When Policy Outlives the Problem

Policy Drift, Institutional Lag, and Reality Drift

Reality Drift Framework — Taxonomy Note #6

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The Basic Pattern

Policies are created in response to particular conditions.

A problem becomes visible.

A rule is introduced.

The rule becomes embedded in procedures, budgets, software, and expectations.

The original conditions then change.

The policy often remains.

The core sequence is:

real condition → policy response → institutional embedding → changing conditions → policy drift

What Is Policy Drift?

Policy Drift occurs when a rule continues operating after the conditions, assumptions, or goals that originally justified it have changed.

The policy may still be enforced consistently.

It may remain legally valid.

It may still produce measurable activity.

But its relationship to the present has weakened.

The rule belongs to an older version of reality.

How Policy Becomes Detached

A policy begins as a representation of a problem.

It identifies what matters, defines categories, and specifies an acceptable response.

Once implemented, organizations reorganize around it.

Staff are trained.

Software is configured.

Budgets are assigned.

Compliance systems are created.

The policy stops being a temporary answer.

It becomes infrastructure.

Why Outdated Policies Survive

Removing a policy is harder than creating one.

The original problem may no longer be visible.

The costs of the rule may be spread across many people.

The organizations responsible for enforcement may depend on its continuation.

Failure to comply remains measurable.

Failure to adapt often does not.

The policy survives because its institutional support is stronger than the feedback calling for revision.

Policy Success and Real-World Failure

A policy can succeed according to its own indicators while failing in practice.

Compliance may increase.

Reports may improve.

Enforcement may become more consistent.

The underlying condition may remain unchanged or worsen.

The system then interprets successful implementation as evidence that the policy is working.

Execution replaces evaluation.

Policy Drift and Reality Drift

Within the **Reality Drift framework**, Policy Drift begins when the continued enforcement of a rule becomes more important than renewed contact with the conditions it was created to address.

The category outranks the case.

The rule outranks the outcome.

Compliance outranks correction.

The policy remains coherent because institutions continue behaving as though its original assumptions are still true.

Policy Drift occurs when a rule remains stable while the reality that justified it moves on.

The Core Principle

Policies preserve past judgments.

That stability can make coordinated action possible.

It can also make old assumptions difficult to remove.

A policy does not have to be irrational.

It may simply be rational for a world that no longer exists.

Policy Drift is what happens when yesterday's solution becomes today's constraint.

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