



Firing Isn't a Strategy

Creating Risk-Ready Employment
Systems in the Public Sector

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What We Say vs. What the System Actually Rewards

We say:

- People are our greatest asset
- We believe in fairness and consistency
- We invest in employee development
- We want accountability at every level
- We support supervisors in leading well
- We want employees to succeed

But in practice, many systems reward something else:

- Problems are tolerated until they become too visible to ignore
- Expectations stay vague until someone misses them
- Coaching happens informally, inconsistently, or not at all
- Documentation appears late and usually under pressure
- Supervisors delay hard conversations until frustration takes over
- Termination becomes the first fully structured response

This Isn't One Problem. It's a Lifecycle Pattern.



Different people.

Different moments.

Same system pattern.

We Keep Calling This a People Problem

“They were not a good fit”

“They lacked motivation”

“They had a bad attitude”

“They were not ready for the role”

“They never seemed to get it”

“The team had too many personality issues”



But those explanations skip the harder questions:

Were expectations clear early enough to matter?

Was performance measured against real standards or shifting opinions?

Did the employee receive specific feedback before consequences escalated?

Did the supervisor have a usable process or just authority without structure?

Did documentation tell a story of support, correction, and consistency?

Did the system identify drift early, or wait until frustration took over?

Most organizations diagnose the ***person***
because diagnosing the ***system*** is harder.

Let's Clear Up the Exception

Some situations do justify immediate action.

assault or threats



theft or criminal conduct



serious safety violations



gross negligence



egregious misconduct

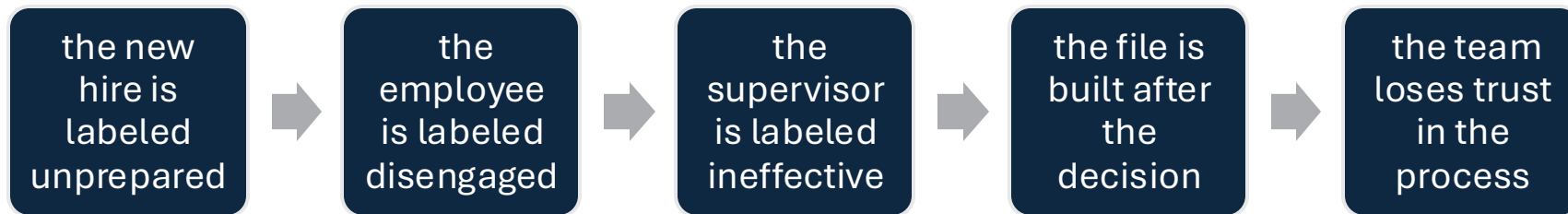


Weak Systems Produce Predictable Failure



- unclear expectations
- inconsistent supervision
- delayed intervention
- weak documentation
- reactive decisions

When the System Is Weak, Blame Becomes Personal



Weak systems turn preventable problems into individual blame.

What If the Problem Isn't the Employee...

...but the conditions around the employee?

- role clarity
- onboarding
- feedback
- correction
- documentation
- consistency

Outcomes are shaped there long before termination.



Firing Isn't a Strategy

It is often the final visible step in a longer chain of system failure, and it does not solve it.

The Elephant in the Room

Most organizations already know this.

Nothing here is shocking.

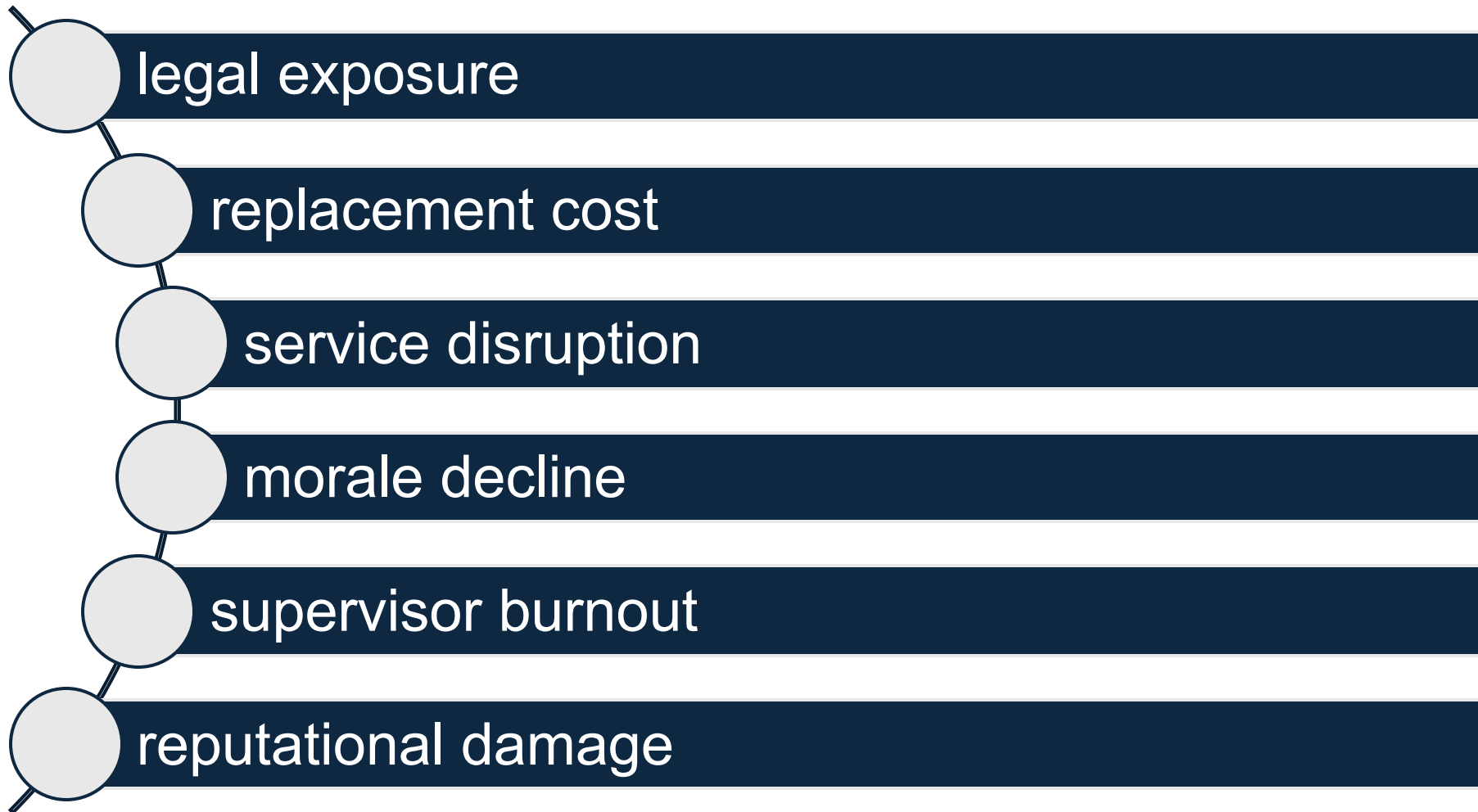
Most of this feels obvious once it is said out loud.

So Why Doesn't This Change?

Where does change break down in your organization?

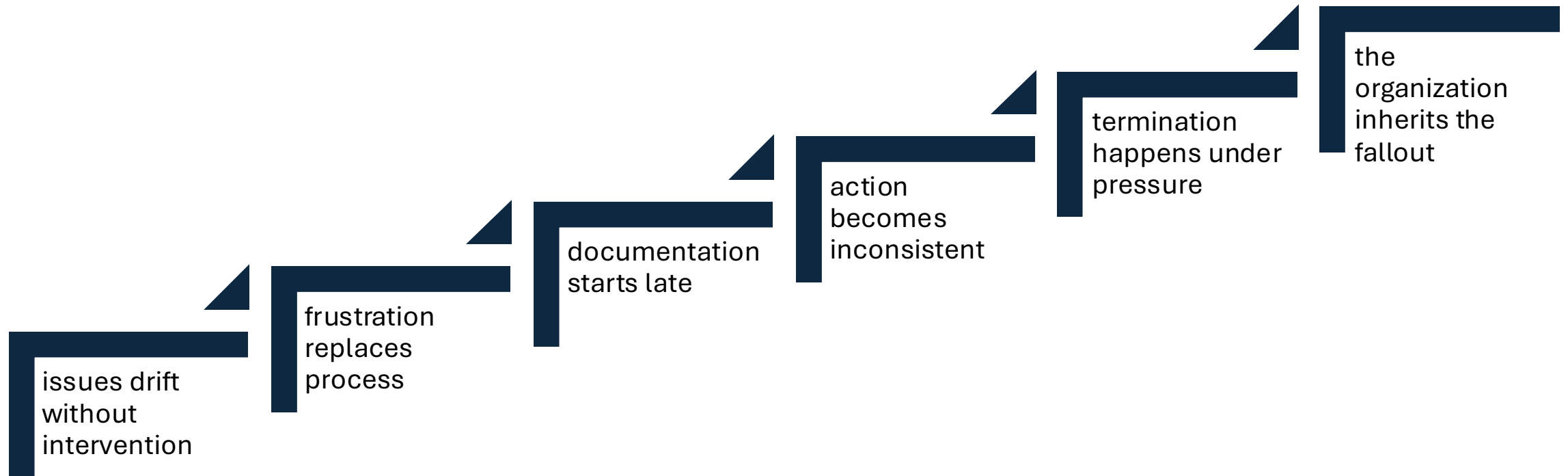


Termination Rarely Ends the Problem



**One decision can
create six more
problems.**

How Termination-First Cultures Compound Risk



The Costs You See vs. The Costs You Inherit

Immediate Visible Costs

- recruitment and advertising
- interview time and background checks
- onboarding and training
- overtime and coverage gaps
- lost productivity during vacancy

Longer-Term Hidden Costs

- institutional knowledge loss
- morale decline and survivor anxiety
- weaker trust in leadership
- service disruption
- harder future recruiting
- reputational damage

The Public Sector Multiplier

taxpayer
scrutiny

public
records
exposure

service
interruption

elected
official
attention

grievance
and claim
risk

community
trust impact

Delay Makes Everything More Expensive

When problems are addressed late:

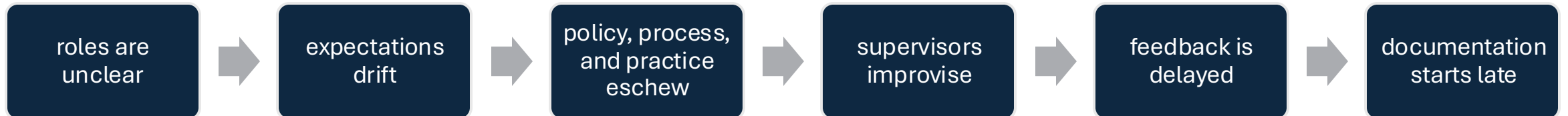
- correction gets harder
- documentation gets weaker
- trust drops faster
- legal defensibility shrinks
- replacement becomes more likely

The cheapest time to act is usually earlier than organizations are comfortable acting.



Risk Does Not Start at Termination

It starts when:



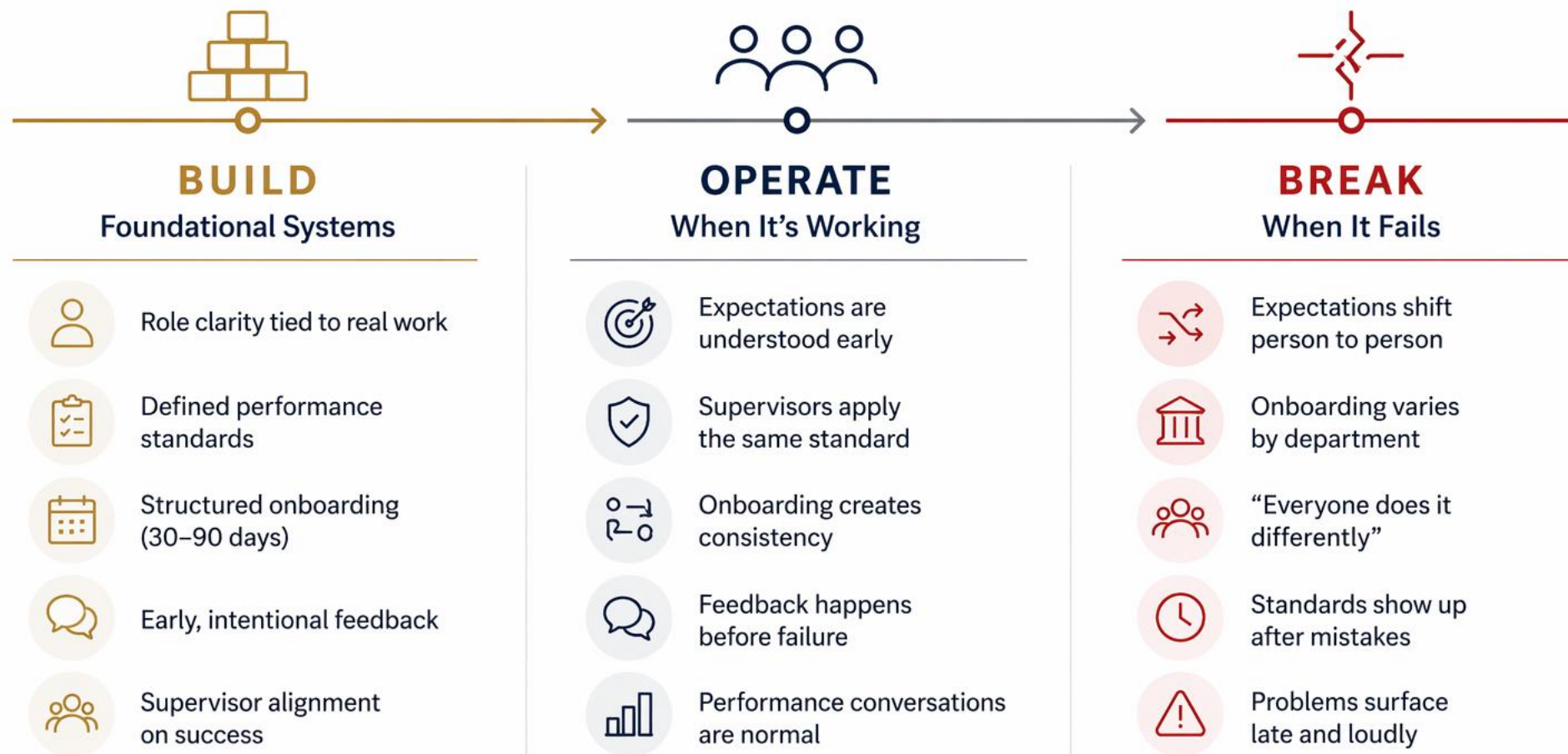
Risk-Ready Employment Systems Do Three Things



1. **Prevents** avoidable problems with clarity and structure
2. **Corrects** issues early before drift becomes escalation
3. **Protects** the organization through consistency and defensibility

Preventive Workforce Architecture

Clarity before consequences.



Strong systems **prevent** problems. Clarity **creates** performance.

Corrective Architecture

— ADDRESS EARLY. CORRECT CLEARLY. STAY CONSISTENT. —



1. BUILD

WHAT IT INCLUDES



Timely coaching conversations



Specific feedback tied to observable behavior



Verbal counseling with clear expectations



Written follow-up when patterns continue



Progressive discipline that escalates with consistency



2. OPERATE

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE



Issues are addressed when they are still small



Employees know what must change and by when



Supervisors correct behavior without overreacting



Accountability feels consistent rather than personal



3. BREAK

WHAT FAILURE LOOKS LIKE



Supervisors avoiding hard conversations



Vague feedback like “fix your attitude”



Long periods of silence followed by sudden escalation



Discipline starting only after patience runs out



Timely correction **builds trust**. Inconsistent correction **destroys it**.

Protective Architecture

CLARITY BEFORE CONSEQUENCES.



1. BUILD

WHAT IT INCLUDES



Documentation that captures facts, impact, and expectations



Policy alignment across corrective actions



Consistency reviews across departments or supervisors



HR oversight at high-risk decision points



Records that show support, correction, and follow-up



2. OPERATE

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE



The file tells a clear story



Actions are tied to policy and expectation



Similar issues are handled similarly



Decisions hold up under review

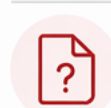


3. BREAK

WHAT FAILURE LOOKS LIKE



Documentation created after the decision



Missing dates, facts, or follow-up



Different standards applied to different people



A file that reflects conclusion without showing the process



Strong documentation **protects** people, decisions, and the organization.

Discussion Point

Looking at your own organization:

1. Where is the system strongest: prevent, correct, or protect?
2. Where is it weakest?
3. Where does drift usually begin?



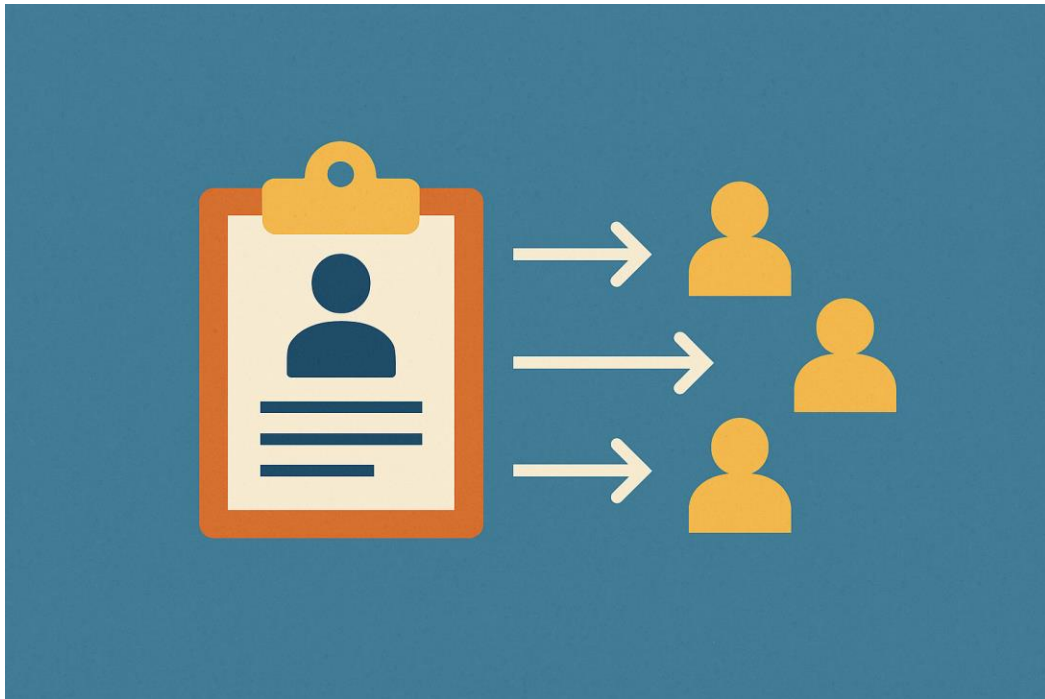
Let's Narrow the Focus

If prevention is where clarity starts
and protection is where defensibility
ends,



**then correction is where most
organizations either stabilize
risk... or accelerate it.**

Correction Is Where Good Intentions Break Down



Most organizations do not fail because they lack policy but because in practice:

- someone waits too long
- someone softens the message
- someone handles it differently
- someone documents only after the decision is made

Why Organizations Struggle to Correct Early

Discomfort with hard conversations

Fear of conflict or grievance

Unclear standards for what “good” looks like

Inconsistency between supervisors

Operational pressure to “just keep moving”

Hope that the issue will fix itself

What Late Correction Feels Like to Employees

“Every time it’s something different.”

“At this point, whatever I do is wrong.”

“So now this is a problem?”

“I’m not even sure what they want anymore.”

“This conversation was coming no matter what I said.”

“Nobody cared about this before.”

When correction comes late, burned-out employees experience frustration towards an inconsistent system.

What a Burned-Out Employee Starts Thinking

“Why bother? They’ll change it again next week.”

“At this point, I’m just trying to get through the day.”

“If it mattered that much, someone should’ve said something sooner.”

“One person says do it this way, another says do it another way.”

“I’m tired of guessing what version of the rule matters today.”

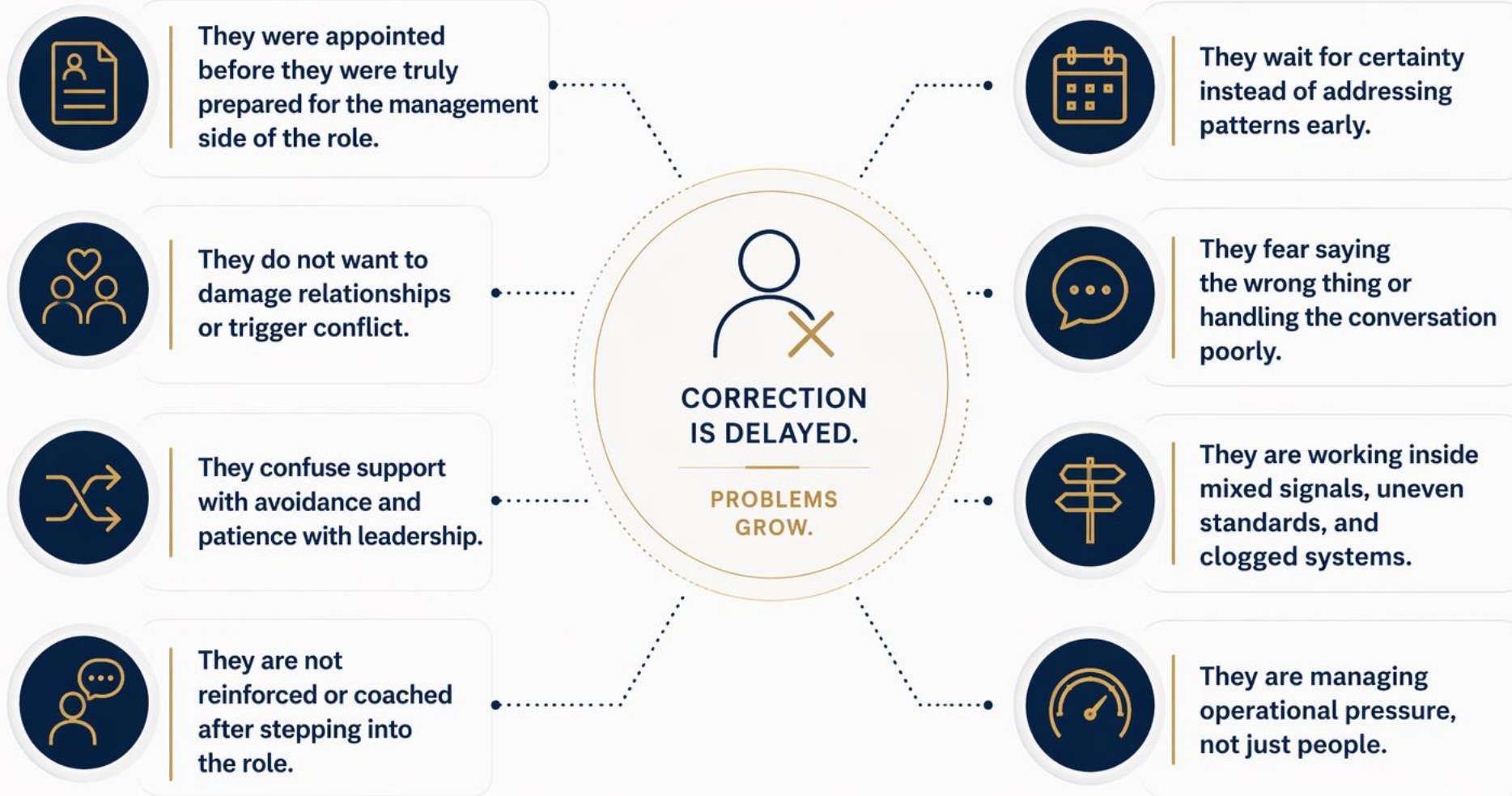
“Let’s see what opportunities are on Indeed today.”

“I’m not fixing a six-month problem in one conversation.”

“They waited until they were fed up, and now I’m supposed to fix all of it at once.”

“I’m already halfway out the door.”

Why Supervisors Avoid the Moment of Correction



Most supervisors do not fail because they lack the authority to lead.

They fail because they were not ***prepared***, not ***supported***, and ***placed*** inside systems that make **good management harder than it should be.**

Progressive Discipline Is Not the Whole System

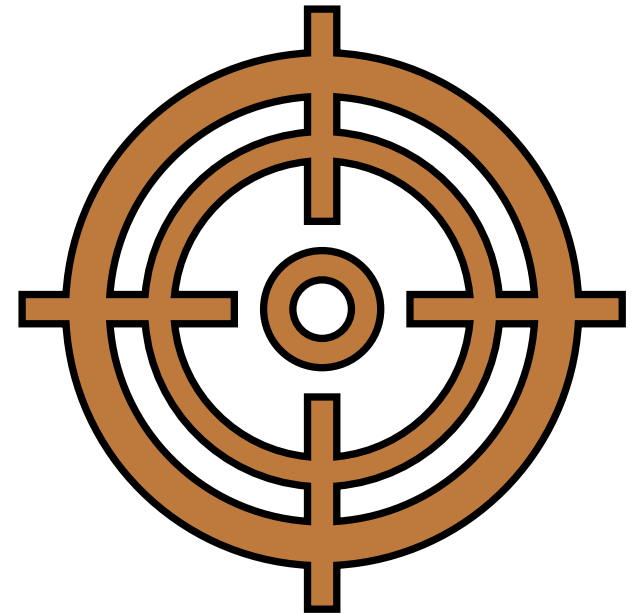
It is one structured tool inside corrective architecture.

- It helps organizations:
 - address issues early
 - escalate with consistency
 - make expectations visible
 - create a defensible record
 - avoid turning frustration into decision-making

The Goal Is Not More Discipline

A strong system does not discipline more. It disciplines better.

- The goal is:
 - earlier correction
 - clearer expectations
 - more consistent follow-through
 - fewer preventable escalations
 - better decisions when action is necessary



Most Formal Discipline Starts With a Missed Conversation

Before the written warning, there was usually:

- a pattern someone noticed
- a conversation someone delayed
- an expectation someone assumed was obvious
- a correction someone softened
- a moment where clarity should have happened

Most escalation begins with a missed opportunity to correct early.



What Early Correction Is Supposed to Do

01

Name the
issue

02

Clearly
connect it to
impact

03

Define what
must change

04

Make support
and
accountability
visible

CLEAR Model



What Works / What Fails

Language That Works

- "I've observed..." (facts)
- "Help me understand..." (collaboration)
- "The impact is..." (consequences)
- "Going forward, I need..." (expectations)
- "What support do you need?" (partnership)

Language to Avoid

- "You always..." (generalizations)
- "You're being..." (character judgments)
- "Everyone thinks..." (gossip)
- "If you can't..." (threats)
- "I've told you before..." (punishment focus)

Performance Issue Opening

"I wanted to talk with you about the project deadlines we discussed last month. I've noticed that the last two deliverables were submitted after the agreed-upon dates. Help me understand what's happening."

Attendance Concern

"I need to discuss your attendance pattern. In the past three weeks, you've called in sick on Mondays twice and arrived late three other days. This impacts our team's ability to serve our residents effectively."

Professional Behavior

"I want to address what happened in today's public meeting. When the resident raised concerns about road repair, your response came across as dismissive. Let's talk about how we can handle similar situations differently."

If the Conversation Worked, You Should Be Able to Answer These Questions



- What exactly is the issue?
- What impact is it causing?
- What change is expected and by when?
- What support was offered?
- What happens if the pattern continues?

The File Tells the Real Story

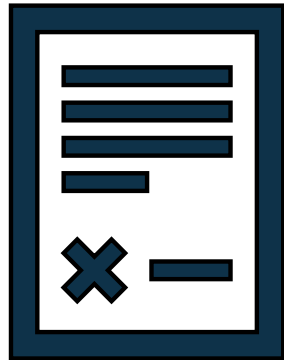
A strong file shows:

- what happened
- what standard applied
- what response occurred
- what support was offered
- what happened next

If the file only shows the outcome, it does not show a defensible process.



What Weak Documentation Usually Looks Like



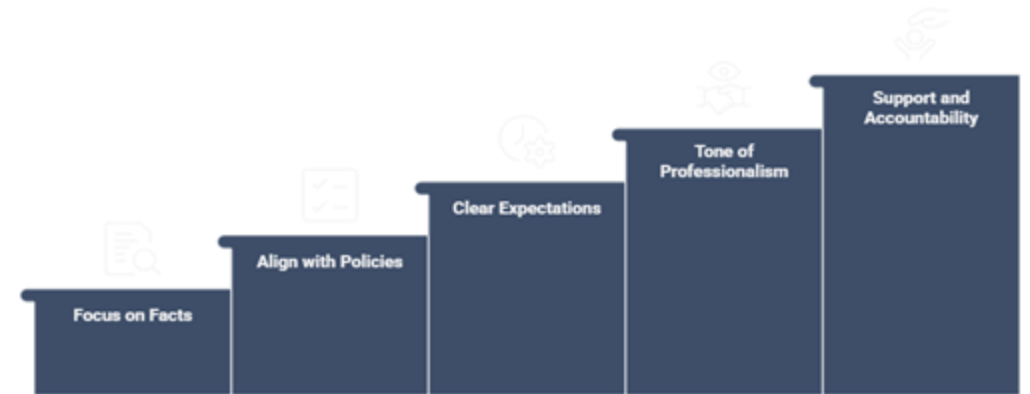
- facts are vague
- dates are missing
- expectations are unclear
- follow-up is absent
- policy links are weak or missing
- the tone sounds emotional, not factual

What Strong Documentation Has to Show

A strong file should tell a story and do more than say what went wrong.

Use the **FACTS** framework to ensure each record holds up under review:

- **Focus on Facts** — Capture specific, observable actions and outcomes, not opinions or generalizations.
- **Align with Policies** — Reference the exact rule, policy, or expectation that was violated.
- **Clear Expectations** — Include what improvement is required, how it will be measured, and timelines.
- **Tone of Professionalism** — Keep language respectful and objective, not emotional or punitive.
- **Support and Accountability** — Document what support was offered and how progress will be followed up.



From Defensive to Defensible

Supervisor Documentation Note

Thomas has continued to demonstrate a poor attitude and lack of professionalism. He has been spoken to several times about performance issues and failure to meet expectations. Improvement has not occurred. Further issues may result in additional disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

Better Documentation Note

On May 8th, Thomas arrived at a conference prep meeting visibly frustrated about last-minute slide edits and stated, “If one more person says ‘can we make this pop,’ I’m going to take these rocks out of my pocket and start throwing them at people.” When redirected to the agenda, Thomas interrupted two coworkers, dismissed feedback, and left before presentation roles were finalized. This delayed prep assignments and created confusion about responsibility for closing session materials. Thomas was counseled that frustration with deadlines does not excuse disruptive behavior, refusal to remain in a meeting, or dismissive communication toward coworkers. Thomas was directed to remain engaged in meetings, communicate disagreement professionally, and raise process concerns without interrupting or leaving prematurely. Follow-up will occur within two weeks to assess improvement.

What Would Your Documentation Show a Judge?



Where to Start Monday:

Start Small Enough to Finish

Better first moves:

- one role with unclear expectations
- one supervisor who needs support
- one corrective conversation standard
- one documentation expectation
- one team where inconsistency keeps showing up

Avoid:

- rewriting every policy at once
- launching a citywide culture initiative
- training everyone before fixing anything
- mistaking motion for progress

If Firing Isn't the Strategy, What Is?

A risk-ready employment system:

- prevents avoidable drift with clarity
- corrects early with consistency
- protects decisions with disciplined documentation
- prepares supervisors before problems peak
- supports managers with systems that make leadership possible



System Design Is the Strategy

Termination should *never* be the first time the organization becomes structured.

Contact / Q & A

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