheet module deprioritized in Week 4 was reinstated with a phased delivery plan. The separate business unit reporting packs approved in Week 4 were replaced by a consolidated format with optional overlays. These corrective actions indicate that the WAC functioned not only as a prevention mechanism but also as a detection and recovery mechanism for drift that had already accumulated.

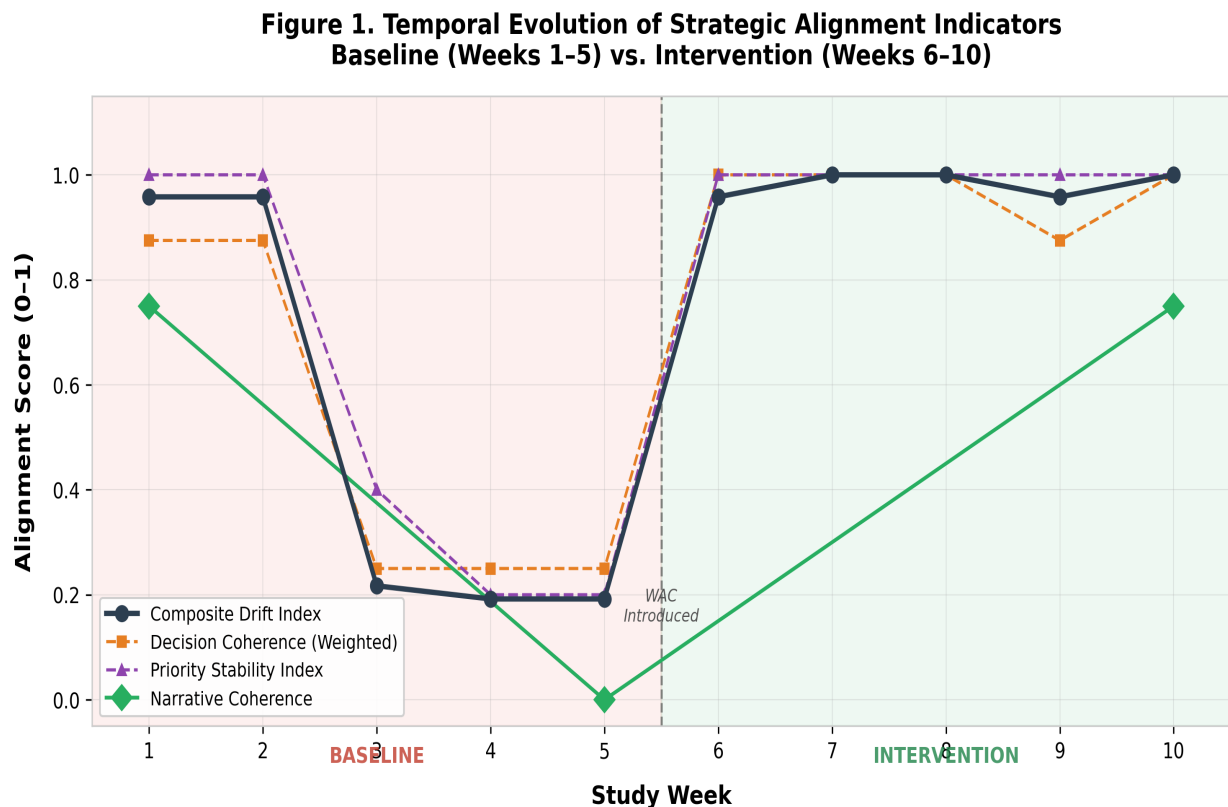
Priority stability returned to 1.00 in Week 6 and remained there for all five intervention weeks. Zero unjustified priority changes were recorded, compared with 11 during baseline.

Narrative coherence recovered substantially by T3 (end of Week 10). Six of eight participants returned to fully aligned responses, and two gave partially aligned responses (Coherence Score = 0.75, matching T1). The FP&A Head, who had reported at T2 that "the automation piece" was no longer on the table, stated at T3: "The close automation is back in scope. The WAC made the team realize we'd stopped talking about it." All eight participants referenced SIR objectives explicitly during T3 interviews, compared with zero at T2.

Figure 1 illustrates the temporal evolution of the composite drift index alongside dimension-specific indicators across both phases.

Figure 1

Temporal Evolution of Strategic Alignment Indicators, Baseline (Weeks 1-5) vs. intervention (Weeks 6-10).



The figure reveals three features that summary statistics alone would obscure. The baseline deterioration drops sharply between Weeks 2 and 3, then stabilizes at a low level through Weeks 4 and 5. This threshold pattern is consistent with the attention migration mechanism: the strategic frame established at program launch retains cognitive salience for a limited period, and once that salience degrades below the level needed to compete with operational demands, drift emerges across multiple channels concurrently rather than incrementally. The recovery at Week 6 is abrupt, with all dimensions returning to near-maximum values within a single week, consistent with Ocasio's (1997) prediction that behavioral patterns shift rapidly when attention structures are altered. The narrative coherence trajectory, measured at only three time points, parallels the weekly indicators, reinforcing the sensemaking interpretation: when social processes reactivate strategic framing, interpretive convergence tracks behavioral and operational recovery.

Phase Comparison

Table 1

Phase Comparison Summary

Dimension	Baseline (M)	Intervention (M)	Delta	Cohen's d
Decision Coherence Score	0.55 (0.41)	1.00 (0.00)	+0.45	1.55
DC Weighted Score	0.45 (0.39)	0.93 (0.07)	+0.48	1.69
Priority Stability Index	0.56 (0.41)	1.00 (0.00)	+0.44	1.52
Tradeoff Documentation %	0.45	1.00	+0.55	-
Unjustified Changes (total)	11	0	-11	-
Inconsistent Decisions (%)	45%	0%	-45pp	-
Composite Drift Index	0.52 (0.40)	0.98 (0.02)	+0.46	1.60

Note. Standard deviations in parentheses. Cohen's d calculated using pooled standard deviations.

Effect sizes are large by conventional standards (Cohen, 1988). These effect sizes should be interpreted with caution given the small sample of weekly observations ($n = 5$ per phase), the absence of a randomized control condition, and the ceiling effects discussed in Section 8.4.

Inter-Rater Reliability and Coding Transparency

Decision coherence achieved a Cohen's kappa of 0.965 across 40 coded decisions, with two initial disagreements subsequently resolved through structured discussion. Beyond the Decision 10 disagreement described above (Week 3: the shift from data model validation to dashboard aesthetics), one additional disagreement occurred on Decision 24 (Week 5), where coders differed on whether the exclusion of a reporting module constituted an inconsistent decision or a neutral resource allocation. Both disagreements were resolved in favor of the inconsistent rating based on the documented coding precedent regarding displacement of higher-priority strategic objectives. Session-level kappas ranged from 0.90 to 1.00, with no session requiring additional calibration beyond the standard resolution protocol.

Narrative coherence achieved a kappa of 0.714 across 24 interview codings. Three disagreements occurred, all at the boundary between fully aligned and partially aligned responses, where the coders differed on whether a participant's omission of one SIR objective constituted a meaningful interpretive gap or a conversational artifact. Resolution followed the same structured discussion process used for decision coherence.

Drift Pattern: Gradual, Episodic, or Event-Triggered?

The evidence supports a characterization of gradual deterioration with event-amplified severity rather than a purely episodic or event-triggered pattern. Drift indicators first appeared in Week 3 across all dimensions simultaneously, suggesting a threshold effect. External events amplified the severity of drift indicators in the weeks they occurred, but drift was present in decisions that had no connection to these events.

Reflexivity and Confound Assessment

The timing of behavioral changes is inconsistent with a pure observer effect. If participation awareness were the primary driver of improved alignment, changes should have appeared at study initiation rather than five weeks later. The baseline phase showed deterioration, not improvement, during a period when participants were already aware of being studied.

The Program Director's attendance at the second WAC session (Week 7) represents a potential confound. Executive presence may have reinforced alignment independently of the WAC mechanism. This cannot be fully disentangled from the WAC effect within the current design.

Discussion

The convergence of evidence across three measurement dimensions, with large effect sizes and consistent recovery profiles, builds a coherent case. Before addressing each research question, it is worth stating what the findings, taken together, suggest about Strategic Alignment Drift as a construct: the data are consistent with a model in which alignment is a maintained condition rather than an established property, where the maintenance mechanism is structural attention to strategic framing at the operational decision level, and where withdrawal of that attention produces predictable, measurable, and reversible deterioration. What follows examines how each research question engages that central proposition.

RQ1: Does the WAC Reduce Strategic Alignment Drift?

Convergent evidence across all three dimensions, large effect sizes ($d = 1.52$ to 1.69), and strong inter-rater reliability ($\kappa = 0.714$ to 0.965) support the claim that the WAC was associated with a substantial reduction in observable drift. Every dimension that deteriorated during baseline conditions recovered upon intervention introduction and held through program close.

This association requires qualification. The absence of random assignment means the observed changes cannot be attributed exclusively to the WAC. The Program Director's attendance in Week 7 may have independently reinforced alignment. The findings are positioned as strongly suggestive rather than causally definitive.

RQ2: Dimension Sensitivity

All three dimensions showed substantial sensitivity. If the WAC operated primarily through documentation discipline, decision coherence would be expected to improve first and most strongly. The simultaneous improvement of priority stability and narrative coherence suggests that the primary mechanism (attention reactivation) and the tertiary mechanism (collective sensemaking) contribute meaningfully.

The narrative coherence dimension showed the most dramatic trajectory: from 0.75 to 0.00 to 0.75 . This is consistent with Weick's (1995) prediction that sensemaking frames are actively maintained through social processes. When strategic sensemaking ceases, interpretive frames diverge rapidly. When it resumes, they reconverge with corresponding speed.

RQ3: Baseline Drift Pattern

The baseline data reveal gradual deterioration with a threshold onset. Weeks 1 and 2 showed no drift. Week 3 marked the onset across all dimensions simultaneously. This pattern is consistent with a model in which the initial cognitive salience of strategic intent provides a temporary buffer, and once that salience degrades below a threshold, drift emerges across multiple channels concurrently.

This finding carries practical implications. Governance interventions designed to prevent drift may need to be introduced before the threshold is reached rather than after drift is detected.

Ceiling Effects and Measurement Limitations

The intervention phase produced ceiling effects across both primary quantitative dimensions: decision coherence and priority stability both reached their maximum possible values for five consecutive weeks. This observation warrants direct discussion rather than only a limitations acknowledgment, because it raises two distinct questions.

First, whether the three-point coding scale (Consistent, Neutral, Inconsistent) has sufficient granularity to distinguish between degrees of alignment quality during high-alignment periods. A workstream producing consistently aligned decisions is scored identically whether those decisions reflect deep strategic reasoning or routine compliance with an obvious directive. A more granular scale, perhaps incorporating the quality of tradeoff reasoning or the strategic significance of the decision, would enable finer-grained measurement during periods of sustained alignment.

Second, the large effect sizes ($d = 1.52$ to 1.69) partly reflect the measurement range from floor to ceiling. They characterize the practical magnitude of the phase difference accurately, but they should not be interpreted as reflecting the same type of variance-based effect that a more granular instrument would capture.

Theoretical Implications

The concurrent onset of drift across all three measurement dimensions (Section 7.1, Figure 1) suggests that the theorized mechanisms, sensemaking decay, attention migration, and local optimization, reinforce one another simultaneously rather than cascading sequentially. The speed of recovery upon intervention introduction suggests that drift is reversible when attention structures are altered. If confirmed in subsequent studies, this pattern implies that targeted reactivation at the operational decision level may be sufficient to restore alignment without major governance redesign.

The baseline phase produced decisions that accumulated strategic incoherence: the balance sheet deferral, the separate reporting packs, the cash flow exclusion, the training deferral. Left uncorrected, these decisions would have compounded into a stock of strategic misalignment carried beyond program close. The logic is analogous to technical debt (Cunningham, 1992): each locally rational shortcut accumulates into a structural liability that constrains future options. The intervention produced decisions that actively reduced that accumulated incoherence, functioning as both a prevention and a correction mechanism.

The baseline drift pattern, in which the workstream's own governance processes failed to detect or correct progressive strategic divergence, is consistent with the broader organizational theory literature on structural inertia (Hannan and Freeman, 1984) and organizational defensive routines (Argyris, 1990). Organizations develop protective responses that resist change, even when change serves their stated strategic interests. The WAC may function, in part, by temporarily overriding these structural tendencies at the workstream level, reintroducing strategic framing that the organization's operational structures had effectively suppressed. Whether this interpretation holds across different organizational contexts remains a question for future investigation.

Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research

Theoretical Contributions

Strategic Alignment Drift is introduced as a theoretically grounded, empirically operationalizable construct distinct from related concepts in the organizational and program management literature. The core contribution is a shift in the unit of analysis for alignment research: from governance structures to decision sequences. Existing research predominantly asks whether appropriate structures are in place. The question posed here is whether those structures produce coherent behavioral patterns over time. The concurrent onset of drift across all three measurement dimensions advances the understanding of how sensemaking, attention allocation, and bounded rationality interact under real program conditions.

Methodological Contributions

The research demonstrates how embedded quasi-experiments with structured pre-post repeated measures designs can be conducted within live transformation environments. The three-dimensional operationalization of alignment drift provides a template for construct measurement that captures alignment dynamics with greater precision than single-dimension approaches.

Practical Contributions

A governance intervention that organizations can implement without significant process overhead is evaluated here. The WAC requires 20 to 25 minutes per week and no additional technology or staffing. The SIR document, Priority Tracking Sheet, and Alignment Log are designed to be adoptable as standalone governance tools.

The finding that the WAC not only prevented further drift but also surfaced and corrected previously accumulated drift has direct practical value. Organizations introducing alignment checkpoints mid-program can expect both preventive and corrective benefits. Implementation does require a minimum governance infrastructure: a documented strategic intent reference, a structured priority tracking process, and access to workstream decision records. Programs lacking these conditions would need to establish them before the full WAC protocol can function as designed.

Limitations

The single-workstream design provides depth of observation but limits statistical generalizability. The study site, a technology transformation workstream within a global banking institution, exhibits specific contextual features: a regulated industry with strong compliance culture, a mature governance infrastructure, and a predominantly technical delivery team. Programs in different industries, at different stages of governance maturity, or operating within different cultural norms around authority and decision-making may exhibit different drift trajectories or different responses to the WAC.

Several boundary conditions warrant explicit statement. The study examined a digital technology transformation; programs centered on operational restructuring, cultural change, or regulatory compliance may exhibit different drift dynamics because they generate different types of operational urgency. The workstream was mid-scale (eight core participants, single workstream within a larger program); larger programs with multiple interdependent workstreams may experience drift through cross-workstream interference that the WAC would not address. The governance environment was relatively centralized; programs operating under more distributed governance arrangements may exhibit faster drift onset or weaker intervention response.

The ten-week study window captures short-term dynamics but may not reveal drift patterns that develop over longer timescales. The pre-post design precludes causal inference at the standard of randomized experimental designs. Regression to the mean is a plausible concern, given that the intervention was introduced at the point of maximum baseline deterioration. The sustained improvement across all five intervention weeks partially mitigates this concern but does not eliminate it.

Future Research

Five directions follow from this study. First, multi-site replication across varied program types, organizational contexts, and cultural settings. Second, longer observation windows to test whether the WAC's effectiveness is sustained beyond five weeks or whether attention fatigue with the intervention itself produces a secondary drift pattern. Third, comparative studies examining different intervention designs (varying WAC components or frequency) to isolate the relative contributions of attention reactivation, documentation discipline, and collective sensemaking. Fourth, measurement of accumulated strategic incoherence at program conclusion, as distinct from drift during execution, to examine the process-outcome relationship that the present study theorizes but does not directly test. Fifth, studies examining whether the WAC's effectiveness depends on the prior existence of a high-quality Strategic Intent Reference document, or whether the intervention can function with weaker or more ambiguous initial strategic framing.

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