The Say–Do Gap

Five places where organizational intent breaks down, and how to close each one

POSITION Consultants
Perspective Paper

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ABSTRACT

Organizations rarely lack intent. They have values on the wall, a performance process on the calendar, a change plan in a deck and a promise to customers on the website. What they often lack is the mechanism that makes each one real on an ordinary Tuesday.

We call the distance between what an organization says and what it does the **say–do gap**. This paper describes five places it appears — work processes, culture, performance management, change and customer experience — and a common way to close it.

Keywords: Culture; Process improvement; Performance management; Change adoption; Customer experience

KEY POINTS

1. Intent is usually expressed as a statement, while performance depends on a mechanism — a form, a meeting, a rule, a measure, a trained manager. Statements without mechanisms lose to daily pressure.
2. The gap shows up in five places: how work actually moves, the behaviors culture rewards, performance conversations that leave no record, change that is announced rather than adopted, and customer promises that aren't delivered.
3. A common method — diagnose, define, design, document, reinforce — turns a standard into something busy managers can run.

1 Why the gap persists

The gap is not usually caused by bad faith. It persists because intent is expressed as a statement, while performance depends on a mechanism: a form, a meeting, a rule, a measure, a trained manager. When the statement is not tied to a mechanism, it competes with daily pressure and loses.

POSITION'S VIEW

This is POSITION's working explanation, drawn from consulting practice rather than a controlled study. We find it useful because it points to something leaders can design.

2 Five places the gap appears

2.1 Processes: work does not move the way the org chart suggests

Work crosses people, systems and handoffs. In our experience, delays and rework tend to cluster at the handoffs rather than inside the tasks. Process improvement starts with mapping how work *actually* moves, then removing steps, clarifying who decides, and aligning resources to the real flow.

2.2 Culture: stated values versus lived drivers

Culture is shaped by what is rewarded, tolerated and modeled, not by what is printed. A useful assessment separates stated values from the behaviors leaders reinforce, then aligns leadership, structure and people systems around a common standard.

2.3 Performance management: conversations that evaporate

When we review performance processes, three problems come up repeatedly:

- **Nothing is captured.** Conversations may be valued but go undocumented, so they leave no organizational memory.
- **Manager quality varies widely.** Some managers coach well; others offer generic feedback, often without training in how to use the competency model.
- **Feedback is disconnected from decisions.** Employees see no clear line from their reviews to promotion, pay or development.

Competency models show a related pattern. When every role carries a long list of expectations, people lose focus. A small set — a few core competencies for everyone, plus a small number of leadership and job-specific ones — is easier to teach, coach and assess. **Fewer, clearer expectations make a standard usable.**

FROM CONSULTING PRACTICE

These are recurring observations from our performance management work, not findings from a representative study.

2.4 Change: announcement is not adoption

Significant change tends to fail when leaders, managers and employees are expected to adopt it at the same moment with the same information. Each group needs something different: leaders need a visible, consistent role; managers need the tools and talking

points to translate it for their teams; employees need to understand what changes for them and what support exists.

2.5 Customer experience: the distance between promise and delivery

A well-known illustration comes from Bain & Company. When Bain surveyed 362 firms, 80% believed they delivered a "superior experience," but customers said only 8% of companies were really delivering [1]. Bain also reported that more than 95% of the management teams it had surveyed claimed to be customer focused.

ABOUT THIS EVIDENCE

This comparison of management and customer perceptions is from 2005, and Bain's 95% figure refers to management teams it had surveyed more broadly, not necessarily the same 362 firms. We use it to illustrate a pattern, not to benchmark today's industries.

The practical lesson holds: organizations that narrow the gap use direct customer contact — interviews, observation — to understand the real experience, rather than relying on internal perception.

3 A common method

Table 1. Five steps for closing the say–do gap

Step	What it means	Example output
Diagnose	Gather the real picture from the people closest to the work	Interviews, process maps, culture and equity assessments
Define	Agree a short, clear standard for what good looks like	Behavioral indicators, service standards, decision rights
Design	Build the mechanism that makes the standard routine	Forms, manager guides, calibration, workflows, journey fixes

Step	What it means	Example output
Document	Capture results so there is organizational memory	System of record, dashboards, check-in templates
Reinforce	Equip managers and review what the data shows	Manager training, quarterly reviews, adjustments

4 Design principles we apply

1. **Design for the busiest manager.** If a process only works when managers have spare time, it will not survive a busy quarter.
2. **Fewer, clearer, behavioral.** Limit standards to what people can remember and observe.
3. **Connect to decisions.** Feedback should visibly inform development, promotion and pay, or people stop investing in it.
4. **Build in fairness.** Structured questions, calibration and clear definitions reduce the room for bias.
5. **Prepare the people, then the process.** Technology and forms help, but adoption depends on trained, confident managers.

5 Implications for leaders

- **Look for the missing mechanism, not the missing intent.** For each stated priority, ask what form, meeting, measure or trained manager makes it happen.
- **Start with the people closest to the work.** Internal perception is a poor guide to how work, culture or customer experience actually feels.
- **Make standards small enough to use.** A short list people can remember beats a complete list nobody applies.
- **Plan change by audience.** Leaders, managers and employees each need different information, tools and timing.

6 Limitations

- The Bain comparison of management and customer perceptions is from 2005, and its customer-sample method is not disclosed in the published summary.
- The explanation of the gap (statements without mechanisms) and the performance-management observations draw on consulting practice, not a controlled study.
- The five-step method is a practical framework; it has not been tested as a whole in controlled research.

7 Questions for discussion

For a leadership team conversation. There are no right answers or scores.

1. Where do our stated values and our promotion decisions disagree?
2. Which process do employees work around most often, and why?
3. If a manager wanted to hold a great performance conversation tomorrow, what would they have to use?
4. What do customers say about us when we are not in the room?
5. For our next major change, what does each audience need to hear, do and receive?

References

[1] James Allen, Frederick F. Reichheld, Barney Hamilton and Rob Markey (2005). Closing the delivery gap. *Bain & Company*.
Comparison of management and customer perceptions across 362 firms; customer-sample details not disclosed in the summary.
https://www.bain.com/insights/closing-the-delivery-gap/

ABOUT THIS PAPER

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