Work–Feedback Loop

The **Work–Feedback Loop** is a thinking and diagnostic model that shows whether work in your organization **creates real effects, makes them visible, triggers decisions, and actually changes future work**. It helps you quickly identify the structural bottleneck that limits adaptability—**without** debating methods or "agility" as a label.

Contact & Discussion

Feedback and discussions about the model are expressly welcome.

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1. What this is about

Many organizations are getting faster: more releases, more initiatives, more meetings, more “output.” And yet a familiar experience remains: **reality changes, but the system doesn’t change along with it fast enough.**

When that happens, it’s rarely a motivation or competence issue. It’s a structural issue: **work is not cleanly coupled to its real effects—and those effects don’t reliably change what work happens next.**

That is exactly what the **Work–Feedback Loop** is for: a thinking and diagnostic model that makes a system’s adaptability visible—regardless of which methods, roles, or process labels are currently in use.

1.1 Practical value

With this model, you can quickly clarify:

- **Where does feedback stop being “information”—and where does it start becoming “consequence”?**
  (In other words: Where does perception turn into a decision that actually changes future work?)
- **Which bottleneck limits adaptability the most right now?**
  Signal (do effects become visible?), Decision (who can reprioritize?), Execution (when does it become effective?), Capital (when can money/capacity really be reallocated?), Alignment (does feedback flow across levels?)
- **Why local optimization often looks like progress—but structurally doesn’t learn.**
  (Because activity increases while coupling and responsiveness stay the same.)

The Work–Feedback Loop is therefore not an “adoption program,” but a tool to identify **direction, cause, and leverage** before trying to “improve” anything.

1.2 The core principle: coupling over activity

The core is deliberately simple:

Work → Feedback → Decision → future Work

A system only learns reliably from reality if all four steps are actually coupled:

1. **Work** creates a real effect (not just internal activity),
2. that effect becomes visible as **feedback** (as a signal, not an opinion),
3. it leads to a **decision** (priorities/assumptions/resources change),
4. and that decision changes **future work**.

If a coupling is missing, the loop becomes open: it may feel productive—but it is not structurally adaptive.

1.3 What this document provides

So the diagnosis doesn't stop at an abstract circle, this document extends the base model along the typical bottlenecks found in organizations:

- **Chapter 2 – Base model:**
  Precise terms (Work, Feedback, Decision, future Work) and the condition for when a loop is truly closed.
- **Chapter 3 – Two speeds & system states:**
  The distinction between *work speed* and *feedback speed* and four typical states. This makes it visible whether a system works fast or learns fast—and where the bottleneck sits.
- **Chapter 4 – Time as a structural variable (FRT):**
  Breaking response time down into signal time, decision time, and execution time. This enables concrete conversations about delay instead of vague "too slow."
- **Chapter 5 – Decision latency:**
  Why many systems don't fail at "delivery," but at binding prioritization and decision-making—and how this latency behaves as structural risk.
- **Chapter 6 – Capital coupling:**
  Adaptation ends where capital/capacity cannot be reallocated. This chapter shows how budget and investment cycles act as a frequency limit—even when teams are operationally fast.

- **Chapter 7 – Nested loops:**
  Real organizations have multiple loops (operational, coordinating, strategic). What matters is not only whether a loop is closed locally, but whether feedback flows **across levels** and synchronizes in time.

1.4 How to read (and use) the model

If you want to use this document as a practical tool, take one concrete unit of work (a release, a meeting, a policy, a reorg) and walk it through the model:

- What **effect** should it create in reality?
- Where does the **signal** become visible—and when?
- Who can make a **binding decision** based on that signal?
- When does that decision become **effective**—and does it really change what work happens next?

The answers quickly show whether you're looking at a *team problem*—or a *system problem* (decision, capital, alignment). And that's exactly what the Work–Feedback Loop is for: **coupling reality to the system so adaptation doesn't happen by accident, but becomes structurally reliable.**

2. Basic model – The Work–Feedback Loop

As we saw in the introduction, learning performance depends on time and coupling. Therefore, we must first define what exactly is coupled. The basic model in this document reduces organizational learning ability to an elementary relationship.

Work → Feedback → Work

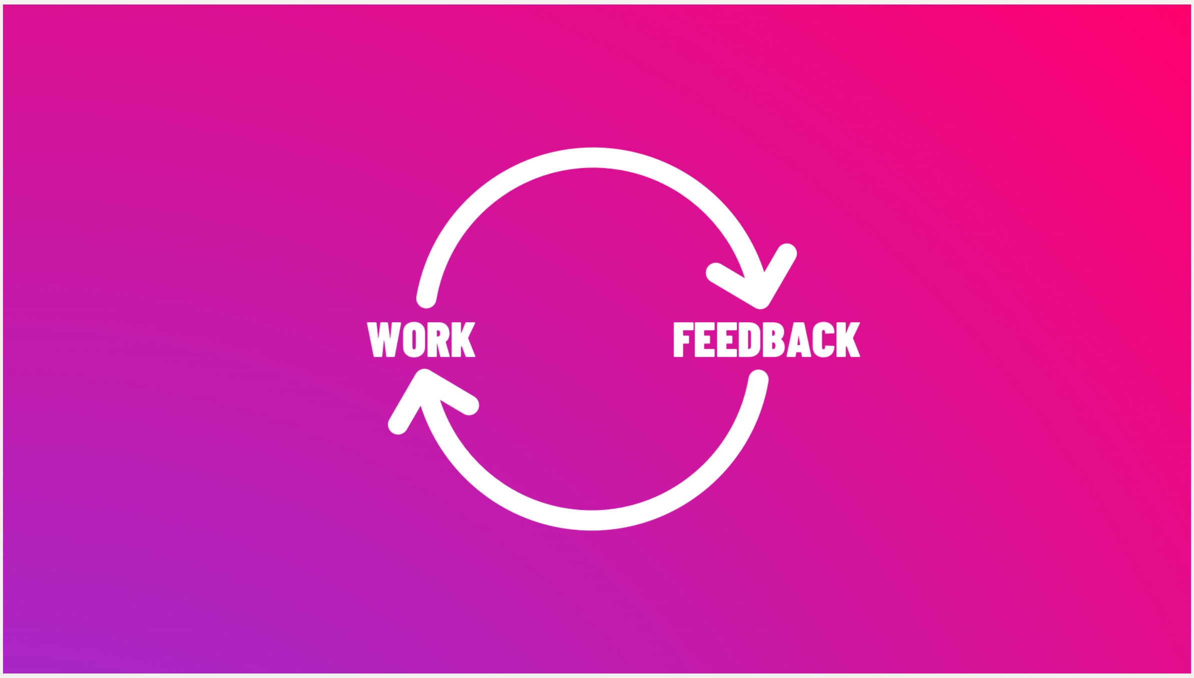

Figure 1: Work-Feedback Loop

It is important to understand that this cycle does not begin with Work. It begins at any point. The illustration describes a **chain of effects**, not a rigid **chronological sequence**. The model does not describe a list of tasks, but rather a condition for learning ability.

In the following sections, we will take a closer look at the elements.

2.1 Work

Work refers to any action that produces an effect in reality. To give you an idea of what work can be, here is an incomplete list:

- A delivered product increment
- A price change
- An organizational decision

It is important for the model that it is not the internal activity within the organization that is decisive, but the real effect in the environment of the organization. In the conceptual model of the Work–Feedback Loop, only work that produces an effect counts. If there is no effect, we lack the learning signal.

2.2 Feedback

Feedback is the observable reaction of reality to work. This can be:

- Usage behavior
- Market reactions
- Qualitative feedback (e.g., from real usage situations)

Feedback in the sense of this model is a **sufficiently valid signal**. Fast but misleading signals do not shorten the work–feedback loop—they generate **actionism** (fast activity without learning gains).

No feedback, for example, is an internal opinion round without reference to observable effects. Feedback is always an **effect** that returns to the system.

2.3 Decision

Feedback alone does not generate adaptation. A crucial step is missing to close the loop, because there is always a decision between perception and change. Decision means:

- Priorities are shifted
- Resources are reallocated
- Assumptions are corrected

Without a decision, feedback has no consequences.

2.4 Future work

As can be seen in the previous section, it is important that decisions based on feedback from past work **change future work**. This closes the work–feedback loop.

If there is no connection between work, feedback, decision, and influence on future work, there is activity, but the loop is not closed. The quality of this circle does not depend on motivation, but on the structural coupling of its elements.

2.5 Closed and open systems

The previous chapters provide an overall picture of a **closed system**. This system is capable of learning. We can describe it as follows. A system is capable of learning if:

1. Work produces **real effects**
2. These effects become **visible**
3. Decisions **respond** to them
4. Future work **arises** from them

If one of these conditions is missing, an open loop is created. This can be productive, but it is **not adaptive**.

Note: The model follows in the tradition of classic feedback concepts such as Deming's PDCA cycle. However, it differs in that it explicitly considers time, decision latency, and capital frequency as structural variables. We will discuss these terms in the following chapters, but it is important to point them out early in the document.

2.6 Speed and reliability

As we approach the quantification of the work–feedback loop, we can note that two characteristics determine the quality of the loop.

Speed
How much time elapses between work and adjustment?

Reliability
How reliably and consistently does feedback lead to changes in work?

It is important to understand that a system can be fast but still react unstable, or it can be stable but react extremely slowly as a result.

Therefore, it is important to note that organizational learning ability arises when speed and reliability are both high. Only the balance of both creates **sustainable adaptability**. One-sided optimization leads either to **chaos** (only fast) or **rigidity** (only reliable).

2.7 Reduction

From this perspective, the work–feedback loop is not a framework but intentionally a reduction. It is highly effective at reducing complex organizations and their processes to the following question:

Is the link between work and reality closed, fast, and reliable?

All of the following sections examine where this link is typically disrupted.

3. Two speeds – states of the system

In the previous chapter, the work–feedback loop was described as a closed control loop. However, to evaluate learning ability, it is not enough to simply consider the existence of the loop. The decisive factor is its dynamics between the individual components.

A distinction must be made between two speeds:

- Speed of **work**
- Speed of **feedback**

These two speeds are independent of each other.

3.1 Work speed

Work speed describes how quickly a system generates work that can have a real impact.

Well-known examples here are: release frequency, time-to-market, throughput, or decision implementation. We can say that work speed is well established in many organizations. It is often clearly visible and measurable.

3.2 Feedback speed

Feedback speed describes how quickly the effect of work is fed back into the system as a relevant signal.

Examples:

- Time until valid usage data is available
- Time until market reactions become visible
- Time until operational side effects are detected
- Time until hypotheses can be verified

Feedback speed is often less transparent than work speed.

3.3 Four structural states

Combining both speeds results in **four basic states** that help us understand the system. These four states are not project phases, but rather show the system configuration. The slower of the two elements (work or feedback) acts as a structural bottleneck for learning ability.

First of all, it should be noted that learning ability is only structurally possible in the **Learning** quadrant. All other states are forms of partial decoupling.

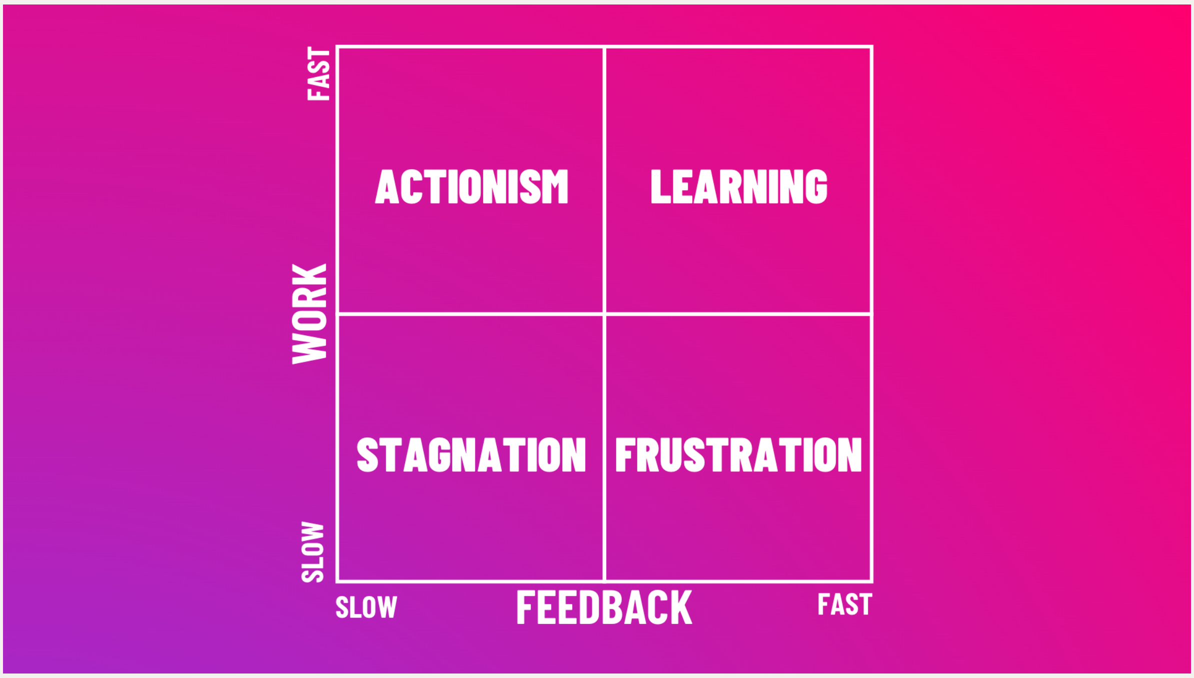

Figure 2: Diagnosis matrix

In the following chapters, we will take a closer look at the quadrants.

3.3.1. Learning

When work is delivered quickly in small cycles and feedback reaches the system quickly, work has an impact. This impact generates a signal that then changes decisions. The system is **adaptive**. This state must be protected.

3.3.2. Actionism

Actionism describes systems that increase their production speed without accelerating their feedback. If work is delivered quickly in small cycles, but feedback generated by this work flows slowly into the system, then the system produces continuously but receives delayed or weak feedback. In this case, activity is high, but the learning rate is low. This results in **actionism**.

The bottleneck here is the **processing of reality** (feedback).

Typical symptoms include feature growth without clear impact or high release frequency without strategic adjustment.

3.3.3. Frustration

If work is slow but feedback enters the system at a high frequency, problems are well recognized but the system does not respond. The bottleneck is not in the signal, but in the decision. This is **frustration**.

Typical symptoms in this situation are many good, recognized but not implemented improvement opportunities, long decision-making processes, or governance blockages.

3.3.4. Stagnation

If both parameters are slow—work and feedback—then neither movement nor adaptation is significant. This leads to **stagnation**. Here, **both** speeds are bottlenecks. The system is doubly blocked.

3.4 States are structural, not cultural

It is important to note that these four states are not descriptions of attitude or motivation. They are **structurally anchored**.

A committed team can work in a state of frustration. A disciplined company can operate in a state of actionism. The cause lies not in people, but in the coupling speed.

3.5 Diagnosis instead of evaluation

The conceptual model described here does not view the four states as degrees of maturity, but rather as a **diagnostic tool**. It is important to understand that a system can exhibit different states at different levels.

Example: A product team can operate in a state of ‘learning’ (fast delivery and adaptation), while the portfolio management above it remains in a state of ‘stagnation’ due to rigid annual budgets.

According to the Theory of Constraints, the bottleneck always determines the performance of the system. Our goal is to find this bottleneck in learning ability.

The goal is to structurally identify where a bottleneck is. Therefore, the crucial question is “*What causes the differences in speed?*”

The answer to this question leads to the time dimension of the loop.

4. Time as a structural variable

Up to this point, the work–feedback loop has been described qualitatively. We have seen that learning performance depends on coupling and that states result from different speeds. We have established that structural adaptation is only possible in the **learning** state.

In order to understand this dynamic precisely, another dimension, **time**, must be introduced, because learning ability is not an abstract property, but rather a function of time sequences within the loop.

4.1 Time between signal and change

There is a time lag between the effect of work and the change in future work. This time consists of at least three components:

1. Time until a signal becomes **visible** (`signal`)
2. Time until a **decision** is made (`decision`)
3. Time until this decision is **implemented** (`deploy`)

We refer to this sum as:

Feedback Response Time (FRT)

Formally: `t(FRT) = t(signal) + t(decision) + t(deploy)`

This relationship is not a mathematical derivation but a **structural decomposition**. Any delay in one of the three elements prolongs the response time of the system.

4.2 Feedback has a validity window

Feedback is not timeless but **becomes less valuable over time**. It ages and decays over time. Therefore, every signal has a validity window.

For example, user behavior may change, competitors may react, or the internal context within the company may change.

A signal that is not translated into changed action in a timely manner thus loses its relevance over time. This can be represented conceptually as follows:

The value of a signal decreases over time. If `t(FRT)` exceeds a critical time window, feedback loses its effectiveness.

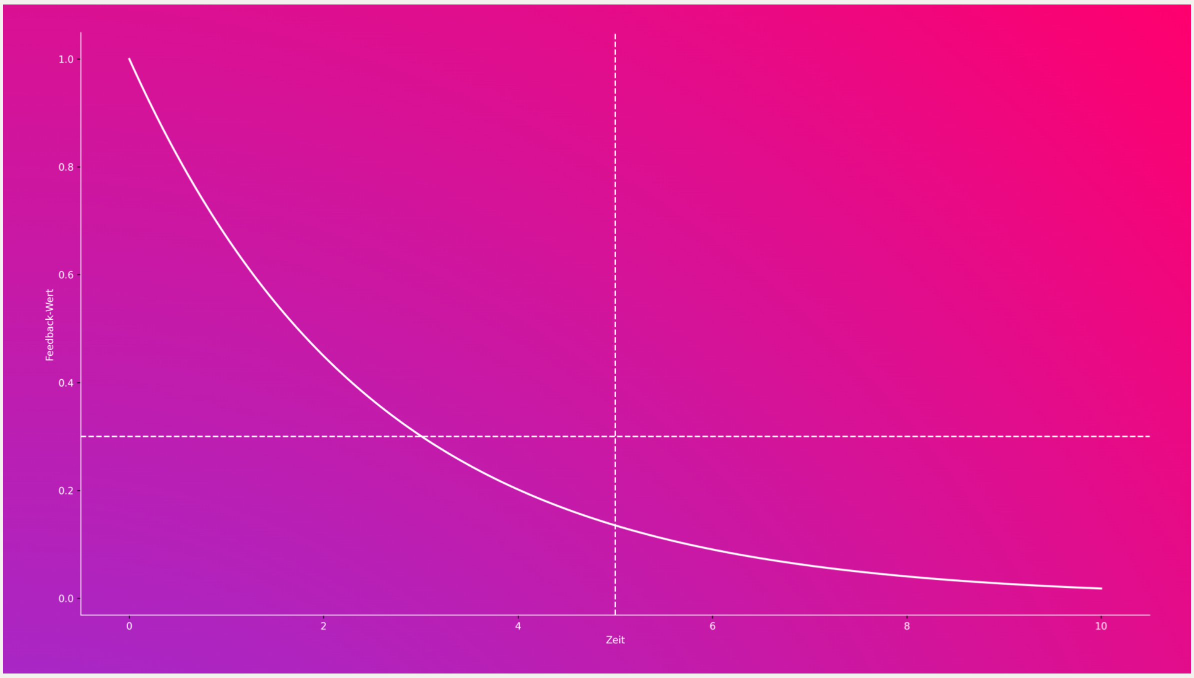

Figure 3: Feedback validity window

The graphic shows three elements:

1. The falling curve describes the value of the signal over time. It illustrates that feedback does not remain relevant constantly, but loses its effect with increasing delay.
2. The horizontal line marks the minimum relevance threshold. Below this threshold, the signal still exists, but no longer guides action.
3. The vertical line marks the feedback response time (`t(FRT)`), i.e., the point in time at which the system actually responds.

The position of this vertical line in relation to the threshold is crucial.

If `t(FRT)` is to the left of the intersection with the relevance threshold, the feedback still guides action.

If `t(FRT)` is to the right of it, the signal is structurally devalued. The system reacts—but too late.

We can conclude that it is not only crucial whether feedback exists, but also whether it **has an effect in a timely manner**.

4.3 Time as a bottleneck

Feedback is available in many organizations. This can be seen from the fact that problems are identified and feedback data exists. The bottleneck is therefore not in the signal, but in the response time.

Typical causes for this are, for example, multi-level decision-making processes, committee structures, budget approvals, dependencies between units, or even risk hedging.

These factors prolong `t(decision)` or `t(deploy)`.

This shifts the system from a state of "learning" towards "frustration" or "actionism".

4.4 Speed is relative

A short feedback response time is not an absolute value; it is always relative to the validity window of the signal. In some systems, a week may be short. In other systems, a week may be too late. The crucial question is therefore:

Is `t(FRT)` shorter than the time window in which the signal is still relevant?

Learning ability only arises when response time and signal relevance are synchronized.

The breakdown of the feedback response time already shows that not all delays are the same. `t(decision)` is particularly critical.

This is because it determines whether feedback actually has consequences. In the next section, we will therefore consider decision latency as an independent structural variable.

5. Decision latency

In the previous section, feedback response time (FRT) was described as the sum of signal, decision, and implementation. This breakdown already shows that not all delays have the same effect.

5.1 What is decision latency?

Decision latency describes the time span between the moment a relevant signal becomes visible and the moment a binding decision is made.

Formally simplified: `t(decision)`

This time is often invisible because it is hidden in coordination loops, committee processes, budget approvals, and many other elements. The longer this phase lasts, the greater the structural disconnect between reality and action becomes.

5.2 Production speed vs. decision latency

A particularly critical case arises when the speed of production is higher than the speed of decision-making.

Formally: When `t(decision) > t(production)`, a structural decoupling of the loop occurs.

The operational system continuously generates new work, while strategic or prioritizing decisions are made more slowly. The result is often that work accumulates, changes in direction are delayed, and feedback is not synchronized. The system moves faster than it can orient itself.

5.3 Symptoms of high decision latency

High decision latency often manifests itself in:

- Priority changes with significant delays
- Discussions without binding conclusions
- Backlogs of initiatives
- Operational teams waiting for approvals
- Strategic insights without implementation

In such systems, feedback is not the problem. The problem is **processing the feedback**.

5.4 Decoupling as a structural risk

If decision latency exceeds the production cycle, a form of decoupling occurs. Operational units work while strategic orientation lags behind. This can cause the system to fall into a state of actionism: high activity with a low learning rate.

It is also possible for such systems to enter a state of frustration. Clear insights exist without the possibility of rapid implementation.

Decision latency thus acts as a **structural bottleneck to learning ability**.

5.5 Latency is not a question of motivation

It should be noted that decision latency rarely arises from a lack of willingness. It arises from structures such as hierarchical depth, diffusion of responsibility, risk minimization, budget cycles, or governance mechanisms.

This makes it clear that learning performance is not a characteristic of culture, but **of time and coupling**.

The next structural coupling level concerns not only decisions, but also capital.

6. Capital as a second coupling

So far, we have looked at the work–feedback loop primarily at the operational and decision-making levels. However, organizations are not only operational systems, they are also capital allocation systems. Work does not arise in a vacuum, but within financial constraints.

This means that, in addition to the operational loop, there is a second level of coupling: **the capital loop**.

6.1 Capital cycles

Capital is usually allocated in **cycles**. We are familiar with forms such as annual or quarterly budget planning and portfolio decisions. These are often linked to investment approvals and business case logic.

These cycles have their own frequency. We refer to this as `t(capital)`.

In many organizations, this frequency is significantly slower than the operational production frequency `t(production)`.

6.2 Coupling ratio

To better understand the structural relationship between capital and production frequency, we can look at the ratio:

`Coupling Ratio = t(capital) / t(production)`

This ratio describes how strongly operational adaptability is linked to financial cycles. If the ratio is low, capital decisions are closely linked to operational reality. If the ratio is high, structural rigidity arises.

6.3 Structural rigidity

If: `t(capital) >> t(production)`, asymmetry arises. The operational system can learn quickly, but capital decisions only respond at long intervals.

The consequences are well known. Findings remain **without consequence** or experiments **cannot be scaled**. Changes in direction are then **financially blocked**. The system can be operationally adaptive, but it is strategically rigid.

6.4 Capital as a frequency limiter

Capital cycles then act as a frequency filter. They limit how quickly an organization can respond structurally.

Even if feedback is generated quickly, decisions are made quickly, and teams deliver quickly, adaptability remains limited because capital is only redistributed periodically.

In such cases, the bottleneck is not in the work–feedback loop, but in **capital coupling**.

6.5 Consequences for learning ability

Organizational learning ability does not end with teams or product decisions. It ends where capital can be realigned. If the capital frequency is not synchronized with the production frequency, a structural limit to adaptation arises.

The next level of this consideration does not concern individual loops, but their interlocking.

7. Nested loops

Up to this point, the work–feedback loop has been considered on a level that looks like this: Operational work produces an effect. This effect generates feedback. The feedback changes decisions. Decisions change future work.

In real organizations, however, there is not just one loop. There are several loops of varying scope and frequency.

7.1 Three levels of coupling

For simplicity's sake, three levels can be distinguished.

1. **Operational loop**
   Cycle: Days or weeks
   Focus: Implementation, delivery, immediate effect
2. **Coordination loop**
   Cycle: Weeks or months
   Focus: Prioritization, dependencies, resources
3. **Strategic loop**
   Cycle: Months or years
   Focus: Direction, positioning, portfolio, business model

Each of these levels has its own decision-making cycles, feedback sources, and time constants.

Note on classification:
This structure is based on established structural models of modern organizational development (e.g., *Flight Levels*).

The key difference lies in the focus: While models such as Flight Levels primarily describe the **topology** of collaboration (Who talks to whom? Where does work flow?), the Work–Feedback Loop considers the **chronology** and **frequency** (How quickly does the system learn?).

We are therefore not using these levels here to design communication structures, but to make the **temporal asynchrony** between operational hecticness and strategic rigidity measurable.

7.2 Frequency differences

The timing of these loops varies.

In simplified terms, we can formulate: `t(operation) < t(coordination) < t(strategy)`

This inequality is not problematic at first. Different ranges require different cycles. It only becomes problematic **when feedback does not flow between the levels**.

7.3 Alignment

There are implicit coupling relationships between the levels.

For example: `Alignment Ratio = t(strategy) / t(operation)`

If this ratio is extremely high, the strategy rarely responds to operational reality.

The result is that the strategic direction remains constant, even though operational signals suggest change. The operational units then optimize **locally** without achieving systemic adjustment. This creates a form of **phase shift**—operations and strategy run asynchronously and work against each other.

7.4 Disconnected Agility

We refer to the above situation as **disconnected agility**. It describes a state in which operational loops work quickly, while strategic or coordinative loops remain sluggish.

In this state, the system appears agile at the team level, but remains structurally unchanged.

Typical patterns we can recognize in this situation: Teams deliver regularly, but portfolio decisions rarely change. Experiments are conducted, but there is no budgetary response to the results. Retrospectives generate local improvements without strategic consequences.

Here, the operational loop is closed, but the strategic loop is not synchronized.

7.5 Synchronization as a prerequisite

The insight we gain here is that **organizational learning ability** does not arise solely from a fast operational loop. It only arises when **feedback flows across levels** and is translated into decisions at each level in a timely manner. Learning ability is therefore not just a characteristic of individual teams, but a **characteristic of nested systems**.

The question we must ask ourselves is not only whether the loop is closed, but whether the loops are coordinated across levels.

This completes the list of all structural components of the conceptual model. These are:

- Coupling between work and reality
- Two speeds (work and feedback)
- Feedback response time
- Decision latency
- Capital frequency
- Nested loops

In the next section, we will bring this model together as an analytical tool.

8. The conceptual model as an analytical tool

The work–feedback loop does not describe a process model. It defines neither roles nor events, nor artifacts or implementation steps. It reduces complex organizations to a core structural question:

Is the system capable of responding to reality in a timely manner?

This reduction is a conscious choice, as it enables analysis without prescribing interventions.

8.1 Diagnosis before intervention

The model is not suitable for direct optimization. It is suitable for diagnosis.

The following key questions are central to this:

1. What is the real effect and is it observable?
2. How quickly does this effect become visible as a signal?
3. How long does it take for a decision to be made?
4. How long does implementation take?
5. Which loop is currently the bottleneck?
6. Is capital synchronized with operational reality?
7. Are strategic and operational loops aligned?

Only when these questions have been answered can a meaningful intervention be chosen.

8.2 Bottleneck logic

In every system, there is a dominant bottleneck at any given time. This can be in signal transparency, decision latency, implementation capability, capital commitment, or level alignment.

The model allows this bottleneck to be located without prematurely changing processes.

8.3 Measurability

Not all components need to be quantified precisely, but each element has a time dimension. How long does it take for a market signal to appear, a priority to be changed, a budget to be shifted, or a strategy to be adjusted? Even rough estimates make structural differences clearly visible.

The strength of the model lies not in mathematical precision, but in structural clarity.

8.4 A different view of agility

From the perspective of this conceptual model, agility is not a collection of practices or methods.

In this thinking model, agility is the ability of a system to translate feedback into changed work in a timely manner. A system can use Scrum and still be structurally sluggish. A system can reject formal agile methods and still be highly adaptive. The decisive factor is not the label, but the coupling speed.

8.5 Summary of the model

Organizational learning ability is a function of time, coupling latency, frequency, and synchronization. The work–feedback loop offers a structured perspective on these relationships. It does not replace methods. It evaluates their structural impact.

This provides a conceptual model that can be used to analyze agile working independently of frameworks.

Glossary

Actionism

State of high production speed with low feedback speed. The system produces continuously but receives delayed or weak feedback.

Adaptability

The structural ability of a system to respond to changing environmental conditions. Adaptability does not describe an attitude or culture, but rather the actual ability to adapt.

Alignment

Temporal synchronization between nested feedback levels (e.g., strategy, coordination, operation).

Alignment Ratio

Ratio between time constants of different levels, e.g.:

`t(strategy) / t(operation)`

Used to evaluate structural coupling between levels.

Bottleneck

The factor that most severely limits the adaptation speed of the overall system.

Capital loop

Structural coupling between capital allocation and operational reality.

Closed loop

State in which:

1. Work produces a real effect
2. The effect becomes visible
3. A decision is made
4. New work is adjusted

Only closed loops are adaptive.

Coupling Ratio

Ratio between capital frequency and production frequency:

`t(capital) / t(production)`

Shows the extent to which operational learning cycles are coupled or decoupled by capital structures.

Decision latency

`t(decision)`. Time span between the visibility of a signal and a binding decision.

Disconnected Agility

State of fast operational loops with sluggish strategic or capital-related loops. Operational dynamics are present, but strategic adaptation is lacking.

Feedback

Observable reaction of reality to an action (“work”). Feedback is not a meeting, an opinion, or planning, but a real effect that flows back into the system.

Feedback Loop

Structural relationship between action and effect, in which the effect influences future action.

Feedback response time (FRT)

Total duration between signal generation and effective adaptation:

`t(FRT) = t(signal) + t(decision) + t(deploy)`

Describes the temporal dynamics of the closed loop.

Feedback speed

Time until a real effect becomes visible in the system as a relevant signal.

Learning (system state)

State of synchronized work and feedback speed. Work produces effects, effects change decisions.

Learning ability

Structural ability of a system to learn from reality. Describes architecture and coupling – not performance.

Learning performance

Actual adaptation speed of a system. Describes the dynamic implementation of learning ability.

Nested loops

Multiple feedback levels with different time constants (e.g., strategy, coordination, operation).

Open loop

Incomplete feedback in which feedback does not lead to changed work. Productivity is possible, adaptability is not.

Relevance threshold

Minimum value of a signal at which it still guides action.

Stagnation

State of low production and low feedback speed. Neither movement nor adaptation are significant.

Structural rigidity

State of high capital or decision latency combined with high operational speed.

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t(capital)

Time constant of capital allocation.

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t(deploy)

Time until a decision made is effectively implemented.

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t(signal)

Time until a real effect becomes visible as a relevant signal.

Validity window

Time span during which a feedback signal remains action-guiding. If `t(FRT)` exceeds this window, the signal loses its structural relevance.

Work

Action with a real effect in the system's environment. Internal activity without external effect is not considered work in the model.

Work speed

Frequency at which work is generated that can have a real effect.