The Five Ways Work Drifts

Seeing drift in the work before it reaches the numbers.

FIELD GUIDE 2 PAGES · 4 MINUTE READ FOR LEADERS READING THEIR OWN TEAMS WEEKLY JULY 2026

THE RETURN ON WORK THESIS

HUB

Return on Work

What Work Costs Now	Chief Work Officer	The Weekly Loop	Five Ways Work Drifts	Reading a Portfolio
what it costs	who owns it	how you run it	what you see	across a fund

Six papers, one argument. The hub is Return on Work. Full library at tlpartners.biz/library.

THE ARGUMENT IN ONE PARAGRAPH

Alignment is not a state you achieve at the offsite and photograph for the board. It is a rate: how fast the work reconciles to a strategy that keeps moving. Drift is normal and constant, and the teams that stay aligned are the ones that name it early. Drift takes a small number of recognizable shapes. In practice, five.

01

OBSERVED

Five shapes, seen in practice. Each has its own tell.

The five shapes drift takes

Each shape has a tell you can spot from the top of the company, and each needs a different fix. That second half is the part most teams skip. Better strategy does not cure an overloaded team, and more accountability does not cure a fuzzy target, so naming the shape correctly is most of the work.

THE FIVE SHAPES, THE TELL, AND THE FIX

Spinning 01	Motion without output. **The tell:** the week sounds busy and nothing you can point to actually moved. **The fix:** name one finishable thing and clear the calendar around it. More effort makes this worse.
Silent pivot 02	The plan changed and no one said so. **The tell:** the work underway is no longer the work you agreed mattered most. **The fix:** say out loud that the plan changed, and decide whether it should have. Half of these are the right call nobody declared.
Fuzzy target 03	Effort without a shared definition of done. **The tell:** no two people would write the same sentence describing success. **The fix:** one owner writes the sentence, and the room either agrees or argues. Accountability applied here just punishes people for a definition they never had.

Stuck 04	Movement has stopped. **The tell:** the same item comes back review after review, waiting on someone. **The fix:** name the decision and the person who owes it, with a date. Escalation works here and works almost nowhere else on this list.
Overloaded 05	Too much for the capacity. **The tell:** everything slips a little and nothing lands. **The fix:** cut scope until one thing can finish. This is the only shape where doing less is the whole answer, and the hardest one to admit.

Post-reset organizations typically find 15 to 20 percent of surviving work has no remaining consumer, which is where spinning and silent pivots go to hide.

02

METHOD

Per priority, every week. The trend is the reading.

How to read it

For each priority leadership has named, check it against the five shapes. Where one shows, that is drift, and how much it shows is your read. Do this every week and watch the trend: one week is a photograph and the trend is the rate. **Drift climbing on a named priority is your early warning, weeks before the number moves.**

03

COUNTER

Two cases the five cannot catch. One silent, one green.

What the five cannot catch

Two cases sit outside the taxonomy. The first is the blind spot: a priority the board still believes is on track, and yet not one team is reporting real work against it. A status field cannot show it and an activity dashboard cannot either, because plenty is happening, just not there. The fix is immediate: name a single owner, and require signal.

The second runs the other way, and its tell is a green number. A priority can be hit by means the thesis cannot afford: the target lands, and the way it lands quietly breaks the economics the plan was priced on. None of the five shapes catches it, because each of the five is a failure to move toward a priority, and here the work is moving toward the priority beautifully. That case is its own paper, The Green Number.

RETURN ON WORK

The gap between strategy and work shows up in these behaviors well before it shows up in the numbers. Learn the five shapes and you see it while it is cheap to fix. The method for running the read every week is The Weekly Loop, and we built Alyn to run it.

Run this yourself this week. Take the three priorities your leadership team named, hold each against the five shapes, and write down which one you see. That is the read. It takes an hour, it needs nothing from us, and if the answer is that you cannot tell, that is the finding.

Start with **Return on Work**. Full library at **tlpartners.biz/library**.

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