

# The Placebo Gap in Organisational Change: A Behavioural–Structural Model for Transformation Integrity

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**Abstract:** Organisational change initiatives frequently show early signs of progress before substantive capability development has occurred. Existing research attributes this pattern to expectancy dynamics, symbolic cues, and social contagion, yet these perceptual mechanisms are rarely integrated with structural predictors of employee experience such as personal values, organisational climate, meaning of work, and commitment. This conceptual paper synthesises these literatures to propose a Behaviourally-Informed Transformation Integrity Model. We argue that early uplift reflects a form of premature collective sensemaking; a behavioural placebo mechanism, while sustained progress depends on deeper structural drivers of satisfaction and wellbeing. Two overlooked moderators, accountability and generational perception, shape how employees interpret symbolic cues and how quickly early narratives of success form or collapse. We introduce the placebo gap, defined as the divergence between perceived momentum and actual capability, and propose it as a measurable governance risk indicator. The paper concludes with testable propositions and practical guidance for distinguishing symbolic progress from structural change.

**Keywords:** *Organisational Change; Placebo Gap; Collective Sensemaking; Organisational Climate; Accountability; Generational Perception; Behavioural Mechanisms; Expectancy; Transformation Integrity; Governance Risk.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Organisations routinely invest in transformation programmes with the expectation that redesigned processes, new technologies, and structured interventions will deliver measurable improvements. Yet across sectors, a consistent pattern emerges; early enthusiasm, positive sentiment, and temporary performance gains appear before any substantive capability development has occurred. This phenomenon has been described as an organisational analogue of the placebo effect, in which expectations and symbolic cues generate short-term behavioural uplift independent of structural change (Somersall-Weekes, 2026).

In parallel, research on employee experience highlights the importance of personal values, organisational climate, meaning of work, and commitment in shaping job satisfaction and wellbeing (Correia & Carvalho, 2026). These structural factors, rather than symbolic cues, determine whether change is internalised and sustained. Despite their relevance, behavioural expectancy mechanisms and structural predictors

of employee experience remain largely disconnected in the literature.

Moreover, two critical variables are consistently overlooked: accountability; which determines whether organisations correct or amplify belief-driven signals, and generational perception; which shapes how employees interpret symbolic cues and organisational narratives. This paper integrates these domains to propose a Behaviourally-Informed Transformation Integrity Model, offering a new lens for diagnosing early uplift, enthusiasm decay, and governance distortion.

## II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### ➤ *Structural Drivers of Employee Experience*

Correia and Carvalho (2026) demonstrate that personal values, organisational commitment, climate, and meaning of work interact to shape job satisfaction and well-being. Their findings show that:

- organisational commitment strongly predicts satisfaction and well-being
- supportive climate mediates satisfaction
- meaning of work mediates well-being
- personal values influence climate and commitment but not satisfaction directly

These variables represent deep structural drivers of employee experience and provide a foundation for understanding sustained behavioural change.

#### ➤ *Behavioural Expectancy and the Organisational Placebo Mechanism*

Somersall-Weekes (2026) argues that early uplift in transformation programmes is driven by:

- Leadership Signalling
- Narrative Framing
- Cognitive Priming
- Social Contagion
- Sense making Under Uncertainty

These mechanisms create belief-driven momentum, which is fragile and often collapses when structural realities surface. Observable outcomes include temporary performance improvements, perceived momentum, and positive feedback loops, followed by enthusiasm decay and late exposure of capability gaps.

#### ➤ *Gaps in the Literature*

Across both literatures, two variables are notably absent:

- Accountability, the governance mechanism that distinguishes symbolic progress from structural evidence.
- Generational perception, the cohort-specific lens through which employees interpret meaning, climate, and expectancy cues.

These omissions limit our understanding of why transformations succeed or fail.

### III. INTRODUCING TWO CRITICAL VARIABLES

#### ➤ *Accountability as a Climate Dimension*

Accountability determines whether organisations:

- Validate capability early
- Challenge narrative distortion
- Correct misattribution
- Prevent enthusiasm decay

Supportive climate without accountability produces permissiveness; accountability without support produces fear. Their balance is essential for transformation integrity and should be recognised as a distinct climate dimension.

#### ➤ *Generational Perception as a Moderator*

Generational cohorts differ systematically in their values, expectations, and interpretations of organisational cues, which shapes how they respond to symbolic actions, leadership narratives, and climate signals.

#### ➤ *Research Consistently Shows That:*

- *Gen Z*  
Places strong emphasis on purpose, transparency, and psychological safety (Deloitte, 2023; Twenge, 2010).
- *Millennials*  
Tend to prioritise autonomy, authenticity, and meaningful work (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).
- *Generation X*  
Typically values stability, accountability, and clear structures (Costanza et al., 2012).
- *Baby Boomers*  
Are more responsive to hierarchy, formal communication, and traditional organisational authority (Pew Research Center, 2015).

These cohort-based differences imply that the same symbolic cue such as leadership signalling, programme branding, or narrative framing may generate expectancy driven uplift in one generation, while eliciting scepticism or disengagement in another.

Generational perception therefore acts as a moderator of both structural mechanisms (e.g., climate, meaning of work, commitment) and behavioural mechanisms (e.g., priming, contagion, sensemaking) within transformation processes.

An additional consideration is the potential interaction between the two moderators. A strong accountability climate may attenuate generational differences by reducing ambiguity and anchoring interpretation in evidence rather than symbolism. When expectations, progress criteria, and capability thresholds are explicit, the moderating influence of generational perception may weaken, as clear structures override cohort-specific meaning-making. Conversely, the very definition of “accountability” may itself vary by generation; younger cohorts may associate it with transparency and real-time feedback, whereas older cohorts may interpret it through more formal, hierarchical mechanisms. This suggests a reciprocal interaction in which accountability shapes generational interpretation, while generational schemas shape how accountability is experienced.

### IV. THE BEHAVIOURALLY-INFORMED TRANSFORMATION INTEGRITY MODEL

#### ➤ *Structural Layer*

- Personal values
- Organisational commitment

- Climate (support, innovation, goals, and rules), to which we add a sixth, critical dimension: accountability.
- Meaning of work
- Job satisfaction
- Wellbeing

➤ *Collective Sensemaking Processes (Perceptual Layer)*

- Expectancy triggers
- Cognitive priming
- Affective uplift
- Social contagion
- Narrative framing
- Sense making coherence

The perceptual layer can be understood more explicitly as a process of collective sensemaking. Employees continuously interpret symbolic cues, leadership narratives, and social signals in an effort to construct a coherent account of whether the transformation is progressing. The organisational placebo effect reflects a form of premature or flawed sensemaking, in which coherence is achieved too early and on the basis of symbolic cues rather than structural evidence. When the underlying reality later asserts itself, through capability gaps, unmet expectations, or operational friction, it triggers a breakdown in sensemaking (“Why did

we believe we were succeeding?”), often accompanied by erosion of trust and a reassessment of leadership credibility. Framing the perceptual mechanisms as a unified sensemaking process therefore clarifies how early uplift emerges and why its collapse can be so destabilising.

This framing also clarifies the role of the placebo gap as the measurable distance between the narrative employees construct during early sensemaking and the structural reality that later confronts them.

➤ *Moderators*

- Generational perception
- Accountability strength (refers to the *robustness and effectiveness* of the accountability mechanisms embedded within the climate, not the presence of the dimension itself).

➤ *Outcome*

The interaction of these layers determines whether early uplift becomes:

- sustained structural change, or
- Placebo-driven illusion followed by enthusiasm decay.

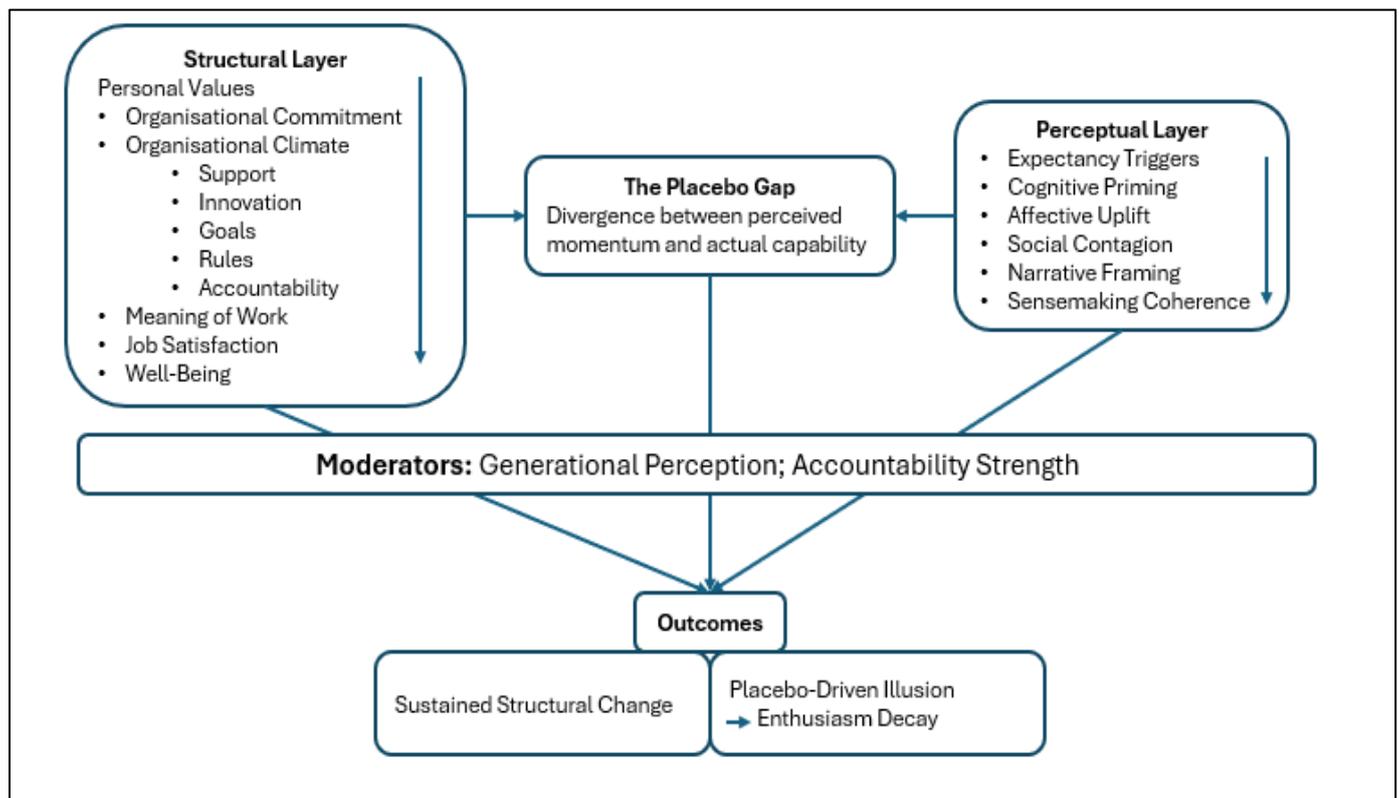


Fig 1 Behaviourally-Informed Transformation Integrity Model.

This model integrates structural drivers of employee experience, including personal values, organisational commitment, organisational climate, meaning of work, job satisfaction, and well-being, with perceptual expectancy mechanisms such as cognitive priming, affective uplift, social

contagion, narrative framing, and sensemaking coherence. Generational perception and accountability strength operate as moderators influencing both layers. The central construct, the *placebo gap*, represents the divergence between perceived momentum and actual capability. Together, these dynamics

determine whether early uplift leads to sustained structural change or a placebo-driven illusion followed by enthusiasm decay.

## V. THE PLACEBO GAP: A NEW GOVERNANCE RISK INDICATOR

➤ *We Define The Placebo Gap As:*

*The divergence between perceived momentum (sentiment, enthusiasm, readiness) and actual capability (skills, processes, behaviours, structural change).*

Beyond its conceptual value, the placebo gap is also amenable to practical measurement. In principle, organisations could survey two distinct dimensions: *perceived momentum* (e.g., “I am enthusiastic about the change,” “I believe the transformation is on track,” “My team is ready for new ways of working”) and *actual capability* (e.g., “I have received the necessary training,” “Our processes have been updated to support the change,” “I have the tools I need to succeed”). A significant and persistent divergence between these two scores would constitute a quantifiable placebo gap, providing a leading indicator of governance risk and illusion-driven decision-making.

This approach also enables organisations to detect illusion-driven momentum early, before it manifests as governance distortion or enthusiasm decay.

➤ *A widening placebo gap predicts:*

- governance distortion
- misattribution of progress
- premature timeline compression
- late exposure of capability deficits
- erosion of trust

This construct provides a measurable governance risk indicator and a diagnostic tool for transformation oversight.

## VI. PROPOSITIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Together, these following propositions translate the conceptual model into a set of empirically testable relationships that connect structural conditions, sensemaking processes, and governance outcomes.

- *P1:*  
Accountability moderates the relationship between expectancy cues and governance distortion.
- *P2:*  
Generational perception moderates the effect of symbolic cues on early uplift.
- *P3:*  
The placebo gap predicts enthusiasm decay over time.

- *P4:*  
Supportive climate combined with accountability predicts sustained well-being better than either factor alone.

- *P5:*  
Meaning of work mediates the relationship between narrative framing and long-term commitment.

- *P6:*  
Accountability moderates the effect of generational perception on the interpretation of symbolic cues, such that higher accountability reduces generational divergence in expectancy responses.

- *P7:*  
Early uplift reflects premature collective sensemaking based on symbolic cues, and the magnitude of the placebo gap predicts the severity of subsequent sensemaking breakdown.

These propositions create a roadmap for empirical validation.

## VII. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Leaders must distinguish placebo signals from structural evidence.
- Governance bodies should monitor the placebo gap as a risk indicator.
- Accountability mechanisms must be embedded early in transformation design.
- Generational differences should inform communication, narrative framing, and climate interventions.
- Symbolic actions should be paired with substantive capability development.

These implications support more resilient transformation governance and reduce the risk of illusion-driven decision-making.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

By integrating structural predictors of employee experience with behavioural expectancy dynamics, and by reframing the perceptual layer as a process of collective sensemaking, this paper offers a new perspective on why transformation programmes display early uplift and why this momentum often collapses. The introduction of accountability and generational perception as moderators deepens our understanding of how employees interpret symbolic cues and how quickly premature narratives of success can form.

The proposed placebo gap, the divergence between perceived momentum and actual capability, provides a novel behavioural–structural construct and a practical governance risk indicator. Its measurement offers organisations a means of detecting illusion-driven progress before it manifests as misattribution, timeline compression, or erosion of trust.

The Behaviourally-Informed Transformation Integrity Model therefore provides a foundation for diagnosing early uplift, preventing governance distortion, and strengthening transformation integrity. Future empirical work should test the propositions outlined, operationalise the placebo gap, and examine how accountability and generational perception interact to shape sensemaking during organisational change.

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## DECLARATIONS

### ➤ Author Contribution

The author confirms sole responsibility for the conception, development, and writing of this manuscript. All theoretical integration, analysis, and model development were conducted independently by the author.

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### ➤ Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to the content, development, or publication of this paper.

### ➤ Ethical Approval

This study is a conceptual analysis and does not involve human participants, personal data, or experimental procedures. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

### ➤ Data Availability

No empirical data were generated or analysed for this conceptual paper. All sources referenced are publicly available and cited appropriately within the manuscript.

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