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The Quiet Drift

Why organisations rarely see their greatest risks developing,
Until the cost of not noticing is already locked in.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organisations rarely fail because of one catastrophic decision — they fail because of hundreds of small, unremarkable ones that compound over time. This is organisational drift: one of the least recognised yet most consequential dynamics facing modern organisations, and it moves toward excellence just as often as it moves toward failure. The determining factor isn't whether drift occurs — it always does — but whether leaders build the organisational awareness to recognise meaningful change while there is still time to shape its direction. This article opens a 13-part series exploring what that awareness looks like in practice.

1. Introduction

Most organisations do not fail because of one catastrophic decision. They fail because of hundreds of seemingly insignificant ones — a delayed review here, an assumption left unchallenged there, a meeting where nobody quite got round to asking that difficult question.

I have sat in enough of those meetings to know how ordinary they feel at the time. A policy that was meant to be temporary is still running two audits later, because nobody owns the decision to retire it. A control gets bypassed “just this once”. And then again, because the exception becomes the precedent nobody wrote down. A supplier relationship changes shape gradually enough that no single conversation ever felt like the moment to raise it.

This is organisational drift — one of the least recognised, yet most consequential, realities facing modern organisations. The danger isn't that drift happens. Every organisation drifts. The danger is that it rarely gets noticed while it's still happening, and by the time it's obvious, it's usually also expensive.

> *None of these events look significant in isolation.*
> *Together, they can redraw an organisation's trajectory.*

2. Organisations Are Always Moving

There is a comforting assumption baked into a governance thinking: that organisations don’t change until something significant happens to them, and it is risk management's job is to watch for that something. Reality is messier than that.

People join and people leave. Technology moves faster than the policies written to govern it. Customers expect more than they did last year. Regulation shifts, competitors innovate, communities get more demanding, and economic conditions fluctuate beneath all of this. Artificial intelligence is reshaping entire industries while most risk registers still describe the organisation as it was two years ago. Supply chains grow more interconnected, leadership priorities shift with each reorganisation — and every one of these changes leaves a mark, whether anyone is tracking it or not.

Some of these forces strengthen the organisation. Others slowly weaken it. Rarely does either happen with any fanfare. The organisation is always moving. The only real question is in which direction.

3. Drift Is Rarely Dramatic

Film and television have taught us that failure arrives with alarms, flashing lights, and a room full of people making one dramatic decision after another under pressure. Real organisational life is far less theatrical than that, which is precisely why it's harder to see it coming.

Drift is quiet. It moves one small decision at a time: a project proceeds despite unresolved concerns, because stopping it now would raise more questions than anyone wants to answer. Documentation gets completed because it is required, not because it informs a better decision. Meetings settle into exercises in confirmation rather than exploration — everyone nodding along to a deck they've essentially already seen. Performance reports become so familiar that nobody stops to ask what they have stopped revealing.

Success breeds confidence. Confidence, left unchecked, erodes curiosity. And reduced curiosity has a way of narrowing what an organisation is even willing to notice. Nothing looks broken. Everything looks normal. Until, one day, it isn't.

When organisations experience a genuine failure, the question that follows is almost always the same: “How did we not see this coming?” In my experience, the honest answer is rarely that there were no warning signs. More often, the signs existed but each one, on its own, seemed too small, too isolated, or too ordinary to earn anyone's attention.

4. The Cost of Familiarity

If I had to name the single biggest driver of organisational drift, it would not be incompetence. It would be familiarity.

We stop noticing what has become routine — the report we've read every month for five years, the meeting that runs the same agenda it ran last quarter, the process that “has always worked”, the supplier relationship that has never once caused concern. Familiarity breeds confidence. Confidence, given enough time, curdles into complacency. Complacency reduces how closely we actually observe things, and observation gets replaced by assumption.

> **Key Point:** Familiarity — not incompetence — is the more common driver of organisational blind spots. That's what makes it harder to fix: nobody feels responsible for something that simply became habitual.

That's how organisations end up seeing what they expect to see, rather than what's actually changing in front of them.

5. Drift Does Not Mean Decline

It's worth pausing here, because drift is often misread as a one-way slide towards failure. That's only half the picture.

Organisations also drift towards excellence — towards better instincts, stronger cultures, sharper decisions. The direction is not fixed by the fact of drifting; it's shaped by whether anyone is paying close enough attention to influence it.

Every organisation is drifting. The real question is whether that drift is intentional, or simply the sum of whatever nobody got round to questioning.

6. Awareness Is Becoming a Strategic Capability

Traditionally, organisations have focused their energy on identifying risks — naming the things that could go wrong and building controls around them. That work still matters. But the environment most organisations now operate in demands something broader than a well-maintained risk register. It demands organisational awareness.

Awareness, as I would define it, is the ability to recognise meaningful change while there is still time to do something about it. It does not come from an annual review cycle, and it can not be delegated to a single department, however good that department is. Collecting more information doesn't automatically produce it either — plenty of organisations are drowning in data and still missing the pattern sitting inside it.

Awareness is built in a few specific ways:

- It strengthens when information gets connected across silos instead of sitting isolated within them.
- It grows when leaders make a habit of asking questions before they demand answers.
- It is sustained when organisations stay genuinely curious about themselves and their environment, rather than treating awareness as a one-off review.

Organisations with strong awareness don't eliminate uncertainty — nobody does. They simply recognise it sooner than their competitors do.

7. Recognition Before Consequence

Every consequence begins as change. Every major disruption was, at some earlier point, a minor variation. Every strategic opportunity first turned up looking uncertain, half-formed, easy to dismiss.

Recognition before consequence is, I'd argue, one of the defining capabilities of a genuinely intelligent organisation. It is not prediction, and it isn't hindsight dressed up as foresight. It is disciplined observation — the willingness to notice small changes before they compound into large problems, and the discipline to keep asking one unglamorous question: “What has changed here that we haven't yet understood?”

> *That question, unremarkable as it sounds, may end up being one of the more valuable ones an organisation can ask itself on a regular basis.*

8. A Different Way of Thinking

For a long time, the risk profession has approached its work primarily through the lens of protection — protecting assets, reputation, compliance, operations. Those responsibilities are not going anywhere, and they never should.

But the organisations that thrive over the next decade will likely have cultivated something else alongside them. They will recognise meaningful change earlier than their peers. They will connect information that looks unrelated on the surface. They will stay curious while others are settling into comfort. They will understand that resilience isn't something you reach for during a crisis — it is something built long before one arrives.

Most of all, they will understand that awareness isn't a happy accident. It is something you can deliberately build.

Conclusion

Organisational drift is inevitable. No organisation stands still, and every decision, every conversation, every unchallenged assumption and overlooked observation nudges it a little further in one direction or another.

The challenge was never to prevent change — that was always going to be a losing fight. The real challenge is recognising change while there is still time to shape where it leads.

Because organisations rarely fail simply because change occurred. They fail because that change went unrecognised. This is where a different conversation about risk begins.