The Hierarchy of Strategic Intent: A Standardized Architecture for Purpose-driven Organizational Design

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Abstract: The proliferation of purpose-driven business models and informal strategic terminology has blurred distinctions among purpose, mission, vision, and values, complicating organizational design and accountability. We propose the Hierarchy of Strategic Intent (HSI), a seven-component teleological framework rooted in the Quintuple Bottom Line of Responsible Business (people, planet, profit, ethics, equity) that standardizes and integrates purpose, mission, vision, and values with governance, legal form, and management structure. HSI addresses a gap in the responsible-business literature: the absence of a coherent architecture linking aspirational language to the administrative systems that either support or undermine it. The framework extends strategic-intent theory by specifying how purpose cascades into structure, and it offers entrepreneurs, established firms, and investors a diagnostic tool for identifying where an organization's stated commitments are, or are not, structurally embedded. The Integrated Performance and Impact Cycle operationalizes HSI into measurable, repeatable performance and is developed in a companion paper.

Keywords: Responsible business, Responsible management, Organizational purpose, Strategic intent, Governance frameworks, Stakeholder alignment, Meaningful challenge

1. Introduction

Corporate purpose has become a defining concern for contemporary organizations. From Fortune 500 companies to startups, firms increasingly articulate intentions that extend beyond profit generation. Yet strategic purpose is only as credible as the structures that support it, and many organizations struggle to translate high-level aspirations into governance, legal form, and management systems that reliably guide decisions and behavior.

This paper addresses that challenge by proposing the Hierarchy of Strategic Intent (HSI), a seven-component architecture—purpose, mission, vision, values, legal form, governance, and management structure—that standardizes the terminology of strategic intent and specifies how each component constrains and enables the ones below it. Table 1 introduces normalized definitions for all seven components.

Table 1: Normalized Definitions of the Seven Components of the HSI

Component	Definition
Purpose	Purpose is cultural and strategic: **Why** we do what we do. An actionable, measurable, outward looking, meaningful challenge. Enable a strategy to solve a problem for those outside the organization, profitably and without creating new problems, (Mayer, et.al 2021).
Mission	Mission is strategic: **What** we do. The operational mechanism of impact (Collins & Porras, 1996).
Vision	Vision: **Where** we're going, and by when (Collins & Porras, 1996).
Values	Values: **Who** we are. The principles and standards that we commit to uphold and to which we are held accountable.
Legal Form	The legal structure chosen to organize the business, through which financial and legal relationships are formalized. A foundation for organizational design.
Governance	The mechanism in which values are institutionalized (Nieto, 2015).
Management Structure	The system that organizes managerial roles, responsibilities, and authority within the organization.

HSI makes two contributions. First, it extends strategic-intent theory by specifying a hierarchy that connects purpose to the administrative systems through which it is enacted. Second, it offers a diagnostic tool: because each component of the hierarchy shapes the ones beneath it, misalignment between any two components helps explain organizational dysfunction, from disengagement to reputational failure. A companion paper introduces the Integrated Performance and Impact Cycle (IPIC) framework (O'Brien and Shockley, in

preparation, 2027), which operationalizes HSI through a tool-agnostic management cycle linking strategic aspiration to measurable, repeatable impact.

The paper unfolds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on strategic intent and purpose failure. Sections 3 and 4 examine the role of language and terminological confusion. Section 5 develops HSI's seven components and its diagnostic value. Section 6 illustrates HSI's application to screening and design. Section 7 introduces an HSI-based maturity model. Section 8 discusses implications and future research, and Section 9 concludes.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The paper's purpose-first orientation draws on the responsible-business philosophy and the Quintuple Bottom Line—Profit, People, Planet, Ethics, and Equity—developed by Kamath at California State University Monterey Bay (O'Brien & Kamath, 2020). This tradition views business as a social institution whose legitimacy depends on how it creates value across multiple constituencies, not solely on financial performance. From this perspective, purpose cannot remain a rhetorical statement separate from organizational design; it must shape the strategies, structures, systems, and accountabilities through which the organization operates.

2.1 The Challenge of Purpose

Organizations increasingly articulate commitments to people, planet, ethics, and equity alongside profit. Yet most struggle to translate these aspirations into coherent structures. Purpose statements, or mission, vision, or values statements confused with purpose, go slack when they describe what a company does or how it wants to be seen, with no real tension to resolve. Only a "meaningful challenge" statement, one that names an external, measurable gap in the world and for whom or how things will change due to the organization's actions, is strategically actionable and can reliably produce impact.

Purpose statements often remain disconnected from governance, decision rights, and management systems, creating a gap between what organizations claim and what they are designed to deliver (Bart & Hupfer, 2004; Henderson, 2020). This gap persists because purpose introduces multi-stakeholder commitments that traditional structures—optimized for financial performance—are not built to support (Freeman, 1984; Mayer, 2018). The challenge, therefore, is not simply to define purpose but to embed it: organizations must ensure purpose shapes strategy, structures, and performance systems in ways that enable consistent, stakeholder-centered outcomes (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Kaplan & Norton, 1996).

2.2 Why Purpose Fails in Practice

Purpose often fails in practice because organizations rely on inwardly focused, non-strategic language. Thus, the structural and managerial capabilities needed to support strategy are missing. Purpose statements influence behavior only when embedded in governance, incentives, and operational routines (Bart & Hupfer, 2004). Intentions without reinforcement systems lead to inconsistent execution and fragmented initiatives (Keller & Price, 2011). Three recurring patterns explain why purpose breaks down: structural misalignment, when governance, legal form, and decision rights remain anchored in traditional shareholder-centric models (Mayer, 2018); managerial inconsistency, when performance systems default to financial metrics despite broader purpose commitments (Kaplan & Norton, 1996); and fragmented initiatives, when purpose-focused efforts take the form of isolated projects rather than integrated organizational commitments (Keller & Price, 2011).

Ries (2026) reinforces this diagnosis, arguing that corporate failure is chiefly structural rather than ethical. An HSI analysis of Whole Foods shows how a firm with a genuinely articulated purpose and loyal customers was nevertheless unable to resist activist investor pressure because its Delaware C-Corp structure provided no legal protection for its purpose. HSI's explicit attention to legal form as a seventh architectural component addresses precisely the structural gap that Ries identifies. Directional clarity of the kind HSI provides is a necessary but not sufficient condition for credible impact; it must be paired with the operational discipline detailed in the IPIC companion paper.

3. Language, Reality, and Strategic Clarity

The effectiveness of HSI depends on a disciplined relationship among purpose, mission, vision, values, governance, legal form, and management structure—and that discipline begins with language. When the

meaning of purpose, mission, vision, and values is blurred, the distinction between aspiration and action collapses, making it difficult to design systems that reliably produce measurable impact.

3.1 Words Shape Reality

HSI is rooted in a fundamental principle: the words leaders use to describe organizational intentions shape shared understanding and, over time, help constitute cultural reality through repeated use and institutionalization (Cuginotti, 2025). When organizations fail to distinguish clearly among purpose, mission, vision, and values—treating them as interchangeable or allowing them to drift conceptually—the resulting ambiguity undermines stakeholder communication, strategic focus, and operational coherence (Bartkus et al., 2000).

By contrast, organizations that articulate a clear core ideology and establish precise definitions for each element of strategic intent create the cognitive clarity required for long-term alignment (Collins & Porras, 1996). The Toyota Management System illustrates this vividly. Rooted in The Toyota Way, it uses terms such as *kaizen* ("continuous improvement") with shared, organization-wide meaning; because people throughout the system understand both the vocabulary and the underlying concepts, the Toyota Production System enables fast, coordinated responses and consistent operational excellence (Liker, 2004; Ohno, 1988). Cognitive clarity becomes structural clarity: strategic vocabulary is not a cosmetic exercise but a form of infrastructure. If leaders cannot say clearly what they mean by purpose, mission, vision, and values, they cannot credibly expect governance, legal form, and management to embody those concepts.

3.2 Why Precision Matters

Purpose, mission, vision, and values statements should be short, specific, and easy to remember, yet challenging and inspirational. Patagonia, the outdoor clothing company and certified B Corp, distills its entire reason for being into nine words: "We are in business to save our home planet" (Patagonia, 2024). Such statements illustrate several design principles that underpin HSI: they focus on the organization's ultimate contribution rather than a product category, use everyday language, and remain concise enough to guide decisions at every level. They are also distinct from mission and vision—Patagonia's purpose does not describe specific activities or time-bound goals. Clear differentiation among these elements creates space for the mission to describe what the organization does now and for the vision to specify where it intends to be, and by when.

3.3 Clarity and Brevity as Design Principles

Because language shapes reality, purpose, mission, and vision must be short, memorable, and precise enough to anchor design choices. Brevity forces clarity: a statement that cannot be expressed concisely is difficult to embed consistently. In HSI, examples like Patagonia's are not offered as slogans to copy but as evidence that precision and brevity make structural alignment possible. When leaders define strategic intent with clear, differentiated language, they create the conditions for governance, legal form, and management structure to be evaluated and redesigned in light of that intent. Clear words become the foundation for clear systems.

4. Terminological Confusion in the Literature

If language shapes organizational reality, then inconsistent terminology does more than confuse—it undermines structural alignment. Several foundational studies document the interchangeable use of core strategic terminology. Kirkpatrick (2017, p. 6-14) finds that vision, mission, and values statements "are often confused with each other, partly due to a lack of standard, accepted definitions," and shows that organizations routinely blur the boundaries among these statements. Cady et al. (2011) offer one of the most widely cited analyses of what mission, vision, and values statements truly communicate. Alegre et al. (2018), synthesizing 53 articles, find that "mission statements are widely used in practice but poorly researched in theory" (p. 456) and trace persistent definitional ambiguity surrounding mission statements since the early 1980s. Bart and Baetz (1998) report that 90% of surveyed firms issue mission and vision statements, yet the terminology for what these statements should contain varies widely, contributing to conceptual disorder. This disorder is precisely what HSI seeks to resolve by providing a standardized set of definitions and a structural hierarchy that connects purpose to administrative structures and systems.

5. The Hierarchy of Strategic Intent

5.1 Formalizing Strategic Intent: HSI

The seven integrated components of HSI—purpose, mission, vision, values, legal form, governance, and management structure—create continuity from purpose to impact. Rather than treating these as isolated statements or administrative choices, HSI frames them as a cascading, interconnected architecture (O'Brien, 2024).

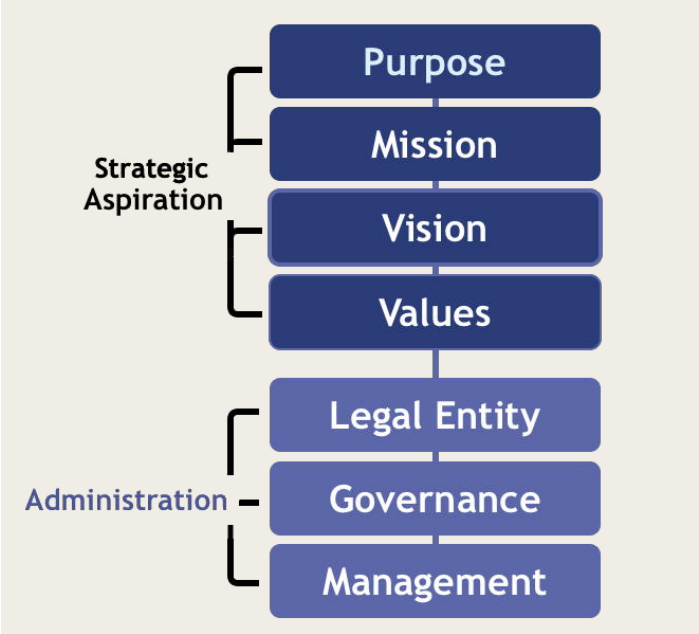


Figure 1: The Hierarchy of Strategic Intent

5.2 The Cascade Principle

HSI operates according to the cascade principle (Lafley & Martin, 2013). Each component informs and constrains the components below it. Lafley and Martin (2013) applied this logic at Procter & Gamble, where they report that the resulting strategy contributed to substantial increases in sales, profits, and market value, and they encourage practitioners to make the cascade a dynamic two-way flow rather than a rigid top-down exercise. Related work on cascading in the Balanced Scorecard reinforces this logic, emphasizing goal alignment throughout the organization (Kaplan & Norton, 1996).

In creating an HSI, the process is iterative and mutually reinforcing rather than strictly linear. Purpose—the foundational element—provides the context within which mission and vision develop. Mission and vision, in turn, both invoke and direct the values the organization must embody to pursue them authentically. Values are reflected in the design of the management organization and shape the choice of governance structures and legal form.

Ries (2026, chap. 3) describes this dynamic, referred to in HSI as the three administrative elements, as building a "governance fortress"—the structural and legal architecture through which organizational ethos is encoded such that it persists through leadership succession and investor pressure. His comparative analysis of Whole Foods and Costco illustrates the difference between purpose embedded rhetorically (the former) and purpose embedded architecturally (the latter), lending empirical weight to HSI's insistence that governance and legal form are design imperatives rather than administrative afterthoughts.

5.3 The Four Aspirational Components of the HSI

The first four components of HSI—purpose, mission, vision, and values—form the organization's aspirational core (O'Brien 2024). They define intent before structure and provide the conceptual foundation from which governance, legal form, and management systems must follow.

5.3.1 Purpose: The existential "why"

Purpose is not the exclusive domain of social enterprises or nonprofit organizations; any business, regardless of sector or ownership structure, can be purpose-driven. The presence of purpose alone does not determine legal structure, governance, or management model; it establishes the foundational intent that should guide subsequent organizational decisions. When purpose is clear and embedded in culture, it generates intrinsic motivation, guides resource allocation and decision-making, and encourages employees to approach their work with genuine enthusiasm and a sense of meaning.

Colin Mayer of Saïd Business School argues that a purpose statement should express a firm's desire "to solve the problems of people and planet profitably and not profit from causing problems" (Mayer et al., 2020, p. 4). Purpose, then, becomes strategy. As Zein Abdalla, a director at Cognizant and board advisor to Mars, Incorporated, observes: "In elevating purpose, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is only powerful when it is part of an integrated ecosystem of vision, strategy, and values" (Enacting Purpose Initiative, 2021, p. 14). Purpose should shape the structure, not be shaped by it.

5.3.2 Mission: The operational "what"

Mission answers the question, "What are we doing now to pursue our purpose?" and describes the mechanism of impact—the services, programs, or offerings that make purpose tangible (Collins & Porras, 2011). A well-crafted mission is specific enough to guide operational decisions yet flexible enough to evolve as capabilities and conditions change. Mission serves as the bridge between aspirational intent and day-to-day execution.

5.3.3 Vision: The temporal future state "where and by when"

Vision defines the future state an organization aims to achieve within a specific timeframe, aligned with its purpose. Temporal anchoring is therefore essential: vision must specify *where* the organization is going and *by when*. Unlike purpose, which is enduring, vision is episodic—it sets a target for a defined strategic period and is revised as the organization progresses. Distinguishing purpose from time-bound vision prevents organizations from mistaking a dreamy notion for near-term strategic objectives.

5.3.4 Values: The behavioral "how" and the bridge to structure

Values articulate the principles and standards the organization commits to upholding. They answer the question, "How do we conduct ourselves?" and serve as the bridge between strategic intent and administrative structure. Values are not aspirational slogans; they are commitments against which stakeholders can hold the organization accountable (Lencioni, 2002). Because values shape expectations for behavior, they naturally inform governance, legal form, and management design. Organizations that claim values they do not structurally support risk cynicism, disengagement, and reputational damage.

Many cooperatives and employee-owned firms use one-member-one-vote ownership and elected boards to codify transparency and democratic participation in their governance structures (Mariño, 2020; Sgarro, 2023; Groban, 2019). When values are honored in rhetoric while organizational structures contradict them, the credibility of the entire enterprise and its brand collapses. HSI therefore emphasizes that values are commitments that must be architecturally embedded in organizational structure, not merely held beliefs.

5.4 The Diagnostic Value of HSI

HSI functions not only as a design framework but also as a diagnostic tool. Because each component of the hierarchy shapes the components below it, misalignment among them often helps explain organizational dysfunction. When firms experience disengagement, stakeholder alienation, ethical failure, reputational damage, or strategic drift, HSI helps locate the structural source of the problem.

Misalignment between values and governance can generate cynicism and weaken commitment, especially when stated principles are not reflected in decision-making authority or oversight systems (Cha & Edmondson, 2006; Çivilidağ et al., 2025). Misalignment between purpose and legal form can likewise create incentive conflicts that default to the entity's dominant logic, often at the expense of stakeholders or the environment (Hayden & Bodie, 2025).

The Etsy case illustrates this dynamic. Etsy publicly positions itself as "the global marketplace for unique and creative goods" (Etsy, 2022) and earned B Corp certification in 2012, but it did not amend its Delaware articles

of incorporation to embed that social-benefit purpose. As a result, directors remained bound by conventional fiduciary duties to shareholders and could not legally prioritize aspirational stakeholder benefits over shareholder returns. This structural gap left the company more vulnerable to activist pressure, leadership changes, and cost-cutting, reshaping its strategic direction and dropping B Corp certification in 2017.

Ries (2026) offers a complementary diagnosis through the concept of "financial gravity"— "the force that no one controls, but everyone obeys." (Ries, 2026, Chap. 3). When legal form and governance are not architecturally aligned with purpose, financial gravity operates by default, pulling behavior toward outcomes leaders may never have intended. HSI's diagnostic value lies in making that gravitational field visible before it becomes irreversible.

6. HSI in Practice: Screening and Design

HSI is designed not only as a conceptual model but as a practical diagnostic and design tool. This section illustrates two primary applications: screening, which uses HSI to assess whether an organization's architecture structurally supports its stated commitments, and design, which uses HSI to build or strengthen that coherence.

6.1 Screening

Screening evaluates whether an organization's stated commitments are structurally supported by its purpose, governance, legal form, and management systems. It does not judge the content of an organization's aspirations; it assesses the coherence between what the organization claims and how it is designed to operate. Effective screening asks three core questions: Is purpose structurally embedded, or does the organization rely on rhetoric unsupported by governance, incentives, or legal commitments (Henderson, 2020)? Do values shape decision rights, or are they disconnected from the mechanisms through which power is exercised (Freeman, 1984)? Are performance and management systems aligned with targets, or do measurement and incentives default to financial metrics alone (Kaplan & Norton, 1996)?

Ries (2026) frames an analogous evaluation through the concept of incorruptible design, asking whether an organization's governance architecture will protect its mission under financial pressure. His diagnostic approach to matching structure with intent is equivalent to the HSI screening question, and his analysis of cases ranging from Costco to Anthropic provides an empirical illustration of what structurally supported purpose looks like in practice. Misalignment, such as purpose statements that are unsupported by legal form or values that are not reflected in governance, signals structural risk (Mayer, 2018); alignment indicates that the organization has the foundations necessary for credible, purpose-driven performance.

6.2 Design Applications

While screening evaluates structural coherence, design focuses on building it—ensuring that purpose, governance, legal form, and management systems reinforce one another rather than compete (Galbraith, 2014). Design begins by clarifying the organization's purpose architecture: the specific commitments implied by its purpose, mission, vision, and values. Research on organizational design shows that alignment across these elements is essential for consistent execution and for avoiding the "say-do" gaps documented in the purpose literature (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; Keller & Price, 2011).

Design prompts leaders to address three core questions: What structures are required to support the organization's purpose and values (Galbraith, 2014)? Where should decision rights reside to ensure accountability for stakeholder outcomes? How should management and performance systems be configured to reinforce stated commitments? These questions move design work beyond symbolic commitments toward operational reality, helping leaders identify where new structures are needed, where existing ones must be adapted, and where misalignments could undermine the organization's aspirations. Design is the constructive counterpart to screening: screening reveals gaps, and design closes them.

7. HSI Maturity Model

The seven components of HSI can also serve as a maturity model for assessing an organization's progress in embedding purpose into its structure and management. Rather than treating purpose alignment as a binary condition, the maturity model recognizes degrees of development across governance, legal form, and management systems. At lower levels of maturity, purpose is primarily rhetorical: expressed in statements but

weakly supported by governance, legal form, or management systems. At middle levels, organizations begin to formalize elements of alignment—clarifying intent and assigning responsibilities—but these elements often remain fragmented. At higher levels, purpose is architecturally embedded and operationally reinforced through coordinated governance and management structures that enable adaptation over time.

Table 1: HSI Maturity Stages

Maturity Level	Characteristics
1. Aspirational	Purpose is stated but not structurally embedded; governance, legal form, and management systems remain largely disconnected from stated commitments.
2. Emerging	Some elements of alignment are visible, such as clearer values or early stakeholder consideration, but implementation is inconsistent and dependent on individual leaders.
3. Structured	Purpose is translated into defined priorities and management routines; governance begins to support stated commitments in more systematic ways.
4. Integrated	HSI components are aligned across the organization; decision rights, incentives, and structure operate as a coherent system.
5. Adaptive	The organization uses continuous learning to refine structures over time; purpose alignment is sustained through evidence, feedback, and structural responsiveness to changing conditions.

The value of the maturity model lies not in ranking organizations for its own sake, but in making developmental gaps visible. An organization may articulate a compelling purpose and mission yet remain at an early maturity level if its governance and legal structure do not protect that purpose under pressure. For boards, executives, and investors, the model provides a structured way to assess the credibility of purpose claims (Henderson, 2020), focusing attention on how deeply purpose is embedded in structures rather than on whether an organization has produced a purpose statement (Freeman, 1984). For managers, the model offers a roadmap for capability-building: moving from Stage 1 to Stage 2 may involve clarifying definitions of purpose, mission, and vision (Kaplan & Norton, 1996), while progress through Stage 3 often involves more fundamental questions about legal form, board composition, and incentive design (Mayer, 2018).

As an integrative framework, HSI inevitably simplifies complex organizational realities and does not capture every nuance of governance, legal design, or the power dynamics and cultural factors that influence how purpose is interpreted and enacted on the ground (Freeman, 1984; Henderson, 2020). The model is theory-driven and practice-informed but not yet validated through large-scale empirical studies; future work could examine how organizations at different maturity stages perform and how transitions between stages occur in practice (Tafuro & Piccaluga, 2025).

8. Implications and Future Research

HSI has three main implications for responsible business scholarship and practice. First, purpose cannot be studied or managed in isolation from governance, legal form, and management systems; the architecture through which purpose is encoded is as important as the statement itself. Second, definitional precision is a prerequisite for structural alignment: organizations that use purpose, mission, vision, and values interchangeably cannot reliably design governance and management systems around them. Third, HSI invites a shift from evaluating purpose as rhetoric to evaluating it as architecture, positioning legal form and governance as design variables rather than administrative defaults.

These implications open several lines of inquiry. One concern is how HSI maturity levels correlate with financial, social, and environmental outcomes across sectors (Tafuro & Piccaluga, 2025). Another is transition dynamics: which governance and legal changes matter most as organizations move between maturity stages, and what conditions enable or impede progress. For practitioners, the central implication is that purpose-aligned performance is inherently architectural: leaders, boards, and investors must attend not only to whether an organization has articulated a purpose, but to whether its governance, legal form, and management systems are designed to sustain that purpose under pressure. Future work should also examine how HSI interacts with the operational cycle developed in the companion IPIC framework, testing whether structurally mature organizations, as defined by HSI, in fact produce more consistent measurable impact.

9. Conclusion

This paper argues that purpose-driven organizations need conceptual clarity and structural discipline to translate aspirational commitments into coherent design. The Hierarchy of Strategic Intent (HSI) addresses a persistent gap in the responsible-business literature: the lack of a coherent model linking purpose statements to organizational design. By standardizing definitions for purpose, mission, vision, and values, and by embedding governance and legal form within strategic intent as design imperatives rather than administrative afterthoughts, HSI gives entrepreneurs, executives, boards, and investors both a design tool for building purpose-aligned organizations and a diagnostic tool for assessing whether existing structures support stated aspirations. In practice, HSI can be used for screening and design, supported by a maturity model that helps organizations assess how deeply their purpose is embedded in their structures. HSI is not proposed as a prescriptive blueprint, but as an integrative architecture for inquiry and practice—one that a companion paper extends into the IPIC, a tool-agnostic management sequence for translating this architecture into repeatable, measurable impact.

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