

FRICTION: A MANIFESTO

Filene*



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OVERVIEW

Workplace inefficiency, miscommunication, and disengagement are often the result of organizational friction, and friction is the result of perverse incentives, misaligned rules and norms, and a failure to value the work of maintaining shared organizational resources.

Executive Summary

Friction in the workplace is familiar and immediately recognizable in its symptoms: frustration, helplessness, and ultimately defeat. But where friction comes from and how to combat it are less well understood. In this playful and provocative pamphlet, researchers from the Filene Research Institute, in conversation with Filene Fellow Huggy Rao, consider the causes, effects, and cures of organizational friction in order to better understand how to make the important things easier to do (and the unimportant things harder to do) in ways that do not exhaust us.

WHAT IS THE MANIFESTO ABOUT?

Organizational friction is the effect of systems and processes that overload employees, waste their time, and devalue their work. Specifically, organizational friction results from disregarding a particular kind of work: the work of maintaining technical and institutional infrastructures, sustaining social relationships, and caring for the “organizational commons,” which is made up of shared organizational resources, especially employees’ time and attention. In this report, we explore the following:

- The negative impacts of organizational friction, as well as when it can serve a useful purpose, in slowing processes down or making some things harder to do.
- How to recognize organizational friction’s many forms, including oblivious executives, burdensome rules, the unintended consequences of communication and collaboration, and the absence of clear norms and expectations.
- How organizational debt is built up by trading speed today for broken and ineffective systems tomorrow.
- The value of maintenance labor and workers, including managers and bureaucrats.
- How work gets done through social relationships and the gendered dimensions of this work.
- How—and especially how not—to combat organizational friction and protect the organizational commons.

Executive Summary

THIS IS AN EXPERIMENT

Why a manifesto? Manifestos aim to challenge and provoke, and ours is intended to spark creative thinking about organizational culture and communication and what kinds of work are valued over others. Part advertisement and part performance, manifestos are also designed to travel, to circulate hand-to-hand, and we hope ours will be shared.

Why now? The coronavirus pandemic has made us newly aware of essential workers and forced us to reckon with maintenance work in new ways, in cooking our food, cleaning our houses, and caring for our children. The pandemic has also forced organizations into remote work, introducing new frictions and exacerbating existing fault lines in communication and workflows.

EVEN AS THE FRICTIONS OF WORK AND LIFE HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE OBVIOUS, THE PRESENT MOMENT ALSO GIVES US A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO REIMAGINE THE KIND OF WORK WE WANT.

How can you take action?

- Share the manifesto. Knowledge sharing and community are resources to fight friction.
- Recognize that the work of combating friction cannot be delegated.
- Understand that the work of combating friction has no end point but must be undertaken in an ongoing way.
- Start with those whose jobs it is to manage and organize processes and systems. Seek to listen and understand before you act.
- Fight the impulse to add (initiatives, meetings, reporting, responsibilities); subtract instead.
- Turn to the cooperative movement. While credit unions and cooperatives struggle with friction like any other organization, there are special tools of collective coordination available as part of the cooperative tradition that can be marshaled to protect the organizational commons.



REPORT NO. 509

CENTER OF EXCELLENCE FOR
PERFORMANCE &
OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

FRICITION: A MANIFESTO

FILENE RESEARCH INSTITUTE AND KATE LARSON
IN CONVERSATION WITH HUGGY RAO¹

Our daily lives take place in a network of technological, socio-technical, and social systems that we barely notice, except when things go wrong.”

— DEBBIE CHACHRA, “GRATITUDE FOR INVISIBLE SYSTEMS,”
THE ATLANTIC (MAY 18, 2017)

“Not often, but once in a while, I take the time to marvel at the fact that so many people do so much work behind the scenes to keep the world humming. Whether it’s the internet, the roads, the electricity grid, you name it. Of course, it’s easy to point out the failures—they’re visible, whereas the bulk of maintenance is practically invisible. But, in praise of maintenance, let me just say this: it’s necessary work; it’s hard work; and for people like me, who are always in a hurry to make the next new thing, it can be really unappealing work.”

— MARTIN CASADO, GENERAL PARTNER AT ANDREESSEN
HOROWITZ, IN CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN J. DUBNER
ON THE PODCAST FREAKONOMICS

“Maintenance: keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight. Show your work—show it again [...] keep the home fires burning.”

“After the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?”

— MIERELE LADERMAN UKELES,
“MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART, 1969!”

¹ With his colleague Bob Sutton, Huggy Rao is writing a book on organizational friction tentatively titled *Out of the Muck*.

Introduction

At some point in your professional life, you have likely realized that your job is preventing you from doing your job.

That is to say: the structures and processes of your workday and work environment are impeding your ability to accomplish your actual work.

Have you ever rushed from meeting to meeting, summarizing the output from one in an email as you only half pay attention to the next, creating lists of next steps and action items that you will not have time to work on until you leave the office, because the work of developing and communicating them has engulfed your entire workday?

Have you ever had to seek approval for an initiative from so many departments that you missed your opportunity to implement it?

Have you ever spent so much of your time battling out-of-date or ineffective processes and procedures that you find yourself unable to perform your duties with the speed and competence stipulated by those processes and procedures? Have you ever found yourself stifled by the lack of rules and expectations, circling around decisions rather than making them?

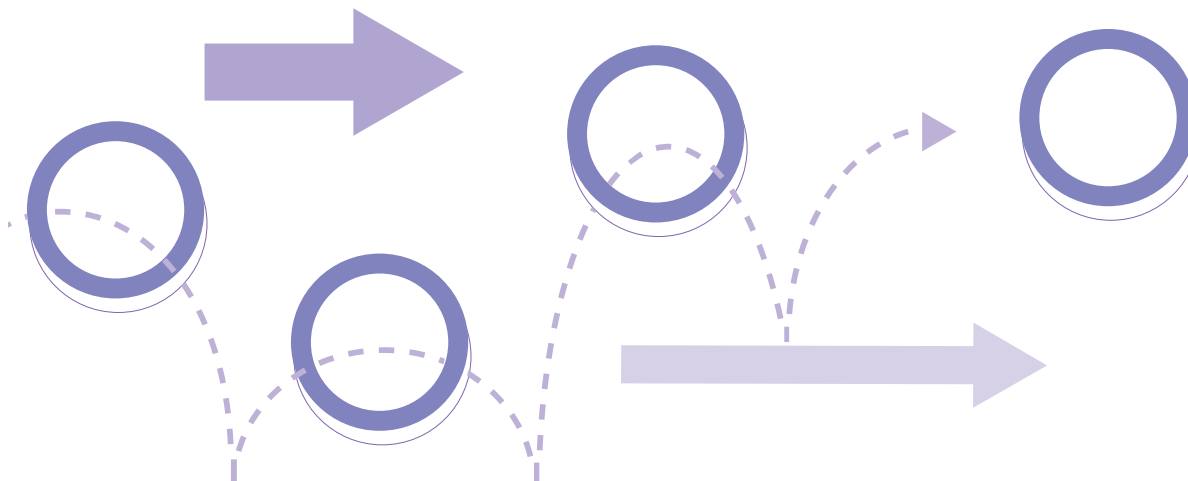
Then you, friend, have faced head-on the specter of **ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION**, which haunts the hallways of the contemporary working world: the Wall

Street bank and the community Credit Union, the Main Street retailer and the Rust Belt manufacturer, the Nonprofit Organization and the Government Agency, the Business School and Design School.

You, friend, have been thwarted, aggravated, and worn down by the grinding of institutional gears, the devaluation of organizational labor and expertise.

At first, you might think **ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION** sounds innocuous. After all: is anyone to blame for a little corporate mechanical chafing? It seems inescapable, a quotidian nuisance. Where are the organizations that have not been decried as friction-filled? Where are the CEOs and middle managers who have not attempted to clean those gears, break down those silos, uncover efficiencies in communication and collaboration?

You would be wrong. **ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION** is real, it is the product of human beings—many of them oblivious to their complicity—and it can be eased by many of those same human beings, should they become aware of its dangers and take comprehensive action.



Introduction

ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION FRUSTRATES EMPLOYEES, DAMPENS ENTHUSIASM AND MORALE, AND LEADS EVEN THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST TO DISENGAGE—THEIR ZEAL SQUANDERED, THEIR PRODUCTIVITY THROTTLED, THEIR EFFORTS CHEAPENED, SCORNEED, OR DISMISSED.

We cannot afford to ignore or make light of the scourge of **FRICTION**. We risk revenue but also human passion, the loss of great employees, the diminishment of work itself, the destruction of our **organizational commons**. We have a duty to confront this threat—immediately!—and allow our places of work to become gardens of achievement, meaning, and satisfaction.

Who shall lead the charge against **ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION**?

The cooperative movement has the history and the resources to grasp the importance of the undertaking and grapple with its complexities. For ultimately, in training ourselves to see and channel **FRICTION** to

productive ends, we learn to see and value the essential work and workers who build and maintain the foundational systems, the plumbing and wiring and logistics, that keep us alive, keep us connected, and allow us to flourish.

organizational commons, n., shared and openly accessible resources, knowledge, networks, and norms, as well as the mechanisms of governing and maintaining them, which, when properly cared for, enable the coordination of relationships, administration of institutions, and realization of value from organizations.

“What is missing [...] is an adequately specified theory of collective action whereby a group of principals can organize themselves voluntarily to retain the residuals of their own efforts. [...] All efforts to organize collective action, whether by an external ruler, an entrepreneur, or a set of principals who wish to gain collective benefits, must address a common set of problems. These have to do with coping with free-riding, solving commitment problems, arranging for the supply of new institutions, and monitoring individual compliance with sets of rules.”
1990 OSTROM Governing the Commons 24, 27.

Principles of the Manifesto

1

ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION is expensive for companies and costly to people. It incurs material and emotional costs, it hits employees and the bottom line by wasting precious resources: money, time, volition, enthusiasm, morale, confidence, esteem, purpose. High-**FRICTION** workplaces are bad places to work.

2

FRICTION can be identified by the effects it has, the toll it takes. Those effects can be “good” or “bad.” **FRICTION** can yield annoyance, frustration, distrust, fatigue, helplessness, defeat, and cynicism—these are its most prominent hallmarks, the heat and noise of **FRICTION**-filled relationships. But **FRICTION** is not always and in itself a bad thing. It can be useful to produce a necessary pause in moments of uncertainty or risk or to slow things down before scaling them up. **FRICTION** can pose a challenge to creativity and gather excitement to spark new thinking. Rely on **FRICTION** to insert a useful barrier to make something unhelpful less easy to accomplish, or to elicit a sense of the value of one’s efforts.

THE GOAL IS NOT TO ELIMINATE FRICTION IN ITS ENTIRETY, BUT TO AMELIORATE ITS NEGATIVE EFFECTS BY CHANGING THE SYSTEMS THAT CAUSE THEM.

3

The negative effects of **FRICTION** can be traced back to cognitive and emotional overload in the face of growing decision-making burdens, unclear expectations, kludgy systems, malfunctioning processes, and poorly maintained relationships. The underlying causes of **FRICTION** are thus cultural and structural, and they include (but may not be limited to):

- The neglect of **social infrastructure**, networks of interpersonal relationships, knowledge-sharing, trust, and obligation that sustain the organizational commons and yet often go unnoticed until they collapse;
- A failure to value **maintenance labor** (all the organizing, administering, cleaning, feeding, sheltering, storing, preserving, accounting, calendaring, caring—both real and metaphorical—that goes into work and workplaces) and the people (typically women) who perform it. Healthy, productive workplace cultures are only self-sustaining when selves do the sustaining;
- A push for ever-increasing collaboration across teams and information exchange across functions, to the point where the effort to communicate and collaborate—or simply talk about communication and collaboration—overtakes any other work. This can take any number of forms: cc’ing colleagues on long email chains with little context, recurring meetings with few real outcomes, onerous oversight requirements that slow project implementation, and
- The absence of rules, policies, and procedures, which produces its own kind of **ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION** in all the extra work required to align assumptions, make expectations explicit, weigh options and calculate costs and benefits, and check and double-check decision-making.

Principles of the Manifesto

4

The individuals who exacerbate **FRICTION** and its negative effects include (but are not limited to):

- **The “hippopotamuses”**—executives with big mouths and little ears, who refuse to listen and thus fail to understand the experiences of their colleagues and subordinates, who do not think diagnostically but have plenty of prescriptions, and whose presence in the office can create extra, valueless work for employees.
- **The “idea men” and “fad surfers”**—managers who implement ceaseless streams of new initiatives and underestimate the coordination burden of these initiatives on workers up and down the org chart.
- **The “cookie-lickers”**—those who feel the need to touch every project but make no contribution and do little or nothing to advance the work.
- **The “rule freaks” and “petty tyrants”**—those who feel the need to enforce rules according to their letters, misunderstand their spirit (and often their content), and refuse to budge even when creative flexibility in applying policy would lessen **FRICTION**.

5

The cures for negative **FRICTION** include (but are not limited to):

- Developing cooperative mechanisms of management and administration to care for and maintain the organizational commons;
- Paying down the **organizational debt** that is incurred when an organization cuts corners for speed and productivity. This entails making repairs to the social, as well as material and technical, infrastructure of the organization;
- Subtracting rules where norms and expectations are strong, adding rules where norms and expectations are weak;
- Convincing leaders to approach their work as the guardians and stewards of other people’s time;
- Enlisting middle managers, who are ideally placed to combat **FRICTION**, because they see both its effects and its causes;
- Assigning ownership of **FRICTION** to an individual/team so that it ceases to be an orphan problem; and
- Seeking employee buy-in for structural anti-**FRICTION** changes.

social infrastructure, n., networks of interpersonal relationships through which goods, money, ideas, information, promises, favors, aid, and any number of other valuable exchanges can flow.

“[...] a social infrastructure of communicative channels that are as essential to economy as roads, bridges, or telephone lines [...].” 2010 ELYACHAR Am. Ethn. 37(3):452.

“[P]eople themselves are the important infrastructure [...], the stuff of shifting circuitries of connection. Information, cash, obligations, possibilities, and support all pass along these circuits.” 2010 SIMONE City Life from Jakarta to Dakar 124-5.

maintenance labor, n., the work of preserving, organizing, repairing, administrating, and sustaining the systems that undergird functioning workplaces, households, and societies. Without this labor, there would be no productivity, innovation, or progress.

“[H]ousework is more characteristic of our society than market work is.” 1983 COWAN More Work for Mother, 8.

“While innovation [...] is important, most technologies around us are old, and for the smooth functioning of daily life, maintenance is more important.[...] We need to figure out better ways of preserving, improving, and caring for what we have.” 2017 RUSSELL & VINSEL NYT Jul 22.

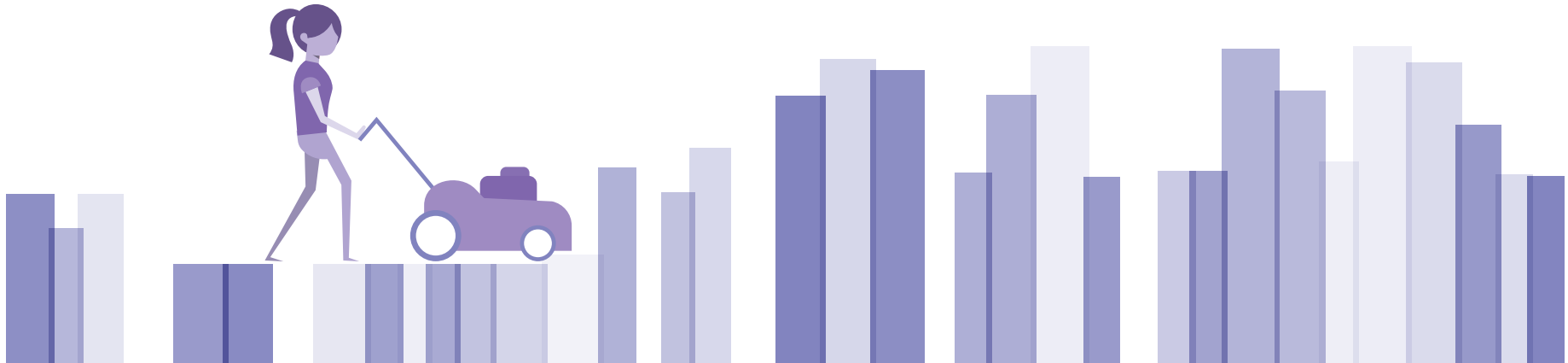
organizational debt, n., the result of moving too quickly and settling for “good enough” now, which will create friction later, in the areas of organization, administration, documentation, policymaking, communication, and value articulation. The “interest” incurred is a loss of employee trust.

“When taking shortcuts and delivering code or systems that get the job done but are not robust and sustainable, a development team incurs Technical Debt. [...] Similar to Technical Debt, Organizational and Cultural Debt comprises all the people/culture compromises made to ‘just get things done.’” 2018 RAO, SUTTON & MAKINEN Stanford Grad. Sch. of Bus. Case No. HR-46.

Maintenance

COMBATTING ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION IS LIKE MOWING THE LAWN OR TUNING AN INSTRUMENT. THE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMONS REQUIRES REGULAR, SCHEDULED, ONGOING MAINTENANCE. THERE IS NO ONE-TIME FIX.

At the same time, when **FRICTION** becomes entrenched and overwhelming, the commons overgrown, more extreme measures are required. Pause the pursuit of growth; take the time to reset cultural norms. Forgive the organizational debt; rip up the weeds and replant the prairie. Whether the fight against **FRICTION** can be waged in the course of normal operations or requires sweeping cultural change, it will be endless, and it will be worth the effort.



The Hands! The Heart! The Head!

IN PRAISE OF MAINTAINERS!

Here's to the ones who maintain the systems. The building cleaners, the data enterers, the electricians and plumbers, the code-fixers and record-keepers. Your maintenance labor is care work. Data don't store themselves; dishes and floors don't clean themselves; meetings don't schedule themselves; knowledge doesn't share itself; trust doesn't endure on its own. Here's to you whose jobs are difficult, tedious, and unacclaimed.

We salute you, organizers-of-space, administrators-of-time, storers-of-data. Your maintenance labor undergirds “innovation” and “disruption.” Once the launch is over, here's to those who keep the novelties operational. Without your careful, skillful maintenance, no sustainable innovation would be possible.

IN PRAISE OF MIDDLE MANAGERS!

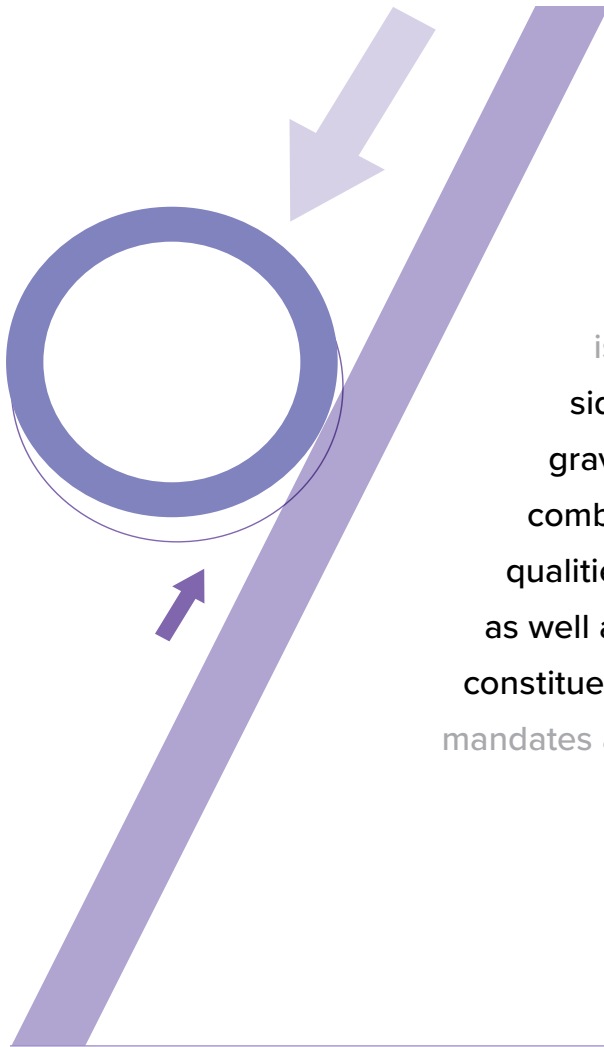
Here we sing of middle managers—the oft-mocked and underappreciated faction, neither high nor low, caught between the esteem of seniority and the fervor of youth. You see the quotidian inner workings of the organization alongside its strategic aims, and you serve as a channel of communication, helping your colleagues understand each other and how they connect to the goals of the organization as a whole. You see possibilities, and you see what it takes to realize them. Your creative flexibility drives the company to meet its goals. You are the ears on the ground and the eyes in the hallways; the beating heart at the center of the org chart; the creative and flexible ligaments that connect people to process, inputs to outcomes, activity to impact. It must have been disheartening to watch so many entities flattening their hierarchies and eliminating your positions; take heart! Many of those same organizations are sheepishly restoring middle management because they have struggled without it. Middle managers, you receive little applause, but your work shapes organizational cultures and societies.

IN PRAISE OF BUREAUCRATS!

Hail to the bureaucrats, the paperwork-passers, the policy-minders! Hail to you, the rarely lauded and openly derided. You remain above the fray, unswayed by special interests and shifting political climates in policymaking, and you remain clear-eyed and careful in putting policy into practice. Your “rule by writing desk” is reviled as inefficient and absurd. An easy target. But what's in a rule? At their best, your rules are meant to short-circuit and automate decision-making, to provide the workarounds we need to save time and energy. They communicate and clarify expectations. They allocate accountability and foster agreement. And they are technologies for remembering, little memory devices for preserving how to do things. Your policies and procedures structure the way we work together. They formalize and institutionalize norms, expectations, culture. When rules are made arbitrary and oppressive—by changing contexts, unintended consequences, or nefarious application—that's when we most need your systemic organizational vision and subtle skills of clerical navigation. We belittle your red tape at our collective peril. Without you, governments fall and empires crumble.

A Brief Science Lesson

FRICION IS AN OPPOSITIONAL FORCE, HUMANS VS. THE SYSTEMS THEY CREATE THE RESISTANCE THAT OCCURS WHEN TWO SURFACES INTERACT WITH EACH OTHER.



It occurs because at the microscopic level, no surface is actually smooth. And so, of course, friction is inevitable. **FRICION** is not considered a “fundamental force” (e.g., gravity) but instead arises from a combination of factors including the qualities and contamination of surfaces, as well as basic adhesion between their constituent particles. A variety of causes mandates a variety of cures.

You may be interested to know that:

- 1 When a moving object encounters a static one, **FRICION** slows its movement. Your best employees are not reaching their full potential.
- 2 **FRICION** converts kinetic energy (work) into thermal energy (heat). Sometimes this heat is desirable—say, when rubbing materials together to spark a flame. A joyful challenge can kindle the fires of innovation. Other times, the heat is unwelcome, and the work is lost. So much human effort is squandered.
- 3 Over time, friction can wear down materials. Are your employees tired, burned out, mistrustful or cynical? **FRICION** can lead them to degrade until they no longer function properly. Consider: lowered productivity, disengagement, a lack of attention to detail, failure to follow through, increased turnover.

Relationship-Building is Vital Work

THIS IS THE WORK

Steph greets Josh as he arrives at the office to say, “Good morning, how was your weekend?”

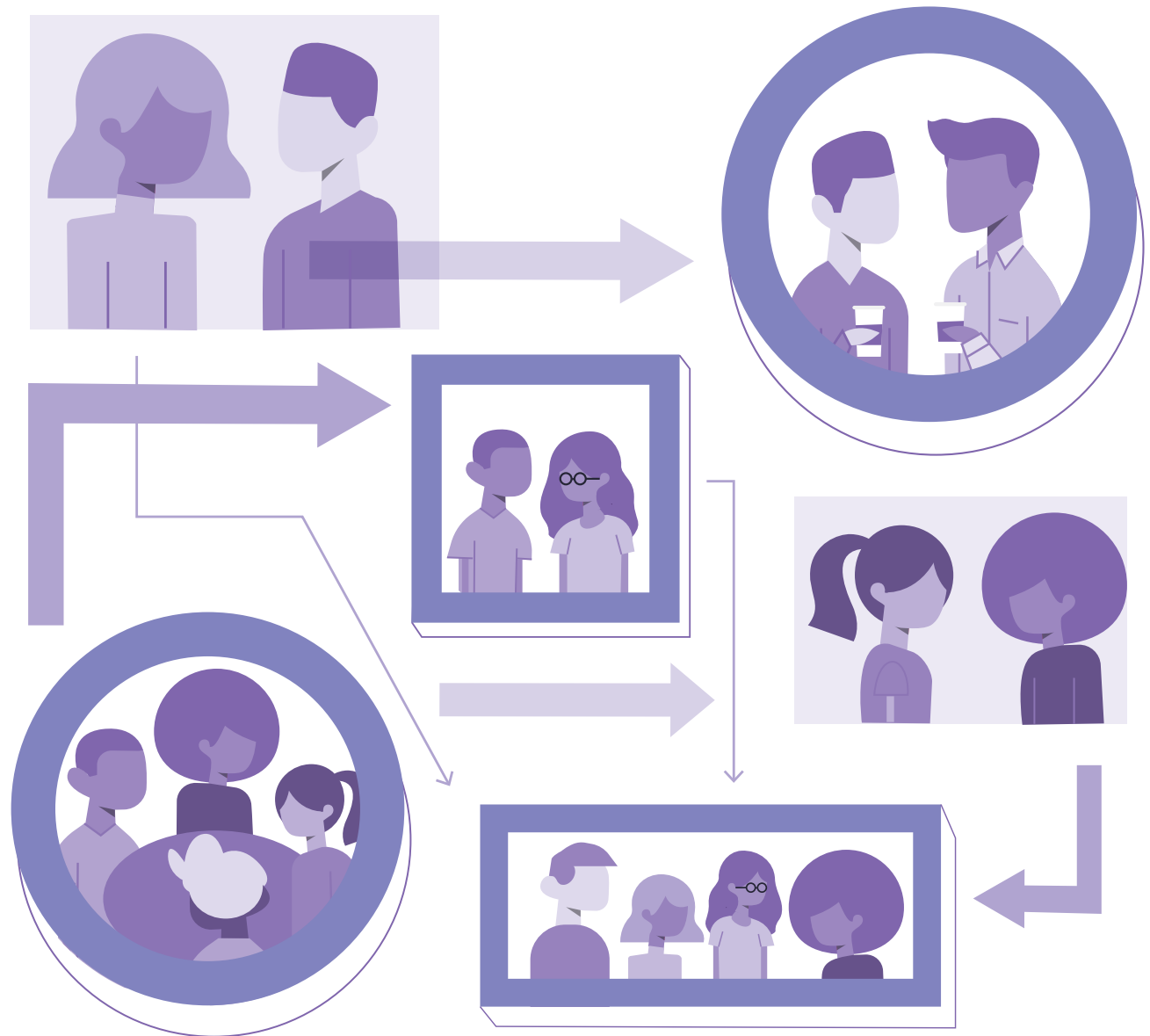
Cheryl lays out goals in a meeting with Dave, Tess, and Javier.

Tess finds Cheryl after the meeting to provide positive affirmation: “That was so great what you did with that project!”

Javier stopped on his way back to his desk to chat with Liz, who mentioned that she had a contact outside the company who had experience implementing a similar program, and she would happily connect them.

Tess meets with her team and delegates work; two of her subordinates decide to check in with each other regularly about their progress.

Dave grabs coffee in the kitchen and sees Josh, and they discuss their weekend plans. Josh is the person who helps Dave understand the complicated office interpersonal dynamics, which makes Dave a more effective manager.



The Enemy Wears Many Forms

Here they come, the parade of hideous **FRICTIONAL BEASTS**—lumbering, shuffling, plodding, stomping, creeping, cringing—an infernal emporium of malevolent foolishness ...

The **COOKIE-LICKER**, with his grotesque tongue, smearing spittle over all he reaches to mark his territory.

The demons who guard the entrance to **MEETING HELL**, crunching agendas and splintering time limits in their terrible maws.

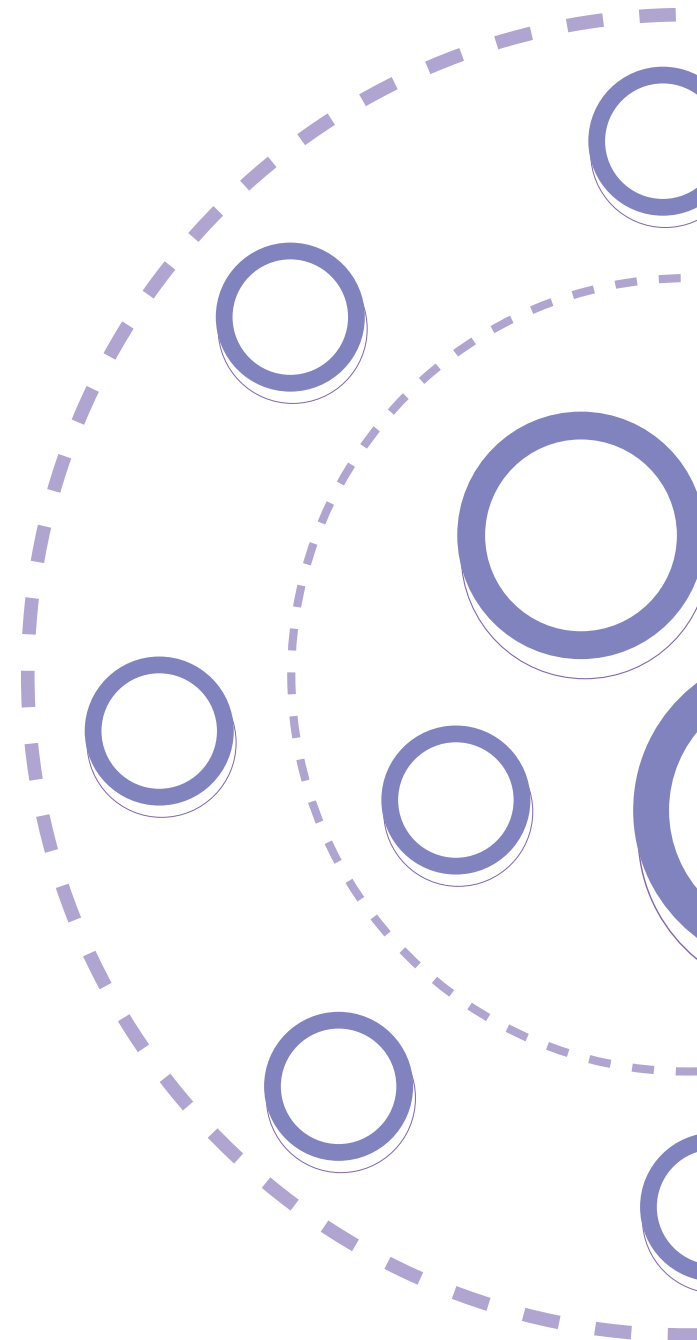
The **GUNK PEOPLE**, oozing their thick, entropic slime into all undefended processes and opportunities.

The **PETTY TYRANTS**, who bark orders while the **RULE FREAKS** impose arbitrary, uninformed demands and the **TROLLS** goad each other into throwing wrenches into the machinery just to hear it clank and screech.

The executive **HIPPOPATOMUS**, all mouth and tiny ears, with his **BULLHORN LACKEYS**, who marches noisily around the office, every spontaneous “got-a-minute?” check-in and extemporaneous “what-about-x?” magnified by his authority, setting off a squall in his wake as he saunters to the next cubicle.

Onlookers tremble, grasping the steel bars that separate them from the hostile menagerie, ready to sigh with relief for their presence and protection when they realize, suddenly, that something is wrong.

**THE BARS DO NOT
RESTRAIN THE
CREATURES!
INSTEAD, ZOOM
OUT, AND SEE THAT
THE BARS ENCIRCLE
THE ONLOOKERS, AN
IRON CAGE AROUND
THE CROWD, ALL OF
WHOM ARE CURRENTLY
INCARCERATED IN
EMAIL JAIL.**



A Job Description

NOW HIRING!

Seeking one **EXECUTIVE** to lead a company engaged in fighting the scourge of **ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION**. Must have a proven track record of success in **REDUCING** the coordination burden caused by an overload of initiatives and programs. Will be asked to serve as the **TRUSTEE OF OTHER PEOPLE'S TIME**, which means understanding the impact of actions taken on employees at all levels. Imperative that this individual **LISTENS** well; **REMOVES** unnecessary processes and administrative hurdles; **REDESIGNS** systems that cause frustration and delay; **UNDERSTANDS** the lived experience of junior staff and line managers, **CULTIVATES** norms and **CLARIFIES** rules that empower decision-making, and **RECOGNIZES** the communication that makes community.

Interested parties may apply at any time.

How Not to Respond

- 1 Introduce a new initiative to reduce **FRICTION**. Then several more. Better yet: open up the question to management and allow anyone to suggest a solution to the problem. Select several colleagues to implement their solutions, simultaneously.
- 2 Let your staff know that you have identified **FRICTION** as a problem. Announce that you will be fixing it. Become distracted by your Q3 financials and let the “**ANTI-FRICTION**” initiative quietly die without any action. Repeat this process once or twice over the course of several years.
- 3 Form a committee. Schedule a series of meetings. Brainstorm regularly but make sure you do not empower the committee to enact structural changes or seek employee buy-in. Do not incentivize committee members to prioritize **FRICTION**-fighting goals and do not reward them for their efforts.
- 4 Purchase a new piece of software, perhaps one that promises to increase productivity by streamlining communication, preferably built by a company with no tech support or customer service. Hire IT professionals devoted to this platform and set up weekly meetings to train staff on the new technology. Watch, frowning, as it fails to integrate with existing systems and inserts additional steps into current workflows. Begin searching for a new software to address this increased **FRICTION**.
- 5 **ASSIGN BLAME. POINT FINGERS. FIRE SOMEONE, THEN FEEL SATISFIED THAT THE COMPANY’S LONE SOURCE OF FRICTION IS NO LONGER IN YOUR EMPLOY.**
- 6 Make ambitious, sweeping plans to fight **FRICTION**. Become overwhelmed. Decide that **FRICTION** is inevitable and quietly budget for the cost of high turn-over and disengaged employees.

How Shall We Maintain the Organizational Commons?

WE PRESUPPOSE that friction arises from a failure to maintain the organizational commons.

ADDITIONALLY, WE ASSUME that this failure is rarely the accident of a moment; rather, it is due to a systemic lack of attention to the maintenance of the organizational commons. Individuals, exhausted by the thousands of decisions they must make daily, are too embattled by friction to notice or address the resulting depletion of these critical shared resources.

WE MUST THEREFORE CONCLUDE that organizations require a better way to care for and preserve the commons.

HOWEVER, any system for maintaining the commons must give rise to new types of friction.

FURTHERMORE, it is difficult to sustain common resources. Without the right rules, even with the best of intentions, humans will take more than their share of these resources. Few incentives for subtraction and many incentives for addition leads to a tragedy of well-intentioned organizational overload.

WE ASSUME that, despite these barriers, a system can be created to maintain the organizational commons such that it would result in a slower build-up of friction within an organization.

WE FURTHER ASSUME that the privatization of collective organizational resources is not the only or even the best way to govern the commons.

WE DECLARE, instead, that we can only protect the organizational commons if we do so together, and maintaining the commons becomes the work of many.

THEREFORE, WE RESOLVE that this system will necessarily be cooperative in nature and **PROPOSE** that the cooperative movement, with its history of community resource- and information-sharing, is the ideal place for such a solution to be built.

Elinor Ostrom's 8 Design Principles for Managing the Commons

1. Commons need clearly defined boundaries. Who is entitled to access what?
2. Rules for the commons should fit local circumstances. There are no one-size-fits-all best practices.
3. Participatory decision-making is vital. People are more likely to follow the rules if they had a hand in writing them.
4. Commons must be monitored. They don't run on good will, but on accountability.
5. There must be a system of graduated sanctions for those who abuse the commons. Don't just ban them.

6. Conflict resolution should be easily accessible. That means informal, cheap, and fast.
7. The community's right to self-determination must be recognized by higher-level authorities. Commons need the right to organize.
8. Commons work best when nested within larger networks. They rely on wide-ranging cooperation among various parties and systems.

Elinor Ostrom (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Women's Work

The first step to tackling the challenge of a **FRICTION**-filled workplace is to recognize and re-value the labor of maintenance. For the work of maintaining systems and dealing with **FRICTION** is typically unpaid or underpaid, because it often goes unseen and unrecognized. Why? In part because the work of maintenance is often understood to be “women’s work.” It is housework, care work, communication work, relationship work, and emotion work: “cooking, shopping, cleaning and laundering, planting, tending and harvesting for others, comforting and guiding, nursing and teaching, arranging and advising, disciplining and encouraging, fighting for and pacifying.”² The kinds of work that women have been doing, quietly and effectively, for decades.

This does not mean that maintenance labor is always, everywhere, and exclusively done by women—although to be sure, it frequently, typically, is. (In the U.S., women do around four hours of unpaid housework and care work every day—totaling, conservatively, \$1.5 trillion in unpaid minimum-wage work in 2019—while men do two and a half.)³

The more critical insight is that maintenance labor, even and especially when it happens outside the home, is perceived as work that women do and that men can ignore. As such, it is regarded as unpraiseworthy, despite its necessity to a functioning household, workplace, and society. Men are conditioned to avoid it, for fear of crossing gender barriers and worried about the social repercussions that follow. Women—especially women of color—are asked or expected to perform it without recognition or compensation.

When a man electively cleans data, organizes a file cabinet, helps a coworker fix a mistake, or coordinates a birthday celebration, he may be chastised for wasting his time, or he may be praised for going beyond the call of duty. When a woman does any of these things, it is business as usual. Think about fathers on the playground, at the laundromat, or in the grocery store: men are praised for the basic tasks associated with parenting children and maintaining a household, tasks that women perform regularly without fanfare.

**THE STRUGGLE AGAINST
THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS
OF FRICTION—THE
FRUSTRATION AND
THE EXHAUSTION—
REQUIRES ALL OF US.
BUT SOME OF US HAVE
BEEN DOING IT, OFF
THE CLOCK, FOR YEARS.**

² Adapted from Selma James, “The Global Kitchen,” in *Sex, Race, and Class* (2012, PM Press), p. 167.

³ Oxfam, “Time to Care: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work and the Global Inequality Crisis,” January 2020.

Frequently Asked Questions

IS MY ORGANIZATION EXPERIENCING UNSAFE LEVELS OF FRICTION?

Does your work bring you joy, or does it wear you down? Does it seem as though you are forever working around an obstacle, or getting things done in spite – not because – your workplace’s systems (technological, administrative, social)? Do you feel aggravated, cynical, or burned out by the work of organizing your work? Do you feel paralyzed by everyday tasks and errands, looking at your to-do list or opening your inbox? If your office were a set of gears, would they be gunky, crusty, and rusty?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you have a **FRICTION** problem.

HOW DO I SELL THE FIGHT AGAINST FRICTION TO MY MANAGER/OUR BOARD/THE C-SUITE/ THE PLACES FROM WHENCE I RECEIVE FUNDING?

Once you have identified prominent sources of **FRICTION**, ask your team or unit for some back-of-the-envelope calculations: how many minutes per day do these activities cost you in lost productivity? Time has value—and moreover, wasted time has emotional and motivational costs beyond the actual lost work. If you take the time to understand the scope of the benefits of reducing **FRICTION**, we suspect you’ll find a persuasive case for doing so.

IS THE ISSUE ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION, OR IS IT JUST SAM IN ACCOUNTING?

It’s probably **FRICTION**. Sam’s dealing with it, too. Cut them some slack.

WE’VE FIXED OUR FRICTION PROBLEM. WHAT DO WE TACKLE NEXT?

Congratulations! You mowed the lawn once. Now you just need to mow it regularly—say, once a week? Otherwise it will get long again, and you’ll be right back where you started. Hope you bought yourself a really sturdy lawn mower! You’ve decided who’s responsible for mowing regularly, right? Also, who is going to make sure the blade gets sharpened and the gas tank stays full? Great. Pay them well. Keep at it. You’re on your way.

HELP! I’M BEING SLOWLY BURNED TO A CRISP BY THE HEAT OF ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION. WHAT DO I DO?

Don’t panic! (Panicking will make this worse.) Start by listening. Listen to your colleagues, and listen to your employees, at all levels. What makes their jobs hard? Identify as many of the sources of **FRICTION** as you can. Look for low-hanging fruit, the sources of **FRICTION** that can be removed quickly to gain buy-in. **FRICTION** can become pervasive, but to combat it, make sure that tackling **FRICTION** is someone’s responsibility and—most importantly—that they have the support they need. Keep at it.

BUT I LIKE HOUR-LONG MEETINGS AND SPENDING ALL DAY TRYING TO CLIMB A MOUNTAIN OF EMAILS THAT JUST KEEPS GROWING!

...this is not a frequently asked question. It might be a never-asked question. Here’s to a future in which tasks like these have been returned to their rightful, low-ish priority level.

A Call to Arms

We have the opportunity and the responsibility to lead the fight against harmful **ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION**.

WHEN DOES FRICTION BECOME HARMFUL? WHEN IT IMPEDES EMPLOYEES' ABILITY TO DO THEIR JOBS WELL.

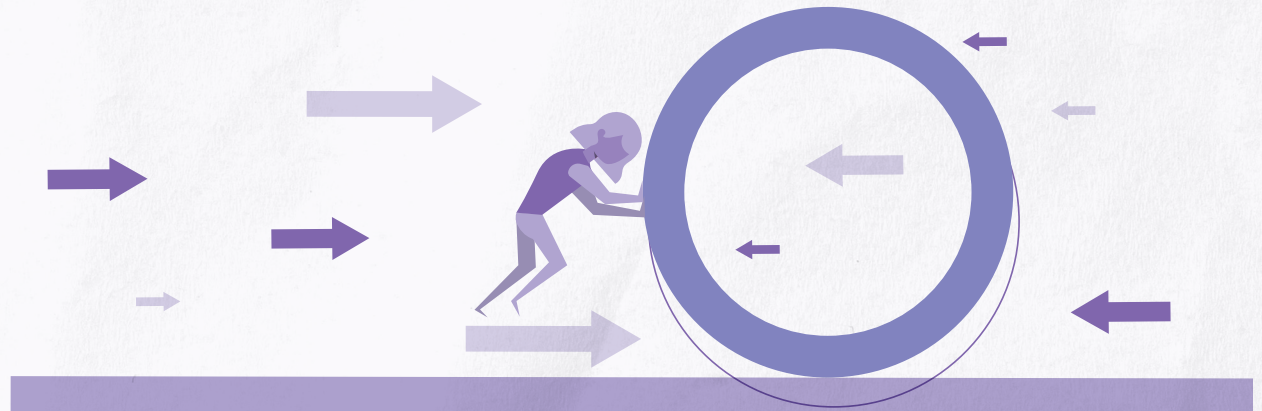
When does **FRICTION** become dangerous? When employees are stressed out, burned out, and emotionally checked out; when passion turns to frustration, then hardens into cynicism and settles into exhaustion.

What are the cures for **FRICTION**? Attention to its causes and rewards for its alleviators. Increased appreciation for and valuation of those who build and maintain infrastructure. Pay attention to what frustrates your employees and declare war on it. More subtraction, less addition.

The work of battling **FRICTION** may not be exciting. You may struggle to find purchase, to make your case to leaders and managers, to convince colleagues of the need for your reforms. We insist that this work is nevertheless valuable, and yet ultimately, work is work. It does not encompass all of life.

You will be fighting **FRICTION** forever. Embrace this struggle. Normalize its key players, its vocabulary and methodology. Incorporate it into your policies and procedures; schedule time on the corporate calendar for checking **FRICTION** levels and taking corrective action.

Now, we charge you to identify, address, and alleviate the **FRICTION** in your own workplace. Forge and adopt collective design principles for governing shared responsibilities. A better workplace—and a better world—await.



MEET THE AUTHORS



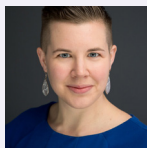
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—Edward A. Filene