

Explaining Knowledge Mismatch: When Organizational Control Is Mistaken for Strategic Change in Dynamic Capabilities

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Abstract: How can strategic success and strategic failure coexist within the same organization at the same time? Organizations may respond to external change by producing an internal strategic response that becomes self-referential: the response is monitored, resourced, and reported as progress, while the external change it was meant to address remains unanswered. This conceptual paper combines established theories from the dynamic capabilities, strategy diffusion, and absorptive capacity literatures, whose interaction reveals more than any single perspective alone. The conceptual approach is necessary because the condition may be invisible from within: the organization's own monitoring system cannot distinguish the strategic response from substantive renewal. Without theoretical intervention, identifying what is occurring and what should change may not be possible. Following Jaakkola's (2020) model type research design, the paper explains why the strategic response can turn inward: rather than addressing the external change that triggered it, the response targets the organization's own structures, producing administrative control that is interpreted as strategic progress. The research problem was identified through problematization: the inertia literature treats inertia as absence of action, while this paper identifies inertia manifesting as active, strategically justified action that produces measurable outputs at every stage. The model does not predict inevitabilities but identifies possibilities that existing theory permits. The paper develops three cumulative propositions. The first demonstrates that administrative control accumulates and is interpreted as strategic progress even when substantive renewal capacity does not increase. The second identifies boundary-spanning micro-contexts as sites where explorative knowledge can emerge outside management's cognitive framework. The third shows that control responses obstruct the preconditions for diffusion from these micro-contexts. The paper contributes to dynamic capabilities theory by identifying the model's process agnosticism as a structural property that permits exploitative execution to remain invisible. It extends strategy diffusion theory to intra-organizational micro-contexts and demonstrates that PACAP and RACAP can develop with contradictory orientations at different organizational levels simultaneously. For knowledge management, the paper reframes the problem from knowledge transfer to knowledge recognition, identifying an internal post-truth condition in which the formal system measures its own assumptions rather than the organization's actual responsiveness to change.

Keywords: Dynamic capabilities, Absorptive capacity, Organizational inertia

1. Introduction

An illustrative example. A competitor introduces an AI-powered service that changes the logic of customer interaction in an industry. Senior management responds by establishing an AI task force, commissioning a phased strategy, and allocating resources. The task force reports progress. Absorptive capacity strengthens. Meanwhile, a frontline employee develops an AI solution that saves 50% of processing time in a key workflow – but the solution was not commissioned by the task force, does not fit the strategy's portfolio, and bypasses its metrics. From management's perspective, it is a control problem, not a signal. The organization now has two realities: formally, its AI strategy is progressing; substantively, its most significant AI-related knowledge cannot enter the formal system because the system was not built to recognize it.

The most familiar explanation for lack of renewal is execution failure, where implementation obstacles form chains of blockages (Candido & Santos, 2015; 2019). The example, however, describes a different problem: the formal strategy is executing exactly as planned, while a working solution emerges independently on the frontline. Existing research describes organizations that are strategically engaged yet unable to renew, but it typically assumes an identifiable failure—a lock-in or a hidden gap between means and ends (Sydow et al., 2020; Jabbouri et al., 2019). Barriers to renewal are often blamed on structure: hierarchies and control mechanisms that constrain autonomy (Gilbert, 2005; Zhou et al., 2021).

The situation here suggests the problem is more fundamental. The capability is developing, the structures are in place, and the investment is sustained. Current research treats this as a capacity problem—a need to align AI tools with human expertise and build stronger absorptive capacity (Yan et al., 2026). When an organization responds by investing further in absorptive capacity, the investment itself can reinforce the standstill. The capacity develops within the same logic it was meant to transcend (Dolmark et al., 2024). Randhawa et al. (2021) document this dynamic: an organization pursues innovation while its cognitive frame remains frozen, producing reported progress without substantive change.

This raises a conceptual challenge: If an organization can build capabilities, deploy resources, and report progress—and if this is not a failure of implementation or a lack of intent—then why does nothing change? Existing explanations account for when things go wrong. They do not account for when everything goes right, yet the organization does not renew. This is the gap the paper addresses, and the conceptual view of the illustrative example.

1.1 Methodology

This conceptual paper follows Jaakkola's (2020) model type research design, building a theoretical framework that predicts relationships between constructs through formal propositions (Meredith, 1993). Each proposition identifies a causal agent that drives a particular outcome (Cornelissen, 2017).

The theories were selected because each addresses a distinct aspect of the condition that the others leave unexplained. Teece (2007) provides the process model through which organizations respond to environmental change. O'Neill et al. (1998) provide the diffusion mechanism that potentially constitutes the counterforce to the inertia this process permits. Jansen et al.'s (2005) PACAP-RACAP distinction separates potential from realized absorptive capacity, revealing where the cycle breaks. Following Lukka and Vinnari (2014), Teece and O'Neill et al. serve as domain theories that define the scope, while Jansen et al. serve as the method theory that provides the diagnostic instrument.

The research problem was identified through problematization (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011): the inertia literature treats inertia as absence of action, while this paper identifies inertia manifesting as active, strategically justified action. Six theoretical pillars provide evidential grounds for three cumulative propositions, following Hirschheim's (2008) argument structure. The propositions identify possibilities the theoretical frameworks permits.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Domain Theory: Dynamic Capabilities (Organizational Level)

Teece's (2007) dynamic capabilities model is a process model. It tells organizations what they must do to survive in changing environments: sense opportunities and threats, seize them by committing resources, and reconfigure assets and structures to match. What it does not tell is what the content of those processes should be. The model specifies the sequence but is silent on whether the organization is actually doing something new or merely reorganizing what it already does. The dynamic capabilities model has attracted sustained criticism including concerns about vagueness (Barreto, 2010) and the inability to distinguish formal execution from substantive effectiveness (Collis & Anand, 2019). This paper identifies a specific structural property that underlies these limitations: process agnosticism with respect to content. This permits all three phases to be completed exploitatively while remaining invisible to management.

Sensing requires scanning the environment for new technologies and opportunities (Teece, 2007), but Collis and Anand (2019) show that these scanning processes tend to filter information through existing structures and cognitive frames. Seizing centres on decision-making protocols (Teece, 2007). Carvalho (2023) points out that these are the ostensive aspect of routines – the formal description of how things should be done. When seizing relies on formal protocols, it can become a procedural exercise. Resources get committed, but the underlying strategic logic does not change. Reconfiguring is supposed to complete the cycle by restructuring assets and capabilities (Teece, 2007). Restructuring the formal architecture does not guarantee that the people inside it will do anything differently. Carvalho (2023) makes this distinction between the ostensive and the performative: you can redesign the structure without changing the practice. Collis and Anand (2019) go further, arguing that established routines can actively constrain the range of strategic options rather than expand it.

Teece (2007) himself concedes that the capacity to sense and seize is more art than science. Process agnosticism is not a minor limitation but a structural property that enables strategic stagnation invisible to management. The formal process produces measurable outputs at every stage, but substantive renewal has no corresponding metric, and its absence goes unnoticed.

2.2 Domain Theory: Internal Strategic Diffusion and Micro-Contexts (Micro-Context Level)

O'Neill, Poudier and Buchholtz (1998) show that strategies diffuse across populations of organizations through local contexts and network connections. The effectiveness of diffusion depends on the compatibility between the originating and receiving context. Their model was developed at the inter-organizational level, but the

mechanism itself contains no level-specific constraints. It operates through local context, network-mediated spread, and context-dependent effectiveness. These are structural properties of social systems, not properties unique to relations between separate organizations. Units, teams, and functional boundaries within an organization constitute local contexts connected by internal networks in exactly the same structural sense.

The micro-context, as defined here, is the socio-psychological and functional space at organizational boundaries where top-down strategic intent meets localized complex adaptive systems (Moyo, 2023). These are not passive relay points. Kristiansen and Schweizer (2021) describe them as filtration points through the Corporate Immune System, where incoming capabilities are evaluated against established local routines. What typically happens is a translation process: the formal shell of the capability passes through, but its transformative substance is neutralized in favour of local operational stability.

Dewett et al. (2007) call this the implementation gap – the space between symbolic adoption and actual behavioural change. An organization can adopt sensing and seizing as formal routines without anyone on the ground doing anything differently. The gap is especially visible in boundary spanning and internal mobility. People who move between units are supposed to carry strategic knowledge with them. In practice, they face immediate pressure to conform to the meaning-making patterns of whatever unit they enter (Ray, 2024; Moyo, 2023). Social cohesion and local efficiency win out. Disruptive knowledge gets diluted or abandoned.

2.3 Method Theory: Potential and Realized Absorptive Capacity

Jansen, Van Den Bosch and Volberda (2005) make a distinction that turns out to be critical for this paper's argument. They separate potential absorptive capacity (PACAP) – the ability to acquire and assimilate knowledge – from realized absorptive capacity (RACAP) – the ability to transform and exploit it. PACAP is built through coordination capabilities: cross-functional interfaces, participation in decision-making, job rotation. RACAP requires something different – socialization capabilities like connectedness and shared socialization tactics, together with systems capabilities like formalization.

This distinction is what allows the paper to diagnose where things go wrong in Teece's process model and why the failure stays hidden. An organization invests in coordination capabilities. Cross-functional teams, participatory decision-making, and job rotation develop PACAP, and new knowledge gets assimilated into the formal system. New knowledge enters the organization and gets assimilated into the formal system. But none of this automatically activates RACAP. Jansen et al. (2005) are explicit on this point: without corresponding investment in socialization capabilities, the transformation of acquired knowledge into new operational routines does not follow. Burisch and Wohlgemuth (2016) explain why this state tends to persist. Organizations operate through simplification and selectivity. Management watches what it can measure – the coordination activities, the cross-functional meetings, the knowledge management metrics – and what it sees looks like progress. The administrative success of coordination gets mistaken for transformational progress. The underlying operational reality does not change, but the monitoring system is not built to see that.

The location of this failure within Teece's framework is specific. It sits in the transition between seizing and reconfiguring. Sensing and seizing draw heavily on exactly the coordination and decision-making structures that fuel PACAP. They produce visible outputs: strategic plans, resource allocation decisions, alignment reports. The formal process looks healthy. Reconfiguring, however, requires the socialization capabilities that drive RACAP – and if those capabilities have not been built, reconfiguring does not happen in any substantive sense. Heracleous et al. (2017) document precisely this pattern in the Xerox PARC case: an organization with exceptionally high PACAP that acquired breakthrough knowledge but never reconfigured itself around it. Management believed it was acting dynamically because planning and coordination were active. The operational core remained untouched.

Section 2 identified where the failure occurs. The following six pillars explain why it persists.

3. Building the Argument: Six Theoretical Pillars

3.1 Structural Inertia as Selection Outcome

Hannan and Freeman (1984) demonstrate that selection favours organizations that reproduce their structures reliably. Reliability requires reproducibility, and reproducibility produces inertia. In stable environments, inertia is a competitive advantage – it is what got the organization where it is. Recent reviews confirm that this selection logic remains operative. Institutionalisation of goals and actions reinforces reliability and accountability but simultaneously encourages replication and exploitation of existing competencies (Ghonim et al., 2026). The consequence is that when the need for exploration is recognized, the action repertoire

available to management is exploitative, because the organizational core has been built on reproducibility. Management has learned to lead through the very mechanisms that now prevent renewal. The organization does not lack the will to explore, it lacks the tools.

3.2 Ambidexterity Requires Tension

O'Reilly and Tushman (2008) argue that ambidexterity requires exploitation and exploration alignments that are contradictory. Contradiction produces tension, and tension is a necessary property of ambidexterity, not a side effect. If there is no tension, there is no ambidexterity – only exploitation dressed in the language of exploration. This provides a diagnostic criterion that connects directly to the PACAP-RACAP gap identified in Section 2.3. When PACAP develops without RACAP, the organization acquires and assimilates new knowledge but does not transform it. There is no contradiction between what the organization says it is doing and what it actually does, because the formal system reports progress. Because tension is absent, management receives no signal that something is wrong.

3.3 Cognitive Inertia and the Managerial Mental Model

Tripsas and Gavetti (2000) demonstrate that capability inertia and cognitive inertia are independent of each other. An organization can develop new capabilities without its managerial cognitive model changing. The cognitive framework does not function as a filter that lets some information through and blocks other information. It functions as a map that determines where one looks and what one considers possible. Beliefs direct search processes, which means new capabilities are built within the old business logic. The operative level may recognize the problem, but the managerial cognitive model and hierarchical position prevent the signal from reaching decision-making. This pillar explains why the PACAP-RACAP gap in Section 2.3 does not trigger corrective action from above: management's cognitive map does not include the possibility that formally successful processes could be substantively empty.

3.4 Resource Rigidity and Routine Rigidity

Gilbert (2005) demonstrates that resource rigidity and routine rigidity are separate forms of inertia that can move in opposite directions simultaneously. Threat recognition reduces resource rigidity – management allocates resources to the perceived problem. But simultaneously, threat recognition strengthens routine rigidity through three mechanisms: authority concentrates, experimentation decreases, and focus remains on existing resources. Overcoming one form of inertia actively worsens the other. Authority concentration is particularly significant. Decision-making moves upward in the hierarchy – to exactly those managers whose cognitive model Tripsas and Gavetti (2000) showed to be frozen. Resources flow, but they flow through routines that cannot transform them.

3.5 Strategic Inertia as Active Decision-Making

Perini, Carneiro and Miller (2024) identify that strategic inertia can manifest as distorted response, where management recognizes the need for change and makes active decisions, but the decisions are anchored in the existing logic. The organization executes strategic processes that appear to be renewal while they actually reinforce the status quo. Perini et al. (2024) treat distorted response as a recognizable pathology – something that can, in principle, be diagnosed. This paper extends their observation to a situation they do not address: one in which the distorted response is not recognized as distorted, because it is strategically coherent and considered successful within the organization. There is nothing to diagnose, because nothing appears to be wrong.

3.6 Inertia as Optimal in Slow Environments

The preceding pillar explained why the condition is not recognized internally. This pillar explains why it is not corrected externally. Stieglitz, Knudsen and Becker (2016) demonstrate that in slowly changing environments, the most successful organizations are often more inert than less successful ones, because continuous exploration undermines performance. Stieglitz et al. show that this favouring is not just structural but rational: inertia produces better outcomes when the environment changes slowly. The problem is that current theory assumes exploration, when it occurs, is genuine. It does not account for the possibility that what appears as exploration is the execution of dynamic capabilities that have been absorbed into the winning inertia.

The six pillars demonstrate that explaining the condition requires combining multiple theoretical perspectives, as no single perspective accounts for why it occurs and persists. From the perspective of existing theory, a self-reinforcing cycle is possible: structure can produce the condition, cognition can prevent its recognition, and

the environment can validate the outcome. Internal diffusion proceeds, but what diffuses is the existing logic rather than the explorative knowledge emerging at boundaries. The propositions that follow identify what this configuration produces.

4. Propositions

4.1 Proposition 1: Formal Control as Perceived Strategic Progress

Gilbert (2005) demonstrates that threat recognition concentrates authority in management. When authority concentrates, management decides on organizational mechanisms – which processes to build, which metrics to monitor, which capabilities to invest in. Jansen et al. (2005) demonstrate that coordination capabilities – cross-functional interfaces, participation in decision-making, job rotation – strengthen PACAP. These are precisely the kinds of mechanisms that concentrated authority tends to produce. But without corresponding investment in socialization capabilities, RACAP does not activate. The formal system reports progress at every stage while the organization's substantive capacity to respond does not increase.

Proposition 1: Administrative attempts to manage uncertainty through formal structures increase organizational control. As bureaucratic activity increases, this control is interpreted as strategic progress even when the organization's substantive capacity to respond to environmental change does not increase.

4.2 Proposition 2: Explorative PACAP in Boundary-Spanning Micro-contexts

Proposition 1 establishes that formal systems are calibrated by management's cognitive framework. Tripsas and Gavetti (2000) show that this framework functions as a map determining where one looks – formal systems detect what the map recognizes as relevant. Jansen et al. (2005) demonstrate that PACAP requires the coordination capabilities described in Proposition 1. However, the framework does not exclude the possibility that these capabilities can manifest in boundary-spanning micro-contexts not designed by management. Because these micro-contexts are not calibrated by management's cognitive framework, explorative PACAP can emerge in them. The operative level may recognize the problem, but management's framework can prevent the signal from rising. Explorative PACAP can therefore emerge at boundaries before it emerges in formal systems, because formal systems are, according to Proposition 1, built to produce exploitative PACAP.

Proposition 2: Boundary-spanning micro-contexts can produce explorative PACAP before formal management systems, because formal systems are calibrated to detect what management's cognitive framework recognizes as relevant.

4.3 Proposition 3: Control Obstructs Diffusion

Proposition 2 establishes that explorative PACAP can emerge at boundaries. Jansen's framework permits local PACAP-RACAP transitions in these contexts. O'Neill et al. (1998) demonstrate that diffusion proceeds through network connections and depends on contextual compatibility – conditions that exist structurally between intra-organizational micro-contexts. But Proposition 1 establishes that management's response to perceived threat concentrates authority, decreases experimentation, and focuses on existing resources.

Gilbert (2005) shows that these mechanisms strengthen routine rigidity precisely when resource rigidity decreases. Kristiansen and Schweizer (2021) demonstrate that the Corporate Immune System evaluates incoming capabilities against established local routines, filtering out transformative substance while preserving administrative form. Dewett et al. (2007) show that symbolic adoption can satisfy formal requirements without corresponding behavioural change. The control mechanisms that Proposition 1 describes narrow exactly the conditions that O'Neill et al. identify as necessary for effective diffusion. Contextual compatibility is reduced because receiving contexts are locked into existing routines. Network connections are weakened because authority concentration restricts lateral interaction.

Proposition 3: If strategic renewal in continuity-oriented organizations unfolds through diffusion from boundary-spanning micro-contexts, increased control responses obstruct the structural and contextual preconditions that diffusion requires.

5. Discussion: Knowledge Management Implications

The configuration that the propositions produce is a knowledge management problem (Figure 1). The formal KM infrastructure develops PACAP through coordination capabilities and assimilates knowledge into the existing logic, because the infrastructure is calibrated by management's cognitive framework (Tripsas & Gavetti, 2000). Simultaneously, explorative PACAP emerges at organizational boundaries in micro-contexts not

designed by management. The organization operates two knowledge systems in parallel: one visible, resourced, and exploitative; the other informal, unrecognized, and potentially explorative. The formal system reports progress that is administratively true but substantively incomplete – an internal post-truth condition produced not by deliberate distortion but by a monitoring system that cannot distinguish administrative truth from substantive truth.

The frontline AI solution described in the introduction was not a transfer problem – it was a recognition problem. The KM literature locates the knowledge problem in transfer and sharing (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This paper suggests it occurs earlier: management fails to recognize boundary knowledge as relevant because its cognitive framework does not contain the category. Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) call this non-reflexivity. Reclaiming organizational knowledge requires not better KM infrastructure but a shift in what management recognizes as knowledge worth attending to.

The propositions suggest that management must recognize how a chosen strategic response can itself constrain the organization's capacity for exploration. If Proposition 1 holds, the formal system cannot distinguish administrative progress from substantive renewal. If Proposition 3 holds, control responses obstruct the conditions that diffusion requires. This implies that the explorative role can be assigned to boundary-spanning entities that operate outside the formal strategic framework – not as unmanaged activity, but as a recognized organizational form. Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004) provide the theoretical basis for this: contextual ambidexterity distributes the decision about what knowledge is relevant to individuals who operate at the boundaries where explorative knowledge emerges.

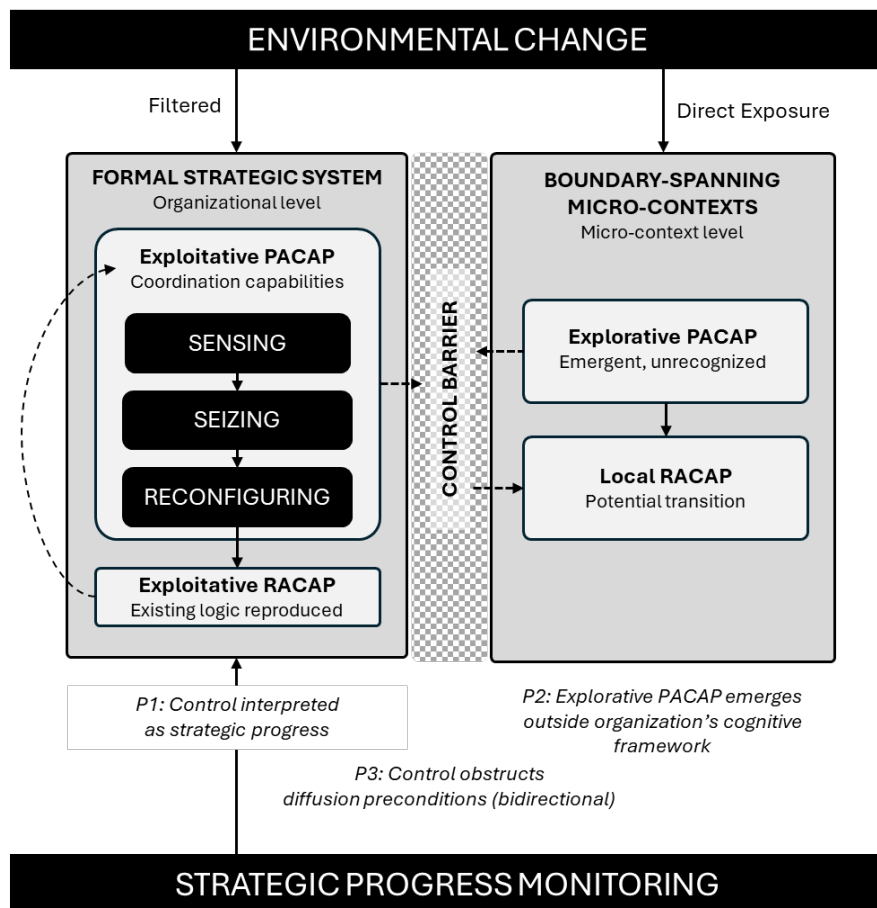


Figure 1: The conceptual knowledge mismatch model

6. Contribution and Conclusion

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

First, the paper identifies a structural property of Teece's (2007) dynamic capabilities model that has not been explicitly recognized in the literature: process agnosticism with respect to content. The model permits a state in which sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring are formally executed while the content of each phase remains

exploitative. The contribution is not a critique of the model but a demonstration of a possibility that its structure allows.

Second, the paper extends O'Neill, Pouder and Buchholtz's (1998) strategy diffusion framework from the inter-organizational level to intra-organizational micro-contexts. It identifies a new boundary condition for diffusion: control responses that obstruct the structural and contextual preconditions diffusion requires. The finding that control and diffusion can operate as simultaneous and conflicting structural properties within the same organization adds a dimension that existing diffusion research has not addressed.

Third, the paper demonstrates that Jansen, Van Den Bosch and Volberda's (2005) PACAP-RACAP distinction can reveal a condition invisible to other frameworks: exploitative and explorative absorptive capacity developing at different organizational levels simultaneously. This extends the use of the PACAP-RACAP distinction from a diagnostic of unit-level knowledge processes to a diagnostic of organizational-level strategic coherence, and positions it as a knowledge management instrument capable of detecting what this paper has described as an internal post-truth condition.

6.2 Conclusion

The condition this paper describes – an organization that builds capabilities, allocates resources, reports progress, and does not renew – is not a consequence of poor management. It is a possibility that the structure of current strategic models permits. The propositions identify mechanisms through which this possibility is realized and becomes self-reinforcing. They also identify where it can be interrupted: at the boundary-spanning micro-contexts where explorative knowledge emerges before the formal system recognizes it.

The propositions identify possibilities, not inevitabilities. They require empirical investigation across organizational contexts. Any organization relying on formal KM systems to assess its own renewal capacity should consider the possibility that the system is measuring its own assumptions rather than its actual responsiveness to environmental change.

Ethics Declaration: This study is conceptual and does not involve human participants, personal data, or empirical data collection. Ethical clearance was not required.

AI Declaration: AI tools (Claude, Anthropic; Gemini, Google) were used to replace a missing co-author throughout the research process, including simplification of the original complex idea, stress-testing of arguments, text drafting and revision, and reference verification. All inputs to the paper were curated and accepted or rejected by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content.

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