

Intent Integrity

A Unifying Principle for Reasoning in Organizational Change

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Abstract

Organizations can successfully deliver change on time, within budget, and within scope while still failing to achieve the outcomes that justified the change. Disappointing outcomes therefore cannot always be explained by execution alone. This paper develops a higher-level conceptual structure for reasoning about organizational change as a connected whole. It distinguishes three fundamental elements: intent, which establishes what outcomes to pursue and why; direction, which establishes how the organization proposes to pursue that intent; and execution, which realizes the chosen direction in practice. **Intent integrity** is the quality and continuity of the reasoning that shapes and connects these elements as change unfolds: quality concerns whether the reasoning is well founded, while continuity concerns whether it remains sufficiently available and connected. The Change Gap Model shows how potential may be lost when establishing intent or choosing direction, or left unrealized through execution. Potential lost when establishing intent or choosing direction cannot be recovered through execution alone unless those earlier choices and the reasoning behind them are reconsidered. The Intent Loop organizes this work through five functions: Intent, Direction, Execution, Validation, and Evolution, which together maintain and reconsider reasoning within a change and use experience to strengthen future change capability. Together, these concepts position intent integrity as a unifying principle for keeping reasoning well founded, available, and connected across roles, methods, and practices in organizational change.

Keywords: intent integrity; Change Gap Model; Intent Loop; organizational change; decision quality; intent tracing; organizational change capability

Author note: This work grew out of a decade of experience as a business analyst in organizational change and a recurring observation that initiatives could be delivered successfully without producing their intended outcomes. It is written for practitioners involved in understanding, shaping, implementing, and evaluating change. The concepts are intended to be refined through application and feedback.

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1 The reasoning problem

A change can be delivered successfully and still fail to achieve what it was meant to achieve. A project may follow its plan, stay within budget, and implement all agreed requirements, yet still have pursued the wrong change or failed to produce the intended effect. Disappointing outcomes therefore cannot always be understood through execution alone.

This pattern led me to look more closely at the purpose of my own work as a business analyst. I could readily describe the activities involved: eliciting information, process mapping, defining requirements, and supporting delivery. Because these activities are visible and produce tangible artifacts, they can easily become the main way the role is understood. It is easy to become absorbed in the work itself and lose sight of the larger purpose it serves. That larger purpose is to help shape change toward better outcomes.

That purpose can also become harder to keep in view over time. Organizational change is often distributed across people with different responsibilities and immediate areas of focus. People move in and out of the work, responsibilities are handed over, and attention shifts toward delivering the solution. Each part of the work may be handled appropriately within its own context while the reasoning connecting those parts fades away. The plan, scope, and immediate work can gradually become what people focus on most, while the reason for making the change becomes less visible.

I also noticed that analysis often began after a direction had already been set. There was usually a problem, some idea of what needed to improve, and a proposed solution or approach. Sometimes that direction had been carefully considered; other times an early idea had simply gained momentum. By that point, the work often focused on what was needed to make the proposed direction succeed, with less attention to whether it was the right one to pursue.

Once execution started, I saw another pattern. A technical constraint would come up, a workaround would be suggested, and the discussion would focus on effort, time, or delivery risk. Each decision could make sense on its own, while the cumulative effect gradually moved the work away from what the change was meant to achieve. The project could still deliver what was in scope and be seen as successful, even though some potential had been lost along the way.

To understand these patterns more clearly, I began looking at change from first principles and asking what needed to stay in view from the reason for making a change to the outcome it eventually produced. I wanted a reference point I could return to when assessing the work and decisions made along the way, rather than letting each part of the work become its own point of focus.

Many established practices already address particular aspects of change. Some help clarify the problem and choose a course of action; others support design, delivery, traceability, benefits realization, and learning. What seemed harder was keeping sight of the reasoning across all of them, from why the change was being considered through to what it eventually produced. Each area could be handled well while the reasoning across the whole still became fragmented or disappeared from view.

This paper develops a higher-level conceptual structure for reasoning about that problem. It frames deliberate organizational change in terms of three fundamental elements: intent, which establishes what the change is trying to achieve and why; direction, which establishes how the organization proposes to pursue that intent; and execution, which realizes that direction in practice. Together, these elements provide a common structure for keeping the whole change in view across different methods, roles, and practices.

Within this structure, the paper defines intent integrity as the quality and continuity of the reasoning that shapes and connects intent, direction, and execution. It then introduces the Change Gap Model to reason about where outcome potential may be lost or left unrealized, and the Intent Loop as a way to maintain and reconsider that reasoning in practice.

2 The mechanics of change

At any point, an organization exists in a particular **organizational state**: how some relevant part of it is structured or operates at that time. This may include its processes, capabilities, systems, organizational structure, roles and responsibilities, information, or behaviors. The **current state** is the relevant organizational state at the point a change is taken up for deliberate consideration.

An organizational state operates within a context: the relevant conditions outside the organizational state under consideration that influence how that state operates and what outcomes it produces. Context may include market conditions, regulation, economic conditions, technology, stakeholder behavior, and relevant conditions elsewhere in the organization.

An organizational state, operating within its context, produces outcomes. An **outcome** is a condition or effect resulting from how that state operates within its context, in relation to something that matters to the organization or its stakeholders. An outcome describes the resulting condition or effect itself. A change in an outcome over time or relative to another organizational state may be understood as an improvement or deterioration. Outcomes may be desirable or undesirable, and intended or unintended.

The current state already produces outcomes, such as particular levels of service, cost, risk, customer experience, or compliance.

A **change need** is a problem, opportunity, constraint, or other condition that provides a reason to consider change. It may arise because current outcomes are inadequate, because changing conditions threaten outcomes that are presently acceptable, or because there is an opportunity for worthwhile improvement.

Deliberate organizational change is a purposeful effort to alter organizational state in response to a change need, in pursuit of outcomes considered valuable. In this paper, change refers to deliberate organizational change unless stated otherwise. A redesigned process, new system, or changed organizational structure describes a change in organizational state. The resulting

levels of service, cost, risk, or customer experience describe outcomes of that changed state. A changed organizational state does not guarantee better outcomes: it may produce less improvement than expected, different effects, or unintended consequences.

Change requires the organization to establish what it is trying to achieve and why, choose how to pursue it, and realize that choice in practice. These requirements give rise to three fundamental elements: **intent**, **direction**, and **execution**.

Intent is what the change is trying to achieve and why. It is established by understanding the change need, determining which outcomes should be pursued in response, why those outcomes are valuable, whose interests they affect, how competing outcomes should be prioritized or traded off, and what constraints must be respected. These outcomes become the **intended outcomes** of the change and provide the reference point for choosing a direction and keeping execution connected to what the change is trying to achieve.

Direction is the chosen way of pursuing the established intent. It establishes the **target state** the organization aims to create and the approach by which it proposes to move from the current state toward that target state. It rests on expectations that the approach will realize the target state and that the target state will produce the intended outcomes.

Execution is the process of realizing the chosen direction in practice. It produces the **realized state**, the organizational state that results from execution. The realized state produces the **realized outcomes** and may differ from the target state.

Taken together, the mechanics of change run from the current state and its outcomes through the change need, intent, direction, and execution to the realized state and its outcomes. Intent establishes the intended outcomes, direction establishes a target state and an approach for reaching it in pursuit of those outcomes, and execution produces the realized state that produces the realized outcomes.

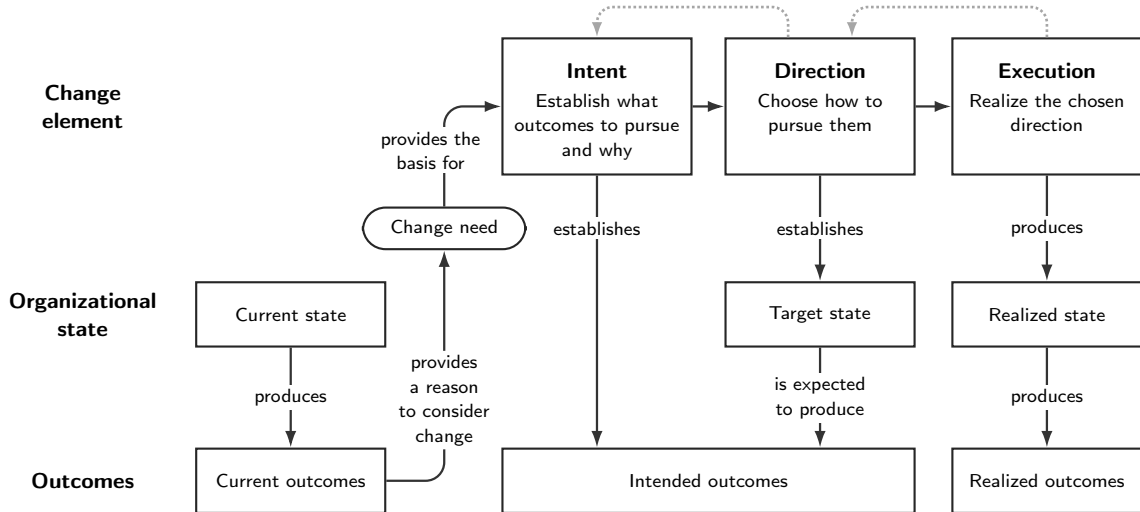


Figure 1: The mechanics of deliberate organizational change. Intent establishes the intended outcomes, direction establishes a target state and an approach for reaching it in pursuit of those outcomes, and execution produces the realized state that produces the realized outcomes. The elements are logically ordered but may be reconsidered as new evidence emerges or understanding develops.

Intent, direction, and execution are fundamental because together they represent the minimum reasoning and action required for deliberate change: deciding what outcomes to pursue and why, choosing how the organization should change to pursue them, and realizing that choice in practice.

The elements have a logical order, but earlier reasoning may need to be revisited as new evidence emerges or understanding develops. Some intent must exist before a direction can be chosen, and a direction must exist before it can be realized. Exploring a direction or executing it may produce new evidence or insights that change how the change need, the intended outcomes, or the chosen direction should be understood. Keeping the elements distinct as they are revisited helps the organization stay clear about what it is trying to achieve, how it proposes to achieve it, and what organizational state is actually being realized in practice.

A direction may be established at different levels of specificity. The target state and the approach for reaching it may initially be broad or provisional and become more detailed as understanding develops. Adding detail that remains consistent with the established target state and approach is further specification of the direction rather than a change to it. Where the target state or the approach for reaching it changes, the direction is being reconsidered; where the outcomes to be pursued or the reasons for pursuing them change, intent is being reconsidered.

3 Intent integrity

Intent, direction, and execution are connected by the reasoning behind the change. That reasoning explains why particular outcomes are sought and why the chosen direction is expected to produce them, and provides a basis for judging whether the course of execution remains consistent with that logic.

In this context, **reasoning** is the process through which judgments and choices are formed, connected, and reconsidered by assessing the reasons relevant to them. It draws on evidence, assumptions, expected cause-and-effect relationships, values, constraints, and trade-offs, under conditions of uncertainty.

Establishing intent requires reasoning from the change need to a justified position on what outcomes should be pursued and why. That reasoning includes how the change need is understood, the value and stakeholder implications of possible outcomes, and judgments about priorities, trade-offs, and constraints.

Choosing a direction requires reasoning from an understanding of the current state to what target state the organization should aim to create, how it proposes to move toward that target state, why the chosen approach is expected to succeed, and why the target state is expected to produce the intended outcomes. That reasoning depends on evidence and assumptions about cause and effect, feasibility, behavior, context, adoption, and other conditions that influence whether the approach will work, and how the target state will operate.

Execution needs to remain connected to the reasoning behind the direction and intent. The chosen direction cannot determine every circumstance encountered in practice, so realizing it requires judgment about how to proceed within what has been established. Emerging evidence also needs to be understood in relation to that reasoning. Many circumstances can be addressed within the established direction, while significant divergence or emerging evidence may require the direction or intent to be reconsidered.

The reasoning behind a change continues to matter after the initial choices are made. It provides a reference point for interpreting new evidence, examining assumptions, and judging how the work should proceed as the change unfolds. For that reasoning to serve this role, it needs to be well founded and remain sufficiently available and connected across intent, direction, and execution. These two requirements form the basis of what this paper calls intent integrity.

Intent integrity is the quality and continuity of the reasoning that shapes and connects intent, direction, and execution as a change unfolds.

Quality concerns whether the reasoning is well founded. High-quality reasoning uses relevant and reliable information, makes assumptions defensible, considers expected cause-and-effect relationships, values, constraints, and trade-offs, accounts for uncertainty, and reaches judgments and choices that are well supported by the reasons considered.

Continuity concerns whether reasoning remains sufficiently available and connected as the change progresses, so that later judgments and choices can be understood and evaluated in relation to the reasoning that preceded them, and earlier reasoning can be reconsidered when needed.

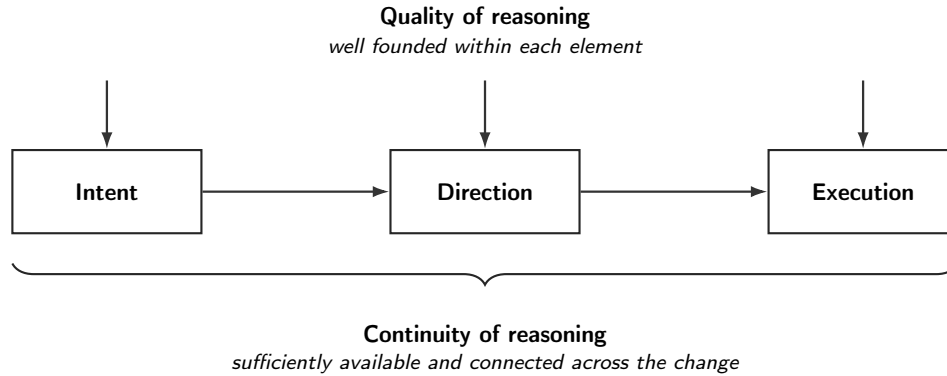


Figure 2: Intent integrity. Intent integrity depends on the quality and continuity of the reasoning that shapes and connects intent, direction, and execution. Quality concerns whether that reasoning is well founded. Continuity concerns whether it remains sufficiently available and connected as the change progresses.

Quality and continuity are both necessary. Well-founded reasoning loses its value if it becomes unavailable or disconnected from later reasoning, while continuity cannot compensate for reasoning that was weak to begin with.

Intent provides the reference point for understanding and judging direction and for keeping execution connected to what the change is trying to achieve and why. The concept is therefore framed as intent integrity because the reasoning across the change remains organized around the established intent. Maintaining that integrity does not mean that the original intent, direction, or earlier reasoning must remain unchanged. New evidence may challenge assumptions, weaken the case for the chosen direction, or change which outcomes are worth pursuing. In those cases, earlier reasoning may need to be revised. What matters is that such changes are recognized, their implications are considered, and the reasoning is reconnected where needed.

Intent integrity can weaken in two ways: because reasoning is poorly founded when establishing intent, choosing direction, or making judgments during execution, or because continuity with that reasoning is lost as the change unfolds. During execution, continuity may be lost when significant divergence goes unrecognized or when emerging evidence that challenges earlier reasoning is not connected back to it. A change can therefore remain on schedule, within budget, and within approved scope while the reasoning behind it is weak or has become disconnected from the course of the work.

Organizational change takes place under uncertainty, with incomplete evidence, competing priorities, and different stakeholder perspectives. Judgment and trade-offs are therefore unavoidable. Intent integrity does not remove that uncertainty; it provides a basis for keeping the reasoning behind those judgments sufficiently well founded, available, and connected as the change unfolds.

Intent integrity is therefore a property of the reasoning behind the change rather than of the outcome it ultimately produces. The quality of that reasoning can be assessed before the eventual outcome is known, while continuity can be assessed as the change progresses. Strong reasoning can still lead to a disappointing outcome, and weak reasoning can sometimes lead to a good one. Outcomes therefore do not establish the level of intent integrity.

4 The Change Gap Model

When a change need is taken up for deliberate consideration, different responses could lead to different organizational states and combinations of outcomes. Some of these outcome possibilities would be stronger than others, although neither the full range of possibilities nor how they should ultimately be judged can be known perfectly. As intent is established and a direction is chosen, some possibilities remain open while others are ruled out. Execution then shapes what is actually realized within what remains possible.

To reason about these possibilities, the Change Gap Model considers the relevant outcomes of a change together as an outcome position. An **outcome position** represents the overall combination of relevant outcomes, considered in light of the values, interests, constraints, and trade-offs through which they should be judged. It is multidimensional rather than a single outcome or measurable quantity. Relevant outcomes are not limited to those recognized or intended by the organization; an organizational state may also produce outcomes that are overlooked, misunderstood, unintended, or unobserved.

Potential represents a conceptual limit: the strongest outcome position that remains reasonably achievable within the possibilities still open to the change. What counts as the strongest outcome position depends not only on what could be achieved, but also on how the relevant outcomes, values, interests, trade-offs, and constraints could be understood and judged.

Potential is counterfactual rather than something the organization can directly identify or determine. It represents what could reasonably be achieved if the relevant choices and judgments were made as well as circumstances allow. It is not the same as what the organization expects to achieve or has currently identified as desirable. Its role in the model is to provide a reference for reasoning about how subsequent choices constrain what remains achievable.

The Change Gap Model distinguishes four outcome positions to show how the possibilities available to a change become progressively constrained and what is ultimately realized.

The **change potential** is the strongest outcome position reasonably achievable in response to the change need.

The **intent potential** is the strongest outcome position reasonably achievable within the established intent.

The **direction potential** is the strongest outcome position reasonably achievable within the chosen direction.

The **realized outcome position** is the outcome position actually produced by the realized state that results from execution of the chosen direction.

Establishing intent constrains the possibilities available in response to the change need, and choosing a direction constrains them further. Intent potential cannot exceed change potential, and direction potential cannot exceed intent potential. Execution produces a realized state and its outcomes within what remains possible through the chosen direction.

The model does not require the organization to identify the three potential positions. Its purpose is to distinguish where choices may rule out stronger outcome possibilities and where execution may leave available potential unrealized. Practices that strengthen reasoning across intent, direction, and execution can increase the likelihood of preserving and realizing more potential without requiring those positions to be identified or measured.

These four positions define the change gap and its three component gaps.

The **intent gap** is the potential lost in establishing the intent. It arises when the strongest outcome position reasonably achievable within the established intent is weaker than what could reasonably have been achieved in response to the change need. This may reflect how the change need was understood, which outcomes were considered valuable, whose interests were considered, how competing outcomes were prioritized or traded off, what constraints were applied, or the assumptions and judgments underlying those choices.

The **direction gap** is the potential lost in choosing a direction. It arises when the strongest outcome position reasonably achievable within the chosen direction is weaker than what could reasonably have been achieved within the established intent. This may reflect weak evidence, untested assumptions, inadequate consideration of alternatives, poorly understood relationships between the chosen approach, target state, and intended outcomes, or insufficiently examined trade-offs.

The **execution gap** is the potential left unrealized through execution that was available through the chosen direction. It may arise because the chosen direction is realized poorly or incompletely, or because reasoning continuity is lost during execution, so that significant divergence or emerging evidence is not understood in relation to the reasoning behind the direction and intent and earlier reasoning is not reconsidered when needed.

The **change gap** is the potential lost or left unrealized between change potential and the realized outcome position. It spans the intent, direction, and execution gaps.

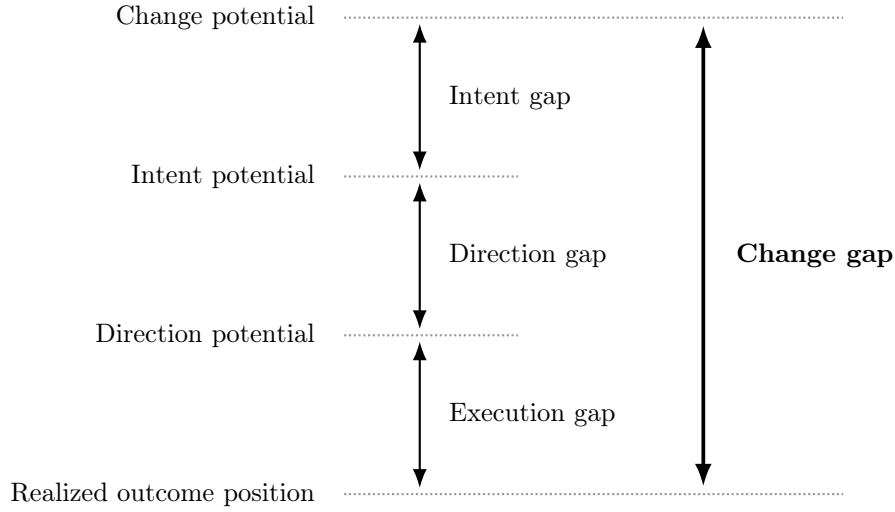


Figure 3: The Change Gap Model. The intent, direction, and execution gaps lie between successive outcome positions and together span the change gap. The positions and distances are conceptual and illustrative rather than measurable.

Potential lost upstream cannot be recovered downstream unless the reasoning that constrained it is reconsidered. Strong execution can realize the potential available through the chosen direction, but it cannot restore stronger possibilities already ruled out by intent or direction.

The conceptual potential positions are not directly observable. To connect the model with expectations and evidence in practice, organizations can use **outcome references**: an outcome baseline for current outcomes, outcome targets for the outcomes expected if the chosen direction is realized, and outcome results for realized outcomes.

The **outcome baseline** provides evidence about the current outcomes produced by the current state, before execution begins to alter that state.

Outcome targets express the expected levels of intended outcomes if the chosen direction is realized. Because direction potential is counterfactual, it cannot be observed directly. Well-founded and sufficiently complete outcome targets can provide a practical reference point for reasoning about direction potential and, where the intended outcomes adequately represent the relevant outcome dimensions and the targets reflect sound judgments about what the chosen direction could reasonably achieve, may approximate it.

Outcome results provide evidence about the realized outcomes and, when they adequately capture the relevant outcomes, provide a practical approximation of the realized outcome position.

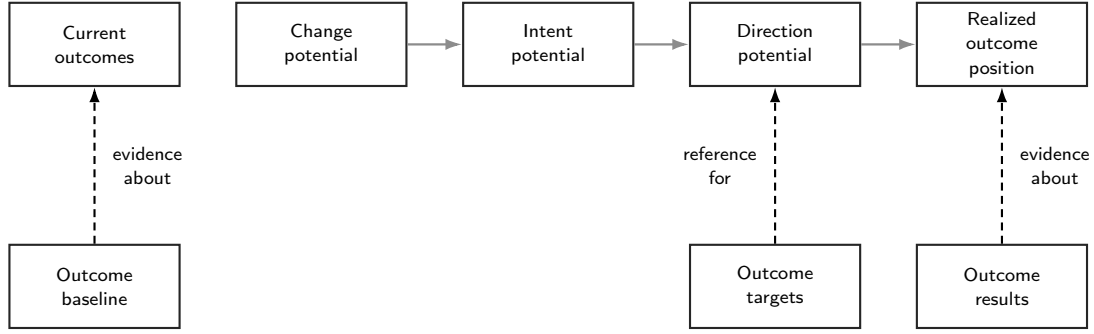


Figure 4: Outcome references in relation to the Change Gap Model. The outcome baseline provides evidence about current outcomes, outcome targets provide a practical reference for direction potential, and outcome results provide evidence about the realized outcome position. These references are not equivalent to the outcomes or conceptual positions they inform.

Because both the intent and direction gaps depend on counterfactual potential positions, they cannot be indicated through a direct comparison of observable references in the same way as the execution gap. Comparing targets with corresponding results can provide an indication of the execution gap, but does not measure it directly. The targets may not accurately or completely reflect what the chosen direction could reasonably achieve, the outcome results may not fully capture the realized outcomes, and the circumstances affecting those outcomes may have changed. A difference between targets and results therefore provides evidence of a possible execution shortfall, but requires interpretation.

Meeting the outcome targets provides evidence that the targeted outcomes were realized as expected, but does not establish that the targets reflected direction potential, that the intent was well founded, or that the chosen direction preserved the potential available within that intent. A change can meet its targets while potential was still lost in establishing the intent or choosing the direction.

The three gaps point to different sources of potential loss or non-realization. Addressing the intent gap requires stronger reasoning about what should be pursued and why. Addressing the direction gap requires stronger reasoning about how the established intent should be pursued. Addressing the execution gap requires effective realization of the chosen direction and sound, connected reasoning as execution unfolds.

The Change Gap Model provides a way to reason about where potential may have been lost or left unrealized, why that may have happened, and what may need to change in response.

5 The Intent Loop

The Change Gap Model shows where potential can be lost or left unrealized across intent, direction, and execution. Preventing that loss requires more than performing each part of the change well in isolation. As change unfolds, attention shifts between questions, roles, practices, and artifacts, and the reasoning connecting these elements can recede from view even

when each part of the work is performed competently. Maintaining intent integrity therefore requires that this reasoning remain sufficiently well founded, available, and connected as the change progresses.

The Intent Loop provides a structure for maintaining intent integrity through five functions: Intent, Direction, Execution, Validation, and Evolution.

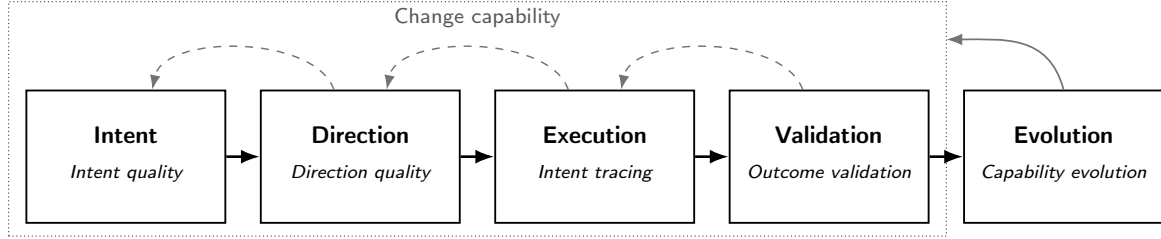


Figure 5: The Intent Loop. The five functions and their associated practices are shown in sequence. Solid arrows indicate the primary flow through the functions, while dashed arrows indicate feedback to earlier functions when reconsideration is needed. Evolution acts on change capability, the organization’s capacity to undertake deliberate change, rather than returning directly to an earlier function of the current change.

Table 1: Functions of the Intent Loop

Function	Role
Intent	Establish what outcomes to pursue and why.
Direction	Choose what to change and the approach for changing it in pursuit of the established intent.
Execution	Realize the chosen direction in practice while keeping the course of execution connected to the reasoning behind the change.
Validation	Establish evidence about emerging and realized outcomes, compare it with expectations, and assess what it implies for the reasoning behind the change.
Evolution	Use experience from change to adapt, renew, and strengthen the capability through which future change is undertaken.

Intent, Direction, and Execution correspond to the three fundamental elements described earlier. Validation uses evidence about emerging and realized outcomes to assess and reconsider the reasoning behind them. Evolution extends beyond the current change, using experience to strengthen the capability through which future change is undertaken.

Reasoning may need to move back upstream as new evidence emerges. Exploring directions may expose weaknesses in the intent; execution may reveal divergence or produce evidence that challenges assumptions behind the direction or intent; and validation may call execution, direction, or intent into question. Reconsideration can therefore extend as far upstream as the evidence warrants. Revising earlier reasoning does not weaken intent integrity when the reasons for doing so remain explicit.

Each function of the Intent Loop addresses a primary vulnerability in maintaining intent integrity or strengthening the capability to maintain it over time.

Table 2: Vulnerabilities and corresponding practices across the Intent Loop

Function	Vulnerability	Practice	Primary effect
Intent	Weak intent	Intent quality	Reduces the expected intent gap
Direction	Weak direction	Direction quality	Reduces the expected direction gap
Execution	Lost reasoning continuity	Intent tracing	Reduces the expected execution gap from lost continuity
Validation	Assumed success	Outcome validation	Establishes whether outcomes align with expectations and provides evidence for reconsideration
Evolution	Capability stagnation or erosion	Capability evolution	Strengthens change capability for future change

Intent quality concerns how well the change need is understood, how relevant and valuable outcomes are identified, whether affected interests and relevant perspectives are adequately considered, and how priorities, trade-offs, constraints, assumptions, and uncertainty are handled when establishing intent.

Direction quality concerns the alternatives, evidence, assumptions, expected causal relationships, uncertainties, and trade-offs considered when choosing the target state and approach through which to pursue the established intent.

Intent quality and direction quality draw on decision quality as a foundation for well-founded reasoning. They apply its principles to two distinct choices within organizational change: intent quality concerns what outcomes should be pursued and why, while direction quality concerns how the established intent should be pursued. Decision quality informs both, including attention to an appropriate frame, creative and doable alternatives, relevant and reliable information, clear values and trade-offs, sound reasoning, and commitment to action.¹

Neither practice identifies the strongest reasonably achievable outcome position, nor can it guarantee that the resulting choice will preserve all of the potential available. Their purpose is instead to strengthen the reasoning through which intent and direction are established. Stronger reasoning should improve the likelihood of making choices that preserve more of what remains reasonably achievable. Intent quality reduces the expected potential loss in establishing intent and direction quality reduces the expected potential loss in choosing direction.

Effective execution requires both realizing the chosen direction well in practice and maintaining continuity with the reasoning behind the change as execution unfolds. How effectively the direction is realized is not itself a property of intent integrity. During execution, intent integrity concerns the quality of the reasoning used to guide judgments and adaptations, and especially the continuity that keeps those judgments connected to the established direction and intent. This makes it possible to recognize significant divergence or emerging evidence and reconsider earlier reasoning when needed.

¹The concept of decision quality and its six elements are drawn from Spetzler, C., Winter, H., & Meyer, J. (2016). *Decision quality: Value creation from better business decisions*. Wiley.

Intent tracing is the practice of maintaining continuity between the reasoning behind intent and direction and the course of execution, so that significant divergence and emerging evidence can be understood in relation to that reasoning and earlier reasoning can be reconsidered when needed.

Execution inevitably brings situations that were not fully anticipated when the direction was established. Many can be addressed within the established direction, while others may significantly affect the target state or approach, or challenge the reasoning behind the intent. Intent tracing maintains the continuity needed to distinguish between them.

Reasoning continuity can be lost when the course of execution diverges from the chosen direction without the significance of that divergence being recognized, or when emerging evidence that bears on the reasoning behind the direction or intent is not connected back to it. Where divergence or emerging evidence is significant, the relevant reasoning can be reconsidered as far upstream as needed. Reconsideration may confirm what was already established or lead to a revision of direction or intent.

One form of lost continuity is **silent drift**: the course of execution gradually diverges from the chosen direction without the significance of that divergence being recognized. The work may still appear reasonable against immediate references such as the plan, specification, scope, or deadline while becoming progressively less connected to what the change was intended to achieve and the reasoning through which it was being pursued.

Intent tracing concerns more than whether needs, requirements, designs, and delivered components can be traced to one another. It keeps visible the reasoning that gives those elements significance: why the intended outcomes are being pursued, the assumptions and expected relationships behind the chosen direction, and how the course of execution relates to that reasoning. A requirement may remain traceable to its source even when the reasoning that made it important has changed or no longer holds.

Intent tracing should be proportionate to the change. Continuity needs to be strongest where divergence or emerging evidence could materially affect the reasoning behind the direction or intent. How much reasoning needs to be retained and made accessible depends on the scale, uncertainty, and stakes of the change. The specific mechanism is secondary, provided the relevant reasoning remains sufficiently available and connected.

Outcome validation uses available evidence about emerging and realized outcomes to assess what outcomes are being realized, how they compare with expectations, and what they imply for the reasoning behind the change. Outcome results provide evidence about realized outcomes and can be compared with outcome targets, while relevant unintended outcomes and changes in context also need to be considered. Validation therefore guards against assuming success from delivery, implementation, or target attainment alone.

Differences between outcome targets and results should be interpreted rather than attributed automatically to execution. They may reflect how the chosen direction was realized, assumptions about how the target state would produce outcomes, changes in context, expectations that were poorly founded, or judgments about value, priorities, and trade-offs that need to be reconsidered.

Validation can begin once meaningful outcome evidence becomes available. As evidence accumulates, it may confirm earlier reasoning or indicate that execution, direction, or intent should be reconsidered. Even when the chosen direction is realized as intended, the resulting outcomes may differ from what was expected, reveal important unintended effects, or prove less valuable than assumed.

Change capability is the capacity of an organization to undertake deliberate change. It is shaped by its people, knowledge, practices, governance, systems, and operating conditions. These conditions change over time: people leave, skills and knowledge are lost, information becomes outdated, practices lose relevance, systems and governance change, and new constraints emerge. Without continued renewal, capability can therefore erode even when it was previously strong.

Capability evolution uses what is learned through change to adapt, renew, and strengthen this capability for future change. That learning may concern the organization itself, the assumptions and criteria used to reason about it, the practices and governance through which change was undertaken, the knowledge developed during the change, or the information and documentation needed to maintain an accurate understanding of the organizational state. What should be carried forward therefore depends on what the change has revealed about both the organization and the way change was undertaken.

Capability evolution occurs when this learning produces a persistent change that can support future work, such as improved decision practices, updated knowledge or organizational-state information, stronger governance, more effective methods, or better-prepared people. If learning remains confined to the initiative and does not change something that remains available for future use, change capability has not yet evolved.

The Intent Loop integrates these functions to maintain intent integrity within individual changes and strengthen the capability to maintain it across future changes. It complements established disciplines and methods, which provide the practices and techniques through which the functions are carried out.

6 Scope, limits, and application

6.1 Scope

Intent integrity applies broadly to organizational change, with greatest practical value where intent, direction, and execution can be meaningfully distinguished and the reasoning connecting them examined and reconsidered as change unfolds.

The Intent Loop is not tied to a linear or project-based lifecycle. Intent, direction, execution, and validation may recur throughout iterative and adaptive change at different levels and at different times as understanding develops. The functions have a logical order, but they can overlap and be revisited as the change develops.

The primary unit of analysis is the change itself rather than a formal project boundary. It begins when a change need is taken up for deliberate consideration and intent starts to form, and may extend beyond implementation as outcomes become observable and validation continues.

Intent integrity remains useful even when outcomes emerge much later or cannot be measured or attributed reliably to a single change. Intent quality, direction quality, and intent tracing strengthen the reasoning intended to improve the likelihood of better outcomes before those outcomes become observable. Outcome validation may therefore be delayed or more limited without negating the value of maintaining intent integrity.

Intent, Direction, Execution, and Validation operate within the organization's existing change capability, while Evolution extends the scope of the Intent Loop beyond the current change by carrying learning into future change capability.

6.2 Limits

Several limitations shape how the framework should be interpreted and applied.

First, the framework is a conceptual structure developed from first-principles reasoning rather than an empirically validated model. It provides a simplified, higher-level way of understanding organizational change and a common vocabulary for reasoning about intent, direction, execution, and their connections. Its concepts can serve as a practical reference without requiring the framework itself to be quantitatively measurable. It remains to be established whether intent integrity can be assessed consistently in practice, under what conditions the framework is most useful, and whether systematic application improves reasoning or outcomes. These questions require further application, comparison, and empirical study.

Second, change potential, intent potential, and direction potential are conceptual positions rather than directly observable or measurable quantities. The resulting gaps cannot be calculated directly. The model supports reasoned judgments, informed by available evidence, about where potential may have been lost or left unrealized, but does not provide a quantitative measure of that loss.

Third, high intent integrity does not guarantee a successful outcome, nor does low intent integrity guarantee a poor one. Organizational change takes place under uncertainty, and outcomes depend on factors that cannot always be known or controlled. Strengthening the quality and continuity of reasoning is intended to improve the likelihood of better outcomes, not to make them predictable.

Fourth, the framework takes a reasoning-centered view of change, while organizational decisions are also shaped by power, incentives, politics, competing interests, and differences in stakeholder values. These influences can affect how intent and direction are established and whether well-founded reasoning is acted on. Making the reasoning visible can expose

these influences and their implications, but cannot ensure that decisions follow the reasoning judged to be most well founded.

Fifth, maintaining intent integrity requires time and attention, so the effort should be proportional to the scale, uncertainty, and stakes of the change. Analysis, documentation, and visibility also carry costs, and beyond some point further effort may add less value than it consumes. The framework does not prescribe how much effort is sufficient; this requires judgment in context.

6.3 How to use the framework

Intent integrity can be used as a higher-level unifying principle for understanding and examining organizational change as a connected whole. It provides a common structure for positioning the different parts of a change and understanding how their roles and contributions relate to one another. Intent provides the reference for what the change is trying to achieve and why, direction for how those outcomes are being pursued, and execution for how that direction is being realized in practice. Using these distinctions helps keep work across different disciplines connected to the reasoning that gives it purpose and to the wider change from need through to outcome.

The framework is intended to improve the effectiveness of reasoning, not to maximize the amount of analysis performed. Change requires timely action under uncertainty and limited resources, so reasoning should be proportionate to the decision at hand while remaining available for later judgments and reconsideration. By focusing effort on relevant reasoning and maintaining its connections as the change unfolds, intent integrity can help organizations gain more value from the time and attention already devoted to analysis and decision-making.

The Intent Loop applies this principle through a guiding question for each function:

Table 3: Guiding questions for applying intent integrity across the Intent Loop

Function	Question
Intent	What outcomes should we pursue, and can we explain why they are valuable?
Direction	What should we change and what approach should we take to pursue the established intent, and can we explain why this direction should work?
Execution	Can we explain how the course of execution, and what we learn during it, relate to the direction and intent, and can we recognize when earlier reasoning should be reconsidered?
Validation	What outcomes are we seeing, how do they compare with what we expected, and what does that tell us about the reasoning behind the change?
Evolution	How should the way we undertake future change evolve based on what this change has taught us?

The questions can be revisited throughout the change and are especially useful when commitments or significant decisions are being made, new evidence emerges, understanding develops, or divergence becomes apparent. They do not depend on particular artifacts or methods, provided the reasoning needed to support them remains accessible.

Intent integrity can be supported by many roles, but responsibility for maintaining it should be clear. That responsibility may sit separately from decision authority. When significant divergence is identified or emerging evidence challenges the reasoning behind the change, it should be brought to those accountable for deciding whether execution should be corrected within the established direction or whether direction or intent should be reconsidered.

Different methods and practices can apply this logic in different forms of work, while intent integrity provides the same underlying principle across functions and roles.

Subsequent work will explore how to operationalize the framework, including practical approaches to assessing intent integrity, supporting its application, and evaluating its effects.

7 Conclusion

This paper develops a higher-level conceptual structure for reasoning about organizational change as a connected whole. It identifies intent, direction, and execution as three fundamental elements; defines intent integrity as the quality and continuity of the reasoning that shapes and connects them; uses the Change Gap Model to show where potential may be lost or left unrealized; and introduces the Intent Loop as a structure for maintaining and reconsidering that reasoning over time.

Together, these concepts explain how competent work across a change can still lead to disappointing outcomes. Potential may be lost when establishing what to pursue or choosing how to pursue it, while sound upstream reasoning can lose its value when divergence goes unrecognized or emerging evidence is not connected back to the reasoning it challenges. Strong execution can realize the potential available through the chosen direction, but cannot recover potential already lost upstream unless the reasoning that constrained it is reconsidered.

Intent integrity provides a common reference for examining whether the reasoning behind a change remains well founded and connected as it unfolds. It complements established disciplines and methods by positioning their contributions within the same underlying reasoning from need to outcome, allowing different roles and practices to specialize while remaining connected to the change as a whole.

The Intent Loop shows how intent integrity can be maintained within a change and how experience can strengthen the capability through which future changes are undertaken. Effective change therefore depends on preserving integrity in the reasoning through which intent is established and direction is chosen, keeping execution connected to that reasoning, and carrying learning forward into future change.