



The Chief of Staff

Summer 2026

The Journal of the Chief of Staff Association



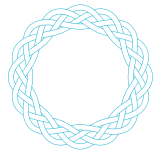
The Unowned Problem



Finance fragmentation in Africa
The federal service talent pipeline
Navigating Asian work cultures
The chief of staff in heavy industry
The Saudi Energy framework



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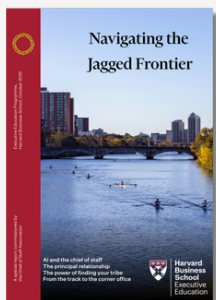
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Navigating the Jagged Frontier

This issue explores AI, authentic leadership and the power of finding your tribe.

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The Golden Thread

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Inside the Symbiotic Partnership

A survey of 121 CSA members, and follow-up interviews, examine the CoS-principal relationship, and geopolitical pressures.

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TESTIMONIALS

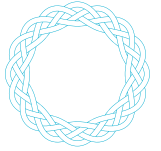
‘Writing for the CSA journal forced a rigour I wouldn’t have imposed on myself. What surprised me was the quality and detail of the feedback. Time and effort had gone into understanding the piece and my writing is markedly better for it. If you’re sitting on an idea you think might not be ready, that’s probably exactly the right moment to submit it.’

Mark Chamberlain

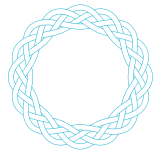
‘Writing an article with the CSA publishing team was a really positive experience. The structured research and writing process helped sharpen my perspective on the topic. The editors challenged ideas, gave thoughtful feedback and helped elevate the message. It was a genuinely enjoyable and collaborative experience.’

Érika Dion

Contents



7	Contributors	30	Your organisation's antagonist
9	Foreword		Brad Abare
	Lisa Annese AM		Identifying the antagonist within names forces not faces, giving your organisation a way forward.
11	Letter from the CEO	35	Why a non-technical chief of staff thrives in heavy industry
	Trent Smyth AM		Érika Dion
12	Letter from the editor		Integrator and truth-teller: a playbook for non-technical chiefs of staff and how they might approach the sector.
	Henry Martin	40	Centre of the hourglass
13	The unowned problem		Jon Dunne
	Aboubakri DIAW		Alignment and the organisational position of the chief of staff: the power of navigating the centre.
	A panel discussion in Ethiopia reveals that fragmentation does not begin between institutions, it starts on the inside.	49	Foundations
18	From federal service to chief of staff		Ryan Foor
	Christopher O'Connell		A theory of action for chiefs of staff in US Government contexts.
	Federal employees and the overlooked talent pipeline to the corporate sector.		
23	Solving the wrong problem		
	Mark Chamberlain		
	Why organisations fail to identify their 'coherence gap' and how the chief of staff can help.		



55 People-centred leadership

Amy Polishuk

A survey of CSA members and interviews reveal that modernisation is a people-first effort.

63 The quiet rise of the chief of staff

Sulaiman S. Al-Ghumaiz with Mohammad Al-Ohali

From executive support to integrator and advisor: the Saudi Energy framework.

69 Navigating work culture in Asia

Anny Tan

A guide to working across Asia, building influence, trust and respect.

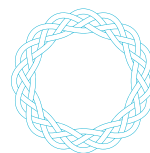
75 The wins and the weeds

Amanda Sugay Alexander

Cultivating second-order effect thinking in the chief of staff role.



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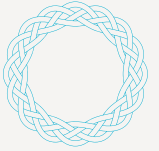
Chief of Staff and certified Executive Coach



Anny Tan

Executive Secretary to Group CEO at GuocoLand Group

The issue in numbers



25% Reduction in cross-group collaboration caused by remote working, p. 77.

Fall in mining productivity between 1997–2023, p. 36.

50%

**\$20b v.
\$200b**

The annual value of raw coco exported from Africa v. global market value, p. 15.

Number of Federal US employees exiting service since January 2025, p. 19.

400k+

50m

Number of PPE masks produced per day by BYD company in May 2020, p. 71.



Foreword



Lisa Annese AM

Chief Executive Officer
Chief Executive Women (CEW)

Real change is difficult. The problems I have spent my career on, across gender equality, diversity and workplace equity, are complex and multi-factor, and they do not yield simply because the case for solving them is sound. There is rarely a shortage of analysis, or of organisations giving themselves to the task. What is scarce is everything that comes after the case is made: the sustained commitment, the leadership, and above all the accountability to hold the course while the resistance does its patient work.

That resistance is the constant. It rarely announces itself. The evidence may be clear, yet the argument remains contested, and the resistance lives on in interests invested in the way things are, and in a reluctance to carry what is hard. This is the terrain the present collection sets out to map. In the opening essay, Aboubakri Diaw describes a panel that can identify every barrier in front of it yet cannot convert that clarity into ownership. Recognising a problem and owning it are not the same act, and the distance between them is where the real work lives.

I have seen that distance from inside several very different organisations. At what was then the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, I helped build some of the architecture Australia still uses to measure gender equality. The case for it was sound, but it was contested all the same; the will to act on it had to be won, and won again. I spent a decade leading Diversity Council Australia, building an evidence base on everything from the economics of the gender pay gap to the experience of being 'out at work'. I currently serve on the board of Amnesty International Australia, one of many board and advisory roles across my career, and I now lead Chief Executive Women, whose members are among the most senior women in the country.

Across settings as different as these, one discipline holds. A strategy succeeds or fails on how well it is made: whether it is responsive to its environment, agile, honest about finite resources and stretched capacity, and built to mobilise stakeholders behind a single, clear vision. Execution is not a separate stage where good intentions quietly leak away. It is the proof of whether the strategy was sound to begin with. Brad Abare names the force that defeats this the Antagonist, the legacy habits and misaligned incentives that stall an organisation more surely than any competitor. Naming that force, and holding an organisation accountable to overcome it, is leadership of a demanding kind.

More and more, this is the work of the chief of staff. Jon Dunne pictures the role as the narrow centre of an hourglass, the point where an organisation's strategy and its delivery meet and are held together. I know its worth from the leader's side of that partnership. The chief of staff is often what stands between a strategy that is announced and one that is resourced, owned and genuinely seen through.

The most consequential problems are rarely simple, and never solved by analysis alone. They are won by people prepared to take ownership of them and stay with them through the difficulty. That is the through-line of this collection, and a timely one. I commend the Association, and every contributor, for taking ownership of a conversation too many of us are content to leave unclaimed.



Letter from the CEO

There is a question that runs beneath every article in this issue, and it is not a comfortable one. When something is broken, and everyone in the room can see it, who decides it is their responsibility to fix it?

The contributors to *The Unowned Problem* have each approached that question from a different angle. Some write from the front lines of organisational complexity: utilities in Saudi Arabia, mining operations, or the upper ranks of the US government departments. Others write from the inside of transformation: the messy, human work of modernising organisations that were not designed for the pace of change now required of them. What connects them is a shared conviction that the chief of staff is not a supporting role in these moments. It is, increasingly, the role on which progress depends.

Chiefs of staff have always operated in the space between an organisation's ambition and its reality. That space is wider now, more contested, and more consequential. *The Unowned Problem* makes the case—through argument, evidence, interviews, surveys and experience—that closing this coherence gap is not incidental to the role. It is the role.

You will find essays here that challenge familiar assumptions: about where talent comes from, about what makes a restructure succeed or fail, about what it means to sit at the centre of an organisation rather than beside it. You will also find something rare in leadership literature: honesty about what does not work, and why.

As Lisa Annese writes in the foreword, 'What is scarce is everything that comes after the case is made.' This issue's contributors address this. In addition to identifying and naming problems, they counter scarcity by freely providing practical solutions. For this, we thank them.

Sincerely,



Trent Smyth AM
Chief Executive Officer



Introduction

In this issue, chiefs of staff seek to establish modes and models for their role: its challenges, responsibilities, stakeholder relationships, and solutions. That search makes the authors turn to theory, interviews, surveys, frameworks, metaphors, case studies and personal reflections.

As the editor responsible for shepherding these pieces through multiple drafts, my job is to stress-test the findings, clarify the emerging meanings and challenge them so that they might be more robust, and more practical for the reader. From this position, and with the final product, I am left with a personal conclusion: each author is intrinsically a problem-solver; they care deeply about finding a solution; and they believe that knowledge sharing is part of the strategy for doing this.

The Latin root of the word essay means to physically weigh something, to discern its value. Michel de Montaigne provided us with its modern definition: to try or trial in words. We should think of the essay, then, as a verb and not a noun. A good one is, by its nature, incomplete: a form of dialectic, not rhetoric.

The sequence of essays moves from problem to solution, but that solution is not necessarily fixed; it will look different depending on the organisation, the moment, and the person leading.

On the whole, *The Unowned Problem* should be considered a form of dialectic; the start of a conversation that continues beyond these pages. Whether it is owning a problem, establishing coherence, identifying an antagonist, learning to communicate more effectively, or adopting second-order thinking, one of the essays within offers something to help you in your role. Something to identify with, disagree with, reflect upon, or bring up with your colleagues and the principal you work alongside.



Henry Martin
Editorial Manager

The unowned problem

Aboubakri DIAW



The unowned problem

Aboubakri DIAW

What a panel discussion in Addis Ababa revealed about fragmentation, development finance, and why integration must begin at home.

The Africa Hall in Addis Ababa carries history in its walls. It's where the African Union was born and where leaders gathered in 1963 to imagine a continent differently. When I walked in one morning for a plenary, the room held it all: screens and lights; ministers and heads of institutions in the front rows; staff members, students and interns along the edges; the energy of a space that believes something important is about to happen.

I noticed it immediately: expectation; the quiet conviction, shared by almost everyone present, that by the time we left, something would begin to change.

I was moderating a panel. This meant my job was to find the thread that connected the head of a global development system, senior executives from development finance institutions, a young entrepreneur from Tanzania, an equity investor from Nigeria, and the voice of the African private sector. It was, I have come to understand, not entirely unlike what a chief of staff does every day: holding coherence across a room full of people, who each see part of the picture, without anyone being formally responsible for the whole. The thread, when it emerged, was not one anyone had anticipated.

The panel had been convened around a familiar question: how does Africa close the gap between capital and development outcomes that remain out of reach? It is a question the continent has been asking for decades. Development finance institutions have refined their answers, governments

have announced frameworks, and continental bodies have produced strategies. And yet the gap persists. Not, I have come to believe, because the answers are wrong, but because the question is incomplete.

About halfway through the discussion, a senior executive from the Development Finance Institution (DFI) said something that stopped the room. He had been speaking about the obstacles to financing cross-border industrial projects: the fragmented regulations; the misaligned fiscal regimes; and the endless certification requirements on either side of borders that should, by now, be more porous. And then he said, plainly, that removing these obstacles was not the work of banks. Banks could move money, but addressing the deeper problem required someone else. He looked, in that moment, toward the continental institutions and organisations like the one I represent, the United Nations.

The room was quiet for a few seconds. I looked across at the equity investor; the former emergency healthcare entrepreneur from Nigeria; and the young entrepreneur from Tanzania who had spent a decade building a cashew processing business. I saw the same thing in their eyes that I was feeling. Not surprise exactly, but the specific weight of a truth, that had been circling the conversation, finally landing. If the institutions designed to move capital were redirecting the problem back to coordination and the system, then what exactly were we waiting for? And who, in that room, was responsible for the system?

F had told his story earlier. Tanzania is the fourth largest producer of cashew nuts in the world. Only around ten per cent of that harvest is processed domestically. The rest travels abroad to be shelled, valued and sold back. When F decided to build a processing facility, he could not find local financing. After years of trying, he secured it from a European Bank. They listened and structured something that fitted his actual situation, rather than asking F to fit a template designed for a different kind of business in a different kind of economy.

It took F ten years to finally access local capital.

When I heard that, I did not think about financing instruments or blended capital structures, I thought about patience and the particular kind of resilience it takes to wait a decade for a system to catch up with your idea. Then I thought about all the young people across the continent whom we encourage into entrepreneurship, whom we tell to be bold, to build and to take risks. F had his opportunity with a European bank, but not all of them will. Not all of them have ten years. The patience that Africa's entrepreneurs needed, their own financial system could not provide. A Dutch bank had to step in.

This is not a financing gap, a relationship gap, a delivery gap, or a shortage of capital. It's a failure to build the models, the patience, and the relational trust that would put capital in service of African entrepreneurs on their own terms.

The African banks were not incapable of helping F, they were simply not designed for this.

OB identified a different face to the same problem. Almost all financing conversations in Africa are about debt, loans, bonds, guarantees or credit facilities. Debt says: prove yourself first, then I will support you. Equity says: I will grow with

**'Africa is not failing to produce.
It is failing to capture what it produces.
The extraction works perfectly but
integration does not exist.'**

you, take the risk alongside you, and stay through the difficult years. The equity layer—the capital that remains for three, four, five years, that sits on your board, that helps you navigate the decisions that determine whether a firm scales or stagnates—is almost entirely absent from Africa's financial architecture. Without it, a pattern holds: firms stay small, do not scale, and disappear with their founders. An *Economist* article once described African businesses as unemployment in disguise.¹ That is, ventures which sustain their owners rarely become the engines of employment and wealth creation that transform economies. This is not a story about insufficient financing. It's a story about the wrong kind of financing, arriving too late and structured for the wrong purpose.

And then there was the image from AA, which has not left me since, of women in Zambia working in gemstone mining, discarding rocks they did not know were valuable. A foreign buyer arrives each week to collect what they call rubbish, paying the equivalent of a dollar and a half per bucket for material worth thousands when processed.

And the cocoa that leaves Africa valued at around ten billion dollars returning as part of a global chocolate industry worth more than two hundred billion.² The shea butter, the leather, the cashews, all of them travelling out of the continent raw, and coming back as someone else's margin.³

This is delivery failure in its most visible form. Africa is not failing to produce. It is failing to capture what it produces. The extraction works perfectly but integration does not exist.

¹ 'Africa has too many businesses, too little business: being your own boss is not the best strategy', *The Economist* (The Economist Group, January 6, 2025).

² 'Global cocoa industry worth \$200b', *The Nation* (Vintage Press Limited, Nigeria, January 4, 2024).

³ Mang'ana, Kulwa and Ngaiza, Revelian and Paul, Michael. 'A Golden Opportunity Ripe for the Picking: Tanzania's Cashew Nut Industry', *SSRN* (Elsevier, June 29, 2024).

Three voices. Three angles. One diagnosis. The constraint is not capital but the system that should, and does not, connect capital to enterprise, enterprise to knowledge, knowledge to policy, and policy to results. As every speaker on that panel converged on coordination, collaboration, and information as their closing message, I noticed something which I have been turning over ever since: nobody claimed ownership. Everyone agreed on what was missing. Nobody said: that is my job.

I understand why. Because the harder truth, the one that sits beneath every conversation about external alignment, is this: fragmentation does not begin between institutions. It begins inside them.

‘A chief of staff who has not achieved coherence inside cannot credibly advocate for coherence outside. Integration must begin at home.’

I see it every day. Divisions that do not speak to departments. Departments that do not speak to sections. Units running parallel workstreams toward the same objective without knowing it, or worse, working against each other without knowing it. The silos are not only between the development finance institution and the ministry, between the continental body and the national government, or between the private sector and the regulator. They are within each of those institutions, running vertically and horizontally, quietly undermining every effort to present a coherent face to the outside world.

This matters enormously for what happened in Africa Hall. When F described ten years of waiting for a system to see him, he was not only describing a failure of external coordination between banks and

entrepreneurs. He was describing the cumulative effect of internal fragmentation across every institution that should have connected him to what he needed, and did not, because each piece of the system was optimising for its own mandate rather than for the outcome his business represented. When the DFI executive redirected the problem toward continental institutions, he was right. But the continental institutions he was gesturing towards are themselves collections of competing divisions, each with its own reporting lines, its own incentives, its own definition of success. You cannot align what you have not first integrated.

This is where I believe chiefs of staff have a role that has not yet been fully named, and a responsibility that extends beyond the boundaries of their own organisations.

We are, at our best, internal integrators. We sit close to leadership. We see across divisions. We hold the thread between strategy and execution, between what was decided and what is actually happening, between what an institution says it stands for and what it does on a Tuesday afternoon. That proximity—that line of sight across the whole—is the thing that makes the role valuable. It is also the thing that makes it demanding, because the forces of fragmentation are not passive, they are active. Divisions protect their mandates. Departments guard their processes. The invisible forces that integrators push against are not laziness or bad faith. They are the accumulated logic of institutions that were built to specialise not to synthesise.

But what that morning in the Africa Hall clarified for me is that the internal work is not only valuable in itself, it is the precondition for everything else. If our own institutions remain fragmented behind the face we present to partners, then we have nothing reliable to offer the external alignment conversation.

A chief of staff who has not achieved coherence inside cannot credibly advocate for coherence outside. Integration must begin at home.

And yet—and this is the thought I could not shake on my way home that evening—the chiefs of staff I know across multilateral institutions, development banks, government offices, and private sector organisations are each, in their own corners, pushing against this same invisible force. We are doing it separately. We are not, in any meaningful sense, doing it together.

The question I did not ask in that room—the one I held back because the moment was not right, because the relationship mattered more than the point, because sometimes the chief of staff’s most important judgement is knowing what not to say and when—is this: what are you willing to sacrifice, as an institution, to address the fragmentation we all just described?

I still do not have the answer, and I think this points toward a conversation that the profession has not yet seriously had: what would it look like if the integrators collaborated? Not the institutions. The integrators. The people whose job it is to hold coherence inside their respective organisations, connecting with each other across organisational lines to build the alignment that no single institution can manufacture alone. Not a new body, not a new framework, not another high-level panel. A network of people who understand, from the inside, what fragmentation actually costs and who have both the proximity to leadership and the cross-institutional relationships to begin dismantling it.

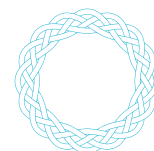
‘The system is not only broken. It is unowned. Everyone is doing their part, but no one feels responsible for the connection between them.’

A speaker on an earlier panel that morning had said, simply: the system is broken. He was not wrong. But sitting in that room watching a development banker, cashew farmer, equity investor, and trade economist, all converge on the same diagnosis without anyone claiming ownership of the solution, I found myself thinking something slightly different.

The system is not only broken. It is unowned. Everyone is doing their part, but no one feels responsible for the connection between them.

That gap between the diagnosis everyone shares and the ownership nobody takes is precisely where chiefs of staff sit. It is uncomfortable territory. It comes without a formal mandate, without the authority to compel, and without the guarantee that the effort will be recognised. But it is also, I would argue, the most important territory in the system right now. Not because chiefs of staff have all the answers. But because the work of holding coherence—inside first, and then across—is work that will not happen unless someone decides it is their responsibility.

Let us fix it. But let us begin where we have authority, inside our own houses, before we reach beyond them.



Aboubakri DIAW has over twenty years of experience in programme management, development planning and leadership. Before joining the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), he served in several senior roles across the UN system, including Head of the Development Pillar at UNAMA in Afghanistan; Head of the Resident Coordinator’s Office in the Democratic Republic of Congo; Chief of Staff at the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS); and Chief of Operations and Planning for UNAIDS in West and Central Africa. Prior to his UN career, Mr Diaw spent five years as a Project Manager with the international NGO Caritas Internationalis and holds a PhD in ‘Integrating Frontier Technologies: Enhancing Efficiency and Impact in the UN’s Response to Global Challenges.’



From federal service to chief of staff:

the overlooked talent pipeline

Christopher O'Connell

From federal service to chief of staff

Christopher O'Connell

Federal employees have the skills to make excellent chiefs of staff but the corporate sector needs to meet them half way.

Since January 2025, over 400,000 employees have left US federal civil service through retirements, reductions in force and voluntary departures.¹ Among them are an estimated twelve thousand senior leaders, individuals who have spent decades operating at the highest levels of government; in fed-speak GS-14, GS-15 and Senior Executive Service (SES).² I was one of them.

In April 2025, after twenty years in service, including time in SES, I found myself navigating the private sector job market for the first time. I was nervous, worried that my experiences would not translate beyond Washington, D.C.

Although I stepped into a chief of staff role relatively quickly, I still doubted if my skillset was directly transferrable in the private sector. Though this doubt was natural, it proved unfounded. Within days it was apparent that federal service had been the ideal training ground for the role. Now I've grown into the position, joined the Chief of Staff Association, and met other chiefs of staff, I am convinced my colleagues in government would make great chiefs of staff in just about any industry. The skillset I, and many feds, developed over the years in government is not just subject matter expertise, but the ability to operate across

complex systems and organisations, translate between stakeholders, anticipate leadership needs, and drive alignment in high-stakes environments.

In this article, alongside my own experience, I draw on conversations with public service leaders and private sector executives, to argue that federal talent may be one of the most overlooked pipelines into the chief of staff profession.

Civil servants as servant leaders

Civil servants can make ideal servant leaders.

In my interview with Jenny Mattingley, VP for Public Policy and Stakeholder Management at the Partnership for Public Service, she outlined exactly the overlap between fed roles and the chief of staff position:

'There are a set of skills that feds use all the time that perfectly align with the chief of staff role. Senior civil servants are constantly navigating between political appointees, Congress, the White House—very different principals often with different priorities.'

What this often comes down to is translating between highly technical front-line staff and

¹ Total separations and accessions since January 20, 2025, as published by OPM Federal Workforce Data. This data is updated monthly on data.opm.gov. Figures are based on April 2026 results.

² This figure is generated by the author based on consultations with Partnership for Public Service and estimates of staff in GS-14 and 15 positions, with additional data from Chris Piper's 'The Politicization of Federal Leadership: Record Non-Senate Confirmed Presidential Appointments and the Hollowing out of Career Leadership', *Partnership for Public Service* (24 March 2026), accessed 20 April 2026.

high-level leadership who need information and data summarised for executive action. It also means that we feed information and resources up the chain of command and are always in a role of advising the principals, prepping them for meetings or briefings on Capitol Hill.

Brian Levine, Executive Director of Former Gov, builds on Mattingley's observation, pivoting to the servant-leader capability of the former fed and new chief of staff. In our interview, he suggested that former federal leaders make ideal chiefs of staff because, 'as a fed, it is never about you. Senior level civil servants are always acting in support of a principal or a mission. They are comfortable outside of the spotlight, quietly driving things forward on behalf of leadership.'

As the above testimonies indicate, federal civil servants are well-suited to chief of staff roles because they combine stakeholder navigation, strategic translation, and a deeply ingrained commitment to servant leadership.

Core skills federal leaders bring to the role

In conversations with current and former feds, as well as private sector leaders who have worked with both feds and non-feds, I have identified several skills that former feds have in abundance which companies often seek when searching for a chief of staff.

1. Anticipation: Senior feds know that, regardless of their official title or duties, they ultimately support the principal—generally a political appointee—who leads their agency or department. Feds are taught to anticipate their needs, set up routines for briefing, and funnel relevant information. A principal can be called before Congress at any moment on just about any topic: from budget to programme performance to whatever topic is in the news that day. Feds learn to keep their principals

prepared and to be ready to pull together deeper-dive resources at a moment's notice. If you need your principal to be better prepared to respond to the board, shareholders or the press, a seasoned fed knows how to make this happen.

2. Translation: At the highest levels of government, senior feds are navigating between different agencies and offices. When I spent a year at the Office of Management and Budget, I saw this firsthand. Each agency had its own vocabulary, culture and processes. But savvy feds can bring very different groups together, translating between them and focusing them on a common objective. They do this between federal agencies, external stakeholders, Congress, political appointees and the press. This makes them an ideal candidate to translate the principal's vision across different departments (e.g. sales, IT and operations), as well as to shareholders, business partners and the public.

3. Crisis management: In government roles a crisis is very often real: real fires, emergencies, wars, famines, disease outbreaks and more. Feds who make it to senior ranks have seen it all. They know how to stay calm, focus on priorities and translate information clearly and quickly. Former feds can help keep things calm when crises come to the corporate doorstep. They can help ensure that there is both a rapid response and that day-to-day operations continue uninterrupted.

4. Discretion: Government work demands a significant degree of confidentiality and trust, and understanding discretion is second nature to a fed. Nearly every senior level fed has a high-level clearance and there are severe consequences for breaking these rules. You can trust a former fed to keep confidence with the principal and the C-suite.

5. Broad Awareness: There is one other trait that Robert Tagalicod, a former Chief of Staff at the US Department of Health and Human Services summarised as 'look at things with

a broad aperture.’ He told me:

‘At the beginning, most managers have a narrow, downward focus when they manage their teams. But as feds progress, they learn to see the horizontal implications of different actions.’

When senior-level leaders are advising their principals, they need to anticipate the wider range of impacts that different decisions might have, not just on the specific program or function they may be responsible for, but the broader impact on an industry, or region or the public.

Federal talent and the broken private sector pipeline

As the demand for chief of staff positions continues to grow, companies will be wise to consider how former feds might bring a unique set of skills and perspectives to day one in the office. For firms, this means thinking outside the box and taking action to understand civil service roles and terminology and revising company job descriptions accordingly. For former feds, it means meeting the employer half-way: deciphering job descriptions and tailoring your resume accordingly. Let’s look at these in more detail.

Many job postings unintentionally screen out former feds. Criteria requiring experience in start-ups, or in a specific industry, or in a certain role, prevent organisations from attracting former feds and they lose out on the skill sets and knowledge the fed can bring. For example, I have seen jobs where I knew former colleagues would be strong fits, but the requirements stipulated having a background in management consulting. My advice to these organisations is: if you widen your scope and consider the federal equivalent of some of these requirements

you will open your applicant pool to include eager and experienced former feds. Three actions organisations can take include:

1. Translate federal titles into private-sector equivalents
2. Remove narrow industry requirements
3. Prioritise cross-functional experience over sector experience

On the applicant’s side, the challenge many former feds face is translating their experience into language that corporations understand. From job titles and duties to resume formats, federal HR vocabulary sounds foreign to private sector hirers. Luckily, there are numerous resources that have popped up, such as fedsforward.org, which can help former feds translate their skills and experiences into something more understandable to private sector employers.

Brian Levine established Former Gov to help overcome another problem that feds face:

‘The challenge a lot of feds face trying to find jobs outside of the federal government is they’ve spent their entire careers in leadership roles that have low visibility when compared to their private sector counterparts.’

Without the robust LinkedIn profiles that corporate staff usually have, a fed needs to work extra hard to stand out. To help both feds and hirers, Former Gov allows employers to search a database of former federal staff, searchable by areas of expertise.

Reframing the private sector transition

The elephant in the room is the persistent misperception that federal employees are lazy. Jenny Mattingley notes that she’s seen the opposite qualities. ‘People think

that feds are not entrepreneurial. But in the past year, I've seen such incredible activity from the people who have left federal service.' My observations support Mattingley's point. I've seen many former colleagues start their own businesses or establish non-profits. Though we often think of entrepreneurs as private-sector actors, some of the most successful people inside of government use the same skills as entrepreneurs.

For instance, Robert Tagalicod told me about his experiences moving up in federal government. Early in his career he saw opportunities for other programs to leverage the insights from his portfolio. He developed a strategic vision and pitched it to a higher-level administrator. This led to more opportunities for his program and had amplifying effects on related programs—all with no additional resources or budget. To me, this is textbook entrepreneurship.

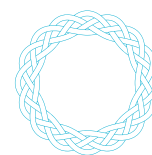
A winning advantage

In the past year, I've come to respect the chief of staff role as a critical partner to senior corporate leadership: someone responsible for translating the principal's vision into execution and coordinating and convening multiple stakeholders to row in

the same direction. These are not new skills for former federal leaders. They were honed over years of working in complex environments where alignment, discretion and adaptability are essential.

The transition into the private sector is not without its challenges. But these are not insurmountable and I would argue the greatest challenge is encouraging organisations to look beyond traditional hiring criteria. Given the numbers outlined at the start of this article, there is a deep and large untapped pool of talent ready to step into the chief of staff role with immediate effect and impact.

For curious feds this transition may feel like a leap. But it is not a standing start. A career in public service is a running track, not a starting line, and when framed properly, that experience can be the advantage that wins the race.



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Solving the wrong problem:

the coherence gap and the
chief of staff

Mark Chamberlain

Solving the wrong problem

Mark Chamberlain

The chief of staff is the structural response to your organisation's failure to translate meaning across your enterprise.

There is a pattern visible to anyone who has worked at the intersection of strategy and execution in a large, complex enterprise. An organisation faces mounting evidence that its strategic intent is not translating into operational reality. Decisions made at the top arrive at the bottom distorted, delayed or unrecognisable. Priorities announced in one forum are quietly contradicted by resource allocation decisions made in another. And the response, almost invariably, is to add more: more governance forums, more reporting cadences, more programme management resources, more process layered over process. Each layer a response to earlier coordination failures.

This instinct is understandable, but also wrong, and expensively so. What these organisations are experiencing is not a capacity problem, but a coherence problem: the systematic failure of meaning, intent and strategic direction to hold together as they move through the complexity of a large, matrixed, often globally distributed enterprise. Capacity interventions, such as those listed above, do not solve coherence problems. They can, and frequently do, make them worse, adding coordination burdens to systems already struggling under the weight of insufficient integration.

I want to argue that the chief of staff role is the structural response to the coherence problem.

It is not a mechanism for managing the principal's diary, or a talent place holder executing special projects, or a senior resource for an overloaded executive team. It is a role whose explicit function is to maintain the integrity of strategic intent across the full distance between where decisions are made and where they are executed, and it carries the reality of that execution back up without the distortion that organisational hierarchy systematically introduces.

The reason this role remains poorly understood, chronically underutilised and frequently absent from organisations that need it most, is not that it is difficult to implement well, though it is. It is that the organisations in question have not correctly identified the problem the role exists to solve. They are looking for a Project Management Office (PMO) answer to a human question, and the chief of staff does not look like a PMO answer. It looks, to the indiscriminating eye, like additional headcount, additional governance or additional overhead. Here, a category error precedes an implementation failure, and until it is corrected the conversation about the role's value cannot properly begin.

More broadly, this article examines the nature of the coherence gap, the category error that prevents most organisations from closing it, and the commercial consequences of leaving it unaddressed. Two examples from BT Group plc are employed to help make this case. It concludes by examining why the coherence gap is more entrenched in the United Kingdom (UK) market than in the United States (US), and what that differential reveals about the category error itself.

The nature of the coherence gap

Strategy, in Roger Martin and A.G. Lafley's formulation, is an integrated set of choices that must hold together from the boardroom to the point of customer contact.¹ Their concept of the strategy cascade describes not just a model of strategy development but a model of where strategy fails. It is like a child's game of whispers. The cascade breaks when a choice made at one level is reinterpreted, diluted or contradicted at the next. By the time strategic intent has passed through four or five organisational layers, it may bear only a passing resemblance to what was decided at the top, and the people executing it will have no way of knowing this because the distortion has been gradual, locally rational and invisible to anyone not positioned to see the whole system simultaneously.

This is the coherence gap. It is not a communication failure in the ordinary sense. Organisations experiencing it typically have abundant communication, for example town halls, cascade briefings, strategy documents and leadership roadshows. What they lack is the active construction of meaning at each level, that Karl Weick identifies as the precondition for organisational sensemaking.² Information transmitted is not the same as meaning made. A strategic priority announced by a Group Chief Human Resources Officer

(CHRO) to five thousand people across four business units is not automatically understood, interpreted or acted upon in the way the announcement intended. It is filtered through local priorities, partial information, existing mental models and the assumptions of whoever is explaining it at each successive level.

The gap operates in both directions. Strategic intent degrades as it travels downward. As it travels upward, the operational reality is smoothed and softened through several rounds of managerial editing, each of which makes the picture slightly more manageable, slightly less urgent and slightly less representative of what is actually happening. Edgar Schein's research on the psychodynamics of organisational hierarchy demonstrated that this upward distortion is not the product of deliberate concealment but of individually rational behaviour by people who have learned, through experience, that delivering unwelcome information carries personal risk.³ The cumulative effect is a principal operating on a picture of the organisation that is structurally, systematically optimistic.

The scale of this problem increases non-linearly with organisational complexity. Jay Galbraith's foundational work on organisational design showed that coordination costs in complex enterprises increase faster than the structures most organisations build to manage them.⁴ The matrix organisation, the global operating model, or the cross-functional imperative do not reduce the coherence challenge. They compound it by multiplying the number of boundaries across which meaning must be actively constructed and maintained.

Galbraith's research was conducted in the 1990s, when functional leadership was still the dominant organisational model. The coordination costs he identified were real

¹ A.G. Lafley and Roger L. Martin. *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013), pp. 15–43.

² Karl E. Weick. *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995), pp. 17–62.

³ Edgar H. Schein. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th edn (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), pp. 219–241

⁴ Jay R. Galbraith. *Designing Organizations: An Executive Guide to Strategy, Structure, and Process* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), pp. 11–34.

then: the management time consumed by senior leaders in meetings that existed to share information rather than make decisions only they can make, the duplicated effort of resolving cross-functional conflicts that a better-integrated structure would never have created. They are considerably higher now, and for a reason that compounds the structural problem he described. That is, the functional model of senior leadership is dissolving. The CHRO who owns people, the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) who owns capital, the Chief Technical Officer (CTO) who owns technology: these boundaries are eroding not because organisations have chosen to erode them but because the problems the executives are being asked to solve often start, are linked to, or cross other domains. The complexity of the problems organisations now face have outpaced the functional structures built to solve them. The CTO, the COO and the CHRO must work together to solve a problem that belongs to none of them individually. Without someone whose explicit job is to own that whitespace—to draw together the separate strands and construct a single coherent narrative across all three domains—the organisation does not speak with one voice. It speaks with three versions of the same message, received differently by every function that hears them.

The category error

The organisations most acutely affected by the coherence gap are typically aware that something is wrong. The evidence is flagrant: strategic initiatives that launch with momentum and stall without explanation, resource allocation decisions that contradict stated priorities, and cultural assessments that bear no relationship to the culture the leadership believes it has built. The diagnosis these

organisations reach, almost universally, is that they need more: more programme management, more governance, more reporting. This diagnosis is wrong because it treats a coherence crisis as a resource shortage. This is a category error. Organisations reflexively reach for more doers when what they actually need to fix is the connective tissue that allows existing resources to function. The interventions do not address, and in some cases actively obscure, the underlying condition.

Chris Argyris's distinction between espoused theory and theory-in-use is instructive here.⁵ Organisations espouse a clear strategic direction. But their theory-in-use—the actual pattern of decisions, behaviours and resource allocations—frequently tells a different story. The governance forum designed to align priorities can become a mechanism for surfacing conflicts without resolving them. The programme management office built to track execution can become a mechanism for producing status reports that everyone reads and nobody acts on. Each intervention is coherent in isolation, but none addresses the systemic condition generating the symptoms it was deployed to treat.

The reason for this persists partly because capacity interventions are legible in ways that coherence interventions are not. Adding a governance forum, expanding a PMO, or hiring a transformation director are visible, bounded and auditable decisions. Their cost is known. Their output, however questionable, can be reported.

The coherence gap, by contrast, is difficult to put on a dashboard. Its cost is distributed across hundreds of decisions that drift, dozens of initiatives that stall, and an unknowable volume of strategic intent that never survives its first contact with the organisation it was meant to direct.

There is also a cognitive dimension. The people diagnosing the problem are, by

⁵ Chris Argyris. *Overcoming Organizational Defenses* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1990), pp. 13–292.

definition, operating inside the vacuum rather than outside it. The principal who commissions another governance review is working with the same distorted picture of the organisation that the governance review is intended to correct. The diagnosis is made from inside the condition being diagnosed, which is precisely why it tends to misidentify what the condition is.

The role as structural response

The chief of staff role is the structural response to the coherence gap because it is the only role in a complex enterprise whose explicit function is to sit at the intersection of strategic intent and operational reality simultaneously, and to maintain the integrity of the connection between them.

It is designed to sit outside of the line, to see across the boundaries and to draw together observations from across the organisation and relay these to the principal.

Every other senior role in a complex organisation carries a functional allegiance or a domain constraint that shapes what it sees and what it is authorised to act on. The chief of staff carries neither, which is precisely what makes the position valuable and why it is so frequently mischaracterised as a form of senior administrative support.

The role closes the coherence gap by actively constructing the meaning that does not travel automatically, carrying the signal that the hierarchy filters out and holding the connection between what the organisation intends and what it actually does. It does this with enough consistency that the gap between these does not become a chasm. In the language of Martin and Lafley's cascade, the chief of staff is the mechanism through which strategic choices at each level are kept coherent with the choices above and below them, not by making those choices, but by ensuring the people making them

have access to the information, context and challenge they need to make them well. In practice, this means operating deliberately outside the formal reporting structure: seeking out the people closest to delivery, asking directly what is working and what is not, and bringing that intelligence back to the principal in a form that has not been filtered by the layers in between.

At BT Group plc (BT), this function was foundational to two major concurrent programmes.

‘The role closes the coherence gap by actively constructing the meaning that does not travel automatically, carrying the signal that the hierarchy filters out...’

Workforce reduction

The workforce reduction programme presented a coherence problem that standard reporting was structurally unable to surface. Reducing headcount from 125,000 to 91,000 people, investing in digital skills, and standing up a new agile operating model required three strands to stay sequenced and coherent with each other, simultaneously. The risk was not that either programme would fail on its own terms, but that reductions made in the wrong places, at the wrong pace, would quietly undermine the others, stripping out capability that the digital and agile programmes depended on, or missing the cost-banking milestones that gave the overall programme its financial logic. The chief of staff function addressed this by operating between channels. Regular time away from the desk—in contact centres, field engineering, technical disciplines and cross-functional teams—gave direct evidence on what was happening, where the pressure was sitting, and what was not working as intended. That intelligence,

unmediated by the managerial editing that shapes every formal report, was carried back to the principal in a form that allowed decisions to be made with facts rather than hierarchy-filtered optimism. The headcount programme delivered £300 million favourable to budget and tracked more than twelve months ahead of plan. The figures reflect not better tracking but the elimination of the smoothing-over that usually hides where a programme is quietly drifting off course.

Agile delivery

The deployment of an agile operating model across eighteen tribes covering five thousand staff presented a different coherence problem. The design was clear. The question was whether it was being implemented. Tribes were being stood up, new routines established, and accountability structures put in place. But the gap between what is designed on paper and what happens in practice is precisely where coherence fails, and where normal reporting is least reliable, because the people closest to the implementation have the strongest incentive to report progress rather than difficulty. The mechanism was the same: turning up to stand-ups revealed what was working, what was not, and where the frustration was sitting. The dependencies that were not being managed, surfaced in these conversations before they appeared in any report. Where practice was diverging from design, the question was not to enforce compliance but to understand why, and to bring that understanding back to the principal so that a decision could be made about whether to correct the design, adapt the implementation, or accept the variation. The operating model was built and deployed while the organisation was simultaneously restructuring around it. That required someone whose job was to hold the connection between intent and execution with enough consistency that the gap between them did not become irreversible.

The commercial consequences of the gap

The coherence gap has commercial consequences that organisations fail to connect to their source. This is because the source is invisible and the consequences manifest at a distance from it, in forms that invite other explanations.

Strategic initiatives fail at higher rates than their design warrants. McKinsey research based on a global survey of over one thousand participants found that less than one third of organisations report transformations as successful at both improving performance and sustaining those improvements over time, with execution failure rather than strategic error identified as the primary cause.⁶ The coherence gap is not the only contributor to this, but, in my view, it is among the most significant and the least addressed. When strategic intent never coherently reaches the people responsible for executing it, the result is a diffuse pattern of under-performance that is much harder to attribute. What the McKinsey data identifies as execution failure is, in many cases, a coherence gap that was never correctly named.

Decision quality degrades in ways that compound over time. Daniel Kahneman's research on cognitive load and decision-making demonstrated that the quality of judgement deteriorates as the volume and complexity of decisions increases.⁷ A principal operating without the coherence function that a chief of staff provides is making decisions under systematically higher cognitive load, with systematically less accurate information.

The chief of staff addresses this directly. Where a principal operating alone sees a decision in isolation, the chief of staff can contextualise it: connecting it to what else is live across the organisation, drawing on direct intelligence from the delivery layer

⁶ Michael Bucy, Bill Schaninger, Kate VanAkin and Brooke Weddle. 'Losing from Day One: Why Even Successful Transformations Fall Short', *McKinsey and Company*, 7 December 2021.

⁷ Daniel Kahneman. *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), pp. 35–49.

to illustrate the real rather than reported position, and mapping the downstream impacts on specific programmes and teams. The decision does not change. The quality of the judgement brought to it does.

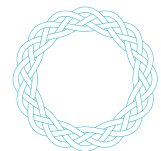
The category error as market condition

The argument of this article is not simply that organisations reach for the wrong solution when execution fails. It is that they fail to identify the nature of the failure itself. A coherence problem, systematically misread as a capacity problem, generates a category error that precedes and shapes every subsequent decision, including what kind of help is required. If this error (mistaking a coherence problem for a capacity problem) is persistent and self-reinforcing at the organisational level, it is reasonable to ask whether the same error manifests at the level of the market. In my experience, it does.

The chief of staff role is considerably more established in the US than in the UK. This reflects my direct experience working across both markets and through the Chief of Staff Association. Across US enterprises, the role is understood as a structural necessity in organisations of meaningful complexity. The conversation in US boardrooms is not whether to have a chief of staff but what kind, at what level, and reporting to whom. In the UK market, the conversation is still, in most organisations, whether the role is necessary at all. The default assumption remains that the combination of governance, programme management and functional leadership is sufficient, and that a chief of staff represents additional overhead rather than a structural correction.

A market in which the dominant framework for thinking about execution problems is a capacity framework will systematically fail to recognise coherence solutions, and the chief of staff as the architect of this. This is because coherence solutions do not look like answers to the questions being asked. In the UK, this is still largely where the market sits. The consequence shows up in the execution rates of transformation programmes, in the stability of strategic direction across leadership transitions, and in the pace at which organisations can adapt to the kind of permanent, multi-dimensional complexity that characterises current technological and geopolitical shifts.

For the profession, the implication is this: the most important contribution chiefs of staff can make is not to advocate for the role, but to demonstrate what the role makes possible. Every time a chief of staff reframes a capacity question as a coherence question or carries unfiltered reality to a principal who would otherwise have received an edited version, they are acting as the coherence architect, building the institutional vocabulary through which coherence solutions become legible. This vocabulary, communicated across enough organisations and enough leadership transitions, is what shifts a market's diagnostic framework. It is, in my opinion, a harder and more ambitious undertaking than making the case for the role in any individual organisation and, given the scale of the gap, possibly the most consequential shift the profession can take.



Mark Chamberlain is a Chief of Staff and Transformation Director with fifteen years across management consulting and FTSE 100 corporate environments. He works with CEOs, CHROs and Executive Committees to close the gap between leadership intent and what the organisation delivers, building the governance, relationships and execution discipline that make complex priorities land. He is a Certified Chief of Staff® (Level 2).



Your organisation's antagonist: a force worth fighting

Brad Abare

Your organisation's antagonist

Brad Abare

When you name what has taken the place of the people at the centre of your mission, you give the organisation a chance to find its way forward.

John and Frances Hesselbein and their eight-year-old son lived in the thriving steel-producing hub of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, about sixty-five miles east of Pittsburgh. It was the post-war 1950s. A former combat photographer, John ran a commercial documentary film and photography studio in the bustling town of 67,000, while Frances helped husband and home.

Girl Scout Troop 17 had just lost their leader who resigned to be a missionary in India. A neighbour asked Frances to lead the troop of thirty ten-year-old girls in the basement of the Second Presbyterian Church.

'I'm sorry, I don't know anything about little girls,' Frances replied, 'I'm a mother of a little boy.'

The neighbour wouldn't relent, and without a replacement leader, the troop would disband.

Frances reconsidered, 'Okay, I'll take them for six weeks, and then we'll find a real leader.'¹

Frances led Troop 17 until all the girls graduated from high school. Doors continued to open to her and Frances kept saying yes to the Girl Scouts over the next twenty years. In 1976, she was named National Executive Director, later re-titled to CEO.

But the Girl Scouts had a problem. They were still operating from yesterday's

model of girlhood. Like other postwar brands and businesses that revolved around stable families, predictable roles and familiar patterns, the Girl Scouts was not prepared for urbanisation, gender shifts and a rapidly changing youth culture.

The 1970s were not the 1950s: cities were growing more complex; families were becoming more diverse; expectations for girls were expanding beyond what contemporaneous programs imagined. In many communities, especially urban ones, the Girl Scouts felt distant, even irrelevant, as if designed for a version of girlhood that no longer existed.

The next fight

I once spent the better part of a year working with my principal and their executive leadership team, scenario planning to break a pattern that kept repeating itself. The organisation was well established and well resourced, having been in slow decline for decades. Although the balance sheet was strong, recent year-over-year deficit spending was unsustainable, and the board wanted a real plan. Again.

The decades-long pattern at this NGO was to double down on costs, reorganise a few verticals on the organisational chart, eliminate positions, and balance the budget

¹ Quotes and anecdotes taken from Frances Hesselbein, *My Life in Leadership* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2013).

for the next few years, only to fall back into the same problem.

They didn't lack ideas or plans. They lacked an understanding of what they were up against.

Growth was possible. Courage was required. But when it mattered most, it was easier to kick the can down the road because survival could be sustained even in the face of stagnation.

And yet something bigger was looming. Beyond the need for great expectations and leadership, this organisation faced a force it needed to confront. It needed to be mobilised around more than reorganising, cost cutting, mission statements or operating plans.

It needed to see the enemy. Not a specific competitor or person, but a clearly articulated force that must be overcome.

I call this force the antagonist, and every organisation has one that it is fighting or being fought by. And often it's more than one.

For Frances and the Girl Scouts, and for my NGO principal, could they mobilise their teams to face what they were up against? Could Frances summon the courage to disrupt familiar ways of doing business which worked in the past, and re-focus her teams to pursue what mattered most? Likewise, could the NGO principal see beyond the temporary fixes of cutting costs and tweaking the organisational chart to mount an attack on what they were really fighting: their fade to irrelevance that could leave them holding safe assets with nothing left to invest in because the mission no longer mattered to anyone?

What you resist can be your antagonist

Principals and the chiefs of staff who serve them are being asked to drive change through constant volatility, tighter resources and faster decision cycles. While the desire to grow, expand, and conquer the next mountain is always present, established organisations continue to be pulled toward

'Principals and the chiefs of staff who serve them are being asked to drive change through constant volatility, tighter resources and faster decision cycles.'

defaults, security, legacy habits and 'the way we've always done it.'

But what happens when a principal and their chief of staff identify the antagonist and mobilise their teams to overcome it? Naming and facing the antagonist is a healthy habit because it gives one's organisation a common enemy that turns frustration into focus without defaulting to blame, burnout or another round of planning theatre.

Naming forces, not faces

For Frances Hesselbein and the Girl Scouts of the 1970s, it didn't take long to identify the mobilising force to rally against: operating from yesterday's model of girlhood was unacceptable and worth overcoming. The organisation was holding together on the strength of what it had been, while slowly losing connection to who it was meant to serve. The mission was still noble, but an increasing chasm separated the organisation's life from the girls outside its reach. According to Frances, the Girl Scouts had organised around itself, not the girls.

The same was true for the NGO principal I was working with. We were optimising budgets and growing assets while avoiding the real issue: allowing the mission to take a back seat.

Rather than confront the underlying antagonists that stalled execution—such as misaligned incentives, cultural habits, risk-minimisation, legacy protection or outdated programs—it was easier to balance the budget than rally the troops. To keep the antagonist useful without letting it spiral into blame, leaders must exercise the discipline of naming forces, not faces. Scapegoating only externalises what should be examined systemically.

Instead, define the antagonist in terms of patterns: habits that persist, incentives that distort, assumptions that harden or dynamics that subtly shape behaviour. This keeps the solution actionable. It gives teams something to confront rather than be confounded by. It also keeps the mirror close, reminding the team that the very forces they're resisting are often ones they help reinforce. When named and resisted well, the antagonist becomes a shared burden rather than a shared accusation, focusing energy on what must be overcome.

The chief of staff advantage

A chief of staff sharpens their influence not by adding more information to the room, but by elevating the conversation to the level of resistance. Instead of allowing executive dialogue to orbit around activities, updates, and what the organisation is doing, they can interrupt the agenda and reframe the discussion around what must be overcome: the forces shaping decisions, slowing momentum or distorting priorities. They can stop the room when it defaults to familiar patterns. They can act as the protagonist, bringing the organisation's greatest strengths to the surface.

This shift changes everything. It exposes trade-offs that habits can hide, clarifies what matters most by contrast, and forces leaders to confront whether their current strategy is overcoming the real constraint. In doing so, the chief of staff becomes a translator between motion and meaning, helping their principal and team move from busy alignment to decisive action. By consistently naming the underlying antagonist, they create sharper focus, more honest conversations, and a

shared understanding of what change will require.

With disarming clarity, Frances Hesselbein always brought it back to the basics: 'It's not about me, it's about [the girls].' She made this real by changing entrenched patterns. She redirected focus to girl-first outcomes rather than program-first thinking. She pushed into urban and underserved communities that the model had neglected, elevating representative leadership and simplifying a structure that had grown inward. In doing so she named the resistance without accusation, that is, the drift toward internal focus and self-serving structures and habits. Once this was recognised, it became difficult to justify decisions that didn't serve the girl at the centre. Hesselbein carried this same discipline far beyond the Girl Scouts, into her leadership at the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management (later the Leader to Leader Institute), her writing, and her counsel to leaders across sectors, consistently returning to the conviction that when you name what has taken the place of the people at the centre of the mission, you give the organisation a chance to find its way forward.

My NGO principal has also started confronting the antagonist that has allowed our mission to take a back seat for too long. As a result, the conversations are changing and the board is increasing its enthusiasm and resolve for what is next. The work is not getting easier, but it is getting clearer. Trade-offs are making their way into more decisions, a sign that success will not be measured by stability but by renewed relevance to our mission, which matters more.

Before solving the next problem, my counsel for fellow chiefs of staff is this: pause

long enough to ask the harder question.

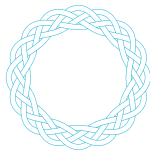
Is this the real problem, or just where the problem is showing up?

Surface problems—missed targets, slow decisions, lack of alignment, financial reports—are visible. They invite quick fixes which create the illusion of progress.

But the antagonist operates one level deeper. To identify it, look for patterns instead of incidents and ask yourself:

- What keeps repeating despite different solutions?
- Where does momentum consistently stall?
- What tension gets managed but never resolved?
- What behaviour is regularly rewarded even when a different behaviour is officially expected?

The goal here is not to diagnose faster, but to see more clearly. Because if you're not naming the antagonist, it's already claiming your future.



Brad Abare is the Chief of Staff to the President of an international NGO, co-founder of the Personality Profile™ framework for organisations and a Certified Chief of Staff® (Level 1). He has previously held a principal position and serves on company boards. Mr Abare has an Executive Master's in Change from INSEAD Singapore and is a graduate of the CSA Executive Education Programme at Oxford University.

Why a non-technical chief of staff thrives in heavy industry

Érika Dion



Why a non-technical chief of staff thrives in heavy industry

Érika Dion

Considering a move into heavy industry? This article explains to principals and chiefs of staff why a generalist brings value to the sector.

Heavy industry runs on safety management, environmental compliance, production targets, technological change, cost management and capital intensity. The sector has historically operated on long planning horizons, linear governance models and cautious change timelines.

That approach is under pressure. A 2025 McKinsey study found that mining productivity fell by half between 1997 and 2023, while other industries made significant gains.¹ The pace of modernisation, now required, demands something the sector has not always prioritised: leadership alignment and organisational agility.

The most pressing challenges are human. Aligning cross-functional priorities, accelerating decisions and translating strategy into execution across silos are not problems that technology alone can solve.

With over thirteen years in this sector, I want to make the case that a chief of staff from a non-technical background can be a force multiplier in this industry.

This article speaks to two readers: a chief of staff considering a move into heavy industry, and a principal weighing whether that candidate belongs at the table.

A typical chief of staff brings breadth of

skills, curiosity and the ability to lead by influence. In complex, safety-critical environments, those generalist strengths are not a consolation prize. They are a strategic edge. This article applies well-established chief of staff leadership models to heavy industry and closes with a practical playbook for those ready to make the move.

Air-traffic controller, integrator, and truth-teller

Dan Ciampa's 'The Case for a Chief of Staff' published by *Harvard Business Review*, identifies five archetypal responsibilities for someone in the role: air-traffic controller, integrator, communicator, honest broker and confidant. Each takes on distinctive weight in heavy industry.²

In large industrial organisations, the chief of staff coordinates multiple priorities largely out of view, sequencing turnarounds, capital projects and regulatory milestones so that senior leaders can focus on decisions that cannot be delegated.

As an integrator, the chief of staff links engineering, environment, health and safety, labour relations and commercial teams, consolidating competing plans into a single course of action.

¹ 'Unearthing efficiency: McKinsey charts mining's tech-driven turnaround', *Canadian Mining Journal* (10 December 2025).

² Ciampa, Dan. 'The Case for a Chief of Staff', *Harvard Business Review* (1 May 2020).

As communicator, the chief of staff aligns what is said in boardrooms, union halls and plant-wide safety stand-downs.

At critical moments the chief of staff is also the honest broker, surfacing trade-offs without departmental bias. A safety upgrade that slows production in the short term may prevent a far more disruptive outage later. Someone needs to say that clearly.

And as confidant, the chief of staff can flag when timing or political costs may outweigh operational gains before those costs become visible to everyone else.

Ciampa's article was written to persuade CEOs of the value of hiring a chief of staff. McKinsey's 2024 *Chief of Staff: Anatomy of the Role in Eight Charts* echoes his model but focuses on the career accelerator effect for high-potential chiefs of staff who learn to manage information flows, decision rhythms and executive cross-functions at the enterprise level.³

For a generalist moving into heavy industry, that development opportunity is real. The role offers deep exposure to operations, project delivery and organisational governance, alongside a clear view of strategic priorities. The breadth of growth it creates can open career paths that may not have seemed accessible before.

Leadership without the title: influence as a core competency

Unlike line roles, a chief of staff typically has high accountability and low formal authority. That sounds like a paradox until you recognise it as a design feature. Lauren Keller Johnson's guidance on influencing without authority sets out the approach: build reciprocal alliances, find overlapping interests and mobilise informal networks to move initiatives through a matrixed organisation.⁴

For chiefs of staff in heavy industry, I recommend Melody Wilding's Influence-Interest Power Map as a starting point. Mapping stakeholders before mapping timelines helps tailor the right kind of engagement with the right person.⁵

- **Manage closely** the high influence/high interest stakeholders, such as corporate functions and internal governance bodies responsible for capital expenditure approvals. Get them involved early in shaping and approving strategic initiatives.
- **Monitor** the low influence/low interest quadrant so they do not become blockers. Media and industry associations fall here, where targeted collaboration on specific topics may be worth pursuing.
- **Inform** high interest/low influence allies who can surface risks early, such as local community representatives whose insight into emerging issues can help teams get ahead of project-related impacts.
- **Satisfy** the high influence/low interest quadrant, including government representatives in natural resources and environment ministries whose decisions can materially affect operations.

In mining operations, particularly those in remote regions, this kind of stakeholder work is not background activity. It is central to how both operations and strategic initiatives succeed. The dynamics here often differ significantly from service-based or metropolitan industries. Major projects involve complex legislative and permit requirements, multi-level public consultations and engagement with first nation councils. Rigorous stakeholder mapping and proactive relationship-building are essential to securing approvals, maintaining social licence and avoiding delays.

³ Goodman, Andrew. 'Chief of Staff: Anatomy of the Role in Eight Charts', *McKinsey and Company* (29 August 2024).

⁴ Keller Johnson, Lauren. 'Exerting Influence without Authority', *Harvard Business Review* (28 February 2008).

⁵ Wilding, Melody. 'How to Build a Power Map for Your Project', *Harvard Business Review* (10 February 2025).

Strategic by design: shadow work that lets the organisation shine

The most effective chief of staff work is largely unseen: addressing risks before they appear on dashboards, reframing disagreements before they escalate, clarifying trade-offs before they slow execution.

John Kotter's research on organisational change shows that large-scale transformation depends less on bold announcements than on disciplined sequencing, coalition-building and consistent communication.⁶ That shadow work, exercised quietly and consistently, is where chief of staff leadership takes shape.

The operating environment is also shifting in ways that make this work more demanding. As Professor Srividya Jandhyala of ESSEC Business School has noted, geopolitical and regulatory headwinds are increasingly defining how organisations operate.⁷ Political volatility and tariffs reshaping supply-chain architectures mean that principals and their stakeholders must navigate prolonged ambiguity rather than episodic disruption. The chief of staff supports that navigation, connecting stakeholders, reinforcing coherence and keeping the organisation moving even when the path ahead is not fully clear.

A playbook for non-technical chiefs of staff moving into heavy industry

There is research to support the case that generalist or non-technical chiefs of staff can do well in heavy industry. In 2018, Florenta Teodoridis, Michael Bikard and Keyvan Vakili found that in sectors with slow rates of change, generalists perform more creatively:

'If the pace of change is slow, teams will likely benefit from employing generalists, who can challenge the industry's taken-for-granted assumptions and bring in new ideas.'⁸

Heavy industry is one such sector. It is a web of interdependencies. A decision or bottleneck in one area affects many others. If an outage window slips, it creates a chain reaction: contractor availability is compromised, lock-out/tag-out protocols need reconfiguring, capacity is reduced and safety risks increase. In systems this connected, the person who spots the pattern across all those moving parts is often more valuable than the person who knows one part deeply. The generalist simultaneously sees how a scheduling change in maintenance affects safety, contracting, capacity and cost. That cross-disciplinary synthesis is what a non-technical chief of staff brings.

There are still skills that will help a non-technical chief of staff gain traction when they are new to the field.

1. Start with a learning thesis, not a résumé gap.

Adopt a ninety-day industrial literacy sprint: time on the shop floor, in control rooms, at maintenance shops and with schedulers, to see how the system really operates. This is a deliberate application of Henry Mintzberg's liaison role — building credibility through presence and becoming the connective tissue across formal lines of authority.⁹

2. Make influence visible, not performative.

Influence is built methodically. Track where power and attention sit, update that picture as conditions change, and use it to shape decisions before they harden in formal forums (Wilding, 2025).

⁶ Kotter, John. 'Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail', *Harvard Business Review* (May–June 1995).

⁷ Jandhyala, S. and Beard, A. 'Why business leaders need political diplomacy skills now', HBR IdeaCast, Episode 1053, *Harvard Business Review* (18 November 2025).

⁸ Teodoridis, Florenta, Michael Bikard, and Keyvan Vakili. 'When Generalists Are Better than Specialists, and Vice Versa', *Harvard Business Review* (31 July 2018).

⁹ Ignatius, Adi. 'The Manager's Job, 50 Years Later', *Harvard Business Review* (19 March 2025).

3. Architect the operating rhythm.

Time kills strategy. A steady cadence of weekly executive priorities, monthly risk reviews, and quarterly strategy checks, shorten the distance between emerging issues and the decisions that resolve them (Ciampa, 2020).

4. Communicate like a systems engineer.

Controlled briefings pull the threads together. Collate cost of delays, risks, health and safety exposures, and stakeholder impacts, into a single line of sight for decision-makers. McKinsey's research shows that the most effective chiefs of staff stand out by managing this information flow, ensuring leaders see the full risk picture when it matters most.¹⁰

5. Secure early wins to sustain change.

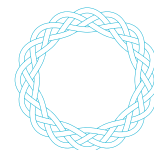
Transformations stall without early, visible progress. Kotter's research shows that momentum depends on short-term wins that people can see and trust. Highlighting early gains builds credibility on the frontline and creates space for longer-term, higher-risk change to move forward (Kotter, 1995).

A successful conclusion: or beginning

This article set out to show how established leadership frameworks can be applied by chiefs of staff working in heavy industry. Returning to Ciampa, success in the role varies by organisation, region and objectives, but three indicators are worth watching:

- The principal's calendar reflects intentional leadership decisions, enabled by the chief of staff translating access into alignment, focus and strategic momentum.
- The workforce moves as one integrated team with clear interdependencies, rather than a set of local optimisations.
- Initiative reviews shift from status updates to decision pipelines, with issues pre-worked and alignment built before meetings begin.

For a non-technical chief of staff, heavy industry offers a genuine development opportunity. A chance to help the enterprise perform while working largely in the background. You will be measured not by the volume of your airtime but by the absence of avoidable friction, the clarity of trade-offs and the velocity of collective wins. That is leadership earned not by title or awarded power, but by results and trust.



¹⁰ Dewar, Carolyn, and Andrew Goodman. 'How to Be a Better Chief of Staff', *McKinsey and Company* (22 February 2024).

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The image features a hand holding an hourglass. The hand is positioned at the bottom, with the thumb and index finger gripping the lower bulb. The hourglass is filled with orange-brown sand. Two orange triangles point towards the narrow neck of the hourglass. The background is a light blue circle on a white textured surface. The title text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

The centre of the hourglass:

the organisational position of
the chief of staff

Jon Dunne

The centre of the hourglass

Jon Dunne

At the centre of the hourglass, the chief of staff shapes how the organisation understands its environment, aligns its efforts, maintains its course and preserves its momentum.

Between 2022 and 2024 I served as Chief of Staff for the United States Marine Corps' Combat Development Command. Every day I saw strategic intent moving downward from senior leaders, operational realities moving upward from organisations, and external stakeholders adding complexity in both directions. These top-down and bottom-up streams, by no means unique to my role or sector, met in a narrow hourglass middle, where timing, priorities and meaning needed to be interpreted, synchronised and synthesised for the work to flow. Increasingly, the hourglass became my model for understanding the position and duties of a chief of staff within a company structure, because it illustrates how they enable complex organisations to navigate pressures, maintain rhythm and purpose, and remain oriented.

For centuries, the hourglass was one of the most dependable instruments aboard a ship. It provided rhythm, reference and coherence amid uncertain seas. It existed, not to make the vessel move faster, but to ensure the vessel stayed oriented. In this article, I explore why it is a powerful framework for capturing how strategy and execution must align at a single point to achieve organisational momentum. Since I

first conceived of it in 2022, the model has matured, informed by conversations with fellow chiefs of staff, and presentations and feedback at Chief of Staff Association events.¹

The hourglass and nautical navigation

Long before it became a decorative object on a desk, the hourglass served a practical and essential purpose at sea. For nearly five centuries, the captain and crew relied on it as one of the most consistent navigation tools. Early mechanical clocks were vulnerable to moisture, temperature and the motion of a ship. The hourglass, by contrast, was dependable. It allowed mariners to combine time, heading and estimated speed.² This enabled them to plan their course, make on-the-spot adjustments and navigate calm or tumultuous seas: *the hourglass was practical*.³

Historians note that the hourglass was as important as the compass because it provided the time reference that made all other calculations possible.⁴ The devices didn't increase the ship's speed, they kept it oriented. They also provided rhythm, reference and predictability when almost everything else was in motion. Suspended in

¹The Chief of staff Association, *The Hourglass in the Middle: What flows through a chief of staff?* September 2024, and *The Centre of the Hourglass Chief of Staff with Jon Dunne*, Leadership Series event, March 2026.

²Heading is the compass direction in which the craft's bow or nose is pointed.

³R.T. Balmer. 'The Operation of Sand Clocks and Their Medieval Development', *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1978).

⁴W.E. May. *A History of Marine Navigation* (Henley-on-Thames: G.T. Foulis, 1973). The hourglass was the product of precision craftsmanship, offering a ship's Captain and its crew with a self-contained, closed system to define a ship's activity and offer a temporal tool to planning and executing a ship's navigational journey.

in wooden frames to maintain stability in heavy seas, *the hourglass was reliable*.

This is why the hourglass maps so effectively onto the chief of staff role. Its value was not the flow of sand, but the ability to create a shared cadence across the crew. With respect to navigation, it told sailors when to check speed and sails and when to adjust course. Beyond navigation, it established a cadence for essential functions, including changing the watch, preparing and serving meals, and scheduling cleaning, maintenance and meetings. In short, the hourglass created a common rhythm that allowed a complex system to operate with coherence. *The hourglass fostered precision*.⁵

Finally, the hourglass model recognises that ‘a ship is a small world moving through a larger world it cannot control.’⁶ Facing an ocean swell or an approaching storm, mariners used the hourglass to time critical decisions. For a captain, time-sensitive and consequential decisions—when to re-plot the course, divert to another port, explore an

unforeseen opportunity, ration provisions, abandon ship, or return to a homeport—were all informed by the device. *Hourglasses allowed for proactive measures during periods of danger or uncertainty*.⁷

Organisational alignment

Pulling a centuries-old device forward as an organisational model today, the hourglass illustrates that the strength of the role is in position not authority. The chief of staff acts at the midpoint of the enterprise: the point of organisational alignment where strategic guidance meets operational reality, the place where direction becomes practical, and where practical insights become strategic.

The upper bulb of the hourglass—Strategic Environment—contains the CEO, the C-suite, the Board of Directors and external stakeholders [see Figure 1]. This end is wide, complex, dynamic and demanding.⁸ The lower bulb (Execution

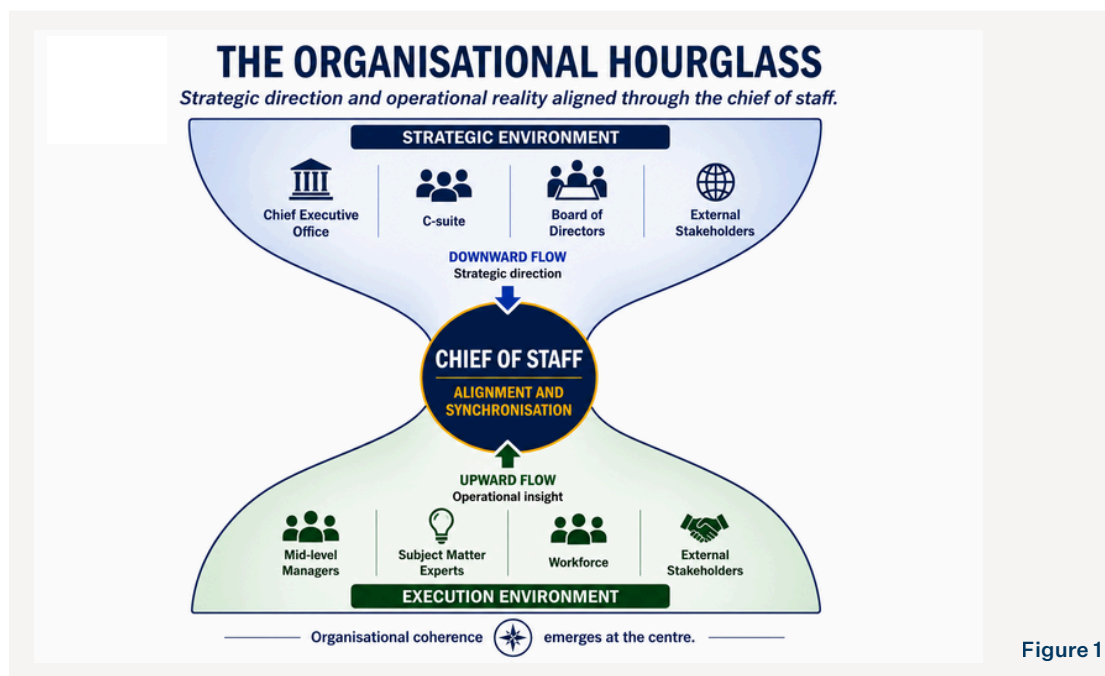


Figure 1

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Little, Brown and Company, 1942), p.163.

⁷ R.T. Balmer. 'The Operation of Sand Clocks and Their Medieval Development,' *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1978).

⁸ Porter, Michael E. *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 3–4. Note: 'competing demands' refers to the external ecosystem that the CEO, C-Suite, and Board of Directors must rationalise, interact with, and compete against.

Environment) is equally wide and contains external stakeholders (suppliers, buyers and competitors) and shows the complexity of the organisation: the mid-level managers, the subject matter experts, the workforce who execute daily tasks to implement operational imperatives and achieve strategic aims. These two ends focus on different parts of a problem, view opportunity and risks differently, and often speak in different languages.

The chief of staff operates at the centre of the hourglass, synchronising the flow between strategic direction and operational execution.⁹ Rather than restricting flow, the centre prioritises, synchronises and aligns organisational effort with clarity. Whatever passes through must be coherent, sequenced and actionable. This is where strategic direction is translated into work the enterprise can absorb and where 'ground truth' is distilled into insight that leaders can use.

From this vantage point the chief of staff becomes the organisation's bilingual interpreter and translator. Executives speak in terms of outcomes, choices and direction. Operators speak in terms of constraints, timing and feasibility. Without translation, these conversations miss one another. The

chief of staff translates between the two and keeps the organisation from drifting into parallel but disconnected narratives.

This positional strength of the role is also relational. Chiefs of staff often hold the trust of senior leaders while remaining close enough to the internal enterprise to sense friction, anticipate resistance and understand the consequences of timing. This dual trust allows the chief of staff to prepare decisions, shape conversations and help leaders and teams meet in the same frame of reference. As adaptive leadership theory suggests that influence across boundaries, rather than formal authority, is what keeps complex systems aligned.¹⁰

The chief of staff is more than the connective tissue. The role enables organisational alignment, and an effective chief of staff creates momentum by ensuring the organisation avoids working at cross purposes [see Figure 2]. Decisions arrive when they are ready. Guidance reaches teams in terms they can use. Insights flow upward without distortion.

The organisation becomes an aligned system rather than a collection of competing priorities. This is why the hourglass resonates. The centre is where the organisation gains its coherence. Success

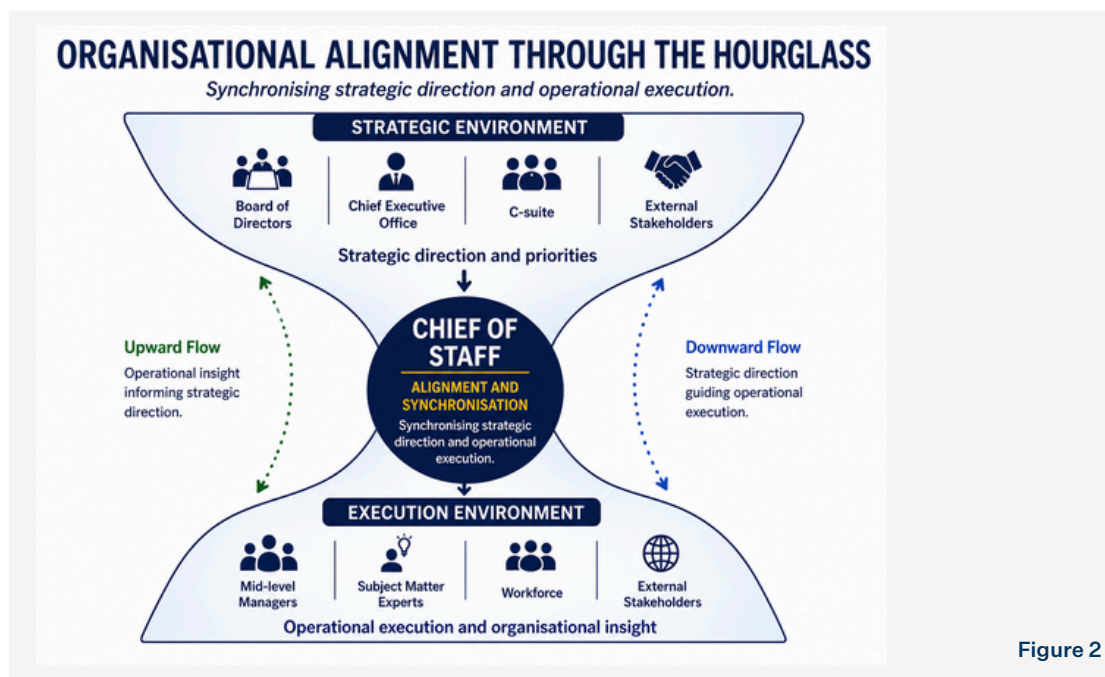


Figure 2

⁹ Ciampa, Dan. 'The Case of the Chief of Staff', *Harvard Business Review*, 98, No. 3 (May–June 2020), p104.

¹⁰ Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

does not come from the volume of activity in the upper or lower bulbs but from the quality of synchronisation at the centre. The chief of staff is the one role positioned to create that synchronisation and to keep the organisation coherently oriented as conditions shift.

Turn the hourglass: enabling top-down and bottom-up organisational dynamics

One of the most overlooked features of the hourglass is that it is made to move. Mariners turned the hourglass regularly to reset the cycle of the ship's navigation and crew's activities. It was never meant to sit still. The same is true for the chief of staff and their role in the centre. The chief of staff routinely interacts with the top and bottom of the hourglass, sustaining alignment and synchronisation between leadership intent and organisational insight, and establishing a rhythm between internal and external stakeholders.

Organisations require this cycle because leadership is never a one-way cascade. Strategy may originate at the top, but it must be clarified, interpreted and sequenced before teams can act on it. Likewise, the most valuable operational truth does not surface on its own. It must be noticed, framed, and brought upward. The hourglass captures this rhythm clearly. Broad strategic direction must narrow into focus before broadening again into execution. Ground truth must rise, refine and shape the next round of decisions. A healthy organisation behaves exactly this way.¹¹

The chief of staff ensures this cycle takes place with purpose. Without someone to keep the hourglass turning, guidance stalls at the top and frustration accumulates

at the bottom. Leaders act without context and the workforce executes without alignment. Decisions collide (or worse, bypass each other) and the organisation drifts. When the chief of staff is actively managing flow, strategy and execution remain aligned and synchronised rather than in conflict or chaos.

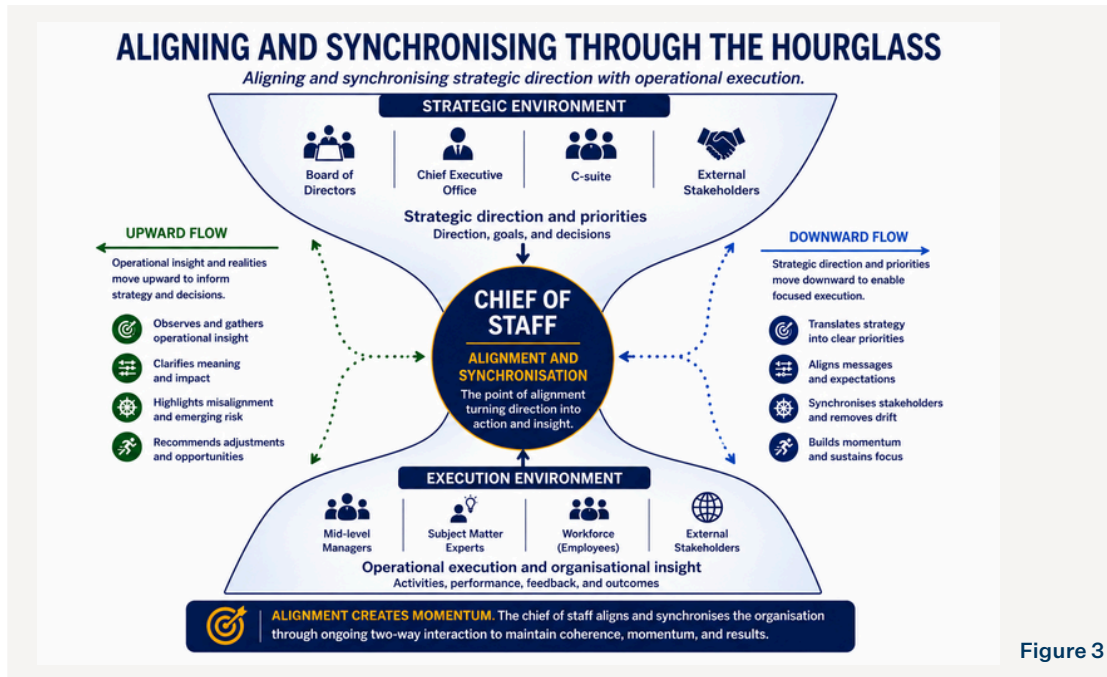
This work is not administrative. It is the organisation's rhythm. Leadership intent must be translated, prioritised and sequenced. Operational insight must be distilled and timed so that it can influence decision-making. Each pass through the centre improves the quality of what moves in both directions. The chief of staff becomes the caretaker of the organisational tempo, creating regularity in an environment defined by noise and motion.

Systems thinking explains why this matters.¹² Complex organisations remain healthy through ongoing assessments and feedback loops. It is not the speed of information that stabilises a system but the quality, timing and interpretation of that information. If it arrives too slowly, the enterprise becomes reactive, too quickly, and it becomes chaotic. The chief of staff regulates this equilibrium, ensuring the organisation acts with awareness rather than impulse.

This continuous engagement also dispels the idea that leadership provides answers while teams merely execute. Leaders need unfiltered insight from the operating environment. Teams need context and framing that make strategy feel connected to their work. The chief of staff is uniquely positioned to see both clearly and to integrate them into a shared organisational story. Turning the hourglass repeatedly allows the grains of sand to mix purposefully.

¹¹ Kaplan, Robert S., and Norton, David P. 'The Strategy-Focused Organization', *Harvard Business School Press*, 2000.

¹² Donella H. Meadows. *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, ed. Diana Wright (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008), 88–91.



Dispelling the bottleneck myth

One of the most consistent observations regarding the hourglass model is the concern that the narrow centre of the hourglass might imply unnecessary or undesired constraint. The question is understandable. In many organisations, narrow points often represent slowdowns, friction or congestion. But this interpretation confuses what the hourglass symbolises. The centre of the hourglass may be narrow, but its dimensions are mathematically precise and intentionally calibrated.

Marine hourglasses were prized because they moved sand predictably, reliably and precisely, not for speed. Mariners trusted the glass because it created a stable rhythm even when everything around them was in motion. Its steady flow made navigation, coordination and shipboard rhythm both possible and reliable.

Organisations benefit from the same principle. Without a chief of staff, work does not support the strategic trajectory, it scatters tactically [see Figure 3]. For

example, leaders push decisions before teams are ready, teams act on incomplete understanding, priorities compete, organisational drift manifests, and the company begins to experience unnecessary redundancies or risk-laden gaps. The enterprise accelerates in multiple directions simultaneously and loses its ability to convert activity into strategic progress. Operations researchers call this thrashing: fast, misaligned or unsynchronised activity that reduces actual output because timing and coherence are missing.¹³

‘The chief of staff ensures that what moves downward is clear, prepared and ready for execution. They also ensure that what moves upward is framed, factual and timed so that leaders can act with awareness.’

This is exactly where the chief of staff adds value. The centre of the hourglass does not obstruct flow: it regulates direction, timing and coherence. The chief of

¹³ Peter J. Denning. ‘The Thrashing Ghost’, *Communications of the ACM* 60, no. 12 (December 2017), pp. 33–35.

staff ensures that what moves downward is clear, prepared and ready for execution. They also ensure that what moves upward is framed, factual and timed so that leaders can act with awareness. In doing so, nothing essential is obstructed, and the only slowed elements are those that would create confusion if rushed through. The distinction is important: speed measures how quickly something moves within a finite moment of time. A rapid action may appear productive, but if it is misaligned or not properly sequenced, it either stalls as an isolated tactical action or contributes to organisational drift from strategic intent. Precision, meanwhile, is the alignment and synchronisation of action, at the right place, at the right time and for the right purpose. A series of precise actions, properly aligned and synchronised, creates organisational momentum towards strategic objectives.

The work at the centre

To stand at the centre of the hourglass is to occupy one of the most distinctive and demanding roles in any organisation. The chief of staff does not set the destination, nor do they execute every initiative directly. Instead, they operate in the narrow but essential space where direction must become action, and action must inform the next round of direction. In this space, the chief of staff shapes how the organisation understands its environment, aligns its efforts, maintains its course and preserves its momentum. Practically, this work can be understood through four interrelated functions [See Figure 4].

1. Awareness and sense-making

Organisations generate more signals than any leader can absorb. Meetings, metrics, informal conversations, external developments and internal pressures all compete for attention. The chief of staff brings discipline to this environment by continuously scanning across the enterprise, integrating signals from multiple vantage points and distinguishing what

matters from what merely appears urgent. This requires not just proper alignment through observation, but engagement across leadership, teams, and stakeholders to reduce blind spots. Awareness alone is insufficient. The chief of staff must translate fragmented inputs into shared understandings and then sequence actions accordingly. Strategic intent rarely arrives in a form the organisation can immediately absorb. It must be clarified, prioritised and aligned within the organisation's capacity to act. Likewise, emerging issues must be framed in a way that allows leaders to make informed decisions before pressure compresses options. In this way, the chief of staff turns raw signals into aligned activities and synchronised outcomes, ensuring that the organisation is acting on what is strategically real and not merely what is tactically visible.

2. Communication and clarity

In complex organisations, breakdowns rarely occur because information is absent; they occur because meaning is distorted as it moves. That is, leaders, teams and stakeholders operate with different assumptions and agendas, intentions and incentives. The chief of staff maintains coherence by deliberately shaping how information is shared, when it is shared and with whom. Not all communication serves the same purpose. Some conversations must remain private to allow ideas to develop, assumptions to be tested, and leaders to think openly. Others require discreet adjustments and realignment among a limited group to prepare the organisation, align stakeholders and address second-order effects. Still others must be communicated broadly to establish direction, signal commitment and create shared understanding at scale. The chief of staff continuously calibrates across these layers, ensuring that communication is neither premature nor delayed, neither fragmented nor overexposed. This work is not about controlling messages. It is about preserving meaning. When done well, the organisation does not simply receive

THE WORK OF THE CHIEF OF STAFF AT THE CENTRE OF THE HOURGLASS

The chief of staff aligns strategic direction, operational execution and organisational rhythm.

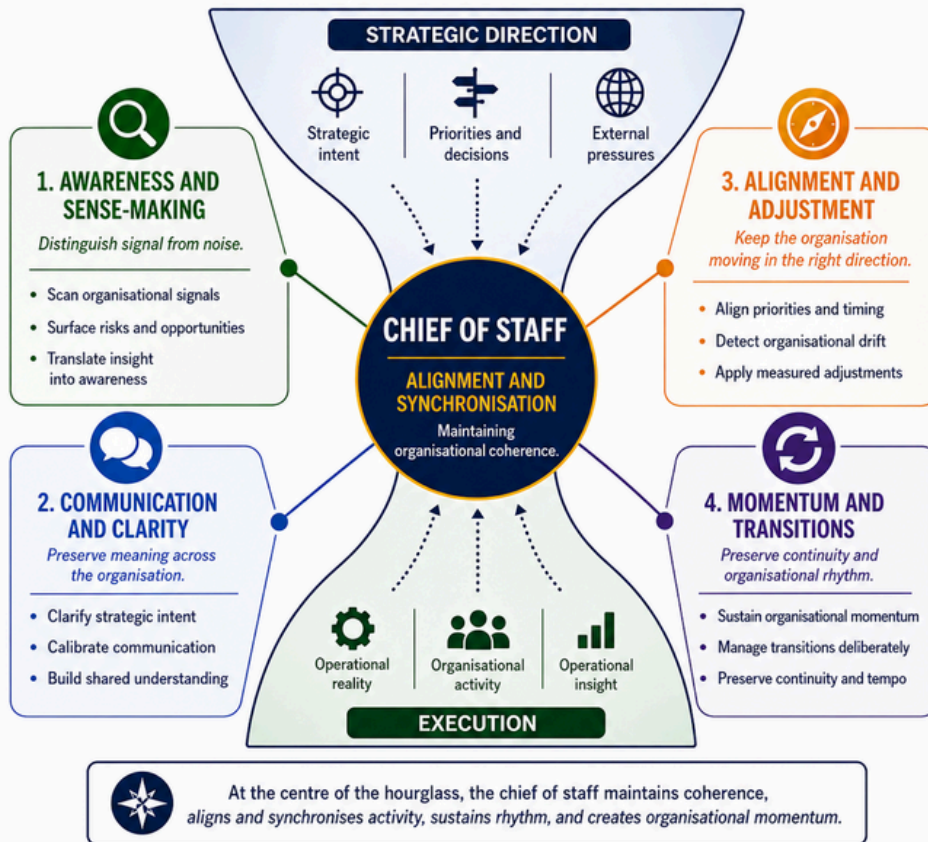


Figure 4

direction; it understands it, trusts it, and can act on it with confidence.

3. Alignment and adjustment

Even in well-led organisations, alignment does not sustain itself. Over time, priorities proliferate, assumptions diverge and execution gradually drifts from intent. This drift is rarely dramatic, but it is persistent. Left unaddressed, it erodes coherence and slows momentum. The chief of staff manages this reality through continuous, measured adjustments. This is not episodic intervention, nor is it an assertion of authority. It is the steady work of noticing

small deviations early and applying proportionate corrections before misalignment becomes visible at scale. This may involve rebalancing priorities, clarifying decision ownership, aligning information across teams, adjusting timing, or reinforcing expectations that have begun to blur. The goal is not to redirect the organisation, but to keep it on its intended bearing. By making small corrections consistently, the chief of staff preserves the connection between strategy and execution, ensuring that the organisation's daily activity remains aligned with leadership intent.

4. Momentum and transitions

Organisations rarely lose momentum during periods of steady execution. They lose it at moments of transition, when priorities shift, ownership changes, leaders rotate or new initiatives begin. In these moments, responsibility moves, but context does not always follow. Work slows, friction increases and alignment weakens. The chief of staff acts as the steward of these transitions, ensuring that momentum is preserved rather than rebuilt. This requires deliberate attention to how work is handed from one person, team or phase to another. Effective transitions do not rely on clean breaks. They depend on overlap, clarity and timing. Incoming owners must be prepared and moving before responsibility fully shifts. Outgoing owners must carry effort through the transition rather than disengage too early. For a brief period, accountability is shared to ensure continuity. At the same time, the chief of staff protects the organisation's broader rhythm. Decision cycles, planning cadences, leadership engagements and communication patterns must be shaped deliberately to match the organisation's capacity. When rhythm is aligned, the enterprise feels focused and connected. When it fragments, activity increases but progress slows. By managing both transitions and tempo, the chief of staff ensures that the organisation moves with continuity rather than disruption.

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This is the deeper truth revealed by the hourglass. The chief of staff at the centre does not push harder or move faster for its own sake, nor do they sit still and merely occupy the hourglass centre. The centre is a position that demands precise work by a chief of staff, leveraging effective leadership and a practical set of skills and tools to

orchestrate a durable organisational coherence.

Embracing the centre

Organisations do not fail for lack of direction. They falter when direction and execution fail to meet. The chief of staff exists at that point of organisational alignment. Positioned between strategic intent and operational reality, the role carries a responsibility that is both structural and relational: to ensure that what leaders decide can be acted upon, and that what teams experience is brought back into decision-making with clarity and precision. This work requires courage. Not physical courage, but the intellectual and moral courage to surface difficult truths early, to slow initiatives that are not ready, to accelerate those that are overdue, and to protect the organisation from misalignment or drift that creates avoidable friction. This work is not episodic but instead is an enduring purpose. It demands the ability to sense emerging pressure, sequence action with discipline, and apply measured adjustments before misalignment becomes visible at scale. It requires the range to operate at the strategic level and the instinct to understand how decisions will land in practice.

To stand at the centre of the organisational hourglass is to accept responsibility for coherence across the system. When done well, direction becomes action, action informs direction, and the organisation moves with alignment rather than noise. This is not a passive position. The centre demands precise, purposeful work: the kind that keeps an organisation aligned, oriented and moving through ever-changing waters.



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A photograph of a man with short, dark, curly hair and glasses, smiling broadly. He is wearing a dark navy blue jacket over a white collared shirt and a yellow lanyard. He is standing in an office environment, with large windows in the background. To his left, a woman with long brown hair is partially visible, looking towards him. To his right, a man with dark hair is also looking towards him. The overall atmosphere is professional and positive.

Foundations:

a theory of action for chiefs of
staff in US Government contexts

Ryan Foor

Foundations

Ryan Foor

Generosity and co-elevation. Crafting a theory of action for chiefs of staff in US Government contexts.

The title of chief of staff is relatively common in US governmental settings, particularly within the federal government, state governments and, to a degree, larger municipal governments. However, despite this, there is no fixed model for an incumbent chief of staff to follow. Often, individuals enter the role with little more than their own understanding of the position, perhaps a job description, and varying degrees of expectations set by the principal.

This article uses the Nebraska Department of Education as a case study to examine the chief of staff role in a state government agency, in this instance one with an elected board and appointed principal. Although this structure cannot immediately be mapped onto other federal, state or municipal bodies, I believe that crafting a theory of action for a chief of staff in government is important, given that the role is often short-lived in these spaces and frequently misunderstood by the public.

The aim of this article, then, is to provide guidance to incumbents and their stakeholders. Specifically, it will identify the different stakeholder roles that chiefs of staff serve in the setting and apply this knowledge to develop a theory of action as a chief of staff serving in state government.

Recognising different stakeholders

The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) is a state constitutional agency composed of an elected board and board-appointed commissioner. The agency is constitutionally separate from the office of the state governor but still part of the executive branch of state government. Along with the commissioner, there are deputy commissioners and an assistant commissioner (serving in the chief of staff role) who make up the senior-level executive team. One advantage to the governance structure under which the NDE operates is that it allows for more stability in leadership. Put another way, it is less subject to immediate changes in leadership after an election. Thus, while the commissioner is the principal to serve, the need to serve the board comes in a close second, and the remit of serving the staff, as a value of serving the organisational mission, cannot be neglected. Another key stakeholder, whether intentionally or not, is the public. What becomes immediately obvious from this is that the chief of staff must keep all parties in mind as they move through their week.

There are two concepts from the work of American author and entrepreneur Keith Ferrazzi that are critical to the success of a chief of staff, whether working in government

or another setting. These concepts—generosity and co-elevation—will be familiar to those engaged in the Chief of Staff Association Core Competency Programme, where they are included in the module *Leading without Authority*, coached by Ferrazzi. Generosity, simply put, is about helping others and demonstrating care. In the context of serving as a chief of staff, it is about building relationships.¹ Co-elevation is the concept of embedding inclusion and co-creation in collaborative activities and decision-making processes. In my role as a chief of staff, co-elevation is about ‘raising up’ those around me: my principal, board, staff and public. Ferrazzi’s book *Leading without Authority* (2020) dives deeper into this concept.

I believe that these two concepts are fundamental in engaging a theory of action for a chief of staff. What follows are examples of how these can be actioned with the four key stakeholder groups described above.

Serving the principal

Practicing generosity with a board-appointed state government official means ensuring recommendations reflect diverse perspectives, not just the most accessible ones. A principal denied breadth is also denied the quality of judgement they need. The same principle applies to staff: generosity means creating genuine opportunities for them to engage with the principal directly.

Co-elevation in practice means ensuring the principal has the information they need to lead well—particularly before a public speech, an important meeting, or a critical decision. In government especially, the chief of staff will often hold deeper operational knowledge than the principal. The role is to put that knowledge in service of the principal’s authority, not to hold it back.

‘The chief of staff, working closely with the principal, has a transformational opportunity to co-elevate board members.’

Serving the board

In the context of state government, my service to the elected board comes in as close second to serving the principal. After all, the principal is accountable to the board, and a dotted line exists between the chief of staff and board members. Practicing generosity with the board is different from practicing generosity with the principal, though there is some overlap. The chief of staff does not directly work for the board but supports the principal in their accountability to these stakeholders, and building trusted relationships is crucial for supporting both. There are times when the chief of staff must ‘take the side of the board,’ for instance when preparing for board meetings and interactions. When reviewing the board meeting agenda, the chief of staff can consider how different board members will view agenda items, what questions they will ask and what information they may request. Here generosity is shown by providing the board with sufficient information on which to base their decisions, while also serving the principal and the organisation through preparedness. While some would argue this is the responsibility of the principal, the chief of staff is often the proxy who must anticipate the needs of the board.

As when working with the principal, co-elevation with the board can be difficult to conceptualise. Elected board members are often unaware of all aspects of their roles and of the scope of the organisation. The chief of staff, working closely with the principal, has a transformational opportunity to co-elevate

¹ Ferrazzi goes into depth on the concept of generosity in his 2005 book, *Never Eat Alone* (expanded and updated, 2014).

board members. One way of doing this is by inducting board members into their roles through an orientation process that helps define their scope.

Serving the staff

When an elected board holds decision-making authority, staff can feel removed from the direction of the organisation. The chief of staff can bridge that gap by communicating the thinking behind board decisions clearly and consistently.

There is also a practical opportunity here. The chief of staff can support staff in presenting to the board or its sub-committees, coaching them through the process, reviewing proposals for alignment with the principal's vision, and building the confidence that makes those interactions productive. Demonstrating generosity and co-elevation in this way benefits the staff member, the principal and the board in equal measure.

Serving the public

Working in state government is an important public service duty. Here the chief of staff is often the bridge between the public (citizens) and the elected or appointed officials. Having a pulse on citizenry and related stakeholders, understanding different perspectives on issues, and filtering messages to the principal serve the citizens with a generosity mindset. Taking calls from citizens on behalf of the principal demonstrates generosity to both stakeholders and the principal. Hearing citizen concerns, working to diffuse an escalating situation, helping the citizen navigate systems, and filtering feedback to determine what may need to change within the agency, all demonstrate generosity, and to a degree, co-elevation. This practice demonstrates to the public that the agency welcomes input and feedback and uses it for

for improvement. The chief of staff has a key role here in working with the principal to set engagement expectations within the organisation, modelling those expectations, and implementing them with fidelity. These expectations can extend to larger, systematic methods of engaging citizens and stakeholders, like advisory committees and day-to-day interactions within the agency. Adopting a mindset of generosity with citizens and stakeholders serves the principal by having a pulse on the work, serves the board by showing care and interest with their constituents, and of course, serves the public through their interests in their government.

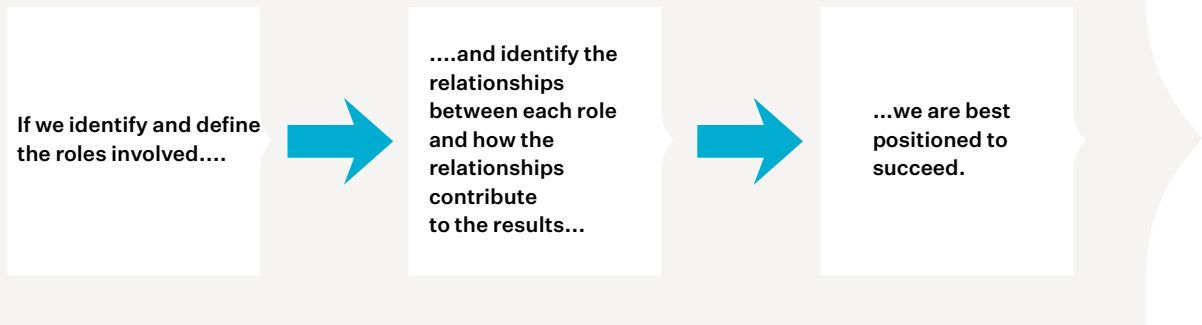
A chief of staff theory of action

Navigating these stakeholders requires executive acumen, the ability to build individual and collective relationships, and intentional actions. The ability to practice generosity and co-elevation with each demands insight into where one role ends and another begins, or where they might overlap. As a public servant, it can often be easy to lose sight of the 'why' in a government agency. The organisation's desired outcomes should drive the chief of staff's daily strategic actions: they must always remind themselves of the organisation's mission and values. Adopting a 'theory of action' can help define results, as well as how to achieve these.

Theories of action are commonly used in American education settings. A theory of action describes how an organisation intends to work to create the outcomes it wants.² A similar but more complex structure is a logic model, often used in programme development, implementation and evaluation. However, in this context, I am proposing that a chief of staff should use a theory of action at the individual level to achieve desired results with different stakeholders. While a specific theory of action is useful based on the priorities of the agency and individuals, I created a simple model focused on people

² Javurek Andres, Abby, and Nordengren, Chase. 'Theory of Action: The Care and Feeding of Your Mission', *Kappan Online* (2 October 2022).

Figure 1: Stakeholder Role Theory of Action for the Chief of Staff



and relationships. This model [see Figure 1] can be tailored to meet the needs of differing situations and contexts, including those outside government.

When implementing this theory of action, begin with the end in mind. What results do you intend to achieve? The results may be directed by a board, the principal, senior leadership, a strategic plan or other external demands, and can be both macro and micro in design. For example, the result you hope to achieve may be board approval of an overhaul of organisational policies (macro) or a staff-level decision on day-to-day operations (micro). Specific strategies to achieve these results should be identified and implemented. Once the results are identified and clear, consider the people necessary to achieve that result. Mapping roles in this way is often an overlooked step in goal planning. Here you can lean on the concepts of generosity and co-elevation to help with buy-in and to ensure alignment. This also allows you to gain input from each role and, in each situation, to ensure a wide range of perspectives are represented.

Mapping roles is only the starting point. What matters as much is understanding how those roles relate to each other, and how the chief of staff can promote generosity and

co-elevation across every relationship in that network: with the principal, the board, staff, the public and others.

Relationships are not background context. They are the mechanism through which results are achieved, and their absence is often what stops progress. Take a routine board meeting agenda item. The chief of staff needs to know where the principal stands, where individual board members stand, how the relevant staff relate to those board members, and what the public view on the issue is. That full picture is what makes preparation meaningful.

A recent example from my work, on a macro level, was the development of an organisational strategic plan. Beginning with the end in mind, the goal was board adoption of the strategic plan document. Next came the identification of roles. The commissioner (the principal in this case) was the individual ultimately recommending adoption to the board. The board (a politically split public body) was the decision-maker. The staff was a key stakeholder group in terms of buy-in and implementation. The public at large was a key stakeholder with varying perspectives of the mission of the organisation. Once the roles were identified, the recognition and analysis of the relationships between each of these stakeholder groups came next. This

analysis led to the development of specific strategies necessary to achieve the results. A statewide public survey, community focus groups in each board member's electoral region, specific focus groups to inform the commissioner, staff focus groups, and regular board touch points yielded trust amongst and between each stakeholder, leading to unanimous approval of the strategic plan by the board.

This framework keeps the chief of staff grounded in what actually drives organisational outcomes: the people involved and the relationships between them. Understanding who holds which role, and how those roles interact, is what turns strategy into action.

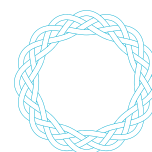
This theory of action can be expressed simply: if the chief of staff clearly defines intended results, maps the stakeholder roles required to achieve them, and actively cultivates relationships through practices of generosity and co-elevation, then alignment, decision quality and organisational effectiveness will improve. This occurs because broader perspectives are incorporated into decision-making, information flows more freely across stakeholder groups, and trust is strengthened over time. While the chief of staff's authority ultimately derives from the principal, effective practice requires operating as a broker across stakeholders, which can create moments of constructive tension, particularly where the needs of the principal and board diverge, that must be anticipated and managed deliberately. The strength of this approach can be assessed through practical signals such as the quality and timeliness of decisions, the level of stakeholder alignment, and the degree of trust evident in interactions across the organisation. In this way, the theory moves

beyond a conceptual model and becomes a practical framework for action and reflection.

Within this framework, clear role delineation matters not as a bureaucratic exercise but as a practical one. It sets expectations, maintains accountability and keeps each group focused on what they are there to do. When that clarity exists, progress becomes easier to track and easier to sustain.

Conclusion

The chief of staff's role in government is demanding precisely because the stakeholders are many and their interests do not always align. Most people enter the role with little more than a job description and a set of expectations, often someone else's. A theory of action does not resolve every possible tension, but it gives a chief of staff in this space a firm footing. Know your results. Map your roles. Tend to your relationships. When these three things are taken care of, generosity and co-elevation stop being abstract ideals and become a daily practice. This framework will not look the same in every agency or context. But for any chief of staff in government, and for the principals and boards who work alongside them, it offers something the chief of staff job description rarely does: a way of thinking about the work that is equal to its complexity.



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People-centred leadership:

chief of staff perspectives on
modernisation

Amy Polishuk

People-centred leadership

Amy Polishuk

Insights from a CSA survey, and interviews, reveal how chiefs of staff can help employees.

Nearly three quarters of organisational transformations fail because management performance does not support the change.¹ Research from 2024 reported that only twelve percent of business transformations achieve their original ambition due to mismanaging talent.²

For those of us who work in executive support positions, these findings are unambiguous: the odds of implementing major changes are not in our favour. Artificial intelligence (AI) further compounds our challenge. In addition to principals and boards calling for the rapid adoption of emerging technologies (as well as pressure to demonstrate improved outcomes), employees face significant mental health risks associated with job security and the pressure to acquire new skills.³

Research on modernisation efforts across organisations and sectors has consistently found that success depends on human, rather than technological, factors. It is nothing new that, as chiefs of staff, we manage emotions, relationships and personalities, just as much as we manage strategic planning, ROI and workflow processes. As more of us are asked to spearhead modernisation efforts, particularly by weaving AI into our work processes, it is imperative that we understand the unique role we play in supporting our colleagues.

This article draws on a modernisation survey of twelve Chief of Staff Association members and five follow-up interviews with members from the corporate, non-profit, government, and academic sectors. While the sample size here is not statistically significant, the perspectives offer something that academic change management literature rarely provides: unfiltered practitioner experiences from people on the inside, across organisations of different sizes, sectors and levels of complexity.

The findings show that many of the best practices in organisational change management are well known but not easily implemented. This is often due to insufficient communication and failure to give employees a genuine sense of ownership of the change. These insights also demonstrate that honest awareness of your organisation, your leadership, and your temperament, are vital for a successful transformation.

How employees experience modernisation

The survey results offered multiple examples of modernisation efforts: upgrading technology or tools, redesigning processes or workflows, restructuring teams, changing operating models, updating decision-making or governance structures and shifting ways of

¹ *The State of the Organization* (New York, McKinsey and Company, 2023), p. 76.

² Peter Slagt, M. B. *The Three Common Transformation Talent Mistakes and How to Avoid Them* (Bain and Company, 14 April 2024)

³ Soulami M., Benchekroun, S. and Galiulina, A., 'Exploring how AI adoption in the workplace affects employees: a bibliometric and systematic review', *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence*, Vol. 7 (2024).

working (e.g., hybrid and agile). Eleven of the twelve respondents noted that their organisation's modernisation involved three or more of these efforts and that the modernisation efforts were organisation-wide.

Modernisation lands differently depending on the organisation, sector and scale of change involved. But across the survey and interviews, regardless of context, one pattern held: employees experience modernisation as a human event long before they experience it as an operational one. Anxiety, uncertainty, and the need to feel genuinely included are not just obstacles to manage. They are the workplace conditions for chiefs of staff and those they serve. The following examples, drawn from a large city government, a university, and a global humanitarian organisation, illustrate how differently that reality can present itself and how humans, not technology, determine the outcome.

Research from the Boston Consulting Group found that seventy percent of digital transformations fall short of their objectives, noting that technology is important, but the people dimension is usually the determining factor for success.⁴ Paul Kadzielski experienced this first hand when he was Digital Director in the office of the Mayor for the City of Los Angeles. Speaking of transforming the digital landscape of dozens of city departments, he observed that 'technology change is a social-emotional influence problem first, and a tech problem second.'

The chief of staff of a prominent university echoed Kadzielski when he emphasised that for modernisation initiatives to succeed, individuals must be involved in planning and decision-making: 'Securing early buy-in is essential. People who feel misaligned are the biggest factor in burnout and discontent.'

Chad Houghton, Chief of Staff at CARE, noted that during recent modernisation efforts, the staff experienced the changes in

'Across the survey and interviews, regardless of context, one pattern held: employees experience modernisation as a human event long before they experience it as an operational one.'

three principal ways: in shock but wanting to stay, not openly rebelling but leaving, and thriving amid change. While many recognised the potential benefits that the modernisation would bring, the nature of the change offered an off-ramp for those ready to leave. CARE used communications to help manage employee anxiety, focusing on the constant state of change in the charity sector and being forthright that modernisation is not a 'one and done' project. These three examples point to a theme among survey respondents: how modernisation is communicated, to whom, and when, matter at least as much as the change itself.

Communication: it's never enough

While seven of twelve survey respondents identified communication as their most important recommendation (specifically defining and articulating the 'why' early and often), the interviews confirmed what research has consistently shown, which is that poor communication makes modernisation efforts fall short. In the example above, CARE understood that communication was critical, but they still felt they did not have enough.

Communication, when employed well, can foster a sense of belonging that supports employees throughout modernisation, ensuring alignment of goals between the individual, their team and the whole organisation. This should involve customising

⁴'Flipping the Odds of Digital Transformation Success', *Boston Consulting Group*, 2020.

communications for a department, team, or even an individual. Kadzielski observed that the digital change he worked on in LA presented nuanced challenges:

‘These were interpersonal challenges that required people to like and trust you, in order to come along with you. To do that, it was necessary to identify the issue that would motivate them. For example, is there a service they would like to improve? You have to craft your approach around their needs as well as their communication style and figure out how best to speak with them so that you can help them improve together with the larger organisation.’

To help identify workforce needs, listen to staff. Identify how modernisation will make their jobs easier, then convey this to them in a way they will be receptive to.

This is easy in theory, but not always in practice, as a chief of staff in a large non-profit organisation highlighted. During their reorganisation, they turned to the standardised communication practices they had been using as part of the regular workforce engagement—such as town hall meetings. However, employees did not feel safe or comfortable raising questions within this environment.

The lesson for this chief of staff was that the format of communications matter as much as frequency or familiarity. What worked once may not be the right format in a period of transformation. Their recommendation: devise alternative communication channels early and customise communications to target specific audiences.

One possible solution to these challenges, which multiple chiefs of staff mentioned is to create your own sounding board beforehand. ‘Have a group of people across the organisation’, Houghton suggested, ‘that you can talk to openly.’

‘The lesson for this chief of staff was that the format of communications matter as much as frequency or familiarity. What worked once may not be the right format in a period of transformation.’

The chief of staff from a prestigious university echoed this:

‘Ask “what am I missing” so you don't lose sight of the bulk of the organisation. Do skip-level meetings. You should also look to have your principal or board members conduct the same, so they are hearing the ground truth as well.’

An additional facet of communication that is often inadvertently neglected is including mid-level management at the outset. A chief of staff at a large non-profit observed that mid-level managers can help absorb the emotional weight that employees carry. During their reorganisation, mid-level managers were unintentionally excluded from the planning process. As a result, they were unable to offer the necessary support that their staff needed. This created a cascading effect in which the emotional support required by each successive layer of management eventually fell to the chief of staff. Such oversights can undermine the chief of staff's capacity to be a grounded presence or support to the workforce. It can also overwhelm someone in the role.

These insights demonstrate that when the chief of staff functions as a people-centred leader, staying curious about the needs of the workforce and stakeholders, the modernisation effort can potentially go more smoothly. When communication breaks down across layers, when managers are left without

information and employees without reassurance, the chief of staff can bring the corrective structure and empathetic attention needed to right the ship. No other role sits close enough to leadership to detect the signal, or close enough to the workforce to feel where confidence is eroding. People-centred leadership does not replace communication. It ensures that when communication falls short, as it almost always does, coherence and trust do not collapse with it.

Employee ownership and technology adoption

Most survey respondents are navigating burdens brought on by AI adoption, including employee mental health risks, job security stress and the pressure to up-skill quickly.

When modernisation efforts involve new technologies, respondents suggest positioning it as a solution to a workforce challenge, and actively involving employees in the process. Several respondents observed that this is an easily overlooked principle, or one that may be presumed to be implemented when, in fact, it is not.

Veronica Frantz, Chief of Staff at the National Industrial Hemp Council, described how her team members faced difficulties adopting technology she had selected to automate and enhance the organisation's systems. Frantz chose technology with which she was familiar. She assumed that some of her team used it already, and others would find it as intuitive as she did. When staff members expressed resistance to the changes, she identified two issues: the failure to involve users from the outset and a staff mindset of 'we have always done it this way, so why change?'

Frantz emphasised the importance of demonstrating how a new technology can assist employees in their daily tasks. 'We needed to take time to build trust and show staff how the changes would support them

and the future of the organisation,' she said. Additionally, when employees encountered difficulties using the new technology, she found that understanding everyone's learning style—when feasible—was essential for adoption. She discovered that some employees needed written instructions, others used recorded videos, while others needed desk-side demonstrations.

The issues Frantz faced are connected to a broader challenge that Houghton highlighted: culture change. At CARE, he explained:

'The organisation has numerous standards designed to comply with regulations or policies, especially concerning finances. We often hire individuals because they excel at functioning within these structures or fulfilling these requirements. However, our modernisation initiative encourages employees to do the opposite, run fast and break things. We need to acknowledge that these are points of tension for employees.'

His solution was to create a safe space for innovation. CARE aimed to foster an environment where teams could experiment and make mistakes without repercussions, thereby enabling more creative problem-solving.

Awareness of self, leadership, and the organisation

Bain and Company's survey of over four hundred executives found that only twelve percent of business transformations achieve their original ambition and those that do differentiate themselves by the way they manage talent (Slagt, 2024). The chiefs of staff I surveyed agree that knowing who you are working with, including yourself, is possibly one of the most underrated factors in modernisation success. As the chief of staff of a prominent university noted, 'it is important

to be clear-eyed about the gaps and weaknesses of your organisation before you start. What areas does your organisation not do well in? What processes are not working?' This involves practicing 'perspective taking.' Seeing the issue from the other person's perspective is a key facet of people-centred leadership. It can bring clarity to the situation and make the modernisation effort more effective.

Sometimes a chief of staff facing into transformation needs radical self-knowledge and reflection. Decide whether you have the right skills or knowledge to lead the effort. Ask yourself, 'How do I deal with change and the pain that comes with it?' Some people, by nature, adapt more easily to change and the unknown. Others resist it. As one interviewee said, 'You will default to your wiring during a stressful time, so understand your tolerance and what your role is in the organisation.' Part of this exercise, given chiefs of staff work in a partnership with their principal, is to evaluate the principal's strengths, weaknesses, preparedness, and tolerance for change.

In one interview, a chief of staff discussed the importance of knowing what the principal, leadership team, or board does well, and where their limits lie. In one example they cited, a non-profit hired a CEO to lead the modernisation, but did not know how he would lead under pressure. His decision-making and leadership had not been stress-tested during change before. In a scenario like this, the chief of staff recommends beginning with a small change, 'as a test', so both chief of staff and principal can understand how they will respond to change. In this example, the CEO was uncomfortable with the pain that the change created. In the end, he inadvertently worked against the modernisation effort. The leadership team had underestimated his ability to lead through change as well as how

much the president would need to be involved. Had this non-profit carried out a smaller, lower-risk change project with the CEO first, they would have done things differently. In a scenario like this, the chief of staff's ability to connect with, and centre, the needs of people is essential. They often must honour the suffering and uncertainty of others when their principal cannot.

Another interviewee reinforced this sentiment while recalling their modernisation initiative. They observed, 'You can't do anything effectively if the principal isn't on board.' This chief of staff's approach was to leverage their long-standing relationship with their principal. Despite the principal's reservations on the initiative, they trusted their chief of staff's judgment. Retrospectively, they saw the positive effects, particularly in time savings and progress made towards achieving the company's objectives.

Working on a smaller change project first is beneficial irrespective of the principal's leadership style or experience. Kadzielski points out that it can also be a way to build momentum and support:

'Digitising and improving the technology of all aspects of the city of Los Angeles was daunting. There was considerable reticence across the workforce at first. We found a relationship between the ease of a project and the motivation of the staff. The harder the project, the more motivation we needed. So, at first, we sought out some easy-to-complete quick wins where the change will be noticed, and we could build momentum. Success for us wasn't just when we automated a process or made a service more efficient; it was when the people on the team we worked with were so happy they would evangelise about the work we were doing to others—that is how we knew we were successful.'

Kadzielski did this by taking what was technically an easy lift for his team, in this instance building an app to digitise one aspect of the fire department's fire prevention work. Since he did not have the right app developers on his team, he involved the workforce from the community, which also built goodwill and broadened buy-in. The app reduced time spent on tasks and improved data accuracy. The mayor also touted the effort's success at a press conference, a moment of high-value for the fire department. After this, the fire department's leaders became advocates for Kadzielski's projects in other parts of the city, decreasing the initial motivation hurdles for subsequent efforts.

This principle also applies to how boards navigate change. As the chief of staff in a large non-profit organisation observes, understanding your board's culture in advance can inform your interactions with them. For boards that prioritise slow, steady growth and focus on their fiduciary and stewardship responsibilities, adopting an innovative approach can be challenging. For modernisation initiatives, however, it is essential that boards are positioned to make decisions about the future. When this tension is identified and communicated, it can facilitate a shift in the board's perspective. One interviewee remarked that, as a chief of staff, it is advisable to hold one-on-one meetings with board members early on to establish strong relationships that can be leveraged during modernisation efforts.

As a chief of staff, exercising courageous leadership is essential for finding a way to execute the principal's strategy without burning out the leadership team. Interviewees cited the need to understand the leadership team early in the process. One noted that there can be tension between the principal and the executive team, with the principal thinking the team is not doing enough, and the team thinking they are doing too much. In this instance, to encourage transparency, the chief of staff devised an internal process to vet ideas across the team, not just with the

principal. This allowed team members to feel heard. At the same time, the chief of staff helped the team reallocate resources and personnel in order to move the process forward in a sustainable manner. This solution demonstrates how we execute people-centred leadership from our position and how courageous leadership balances the needs of our principal, the organisation, and the workforce.

'For modernisation initiatives, it is essential that boards are positioned to make decisions about a future that has not yet materialised.'

Managing transformation over the long haul

Modernisation is a process as much as an outcome, and sometimes external forces will force us to start without knowing it.

McKinsey's 2026 *State of Organisations* report identifies three forces that will continue to reshape how organisations work: the infusion of technology through AI, automation and data analytics; economic disruption and geopolitical uncertainty; and shifting employee expectations driven by demographics and new working models. For chiefs of staff, this means the conditions of modernisation are not temporary. They are often the very environment we are working in.

Sustaining momentum over months or years requires balancing two elements that sit in tension: the discipline to hold course and the flexibility to adjust when needed. One interviewee put the case for flexibility plainly: 'You need to incorporate natural points where changes in the modernisation processes can be implemented. The process should not be so inflexible or unchanging that it causes unnecessary additional difficulties.'

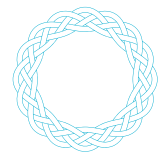
Another, at a large non-profit, made the case for perseverance: 'The temptation was to stop short, to end the pain, but we kept the course and fully executed. Had we not, we

would have subjected ourselves to greater difficulties in the future.’ Holding both instincts at once—knowing when to adapt and when to stay the course—can be one of the more demanding aspects people-centre leadership.

Timing matters too. One interviewee was direct: avoid launching modernisation during an unrelated crisis if you can. During the COVID-19 pandemic, their organisation transitioned its entire workforce to remote working and embarked on a modernisation effort simultaneously. In retrospect, the chief of staff felt the two could and should have been separated. The lesson is not that modernisation must wait for calm times but that the chief of staff needs to read the conditions honestly and advise accordingly. As Houghton put it: ‘If you’re not enabling opportunities at the fear of too much risk, then you will lose.’ When we centre the needs of our workforce and draw on our knowledge of the organisation’s capacity, we can make more effective decisions about how the weight of change will affect the organisation.

Many embark on modernisation efforts with the hope that it will bring about effective results. An interview with a chief of staff in higher education reminded me of this. ‘Take time to celebrate your wins,’ they advised. ‘We do not do enough of this in our culture. Celebrating our wins helps stabilise trust and can provide momentum to move into new phases.’ In a study on the human dimension of modernisation, this is perhaps the most human observation of all. Trust is built in small moments as much as large ones. Recognising progress is not a distraction from the work: it is part of it.

When most organisational transformations fall short and only a fraction achieve their original ambition, the difference is rarely strategy. It is the quality of leadership at the human centre of the effort. Whether that involves assessing risk, actively shaping communications, or navigating human anxiety, chiefs of staff can provide the grounding and connection needed for the organisation and workforce to successfully summit the modernisation effort.



Amy Polishuk is a seasoned executive leader and advisor with over 20 years of US Government experience, specialising in strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and collaborative problem-solving. Known for launching high-impact initiatives, leading cross-functional teams, and streamlining communication, Amy is recognised for her ability to navigate ambiguity—guiding leaders through national security crises, complex decision-making, and leadership transitions with clarity and composure. A certified executive coach, meditation teacher, and emotional intelligence instructor, she facilitates executive decision-making, leadership growth, and organisational effectiveness at every level. She is a Certified Chief of Staff® (Level 1).



The quiet rise of the chief of staff:

from executive support to
enterprise integrator and advisor,
the Saudi Energy framework

Sulaiman S. Al-Ghumaiz

with Mohammad Al-Ohali

The quiet rise of the chief of staff

Sulaiman S. Al-Ghumaiz
with Mohammad Al-Ohali

From executive support to enterprise integrator and advisor, the Saudi Energy model proves how a chief of staff is a stabilising force in complex organisations.

In complex organisations, strategy rarely fails in design: it fails in execution. Priorities fragment, decisions stall, governance becomes mechanical, and execution drifts away from intent.

In this space, between executive ambition and enterprise reality, the modern chief of staff role is quietly redefining its relevance.

Once perceived primarily as an extension of the CEO's office, responsible for coordination, briefing materials, and schedule management, the chief of staff function is increasingly emerging as something more consequential: a stabilising force in complexity and a disciplined integrator of enterprise execution.

This shift is becoming more visible in Saudi Arabia and across the MENA region, where large-scale transformation agendas, significant capital deployment, and rising stakeholder expectations are increasing the need for stronger enterprise alignment and faster, more disciplined execution. It is particularly evident in the utilities sector, where regulatory oversight, public accountability, capital intensity, and multi-business-line coordination converge, making disciplined orchestration a strategic requirement rather than an administrative function.

Complexity as the defining condition

Utilities operate in highly interconnected operating, regulatory and stakeholder environments. Capital-intensive assets, regulatory oversight, public accountability, multi-business-line structures, digital transformation, energy transition, and geopolitical considerations converge at the CEO's desk.

In such systems, decisions cannot simply be made, they must be orchestrated.

A capital allocation choice affects regulatory posture. A digital investment alters operational resilience. An ESG commitment reshapes stakeholder expectations. A grid modernisation program touches multiple business units simultaneously. Taking them together, these dynamics mean that even a single executive decision can quickly become a cross-enterprise coordination challenge.

Failure to deliver is not caused by a lack of intelligence or effort. It is caused by fragmentation across ownership, reporting, and accountability, resulting in slower decision-making, misaligned execution and loss of enterprise value. As complexity increases, so does the need for an enterprise integrator, one who ensures executive direction is not merely announced but embedded. This is where the chief of staff function begins to evolve.

Three faces of the chief of staff

Across industries, three broad expressions of the chief of staff role can be observed, not as rigid categories, but as stages in an organisational journey.

First face: the executive support hub

At its most traditional, the chief of staff ensures the CEO's world runs smoothly.

Agendas are structured. Board materials are compiled. Follow-ups are tracked. Executive engagements are coordinated. This model provides order and professionalism. In stable environments, it can be sufficient.

But as enterprises scale and inter-dependencies deepen, the limitations of a purely supportive posture become visible. Coordination alone cannot support the resolution of cross-functional tension. Material preparation alone cannot support the delivery of disciplined execution.

The role begins to expand.

Second face: the execution integrator

In more complex settings, the chief of staff becomes the execution integrator.

Operating rhythms are standardised. Executive forums are structured around decisions, not updates.

CEO and Board actions are formally tracked. Cross-business dependencies are surfaced early. Here, the chief of staff moves beyond coordination into orchestration. The function becomes the central link between executive intent and business line accountability.

For utilities, this transition is pivotal. Reliability, regulatory compliance and capital effectiveness not only depend on sound strategy but on synchronised delivery across operational domains.

Yet even disciplined execution is not the limit for the chief of staff.

Third face: the enterprise integrator and advisor

At higher levels of organisational maturity, the chief of staff role expands further, not into strategy ownership, but into strategic enablement as enterprise integrator and advisor.

At this stage, the chief of staff also functions as the institutional memory of the enterprise, preserving strategic context, tracking the evolution of priorities, and ensuring that new initiatives build on accumulated insight rather than restarting from zero. The function begins to:

- Institutionalise foresight around emerging risks and opportunities
- Provide structured challenge on high-impact decisions
- Clarify escalation pathways before exposure crystallises
- Embed value-tracking mechanisms tied to executive priorities
- Leverage integrated dashboards and predictive analytics
- Safeguard strategic continuity and execution stability across leadership transitions

This evolution does not encroach upon the role of strategy or business units. Rather, it strengthens coherence. It ensures that ambition is grounded in governance discipline, and that execution risk is surfaced before commitment.

'The chief of staff also functions as the institutional memory of the enterprise, preserving strategic context, tracking the evolution of priorities, and ensuring that new initiatives build on accumulated insight rather than restarting from zero.'

Why we need the enterprise integrator

For utilities navigating energy transition, digitalisation and rising regulatory expectations, disciplined orchestration is no longer enough. Boards demand defensibility, regulators demand transparency, investors demand capital discipline, customers demand reliability and employees demand clarity.

Under such scrutiny, executive decisions must travel through the organisation with integrity intact. This becomes particularly important during leadership transitions, such as the appointment of new CEOs. In utilities, where regulatory relationships, capital programs, and grid initiatives extend across long time horizons and multiple leadership cycles, the chief of staff helps preserve strategic context, sustain execution continuity, and reduce the risk of unintended strategic resets. The enterprise integrator and advisory chief of staff contribute by:

- Ensuring priorities cascade cleanly across business lines
- Protecting governance rigor in executive workflows
- Reducing executive bandwidth consumed by fragmentation
- Converting decision forums into accountable outcomes
- Providing consolidated, real-time visibility into risk and progress

An evolved model in practice: Saudi Energy

Saudi Energy (SE) is the largest integrated utility company in the MENA region, serving the entire Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) across the full electricity value chain, from generation and transmission to distribution and customer service, and acting as a key enabler of KSA's Vision 2030.

SE offers an example of how the chief of staff function can operate as a mature enterprise capability in practice. In recent

years, SE redefined the vision of its chief of staff organisation to activate a centralised, efficient, and strategic function that enhances decision-making, streamlines operations, and supports enterprise goals.

Today, Saudi Energy's chief of staff is an official 'sector' headed by an executive director, reporting directly to the CEO. The sector comprises four specialised departments that function as an advisory extension of the CEO's office, including Executive Centre of Excellence (CoE), CEO Office Operations, Board and Committees Executive Support, and CEO Protocol and Communications departments. The sector structure reflects an increasingly disciplined setup, where executive forums are better organised, decision tracking is more systematic, business line coordination follows defined pathways, and governance review is embedded into executive workflows.

The chief of staff organisation recognised that structure alone was insufficient, and Saudi Energy expanded the role to embed advisory depth, measurable value and enterprise-level integration into the chief of staff's mandate. This evolution was not the result of a single redesign, but a deliberate progression, from establishing structural clarity to embedding operational discipline, and delivering sustained enterprise impact. Structure provided the foundation, while activation translated the model into consistent execution and measurable outcomes.

These initiatives were not implemented simultaneously but introduced progressively as needs emerged. The CoE department played a central role in shaping and operationalising them, defining priorities, aligning stakeholders, piloting approaches and scaling adoption across the organisation.

Together, these initiatives have built the capabilities that elevate Saudi Energy's chief of staff from an execution integrator to an enterprise integrator and advisor.

Deepening advisory capability

One step in this direction was the activation of an Advisory Networking Group under the CoE department. This group draws on specialised expertise within the company alongside external experts from other energy partners.

Rather than relying on ad hoc expert inputs, SE formalised recurring sessions across strategic, technical, and industry domains. The aim was not to create parallel analysis, but to institutionalise disciplined foresight, bringing structured external and internal perspectives and insights into CEO-level discussions.

The advisory group translates these insights into decision-ready recommendations. The chief of staff brings these into CEO and executive forums, where they are aligned, approved and tracked through to implementation.

In complex utilities, this kind of structured foresight is increasingly essential as rapid energy transition, capital intensity, regulatory scrutiny and digital disruption place greater demands on coordinated, enterprise-level decision-making.

Clarifying interaction pathways

The most important structural step in utilities is the formalisation of interaction between the chief of staff and business lines. This is essential to avoid fragmentation across functions, which can lead to delays in decisions, inconsistent inputs and increased execution risks at the enterprise level. SE has implemented a structured workflow model defining:

- Trigger points for executive requests
- Clear ownership for content development
- Defined review checkpoints
- Named focal points across business lines

This reduces ambiguity and prevents last-minute escalation. It ensures that executive engagements are supported by coherent, validated inputs. In multi-business-line environments, interaction clarity is the foundation of alignment.

Institutionalising executive governance through committees

A distinctive element of SE's model is the central role of the chief of staff in managing CEO and board-level committees.

Finance, ESG, HR, Risk, and other strategic committees operate under structured governance rhythms coordinated centrally by the chief of staff. In many organisations, such committees are dispersed across functions. At SE, their orchestration sits within the chief of staff domain.

This model recognises a structural reality: critical and strategic objectives are increasingly achieved through committee-based governance mechanisms. By managing these committees centrally through the chief of staff sector, this ensures alignment across agendas, consistency in materials, disciplined follow-up on decisions, and cross-committee visibility of risks and trade-offs.

The result is not administrative control, but governance coherence.

Strengthening decision integrity

SE added a dedicated Governance, Risk and Compliance (GRC) function reporting to the chief of staff to reinforce governance oversight. The objective is not structural novelty. It is decision integrity. By synthesising legal, risk and governance perspectives into executive-ready inputs, and providing independent challenge before high-impact commitments, the GRC layer safeguards defensibility under board and regulatory scrutiny. In high-stakes industries, this discipline is strategic.

'In an era defined by regulatory, operational, technological, and stakeholder complexity, the quiet rise of the chief of staff may prove to be one of the most important organisational evolutions of our time.'

Making value visible

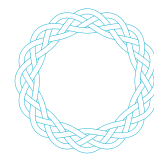
Execution without measurement weakens credibility. To address this, Saudi Energy's chief of staff has defined a new Health Index KPI that aggregates performance across alignment, agility, priority focus, and digital enablement. This KPI is customised for Saudi Energy to reposition the chief of staff organisation from tracking activity to measuring enterprise impact. By measuring how effectively CEO priorities cascade into business line objectives, how quickly executive decisions are closed, and how consistently value is realised on flagship initiatives, this KPI will reinforce accountability at the centre of the enterprise.

The emerging identity of the chief of staff

The transformation of the chief of staff function is subtle. It does not announce itself through organisational charts alone. It emerges through clarity of mandate, disciplined interaction, governance courage, measurable impact and digital fluency.

Saudi Energy's model reflects a broader reality: the chief of staff can operate as a stabilising force in complexity, not by owning strategy, but by enabling its disciplined execution. In advanced forms, the role strengthens coherence, reinforces governance rigour and ensures that executive ambition translates into accountable action.

In an era defined by regulatory, operational, technological, and stakeholder complexity, the quiet rise of the chief of staff may prove to be one of the most important organisational evolutions of our time.



Sulaiman S. Al-Ghumaiz is the Chief of Staff to the CEO of Saudi Energy (SE). In this role he leads the chief of staff function, driving the CEO's strategic agenda and overseeing the CEO's Office and managing board and executive committee engagements. He is also responsible for strengthening governance across the SE's chief of staff sector, enhancing decision-making frameworks and ensuring effective alignment between executive management and internal governance bodies. Mr Al-Ghumaiz also oversees CEO Protocol and Communications functions, managing executive engagements, strategic events and leadership communications that support organisational alignment and executive effectiveness. He is a Certified Chief of Staff® (Level 3).

Mohammad Al-Ohali serves as the head of the Executive Center of Excellence (CoE) at Saudi Energy. Reporting to the Chief of Staff (Sulaiman S. Al-Ghumaiz), he acts as a strategic architect for the CEO and chief of staff, orchestrating high-impact executive committee engagements through governance and strategic insights. Mr. Al-Ohali directs specialised advisory centers dedicated to elevating decision quality by providing the data-driven counsel and executive-ready intelligence necessary to navigate the company's most critical priorities.

A photograph of two men in business attire. An older man with glasses and a blue suit is leaning over a desk, pointing at a document. A younger man in a dark suit is smiling and looking at the document. On the desk, there is a tablet displaying charts, a calculator, and some papers. The background shows a bookshelf with books.

Navigating work culture in Asia as a chief of staff

Anny Tan

Navigating work culture in Asia as a chief of staff

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Practical tips and insights for chiefs of staff operating with Asia-based teams, on hierarchy, communication, influence and relationship building.

After nearly three decades working in executive support roles in companies across Asia (e.g. China, Vietnam, India and Thailand), I've observed that success depends not only on capability but on cultural fluency. Communication patterns, leadership expectations and decision-making norms vary across the region, yet share underlying principles that shape how influence is built and how alignment is achieved.

This article offers practical insights for chiefs of staff who operate in or with Asia-based teams, focusing on hierarchy, harmony, trust-building and cross-regional translation. These are not abstract ideas but daily dynamics that directly affect execution, partnerships and organisational cohesion.

Three core Forces in Asian work culture

1. Respect for hierarchy

Many Asian organisations emphasise respect for titles, seniority and established decision structures. By respecting hierarchy, you will grow trust with your stakeholder. Relatedly, the concept of 'saving face', protecting their dignity, and avoiding embarrassment, is foundational across Asia. Practical moves to respect hierarchy and save face, include:

- Acknowledge senior voices first in meetings
- Socialise ideas one-on-one before public discussions
- Avoid surprising leaders in group settings
- Provide context, not confrontation in discussion

Hierarchy provides structure and stability. The chief of staff should pay attention to it and modify their communication style to respect cultural expectations.

2. Harmony and indirect communication

Across Asian cultures, maintaining harmony is a strong social value. Disagreement should be expressed gently, through questions or alternative suggestions, rather than with direct confrontation. In this way, disagreement is implied but not articulated. Confucius emphasised this principle, noting that leadership grounded in virtue and proper conduct leads people to 'order themselves harmoniously.' This makes tone and context as important as the content of what you say. Chiefs of staff must also develop the skill of interpreting what is implied but not openly stated, as well as creating safe private channels for candid discussion, rather than public displays of disagreement.

Instead of disagreeing openly, you can achieve your objective by assuming the

position of positive intent. Popularised by Indra Nooyi (former chairman and CEO of PepsiCo), positive intent helps in understanding others more clearly, staying calm instead of being defensive, and building trust and opening doors to more constructive interpretations and responses. When giving or receiving feedback, keep in mind that the intent is not criticism but guidance, or care and collaboration expressed in a different way.

3. Decisiveness and speed

The 'slow start, fast finish' approach, favoured by many long-distance runners, is a business hallmark of many Asian teams. By investing time in alignment upfront, Asian teams execute with considerable speed later. Chiefs of staff can adopt this approach by doing 'heavy lifting' in task force committees early on, clearing up uncertainty and getting everyone on the same page so the team can move with greater speed and less friction.

Case study: BYD Company

When COVID-19 hit worldwide in 2020, BYD quickly shifted to producing COVID-19 masks in early 2020, launching mass production in Shenzhen by February. A team of over 3,000 engineers built the machinery in just a week. Output scaled rapidly, reaching 5 million PPE masks per day by mid-March and 50 million per day by May.¹ The masks were first used to support frontline workers and outbreak control in China, then exported worldwide. The company also began making disinfectant gels during this time. This remains a strong example of a pre-aligned Asian company moving at great speed (e.g., assembling production lines within two weeks) and rapidly reallocating resources to meet a global problem.

Reading the room and building quiet influence

Understanding the unspoken

High-context communication requires active observation. Body language, pacing and phrasing may carry important signals. A subtle comment such as 'Let's revisit later' may indicate significant concerns rather than simple postponement. Silence is also part of the conversation. It may indicate reflection, disagreement or a desire to avoid public friction. Empathy, too, is essential. It underpins strong leadership, and in today's AI-powered world, it remains one of the most important leadership capabilities.

Case study: Mr Lee Teng-hui

Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's president from 1988 to 2000, is remembered as a master of reading the room. He navigated high-stakes situations (democratisation, cross-strait relations, and internal party power struggles) by understanding the unspoken, managing pace, and keeping political tensions in check. Often appearing mild-mannered while carrying out bold reforms, he handled immense pressure without open conflict. He remains a rare example of a leader who transformed an authoritarian system into a democracy in a largely reserved and 'silent' fashion.

Trust-building takes time

'Business opportunity seldom knocks on the door of self-centred people.'²

Relationships matter deeply across Asian business cultures. Establishing trust may involve informal conversations, shared meals or consistent follow-through on commitments. Sincerity and respect are

¹ Sun, Yilei, Goh, Brenda, Donovan, Kirsten and Barbara Lewis. 'Electric car maker BYD says profits up as becomes leading mask maker', *Reuters* (28 August 2020).

² 'Unlocking Inamori's Secrets to Success through the Kyocera Philosophy, Hidden wisdoms to revolutionize your life and management skills', *Medium* (24 September 2023)

also key. This means addressing your ego. As Kazuo Inamori, the founder of Kyocera and KDDI, refers to above, egoless respect and sincerity of actions are key in Japanese and broader Asian business ecosystems. Once formed, trust becomes a strong basis for collaboration and problem-solving.

Influence through listening and leading by virtue

Chiefs of staff often achieve influence not by asserting authority but by listening carefully, distilling viewpoints clearly, and guiding stakeholders toward a common goal. By raising thoughtful questions in private, they can uncover concerns that might never surface in a larger forum. This approach has deep roots in Confucian thought. Confucius taught that virtue, what he called *de*, is the foundation of genuine leadership. A leader who embodies strong moral character does not need to command. People choose to follow. Respect, in this tradition, is not demanded through hierarchy alone but earned through conduct, through *li*, the rituals and forms of propriety that signal care for others and awareness of one's role.

For a chief of staff working across Asian contexts, this is not a philosophical footnote but a practical reality. The leader who is trusted is the one who is seen to act with integrity consistently. Not only in high-stakes moments but in the small, daily interactions that build or erode credibility over time.

Bridging global headquarters and Asian teams

'Customer number one, employee number two, shareholder number three.'³

Acting as a bridge between Global HQ and Asia is one of the most critical functions of a chief of staff. It requires translating not just language, but assumptions, expectations

and cultural norms, or what I call translating expectations in both directions. Global teams, for example, may value directness and speed, while Asian teams prioritise consensus and relationship-building. The chief of staff can help each side understand the other's reasoning and friction points, which might include:

- 'Why didn't they raise concerns earlier?'

In high-harmony cultures, public dissent may feel inappropriate.

- 'Why does this require so much relationship-building?'

Relationships underpin trust, which in turn underpins execution.

- 'Why won't anyone say no directly?'

A soft no or a request to 'reconsider options' may serve the same function.

Taking the above quote from the co-founder of Alibaba Group and Yunfeng Capital, Jack Ma as an example, we can see how Western perspectives might differ from Asian ones, in this case, China. Ma's quote demonstrates a customer-first approach to business, which might differ from many Western shareholder-first models, influencing how decisions are framed by a chief of staff across Global HQ and Asian offices.

The key is not to force one side to become the other. Instead, the chief of staff helps both sides understand the logic behind each style: directness can improve speed, while indirectness can preserve harmony and long-term cooperation. That makes difficult conversations less personal and more operational. To put it simply: when HQ asks, 'Why didn't they say no?' the chief of staff can explain that 'we need to reconsider this' may be the local version of 'no.' Likewise, when Asia asks why HQ keeps pressing for faster closure, the chief of staff can explain the

¹ 'Alibaba Founder and Executive Chairman Jack Ma Speaks with CNBC's "Squawk on the Street" Today', CNBC (19 September 2014)

urgency as a governance and market-timing concern, not disrespect. A strong chief of staff:

- Translates language as well as intent
- Creates forums where dissent can happen safely
- Keeps reminding both sides of the shared goal

That shared goal is the anchor. Whether the company speaks in customer-first, employee-first, or shareholder-first language, the chief of staff's job is to make sure the organisation understands the trade-offs and does not mistake cultural style for lack of commitment.

Practical tools for working in Asia

1. Temperature-checks

Silent concerns are often the real barrier to progress. As chief of staff, you have practical strategies to break the silence. For instance, before finalising a regional product launch, check in with regional heads by asking, 'How comfortable are you with the proposed timeline?' Be ready for the answers that come:

- Japan says they are concerned about quality assurance timelines
- Indonesia says they are fine but need more marketing support
- India says nothing in the group meeting but privately flags pricing concerns

Having checked the temperature, you can follow up with: 'What would help increase your comfort level?' and adjust the roll-out plan for the product launch to address their concerns (e.g., staggered launch, added marketing budget, pricing review). This strategy makes regional heads feel seen, heard and trusted, and avoids resistance later.

2. Dual communication channels

Use formal channels such as structured documents, presentations, and official briefings for clarity, transparency and proper record-keeping. Complement these with informal channels including messaging apps and one-to-one conversations. This facilitates sense-making, consensus-building and alignment. For example, after circulating a formal strategy deck outlining a Southeast Asia expansion, initial feedback in the meeting may appear uniformly positive. However, through informal follow-ups on platforms like WhatsApp, WeChat, or individual conversations, deeper insights often emerge:

- A Thai leader admits concerns about regulatory risk
- A Vietnamese leader says the timeline is unrealistic

These perspectives can then be synthesised, without attribution, into a follow-up memo, noting that 'several markets flagged regulatory and timing concerns', alongside recommended adjustments. This approach preserves psychological safety while ensuring that decisions are grounded in a more accurate reflection of on-the-ground realities.

3. Recognising red flags

Any of these red flags can lead to misalignment or delays later if not addressed early. For instance, during a regional leadership call:

- A country head openly challenges the CEO's direction in front of everyone
- Another leader quickly says, 'Seems we all agree, let's move forward,' even though the discussion was shallow
- The plan assumes China, Singapore, and India will adopt the same go-to-market model

As an observant chief of staff, you should slow down the momentum and suggest: 'Let's take this offline for deeper alignment across markets before locking in.' You then run follow-ups to resolve differences before they become execution problems.

4. Building a relationship map

People follow leaders they trust, and trust grows through genuine connection. Develop a simple matrix that maps each stakeholder's priorities, communication style and preferred mode of engagement. Across Asia, trust is often personal before it becomes professional. For example:

- China GM: Values hierarchy, prefers formal updates, relationship built over dinners
- India GM: Direct communicator, prefers quick calls, values speed
- Indonesia GM: Consensus-driven, prefers informal chats before decisions

Simple ways to build trust include:

- Schedule a dinner when visiting Shanghai
- Call the India GM directly for quick decisions
- Have pre-meetings with the Indonesia GM before group discussions

When relationships are strong, alignment becomes easier. Consistent, thoughtful relationship building creates trust and pays off significantly during periods of urgency or change. For example, when an urgent restructuring is needed, these leaders are more receptive because trust is already established.

Understand the cultural 'trust currency'

Asia is not homogeneous. Strategies that succeed in Singapore may fall flat in Japan, Indonesia, or India. Each culture values different behaviours as signals of trust:

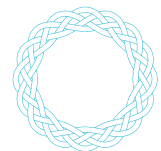
- Japan: reliability, discretion, harmony
- Singapore: competence, efficiency, clarity
- Indonesia: warmth, respect for hierarchy, patience
- India: flexibility, relationship-building, responsiveness
- China: long-term partnership, loyalty, practical value

As a chief of staff, you need to tailor your approach to each local context while still ensuring alignment with the organisation's broader goals.

Conclusion

Working effectively as a chief of staff in Asia requires adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and strong relationship-building skills.

Decision-making processes are shaped by hierarchy, the need for harmony, and the importance of trust. The chief of staff's role is to interpret these dynamics, build alignment across diverse stakeholders, and support leaders in navigating the environment with respect and clarity. By understanding cultural nuances and nurturing meaningful relationships, chiefs of staff can help leaders achieve organisational goals while strengthening trust, cohesion, and collaboration across borders.



Anny Tan is a senior executive support professional with over three decades of experience partnering with C-suite leaders across the legal, financial, property and corporate sectors. Currently as Executive Secretary to the Group CEO of GuocoLand Group, she acts as a trusted strategic partner, managing executive priorities, driving cross-functional alignment and ensuring seamless coordination across the Board, senior leadership and external stakeholders. She is a Certified Chief of Staff® (Level 2).

The wins and the weeds:

cultivating second-order thinking in the chief of staff role

Amanda Sugay Alexander



The wins and the weeds

Amanda Sugay Alexander

Quick wins have a cost that surfaces later. Second-order thinking is how chiefs of staff stay ahead of it.

‘man muss immer umkehren’, Carl Jacobi

Arguably one of the best investors of all time, Charlie Munger, built his decision-making philosophy around a principle borrowed from mathematician Carl Jacobi, quoted in German above: ‘Invert, always invert.’

Jacobi advised his students to use this mantra to generate new lines of research from pre-existing formulae. Munger applied it to business. Rather than asking ‘How do I make this succeed?’ he trained himself to ask, ‘What would make this fail... and how do I avoid that?’

The inversion principle connects to a related mental model in systems thinking and structural engineering: second-order effects (SOE).

First-order effects are the immediate, visible outcomes. SOE ask us to look past immediate results and anticipate what comes next. They involve what may surface later, often in areas we did not think to watch. Both effects can be positive or negative.

Whether we name it or not, chiefs of staff operate with a SOE mindset: part of our job is to weigh up the cost of consequences that have not yet arrived.

When I see the acronym I think immediately of its homophone, sow: to do

something that that will bring about a particular result. To extend the analogy: every decision is a seed. Some leaders gravitate toward seeds that sprout fast: the quick wins we can point to by quarter’s end. But a garden does not reveal its true shape in the first season. The initial bloom might fade quickly, and second-order effects can climb a lattice unplanned, reshaping the garden. These second order effects can be good or bad: some vines bear fruit, while others, left untended, quietly overtake the structure holding everything up.

This article surfaces second-order effects, tracing consequences of consequences and sharpening our instincts for spotting them. To illustrate this, I provide four scenarios where the quick win later came with a cost that went unnoticed at the time.

Remote work: pulling up roots

When organisations shifted to remote work models due to COVID-19, the first-order gains were real: lower overhead, broader talent access, and a more flexible workforce. Cisco, for example, cut its real estate footprint by fifty per cent saving roughly \$500 million.¹ Geographic hiring barriers dissolved just as quickly. US employers began recruiting tech talent from Boise and Raleigh instead of defaulting to Silicon Valley, while European

¹ Kidwai, Aman. ‘How much money employers can save when they switch to remote or hybrid work’, *Fortune* (15 August 2022)

employers drew talent from Lisbon, Kraków and Vilnius.²

The second-order costs surfaced gradually. Informal collaboration—hallway conversations, shared lunches, unscheduled moments—began to erode.

Drawing on data from Microsoft's entire US workforce, research from the Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley found that remote work reduced cross-group collaboration by twenty-five per cent and transformed once-interconnected networks into silos.³

Meanwhile, talent development, previously fuelled by proximity to top performers and real-time exposure to senior leaders, slowed. Researchers at Federal Reserve Bank of New York observed the consequence directly. When proximity became impossible, firms stopped building talent and started buying it, shifting hiring away from junior employees towards workers who arrived already developed.⁴

Here, an apparent operational win quietly traded away two sources of resilience: the informal collaboration that a shared workplace makes possible, and the developmental infrastructure that turns promising employees into seasoned leaders. The first sustains the trust and informal norms that hold teams together under pressure. The second expands perspective in both directions, as mentorship is received and reciprocated across generations of talent.

Although these sources of resilience take far longer to rebuild than they did to lose, organisations can recover them through remedies that a chief of staff is well-placed to develop.

SOE 1: talent erosion

Long-term collaboration and talent development were compromised for short-term savings on operating expenses.

Role of chief of staff alleviating SOE:

Collaboration architecture: A chief of staff can design the conditions under which cross-functional collaboration happens—not by scheduling more meetings, but by engineering the unscheduled moments that remote work eliminated. This means building recurring touchpoints with low agendas and high access: open office hours, working sessions across teams and visible leadership moments that recreate the informal proximity that the office once provided.

Network bridging: The Berkeley Haas research found that remote work did not just reduce collaboration—it siloed it. Chiefs of staff sit at the intersection of functions, uniquely positioned to identify where collaboration has gone dark. We can map white space: identifying which teams have stopped talking, which leaders have lost visibility on each other's work, and where decisions are being made in isolation that should be made in concert. From this position, intervention can be deliberate rather than reactive.

Proximity by proxy: When physical co-location isn't possible, a chief of staff can engineer the conditions that proximity once created naturally. This means pairing junior employees with senior leaders for strategic work, embedding emerging talent in high-stakes decisions, and creating structured exposure to how principals think and operate.

² Alexander, John. 'Remote work trends that matter in 2025: a talent strategy perspective', *JobsPikr* (29 April 2025).

³ Yang, L., Holtz, D., Jaffe, S. et al. 'The effects of remote work on collaboration among information workers', *Nature Human Behaviour*, pp. 43–54 (9 September 2021).

⁴ Natalia Emanuel, Emma Harrington, and Amanda Pallais. 'The Power of Proximity to Coworkers', *NBER Working Paper* 31880 (2023).

The developmental infrastructure that remote work quietly dismantled does not rebuild itself, it requires someone with access, influence, and a long view to champion it.

Mitigants:

- **Low cost:** Virtual rituals to create informal connections (e.g. coffee chats and non-work social channels).
- **Medium cost:** Quarterly off-sites for in-person connections designed for both casual collaboration and meaningful mentorship.
- **High cost:** A hybrid work model with designated in-office 'anchor days' to engineer the engagements that remote work eliminates.

The second-order costs of remote work did not show up on a spreadsheet. They showed up in siloed teams, stalled development, and leaders who stopped learning from each other. Recovering this ground requires someone with cross-functional visibility, proximity to the principal, and the judgment to act before problems further compound. Chiefs of staff do not just support this recovery. In many organisations they are the ones who can make this recovery possible.

Reflection

If you are a chief of staff sitting at the intersection of teams that have drifted apart, can you engineer one engagement this quarter that would not have happened otherwise?

'First-order effects are the immediate, visible outcomes. Second-order effects involve what may surface later, often in areas we did not think to watch.'

Artificial intelligence:

Miracle-Gro overuse

When organisations began embedding AI into their workflows, the first-order gains were immediate and measurable: faster output, broader capacity and individual contributors operating well above their prior ceiling. A 2023 MIT study published in *Science* gave professional writing tasks to 453 workers and found those who used ChatGPT completed tasks forty per cent faster.⁵ For knowledge workers facing growing workloads and flattening headcount, the case for adoption was compelling.

However, second-order effects surface in the quality of output, and this has been documented at scale. A 2025 KPMG study of 48,000 workers found that more than half of those who used AI without reviewing its output reported errors in what it produced.⁶ This landed in inboxes, forcing colleagues to decode vague language, fill in missing context, or redo the thinking entirely.

The productivity gain was real but unevenly distributed: speed accrued to the individual, while the hidden cost in quality—resulting in rework, lost credibility, or worse, decisions made on flawed inputs—accrued to the broader team.

⁵ Shakked Noy, Whitney Zhang. 'Experimental evidence on the productivity effects of generative artificial intelligence', *Science*, Vol 381, Issue 6654, pp. 187-192 (July 2023).

⁶ Gillespie, N., Lockey, S., Ward, T., Macdade, A., & Hassed, G. *Trust, attitudes and use of artificial intelligence: A global study 2025* (The University of Melbourne and KPMG, 2025).

SOE 2: AI quality assurance

Teams waste time correcting low-quality output rather than advancing strategies.

Role of chief of staff alleviating SOE:

Setting standards: Mandate that AI-assisted work passes through a human before it leaves a drafting screen—not to slow adoption, but to protect the quality and credibility of what the team puts its name on. The most durable way to do this is to establish a review checkpoint in approval workflows that already exist, rather than creating a new process that gets skipped under pressure. Structure holds where discretion does not.

Modelling quality: Standards are not set in a policy document. They are set every time a chief of staff decides what does and does not leave their hands. Circulating polished, human-reviewed work signals where the bar is set. So does visibly slowing down output: returning a draft with a note on what needs human judgment or declining to forward something that is not ready. The team will recalibrate to the quality the chief of staff models, not to what they are told or what is published in a policy document.

Building capabilities: Invest in structured training that covers prompt engineering, output evaluation, and use cases when not to use AI. One practical approach is for the chief of staff to lead a working session where the team stress-tests AI output together, identifying where it adds value, where it falls short, or where it cannot replicate human judgment. The goal is a shared understanding of where AI can sharpen thinking, and where it cannot substitute for it.

Mitigants:

- **Low effort:** Set the expectation in writing (e.g. in a team briefing or a direct note from the principal) that AI-generated work is never circulated without thorough human review.
- **Medium effort:** Organise in-house training on core AI skills, with concrete and role-appropriate use cases that build capability without assuming it.
- **High effort:** Develop an AI use policy that specifies where AI adds value, where human judgement is non-negotiable, and who is accountable for quality before output reaches a decision-maker.

AI will continue to accelerate what teams can produce, but in organisations where speed is rewarded and review is assumed, the second-order cost can be erosion of the quality and credibility that make the output worth reading in the first place.

Reflection

How is your organisation distinguishing between AI adoption and AI discipline and who is accountable for the difference?

The EA-to-CoS promotion: grafting without pruning

Promoting a high-performing executive assistant (EA) into a chief of staff role is one of the most intuitive moves a principal can make. The candidate knows the organisation, understands the principal's working style, and has already demonstrated the judgment and discretion that the role demands. The promotion feels like a natural next step and the first-order effects reflect that. Morale lifts.

Loyalty deepens. The organisation signals that it nurtures talent from within.

The second-order cost surfaces in the months that follow. Without an EA backfill, the promoted chief of staff rarely escapes the gravitational pull of their former responsibilities. Calendars still need managing, inboxes still need triaging, and travel still needs booking. Knowing they can do it faster than anyone else, the chief of staff keeps doing it. The strategic capacity the promotion was meant to unlock never fully materialises.

Lean budgets make backfilling feel discretionary. But the staffing decision warrants an ROI lens: a chief of staff absorbed by administrative duties is unavailable for the thought partnership, cross-functional coordination and anticipatory thinking the principal needs. The organisation pays for a strategic hire and receives an overextended operator.

SOE 3: role constraint

The chief of staff's ability to serve as a strategic partner is constrained by the EA role they were promoted out of.

Role of chief of staff and principal in alleviating SOE:

Scope definition: Before the promotion takes effect, co-author a role charter that explicitly names what the chief of staff is—and is not—responsible for going forward. Ambiguity does not resolve itself; it fills with whatever is most urgent, which is almost always administrative.

Boundary enforcement: The principal must actively redirect EA-level requests once the transition is made. If they do not hold the line, no one else will. A chief of staff cannot advocate for their own scope without appearing self-serving. Advocacy for the role must come from the top.

Transition planning: Build a 30-60-90-day plan that phases out EA responsibilities and phases in chief of staff priorities, rather than flipping a switch on day one. The chief of staff can drive this plan and the principal needs to sponsor it publicly.

Mitigants:

- **Low cost:** Promote without backfilling but set honest expectations—one person is effectively doing two jobs, and the strategic contribution will reflect that until the balance shifts.
- **Medium cost:** Promote and outsource EA responsibilities to a virtual or fractional assistant to free up chief of staff capacity incrementally.
- **High cost:** Promote and backfill the EA role, creating the clean separation of function that allows both people to work from their strengths.

When a promotion is made without a plan for the work left behind, the organisation doesn't gain a strategic partner. It gains a highly capable person whose contributions are diluted by running in two directions at once.

Reflection

If your organisation has promoted an EA to chief of staff, what steps were taken to ensure that the role, and not just the title, changed?



Workforce changes: rearranging the garden beds

I've held two leadership roles that required changing the scope of an entire department. In the first, we rebuilt from scratch—mass layoffs followed by two thousand new hires. In the second, we kept everyone on and transformed their roles instead. The organisational model changed in both cases, with the expectation that the people would change with it. Lessons from both are still unfolding.

A restructure without layoffs looks like the humane choice: morale is preserved, institutional knowledge stays intact, and the organisation demonstrates it values people. The first-order effect is sound, but the second-order effect surfaces later, and subtly. In our situation, employees transitioned into new roles without assurance that their skills and motivations matched new expectations. This misalignment produced disengagement, which showed up directly in the business.

The contrast sharpens when the restructure involved starting from scratch. A key filter was hiring for mindset alongside skill set, ensuring that new hires were committed to a different model from day one and not the legacy one. The onboarding was slower, but engagement was higher and the business results proved it.

SOE 4: workforce changes

Preserved headcount can feel like preserved morale, but in the long term exposes misalignment. Employees are neither equipped nor inspired to drive what the new model demands and unable to deliver desired results.

Role of chief of staff and principal in alleviating SOE:

Narrative ownership: Partner with the principal to communicate the why behind the change early, clearly and repeatedly, before a rumour mill fills the silence. A chief of staff can draft the messaging architecture: what leaders say first, what comes next, and what questions to anticipate before large meetings. The story of the change is as important as the change itself.

Capability-to-role alignment: Before anyone is transitioned, facilitate an honest assessment of whether skills and motivations match new requirements. This is where a chief of staff adds disproportionate value: they can hold conversations that sit awkwardly between HR and the line manager, surfacing misalignment before it becomes a performance issue. Misalignment caught at month one is a conversation. At month twelve it is a problem.

Performance management: Work with the principal to set measurable expectations for the new model and build early checkpoints into the calendar to cover KPIs and staff sentiment. The chief of staff can own the tracking cadence, flagging where targets are slipping and where employees feel misaligned, prompting next steps before the problems become habits.

Mitigants when opting to avoid layoffs:

- **Low effort:** Before transitions take effect, put in writing what success looks like in each new role, who oversees employee concerns, and when the first check-in will happen.
- **Medium effort:** Treat each role transition like a new hire experience, with a structured onboarding plan, clear milestones, and an explicit off-ramp if the fit is not working.

- **High effort:** Where the new model demands genuinely different capabilities, build the ROI case for whether redeployment is the right answer, or whether a deliberate rebuild, hiring for mindset from the start, delivers better results.

Keeping people through a restructure is not the same as setting them up to succeed in it. The second-order cost of skipping that distinction does not show up in the communication cascade, it shows up in the results.

Reflection

If you mapped every person affected by your last restructure on two axes, capability fit and motivation fit, how many would land in the correct quadrant, and how would you know?

Summary

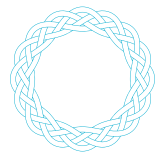
1. Remote work may save money but can erode informal collaboration and talent development.
2. AI may speed up drafting but can damage output quality and team credibility.
3. Promoting an EA to chief of staff without backfilling the role constrains strategic capacity and dilutes contributions.
4. Restructuring without layoffs may preserve morale in the short term at the later cost of performance.

What's growing around the corner?

As someone with a bias for action, I am wary of second-order thinking becoming a reason for analysis paralysis. Most of these lessons came into focus only in hindsight. No individual can anticipate every outcome. But by swapping insights across roles and industries, and weaving second-order language into how we frame challenges, we get help minimise second-order risks.

Munger championed a 'latticework of mental models', built on knowledge from multiple disciplines. Every insight we exchange strengthens that lattice, and every hard-won lesson is another vine trained along it—not for the quick bloom, but for the deep rooted system that helps our organisations hold when the weight arrives.

The second-order effects we set in motion today will not announce themselves. But chiefs of staff who think in this register, who ask not only what this decision achieves but what it quietly costs, are better placed to recognise the effects when they show themselves: the wins and the weeds.



Amanda Sugay Alexander is a Chief of Staff and Director of Commercial Operations at Genentech, the world's first biotech. A Doctor of Pharmacy by training, she brings a scientist's discipline to organisational systems and applies the same rigour to building her own portfolio of businesses. A graduate of the CSA Harvard Executive Education Programme, she serves as a CSA mentor and is pursuing her Certified Chief of Staff® (Level 2) certification. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her wife and their two small children.



The
Chief of Staff
Association

Talent

In 2026, the Chief of Staff Association acquired Vannin Chief of Staff, the world's leading talent consultancy for the chief of staff role. As a result, CSA members now belong to the only professional association that connects development, certification and career opportunity under one roof.

Whether you are seeking your next role, exploring fractional work, or looking to place a chief of staff in your organisation, the CSA gives you an advantage no other network can offer.

300

leaders served globally

10

countries of operation

60

years' collective CoS experience

What talent offers

Your next role, found

With the acquisition, the CSA now has a network of 8,000+ chiefs of staff and a 96% placement success rate.

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Find or develop the right chief of staff

The CSA helps executives appoint the right chief of staff and maximises that partnership once it is in place.

Our proprietary advisory programme and onboarding framework are built on 60 years of collective chief of staff experience, with a 100% client referral rate.

Support throughout your career

CSA members have direct access to our recruitment network, providing visibility into off-market opportunities, specialist career guidance, and the CSA Success Series: monthly live workshops designed to support you throughout your career as a chief of staff, and beyond.

Industry recognition

The Certified Chief of Staff® credential – earned through our online competency programmes or our executive education programmes – signals to employers and stakeholders that you meet the highest professional standards the role demands.

A stronger candidate

Demonstrating mastery across the profession's core skills, certification strengthens your candidacy for chief of staff roles at the highest level. Certified members are preferred candidates through our recruitment and placement offering.



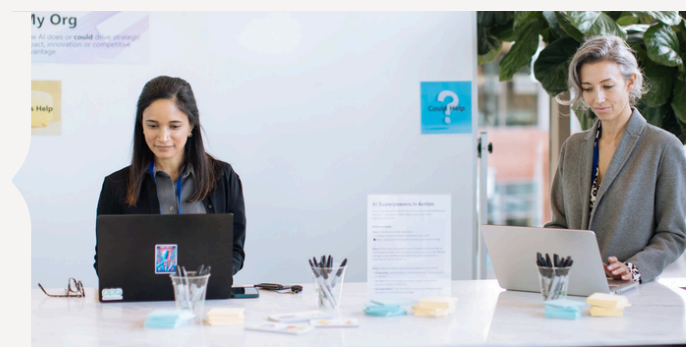
How to get certified

Online Competency Programmes

Two structured online programmes – Core Competency and Advanced Competency – taken consecutively over 10 to 12 weeks each. Built specifically for chiefs of staff, they develop the key skills the role demands.

Residential Executive Education

Multi-day residential programmes at the most prestigious business schools. Immersive, peer-led and tailored to the role, with sessions led by world-class faculty and senior practitioners across business, government and diplomacy.





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