The Chief Work Officer

TL PARTNERS | FIRST ARGUED JUNE 2026; THIS VERSION JULY 2026 | THOMAS IGEME

For the entire history of organizations, managing the people and managing the work were the same act. The overseer of the granary, the foreman on the line, the engineering VP in the sprint review: watch the people, and you have watched the work, because people were the only thing work could be made of. Every management structure we have, the org chart, the performance review, the headcount plan, is built on that ten-thousand-year-old assumption.

The assumption just broke. Work is now produced by people, by AI, and by combinations of the two that change quarter to quarter. The org chart still tracks the people. Nobody tracks the work.

Every company has someone accountable for talent. Almost no company has someone accountable for work. If I had my way, the seat would not be a chief talent officer at all. It would be a chief work officer, because the goal was never to have talent. The goal is to get work done, and we now get work done with talent and, increasingly, with agents. The only question that matters is one most leadership teams cannot answer with evidence: is the work we need done actually getting done? They can tell you headcount, engagement, and attrition to the decimal. None of those are the work.

The pattern that repeats

Here is what I have watched across every organization I have operated in or advised, from a PE portfolio to enterprises of tens of thousands: the gap between what leadership said matters and where the day-to-day work actually goes shows up late, usually once it is in the numbers. By then you are explaining rather than steering. The drift was visible months earlier, in behaviors: effort pooling against a priority that quietly died, decisions circling because ownership never landed, a team still staffed to last year's plan. Nobody saw it because nothing was instrumented to see it. Strategy clarity is rarely the constraint. People understand the strategy and still cannot execute cleanly against it, because priorities get renegotiated inside the work, where no one is watching.

Two convictions follow, and they are the working thesis of this firm.

Alignment is a measurement problem before it is a communication problem. The reflexive fix for drift is more communication: another all-hands, a crisper narrative, a new cascade. But you cannot correct what you cannot see, and communicating harder about an invisible problem mostly produces fatigue. Instrument the work first. Then communicate about the specific places it diverges.

Leadership is trainable, like any expert skill. Once you can see where a team's work has drifted, the fix is rarely replacing people. It is a small number of concrete, repeatable leadership actions, run consistently, in the specific places the instrument points. Diagnosis without that follow-through is a report. Follow-through without diagnosis is a guess.

Alignment is a rate, and it buys you adaptive capacity

One refinement matters more than the rest. Alignment is not consensus, and it is not a state you achieve at the January offsite and photograph for the board deck. Alignment is a rate: how fast an organization reconciles the work people actually do to a WHAT that keeps changing. And the WHAT always changes. A pivot, an acquisition, an AI reset, a new platform bet; any honest twelve months contains at least one.

Measured as a rate, alignment stops being a culture word and becomes the leading indicator of the asset every board and every fund actually wants: adaptive capacity. A perfectly aligned organization that reconciles slowly is one strategy change away from mediocre. An organization that reconciles fast compounds through every change you throw at it. This is also the honest answer to the sharpest critique of alignment work, that static alignment is the wrong goal in complex environments. It is. The rate is the goal. Alignment measured weekly is simply how you see the rate.

Why this gets more true every quarter

AI will keep absorbing more of how work is produced. That makes the chief work officer question more urgent, not less, because when the workforce is part human and part agent, the only stable thing left to manage is the work itself. People strategies age out. Agent capabilities shift monthly. The work, what the organization must produce next and whether it is being produced, is the one managerial object that survives the turbulence.

This is why the seat changes shape. The executive who owns work needs three literacies that rarely live in one person today: the talent literacy to develop leaders where the instrument points, the systems literacy to read how work actually flows, and the business literacy to keep both anchored to what the strategy is for. CEOs have started asking for exactly this profile; the search firms will tell you it is the hardest brief they carry.

For an operating company, the implication is a redesigned people function with work instrumentation at its center. For a fund, it is sharper: the portfolio that instruments work owns the only reliable early-warning system on every thesis it holds. Instrument the work and you course-correct in weeks. Skip it and the numbers will keep breaking the news to you, months late, the expensive way.

The title may take a decade to appear on org charts. The accountability is available now.