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Designing Institutional Attention

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Executive Summary

Public institutions operate under an unavoidable condition of scarcity: they face more signals, demands, problems and potential priorities than they can examine with equal depth or sustain simultaneously. This is not, in itself, an institutional failure. Attention is necessarily selective. The more consequential question is how that selectivity is organised, because institutional structures do not merely process information; they shape which issues become visible, which acquire legitimacy, which reach decision-making authority, which remain on the agenda and which disappear before receiving sustained consideration. Organisational goals, professional specialisation, hierarchy, established categories, issue salience and information-processing pressures can all contribute to this allocation. Many of these mechanisms are indispensable to institutional functioning, yet the same mechanisms can also produce systematic forms of exclusion, attenuation and delay.

The resulting problem should therefore not be understood simply as information overload. Institutions can possess relevant information without giving it sufficient attention, and they can recognise an issue locally without allowing it to acquire institutional significance. A concern may fail to fit established categories, remain confined within one organisational unit, lose urgency as it moves through hierarchy, depend on actors with limited voice, or be crowded out by more visible and immediate demands. Under such conditions, selective attention can become misallocated. Where materially relevant information or signals exist or are reasonably accessible but institutional arrangements repeatedly fail to bring them into sufficient recognition, consideration or reconsideration, an institutional attention blind spot can emerge. Such failures may contribute to recognition delays and reactive responses, although their wider consequences depend on context and should not be treated as automatic.

The appropriate institutional response is not to eliminate selectivity, maximise the volume of information entering decision processes or attempt to create complete organisational awareness. Such approaches would reproduce the very processing pressures that make selection necessary. Instead, institutions should govern selectivity itself. This requires attention to the lifecycle through which issues enter consideration, compete with other claims, move towards appropriate authority, retain or lose priority and become eligible for reconsideration. The central design objective is to make this process sufficiently deliberate and inspectable to improve allocation while retaining enough permeability to admit consequential exceptions and enough flexibility to revise priorities when evidence or circumstances change.

This paper therefore advances three recommendations. First, institutions experiencing material attention-allocation failures should provide more than one legitimate route through which consequential concerns can enter consideration and should compare competing claims on attention through explicit but non-exclusive criteria. Second, where material issues are being attenuated, stranded or crowded within existing priorities, institutions should establish proportionate escalation with accountable recipient responsibility and recurrent portfolio reconsideration capable of changing attention status as evidence and competing demands change. Third, institutions whose first-order attention arrangements are sufficiently mature should test bounded mechanisms for examining whether existing criteria, priorities and escalation pathways are themselves creating persistent exclusion or displacement. The first two recommendations support conditional implementation where the diagnosed problem and institutional readiness justify it; the third should remain more experimental because the evidence for integrated second-order attention governance is less mature.

Implementation should remain proportionate. An institution does not need the most elaborate attention architecture it can sustain; it needs the least burdensome arrangement capable of correcting the diagnosed failure. Smaller institutions may perform the necessary functions through lightweight routines, while larger or more fragmented systems may need more explicit pathways for entry, escalation and review. In every case, authority, responsibility,

challenge legitimacy and genuine capacity to reprioritise matter more than the adoption of a particular tool. Success should likewise be assessed behaviourally rather than procedurally. Institutional Attention Capability means becoming better able to direct scarce attention towards materially decision-relevant issues while preserving routes for consequential exceptions and retaining the ability to correct that allocation as evidence, conditions and competing demands change. The objective is not to notice everything. It is to make institutional selectivity more deliberate without making it rigid.

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1. Why Institutional Attention Needs to Be Designed

Every institution operates through selection. At any given moment, public organisations face a larger universe of potentially relevant information, operational pressures, emerging concerns, political demands and strategic questions than they can process with equal intensity. Time is finite, decision capacity is constrained and organisational cognition is distributed across people, units, procedures and levels of authority. Some issues must therefore receive sustained consideration while others receive less, are deferred or remain outside the active agenda altogether. This condition is neither exceptional nor inherently pathological. It is a basic consequence of limited institutional processing capacity. A functioning institution must reduce complexity if it is to act at all, and attention is one of the principal means through which that reduction occurs (Ocasio, 1997; Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Cantarelli, Belle and Hall, 2023).

This makes selectivity unavoidable, but it does not make all forms of selection equally effective. Institutions do not allocate attention in a neutral space. What becomes visible and what remains peripheral is influenced by organisational goals, established mandates, professional categories, reporting relationships, formal routines and informal expectations. Issues that fit existing responsibilities are often easier to recognise and route than those that cut across organisational boundaries; concerns associated with established priorities can enter decision processes more readily than issues that do not yet have a clear institutional owner; and urgent or highly visible events may command attention that less salient but strategically important developments struggle to obtain. These arrangements are frequently functional. Goals focus effort, specialisation makes complex organisations manageable and hierarchy protects decision-makers from unfiltered informational demand. The same arrangements, however, also determine what is filtered out (Ocasio, 1997; Van der Heijden and Kuipers, 2026).

The institutional problem therefore begins not with the existence of filters but with the possibility that their effects become persistently misaligned with what the institution needs to notice and consider. More information does not automatically produce better attention, just as greater workload does not automatically produce attention failure. What matters is the interaction between informational demand and the organisational architecture through which that demand is interpreted. Under conditions of pressure, institutions may rely more heavily on existing categories, familiar priorities, visible indicators or established channels precisely because these mechanisms make complexity manageable. Yet this can also make it harder for ambiguous, cross-cutting or weakly represented concerns to acquire sufficient attention. Scarcity creates the need to discriminate; institutional design influences how that discrimination is performed (Eppler and Mengis, 2004; Cantarelli, Belle and Hall, 2023).

Attention misallocation should consequently be understood in relational rather than absolute terms. It does not imply that an institution could have attended comprehensively to every potentially relevant issue, nor does it require an objective observer to identify a single correct hierarchy of priorities. Public institutions operate amid legitimate political choices, competing mandates and uncertainty about future significance. The problem arises when organisational arrangements repeatedly prevent materially relevant issues from receiving attention proportionate to their potential importance, or when previously reasonable attention allocations become difficult to reconsider after conditions change. In such circumstances, the institution is not simply choosing among priorities. Its own attention architecture may be constraining what can become a priority in the first place (Ocasio, 2011; Lerusse and Van der Voet, 2026).

This distinction matters because common responses to overloaded institutions often focus on increasing informational capacity: better reporting, additional monitoring, new dashboards, more data or more extensive scanning. These interventions can be valuable when the underlying problem is genuinely one of information availability. They are less likely to resolve situations in which information already exists but does not travel, where staff recognise a concern but cannot bring it into legitimate consideration, or where established commitments continue to dominate attention after their relative significance has changed. The institutional question is therefore not simply how to supply decision-makers with more information. It is how an organisation decides what is allowed to compete for attention, how competing claims are compared and how those allocations can subsequently be challenged or revised (Cantarelli, Belle and Hall, 2023; Eppler and Mengis, 2004).

Designing institutional attention does not mean constructing a comprehensive system that dictates what an institution should care about. Nor does it imply removing political judgement from priority-setting. Public institutions necessarily make substantive choices about goals, risks and values, and no attention architecture can make those choices neutral. Institutional design can, however, shape the conditions under which those choices are made. It can affect whether consequential concerns have legitimate routes into consideration, whether the basis for allocating attention is sufficiently visible to be examined, whether important issues can move across organisational boundaries and whether yesterday's priorities can be reconsidered when evidence or circumstances change. The objective is therefore not to replace judgement but to improve the institutional conditions under which judgement is exercised.

The remainder of this paper develops that argument. It first examines how otherwise functional mechanisms of organisational filtering can produce systematic losses of attention, before distinguishing information absence from the more specific problem of institutional attention blind spots. It then develops an intervention architecture based on governed selectivity: making entry, comparison, escalation and reconsideration sufficiently explicit to improve allocation without pretending that institutional attention can become unlimited or politically neutral. Because formalisation can itself create rigidity, the argument also develops a complementary principle of contestability, through which attention arrangements remain open to challenge, re-entry and correction. institutions cannot avoid choosing what receives attention, but they can design those choices so that necessary selectivity is less likely to become preventable blindness.

2. How Institutions Lose Sight of What Matters

Institutional attention is shaped by mechanisms that exist for good reasons. Public organisations cannot treat every piece of information as equally important, nor can they continuously reopen every question that might bear on their objectives. They establish mandates, divide responsibilities, create professional specialisations, organise reporting relationships and maintain categories through which incoming information can be interpreted. These arrangements allow institutions to reduce complexity and coordinate action across large numbers of people and tasks. Without them, the problem would not be insufficient attention to particular issues but an inability to discriminate among competing claims at all. The relevant starting point is therefore not that organisational filters are undesirable. It is that every useful filter also creates a boundary between what is easier and harder for the institution to recognise, transmit and sustain in attention. Attention failure becomes possible when those boundaries systematically disadvantage issues whose significance does not align with the structures through which the institution normally makes sense of its environment (Ocasio, 1997; Ocasio, 2011).

One source of this selectivity lies in the relationship between attention and established organisational goals. Institutions are more readily able to interpret information that corresponds to existing mandates, priorities and categories because those structures provide a basis for deciding why something matters and who should respond to it. This goal-conditioned filtering is indispensable: an institution that treated every external development as equally relevant to every organisational objective would quickly lose the capacity to focus. Yet the same mechanism can reinforce existing attention patterns. Issues that fit recognised categories arrive with an institutional vocabulary, an identifiable owner and an established route towards consideration, whereas concerns that cut across mandates, challenge prevailing assumptions or do not yet correspond to a recognised problem can face a higher threshold for attention. The difficulty is particularly important where significance emerges gradually or where the institutional relevance of an issue becomes apparent only after information from different domains is combined. A filter that successfully protects attention from noise can therefore also make novelty difficult to distinguish from irrelevance (Van der Heijden and Kuipers, 2026; Ocasio, 1997).

Specialisation creates a related problem. Modern public institutions depend on specialised units because the complexity of their responsibilities exceeds what any single organisational centre could competently process. Expertise allows particular signals to be recognised with a depth that would otherwise be impossible. At the same time, specialisation distributes fragments of institutional awareness across organisational boundaries. Different units may each possess information that is meaningful within their own remit without any one of them being able to see the wider pattern created by those fragments. A concern may consequently be present in the institution without becoming institutionally present as a coherent issue. This is not simply a failure to share information. Information can circulate and still fail to acquire attention if no organisational actor has sufficient reason, legitimacy or responsibility to assemble it into a claim on the broader institutional agenda. The attention problem created by specialisation is therefore less about the existence of organisational boundaries than about whether consequential issues can cross them when their significance exceeds the categories through which they were first recognised (Van der Heijden and Kuipers, 2026; Cantarelli, Belle and Hall, 2023).

Hierarchy introduces a further layer of selection. Large institutions need mechanisms through which local information is aggregated, interpreted and prioritised before reaching actors with wider decision authority. Senior decision-makers cannot absorb every operational concern directly, and hierarchical filtering can protect scarce decision attention from being overwhelmed by matters that can appropriately be resolved elsewhere. But information does not move through hierarchy without transformation. As issues pass between organisational levels, their context may be compressed, their significance reframed and their urgency compared with other claims competing for the same attention. Signals that are ambiguous, politically inconvenient, difficult to quantify or poorly aligned with established priorities may be particularly vulnerable to attenuation. Conversely, highly visible concerns can acquire disproportionate weight as they move upwards. Hierarchy should therefore not be treated as inherently suppressive: it is simultaneously a mechanism for concentrating attention and a potential mechanism for distorting what reaches that concentration point (Ocasio, 1997; Van der Heijden and Kuipers, 2026).

Whether an issue travels through these structures also depends on voice. Recognition somewhere inside an institution does not guarantee that the recognised concern becomes an effective claim on institutional attention. People differ in their formal authority, organisational standing, proximity to decision-makers and confidence that raising a difficult issue will produce a meaningful response. Units likewise differ in their capacity to place concerns on shared agendas. Where attention entry depends heavily on established ownership or hierarchical sponsorship, issues recognised by actors at organisational margins may struggle to move beyond local awareness. Formal channels can improve this situation, but their existence alone is insufficient. A route for raising concerns has limited attention-governance value if potential contributors do not regard it as legitimate, if raising an issue carries disproportionate personal or organisational cost, or if recipients have no corresponding responsibility to interpret and disposition what they receive. Institutional voice is therefore not merely an information-supply mechanism. It helps determine which information can acquire the status of an issue deserving further attention (Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 1997; Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2025).

These structural effects interact with salience. Institutions, like the people within them, must make decisions under conditions in which some developments are more immediate, visible or readily interpretable than others. A sudden operational failure, a public controversy or an urgent demand from a powerful stakeholder may legitimately require concentrated attention. Salience is therefore not evidence of irrationality, and political urgency cannot simply be treated as a distortion to be designed away. Public institutions are accountable to political authority and changing social demands, and responsiveness to immediate conditions is part of their function. The difficulty arises when visibility and immediacy become persistent substitutes for comparative significance. Issues that generate clear indicators, immediate consequences or strong external pressure can repeatedly outcompete concerns whose effects are diffuse, cumulative or uncertain. Under these conditions, an institution may become highly responsive to what is conspicuous while remaining systematically less capable of sustaining attention to what is consequential but difficult to render urgent (Lerusse and Van der Voet, 2026).

Information overload can amplify each of these dynamics, but it should not be confused with them. The effects of high informational demand depend on the volume, complexity, diversity and pace of incoming material, as well as on the time, expertise and processing capacity available to the institution. High volume does not mechanically produce poor attention allocation. In some settings, additional information improves discrimination; in others, established routines allow large flows to be processed without material deterioration. Problems arise when processing demands exceed the capacity of existing arrangements to distinguish among competing claims without relying excessively on simplifying cues. Under pressure, familiar categories, existing priorities, hierarchical signals and visible indicators may become even more influential because they reduce the cognitive and organisational cost of selection. Overload can therefore intensify existing filters, but it does not by itself explain which issues will receive too little attention. To understand that, it is necessary to examine the architecture through which information is being selected (Eppler and Mengis, 2004).

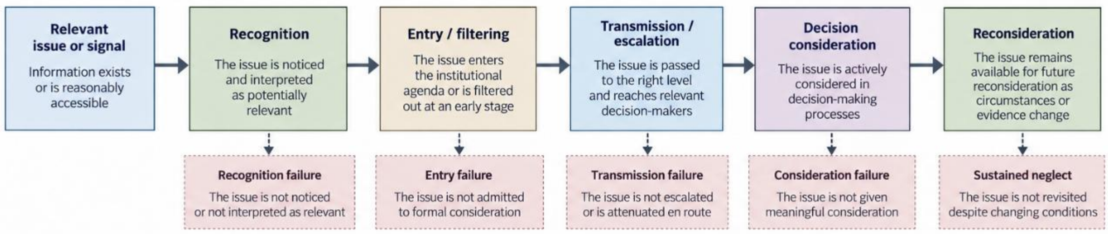
Taken together, these mechanisms show why institutional attention cannot be reduced to the amount of information available to decision-makers. A potentially consequential issue may exist in the institutional environment, be detected somewhere within the organisation and still fail to become a sustained object of institutional consideration. It may not fit an established category; its significance may be distributed across specialised units; it may lose force as it moves through hierarchy; those who recognise it may lack effective voice; more salient concerns may repeatedly displace it; or processing pressure may strengthen the filters already working against its consideration. Their importance lies in demonstrating that attention can be lost at several points between the availability of information and its meaningful incorporation into institutional judgement.

This also reveals why simply increasing the supply of information can be an inadequate response. If the underlying problem lies in entry, interpretation, transmission or comparative consideration, adding further reporting may leave the relevant attention mechanism untouched while increasing the processing burden placed upon it. The institutional question is not only whether information can reach an organisation, but whether a consequential concern can become a legitimate claim on attention and survive the organisational processes that determine what deserves continued consideration. An issue can therefore be informationally present while remaining institutionally peripheral (Cantarelli, Belle and Hall, 2023; Eppler and Mengis, 2004).

That distinction provides the bridge to the more specific failure examined in the next section. When materially relevant issues are repeatedly attenuated or excluded somewhere between recognition and sustained consideration, the institution may develop blind spots that cannot be explained simply by the absence of information. Understanding those blind spots requires distinguishing what an institution could not reasonably have known from what it was, in some meaningful sense, already capable of knowing but failed to bring into sufficient attention.

Figure 1. How Consequential Issues Can Be Lost from Institutional Attention

A stylised representation of where and how materially relevant issues or signals can be lost, attenuated or deprioritised within institutional attention processes.



Note: This figure provides an illustrative representation of potential points at which a consequential issue can be lost, attenuated or deprioritised within institutional attention processes. It does not imply a universal sequence, and not all issues will experience each stage or failure mode.

3. From Information Overload to Attention Blind Spots

The distinction between information and attention becomes especially important when institutions fail to anticipate or respond to consequential developments. In retrospect, it is often tempting to interpret such failures as evidence that an institution did not possess enough information, or alternatively that relevant information was available and should therefore have produced an appropriate response. Neither conclusion is necessarily warranted. Information may genuinely have been unavailable, too ambiguous to interpret or dispersed beyond the institution's reasonable capacity to recognise its significance at the time. In other cases, however, relevant information may have existed within or around the organisation without acquiring sufficient institutional attention. Distinguishing these situations matters because they imply different institutional problems. Information absence may call for better sensing, data collection or environmental scanning. Attention failure concerns what happens after potentially relevant information becomes available to institutional actors but before it receives the level of recognition and consideration its significance may warrant (Cantarelli, Belle and Hall, 2023; McConnell and 't Hart, 2019).

Three analytically distinct situations can therefore sit behind what later appears to have been a missed issue. The first is **information absence**: the institution simply did not possess, and could not reasonably access, the information needed to recognise the development. This lies largely outside the problem addressed in this paper. The second is **recognition failure**: information exists or is accessible, but established categories, assumptions or patterns of attention prevent its significance from being adequately recognised. The third is **consideration failure**: an issue is recognised somewhere in the institution but fails to travel, escalate, compete successfully for attention or remain under consideration long enough to influence institutional judgement. The boundaries between these situations are not always clean, and an issue can move between them as knowledge develops. Nevertheless, the distinction prevents every failure of anticipation from being attributed to attention and, equally, prevents the existence of information somewhere within an organisation from being mistaken for meaningful institutional awareness (Van der Heijden and Kuipers, 2026; McConnell and 't Hart, 2019).

This provides a more precise basis for defining an institutional attention blind spot. An **institutional attention blind spot exists where materially relevant information or signals exist or are reasonably accessible, but institutional attention arrangements repeatedly fail to bring them into sufficient recognition, consideration or reconsideration**. The qualification is important. Not every unattended signal constitutes a blind spot, because selective attention necessarily leaves many matters outside active consideration. Nor can materiality always be established with certainty in advance. Institutions operate under uncertainty and must make judgements about significance using incomplete knowledge. A blind spot becomes an institutional concern when patterns of allocation systematically make certain consequential issues harder to recognise or sustain in attention than their plausible importance would justify, rather than simply because a particular issue was not selected on a particular occasion.

Such blind spots can form at several points. Relevant information may be available but remain difficult to interpret because it falls outside established organisational categories. It may be recognised within one specialised unit while its wider significance remains invisible across organisational boundaries. An issue may be raised but attenuated as it moves through hierarchy, or may never acquire sufficient organisational voice to enter a shared agenda. It may receive temporary consideration but repeatedly lose attention to more salient or immediate demands. Alternatively, an issue that was once reasonably deprioritised may remain outside consideration even after evidence or circumstances have changed because no mechanism prompts the institution to revisit earlier attention decisions. The important point is not that these pathways inevitably produce blind spots, but that institutional attention can fail through the cumulative interaction of selection mechanisms even when no individual actor has deliberately chosen to ignore the relevant concern (Van der Heijden and Kuipers, 2026; Bach and Wegrich, 2019).

This perspective also helps explain why attention failures can be difficult to detect from inside an institution. Organisational processes generally make visible what they process rather than what they repeatedly exclude. Reporting systems record issues that enter formal channels; agendas document matters that receive consideration; performance systems track categories that have already been judged relevant. The absence of an issue from these systems may therefore generate little evidence of its own. Moreover, when an issue has no clear owner or crosses established boundaries, responsibility for noticing that it is missing can itself be diffuse. Institutional attention can consequently reproduce its own patterns: what is already recognised becomes easier to discuss and measure, while what remains outside the prevailing architecture can struggle to generate the organisational evidence required to challenge its exclusion.

The immediate consequences of these failures are more defensible than broader claims about institutional performance. Where materially relevant concerns are repeatedly attenuated, institutions can experience delayed recognition, delayed escalation or delayed consideration. Decision-makers may encounter an issue only after the range of available responses has narrowed, while operational units may continue to act on assumptions that no longer reflect changing conditions. In some circumstances, such patterns can contribute to more reactive forms of governance, particularly where institutions repeatedly encounter consequential developments only once they have become urgent or highly visible. The relationship with wider outcomes such as strategic drift is less direct. Many other factors shape institutional strategy and performance, and an attention failure should not be treated as a sufficient explanation for poor outcomes. The stronger claim is narrower: persistent failures of attention can reduce the institution's ability to bring materially relevant issues into judgement at a time when they can still be considered deliberately (McConnell and 't Hart, 2019).

This is why the objective cannot be to eliminate blind spots altogether. No institutional architecture can guarantee that every consequential development will be recognised early enough, interpreted correctly or assigned the appropriate priority. Attempts to maximise sensitivity indiscriminately would generate their own problems by increasing informational demand, expanding escalation and making it more difficult to distinguish consequential exceptions from ordinary variation. A system designed to ensure that nothing could be missed would quickly undermine the selectivity required for attention to have value. The relevant institutional ambition is therefore more modest: to reduce **preventable** blind spots by improving the conditions under which potentially consequential concerns can enter, compete for, retain and regain attention.

That shift has an important implication for institutional design. If a concern is absent because the institution lacks relevant information, the appropriate response may involve sensing, research or data acquisition. If information exists but fails to become institutionally significant because of the way attention is allocated, supplying more information may leave the underlying failure unchanged. The intervention must instead address the arrangements that govern entry, comparison, escalation and reconsideration. It must ask whether legitimate routes exist through which consequential concerns can reach consideration, whether competing claims on attention can be compared without reducing judgement to rigid criteria, whether issues can reach actors with the authority to respond, and whether attention commitments can change when evidence or conditions change.

Treating attention as an object of institutional design does not mean assuming that administrators can engineer an objectively correct allocation of organisational concern. Attention remains inseparable from judgement, mandate, power and political choice. Public institutions must decide among legitimate competing priorities, and no procedural architecture can remove the normative dimensions of those decisions. What institutional design can do is make some of the processes surrounding those choices more deliberate and correctable. It can reduce unnecessary dependence on a single route of entry, make the basis for comparative attention more visible, clarify responsibility when issues are escalated and create opportunities to reconsider priorities that would otherwise persist by inertia.

The intervention problem is therefore not how to replace selective attention with comprehensive awareness. It is how to govern necessary selectivity. It seeks to make institutional attention sufficiently permeable that consequential exceptions can enter, sufficiently discriminating that openness does not become overload, sufficiently connected to authority that recognition can become meaningful consideration, and sufficiently revisable that established priorities do not become permanent simply because they once commanded attention. The central challenge is to make selectivity governable without making it rigid.

4. Governing Selectivity

If institutional attention is necessarily selective, improving it cannot mean removing the filters through which institutions reduce complexity. The more realistic objective is to govern those filters so that selection becomes more deliberate without becoming mechanically predetermined. This paper uses the term **governed selectivity** to describe an institutional condition in which the processes through which issues enter, compete for and receive organisational attention are sufficiently explicit to be examined and adjusted, while remaining flexible enough to accommodate judgement, uncertainty and legitimate political choice. Governed selectivity does not promise neutral prioritisation. Nor does it require every institution to formalise attention through a dedicated system. Its purpose is narrower: to make it less likely that consequential issues are excluded simply because they lack an established route, fit poorly with existing categories or cannot survive the organisational processes through which scarce attention is distributed.

The first requirement is selective permeability. Where entry into institutional consideration depends almost entirely on established ownership, hierarchical sponsorship or conformity with existing priorities, issues that do not fit those arrangements face an additional barrier before their significance can even be compared with competing claims. This is particularly problematic for concerns that cross organisational boundaries, emerge first among actors with limited agenda access or acquire significance before a clear institutional owner exists. Improving permeability means ensuring that consequential concerns have legitimate ways to enter consideration even when they originate outside the routes through which attention normally flows. It does not mean allowing every observation to bypass established responsibilities or requiring senior decision-makers to receive unfiltered streams of information. The institutional function is to create enough plurality in entry that no single organisational filter becomes the exclusive determinant of what can become visible (Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 1997; Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2025).

Plural entry is valuable only if it remains selective. An institution that creates multiple channels without a corresponding capacity to discriminate among the claims entering them can simply relocate overload from one part of the organisation to another. The objective is therefore not maximum openness but **selective permeability**: sufficient openness to allow consequential exceptions to surface, combined with sufficient triage to protect attention from indiscriminate escalation. This requires attention to both sides of the mechanism. Potential contributors need routes that are known, legitimate and realistically usable, while the institution needs a way to determine which incoming concerns warrant further consideration and where that consideration should occur. The effectiveness of the arrangement depends less on the number of channels than on whether they genuinely alter the conditions under which relevant issues can enter institutional attention.

Recommendation 1 — Govern Entry and Comparative Selection

Institutions experiencing material attention-allocation failures should provide more than one legitimate route through which consequential concerns can enter consideration and compare competing claims on attention through explicit but non-exclusive criteria, with exception routes and periodic review preserving the ability to challenge established attention patterns.

The second half of this recommendation is as important as the first. Once an issue has entered consideration, the institution still needs to decide how much attention it deserves relative to other claims. In many organisations, this comparison occurs through a mixture of mandate, urgency, hierarchy, professional judgement, available evidence and established practice. Making some of this basis explicit can improve consistency and make trade-offs easier to examine.

Criteria can help decision-makers distinguish immediate operational urgency from longer-term significance, clarify why one issue is receiving sustained attention while another is not, and reduce excessive dependence on whichever concern is currently most visible. They can also make it easier to revisit earlier allocations because the reasoning behind them is more accessible than it would be if priorities emerged only from accumulated habit or implicit judgement (Van der Voet and Lerusse, 2024).

Explicit criteria, however, create their own failure modes. What can be specified and measured may acquire an advantage over what remains uncertain, qualitative or difficult to categorise. Criteria can become targets for strategic presentation, encourage false precision or gradually harden into eligibility rules that exclude precisely the unusual concerns they were intended to help evaluate. Formalisation can therefore improve attention allocation and narrow it at the same time. For this reason, comparative criteria should structure judgement rather than replace it. They should be explicit enough to make attention choices intelligible but non-exclusive enough to permit justified exceptions. An institution should be able to explain why an issue merits consideration even when it does not perform well against the normal basis for comparison, provided there is a legitimate reason to believe that the standard criteria are failing to capture its potential significance (Adler and Borys, 1996; Kaufmann, Borry and DeHart-Davis, 2019).

This also means that criteria themselves require stewardship. An explicit basis for allocating attention should not become a permanent representation of what the institution considers important. Mandates change, environments change and experience can reveal that apparently reasonable criteria systematically favour certain types of issue over others. Periodic review is therefore necessary not to produce constant reprioritisation but to examine whether the selection architecture continues to perform the function for which it was introduced. The relevant questions include whether the criteria are producing understandable choices, whether important exceptions can still enter consideration and whether the process has created excessive burden or incentives to game the system. The objective is a basis for comparative judgement that remains stable enough to guide attention while being open enough to correction when its effects become problematic.

The design of entry and selection also has an unavoidable power dimension. Organisational attention is partly shaped by who can make a concern visible, whose interpretation is treated as credible and which issues already possess institutional sponsorship. Introducing explicit routes and criteria does not remove these differences, nor does it make substantive priority choices politically neutral. It can, however, make some of their effects more visible and contestable. Separating the right to raise an issue from responsibility for ultimately owning it is particularly important. Staff or units should not necessarily need to demonstrate that they can solve a problem before they can legitimately surface it. At the same time, a route for raising concerns should not become an unrestricted mechanism for transferring responsibility upwards. The purpose is to allow significance to be considered before organisational ownership becomes a barrier to attention.

This is where entry governance connects to escalation. An issue has not received meaningful institutional attention merely because it has been submitted, recorded or mentioned in a meeting. If its significance exceeds the authority or perspective of the point at which it first enters consideration, the issue must be capable of reaching an actor or forum able to interpret it in a wider institutional context. Escalation should therefore be understood not simply as upward transmission but as the transfer of **attention responsibility** to a level or function capable of determining what should happen next. Depending on the issue, that may mean consideration at a more senior level, movement across organisational boundaries or redirection to another function with the relevant authority. The central requirement is not verticality but a credible connection between recognition and decision-relevant consideration (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2025).

Reliable escalation consequently requires responsibilities on both sides of the pathway. Those raising concerns need sufficient clarity about when and how escalation is legitimate, but recipients also need a responsibility to disposition what reaches them. Receipt alone is not evidence of consideration. A recipient may decide that an issue requires action, further analysis, redirection, continued observation or no further institutional attention at that point. Any of these outcomes can be legitimate. What matters is that escalation does not terminate in an organisational void in which the issue has technically been communicated but no actor is responsible for determining its attentional status. This recipient responsibility is particularly important in fragmented institutions, where information can circulate extensively without acquiring a clear locus of judgement.

Recommendation 2 — Establish Reliable Escalation and Portfolio Reconsideration

Where material issues are being attenuated, stranded or crowded within existing priorities, institutions should establish proportionate escalation with accountable recipient responsibility and recurrent portfolio reconsideration capable of changing attention status as evidence and competing demands change.

The escalation component of this recommendation should be implemented proportionately. Not every concern needs senior attention, and a system that treats escalation as the normal response to uncertainty would rapidly reproduce overload at higher organisational levels. Escalation arrangements should instead preserve the ability of issues to move when their potential significance exceeds the authority, information or perspective available at their current location. This requires enough clarity to make legitimate escalation possible without turning thresholds into rigid barriers. It also requires resistance to escalation inflation, in which actors learn that presenting every concern as urgent is the most reliable way to obtain consideration. A functioning attention architecture therefore combines access with discrimination: the ability to move an issue must coexist with the ability to determine where meaningful consideration should occur.

The same principle applies to centralisation. Better attention governance does not imply that more decisions should migrate towards the organisational centre. In many circumstances, local actors possess better contextual knowledge and can resolve issues more effectively without wider escalation. The institutional objective is not to concentrate attention but to prevent consequential concerns from becoming trapped by the structure through which attention is distributed. A reliable pathway should therefore be capable of moving attention upwards, laterally or back towards the appropriate operational level, depending on where the necessary authority and knowledge reside. The quality of escalation lies in connecting significance to an appropriate locus of judgement, not in maximising the number of issues visible to senior leadership.

Governed selectivity thus requires a balance between permeability and discrimination. Institutions need enough openness for consequential exceptions to enter, enough structure to compare competing claims and enough connectivity for material concerns to reach appropriate authority. Greater permeability without discrimination can generate signal flooding; stronger criteria without exception pathways can produce tunnel vision; easier escalation without recipient responsibility can create congestion and responsibility transfer. Institutional attention improves not by maximising any one component but by configuring them so that the overall architecture remains capable of making meaningful distinctions under conditions of scarcity.

Yet even a well-designed architecture of entry, comparison and escalation leaves one problem unresolved. Attention that successfully reaches the institutional agenda consumes capacity once it arrives. If new priorities can enter but established commitments rarely lose attention, improved permeability can gradually produce the same overload the architecture was intended to manage. Governing selectivity therefore cannot stop at deciding what deserves attention. It must also address how long attention commitments persist, under what conditions they can be reconsidered and whether issues that no longer warrant the same level of institutional concern can release capacity for competing demands. The next stage of attention governance is consequently not further expansion of access, but the capacity to revise what the institution has already chosen to attend to.

5. Making Attention Revisable

An institution can improve the way issues enter attention and still fail to improve the allocation of attention overall. Every new concern that crosses an entry threshold, survives comparative selection and reaches an appropriate locus of authority creates a claim on capacity that must coexist with commitments already receiving consideration. If existing priorities are rarely questioned, improved entry can therefore produce accumulation rather than better allocation. The institution becomes progressively more capable of adding concerns to its agenda while remaining weak at deciding what should receive less attention in return. Over time, this can create a portfolio in which almost everything remains important, formal priorities multiply and the distinction between nominal and effective attention becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Governing attention consequently requires more than deciding what should enter. It requires the capacity to reconsider what is already there (Roberts and Edwards, 2023; Shabad, 2026).

Portfolio reconsideration provides this function by reopening existing attention commitments to comparative judgement. Its purpose is not to subject every priority to continuous review or to encourage instability in institutional objectives. Stable attention is often necessary: complex problems require sustained work, long-term policy commitments cannot be abandoned whenever a more visible issue appears, and institutions need sufficient continuity to learn from implementation. The problem arises when persistence ceases to reflect continuing judgement and becomes the default consequence of previous allocation. A priority may retain institutional attention because it once deserved it, because organisational resources have accumulated around it, because ownership creates incentives for continuation or simply because no process requires its relative significance to be reconsidered. Portfolio reconsideration creates an opportunity to ask whether the current distribution of attention remains justified when viewed against new evidence, changed conditions and competing demands (Roberts and Edwards, 2023).

This completes the logic of Recommendation 2. Reliable escalation allows a materially significant issue to reach an appropriate locus of judgement; portfolio reconsideration allows that locus to make space for it when necessary. A meaningful review must therefore possess more than the capacity to discuss existing priorities. It must be capable of changing their attentional status. Depending on context, that may mean maintaining attention at its current level, elevating an issue, redefining its scope, reducing the attention it receives, deferring further consideration or releasing it from the active portfolio. The exact categories need not be standardised across institutions. What matters is that review can produce genuine reallocation rather than becoming a ritual through which every existing priority is periodically reconfirmed.

The evidence supports the need for meaningful reconsideration more strongly than it supports any single formal mechanism for releasing attention. Institutions should therefore ensure that attention commitments can be reduced or ended when their relative justification weakens, but the procedural form through which this occurs should remain context-dependent. In some settings, existing planning or governance processes may already provide sufficient authority to reprioritise. In others, a more explicit portfolio review may be necessary because priorities otherwise accumulate without a clear point of reconsideration. The relevant design test is functional: can the institution actually reduce attention to one commitment so that capacity becomes available elsewhere? Creating a new review forum is unnecessary if an existing process can already perform that function reliably (Shabad, 2026).

Release also needs protection against its opposite failure: premature abandonment. Issues that are uncertain, long-term or difficult to measure can be especially vulnerable when institutions seek to reduce an overloaded portfolio, because their immediate claims on attention may appear weaker than those associated with visible operational demands. A capacity to release attention should therefore be accompanied by a capacity for re-entry. Re-entry does not mean that every issue previously deprioritised must remain under continuous observation. It means that a previous attention decision should not become irreversible merely because the issue left the active portfolio. Where materially relevant evidence or conditions change, there should be a legitimate way to reconsider whether the earlier allocation still makes sense. Release and re-entry together allow an institution to recover scarce capacity without converting temporary deprioritisation into permanent exclusion (Plotnikova, Pandza and Whittington, 2024).

Persistence and revisability therefore have to be balanced. Too little reconsideration allows inherited priorities to dominate attention through inertia; too much reconsideration can create volatility, undermine long-term commitments and consume substantial organisational capacity in repeated priority-setting. The appropriate architecture should preserve attention long enough for sustained institutional work while ensuring that persistence remains capable of justification. This is particularly important under high uncertainty, where institutions may need to make attention decisions before the significance of an issue is fully known. In such settings, the ability to revise an allocation can be more valuable than attempting to construct increasingly elaborate criteria intended to make the initial choice correct.

Revisability at the level of individual priorities, however, does not fully resolve the problem. An institution may become capable of reconsidering items within its portfolio while continuing to reproduce the same pattern of exclusion through the criteria, channels and assumptions that determine which issues reach that portfolio in the first place. A selection architecture can operate consistently and still be systematically narrow. Escalation pathways can function as designed while favouring issues that already possess recognised organisational sponsors. Portfolio review can genuinely remove priorities while repeatedly privileging short-term or readily measurable concerns. Attention governance therefore needs a limited capacity not only to revise particular allocations but also to question the patterns generated by the architecture itself.

This paper describes that property as **contestable selectivity**. Governed selectivity concerns the way institutions structure necessary selection: how issues enter, how competing claims are compared, how significant concerns move towards appropriate authority and how existing commitments are reconsidered. Contestable selectivity concerns the institution's capacity to recognise that those arrangements may themselves be producing consequential exclusions. Contestability does not mean that every attention decision should be permanently open to challenge or that established priorities lose authority whenever an alternative claim appears. Such an arrangement would undermine the capacity to select at all. Instead, it means preserving bounded opportunities to examine whether the rules, routines and patterns through which attention is allocated remain defensible in light of their observed effects.

Several questions can support this examination. Are particular types of concern repeatedly failing to enter consideration despite plausible material significance? Do some organisational boundaries consistently interrupt the movement of issues? Are attention criteria favouring what is readily measurable while making uncertain or cross-cutting concerns systematically harder to sustain? Do escalation arrangements repeatedly concentrate attention in one part of the institution while leaving other relevant perspectives outside? Are priorities being maintained despite changing conditions because the costs of challenging them are too high? None of these questions requires an assumption that exclusion is necessarily evidence of failure. Their purpose is to make persistent patterns available for institutional examination when there is reason to believe that the attention architecture itself may be contributing to them.

Recommendation 3 — Pilot Bounded Attention Self-Correction

Institutions with sufficiently mature attention-governance arrangements should test proportionate ways of identifying whether existing criteria, priorities and escalation pathways are producing persistent exclusion or displacement, while preserving routes for challenge and re-entry where materially relevant conditions change.

The deliberate emphasis on testing is important. The evidence for the individual problems that motivate self-correction—rigidity, exclusion, attention displacement and the possibility that formalised selection reproduces its own biases—is stronger than the evidence for any integrated institutional mechanism designed to detect and correct them systematically. There is therefore insufficient basis for prescribing a universal attention audit, a standard displacement index or a dedicated oversight structure. Institutions should instead experiment cautiously with mechanisms that fit their existing governance architecture and evaluate whether those mechanisms produce useful corrective information. In one context this may involve examining recurring patterns within an existing portfolio review; in another, periodic challenge from actors outside the dominant attention pathway may be sufficient. The institutional function is more important than the organisational form.

Such experimentation should also remain bounded because self-correction carries its own countereffects. A system designed to examine attention can become another consumer of scarce attention. Extensive documentation of why issues were selected or rejected may encourage defensive behaviour rather than learning. Persistent challenge can make priorities unstable, while retrospective examination can create a misleading impression that the significance of previously neglected issues should always have been obvious. Hindsight is particularly dangerous in attention governance because institutions necessarily make decisions under uncertainty. A later outcome cannot by itself demonstrate that an earlier allocation was unreasonable. Self-correction should therefore focus on recurring patterns and plausible institutional mechanisms rather than on assigning retrospective blame for every issue that failed to receive attention (Adler and Borys, 1996; George et al., 2021).

The same principle applies to challenge. A contestable architecture needs legitimate ways to question established attention patterns, but challenge must remain connected to institutional judgement. An exception pathway should allow actors to argue that ordinary criteria are failing to capture a concern's significance; it should not guarantee that the concern receives sustained attention. Re-entry should allow materially changed conditions to reopen an earlier decision; it should not mean that every rejected issue remains indefinitely active. The distinction is essential because contestability serves selectivity rather than replacing it. Its purpose is to help an institution correct consequential allocation errors while preserving the ability to discriminate among competing claims.

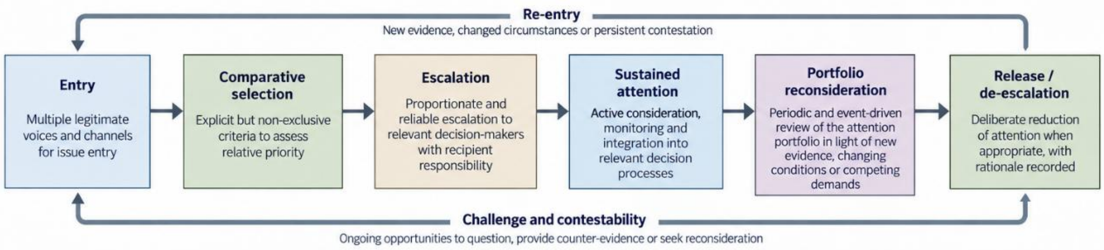
For this reason, bounded self-correction is best introduced after the basic architecture of attention governance is functioning. An institution that lacks clear responsibility for receiving escalated issues, genuine authority to reprioritise or basic capacity to review its active commitments is unlikely to benefit from adding a second-order mechanism for examining the quality of those arrangements. Under such conditions, the immediate task is to establish workable first-order attention governance. Once entry, comparison, escalation and reconsideration are sufficiently stable, the institution can more meaningfully test whether the architecture is producing systematic exclusion or displacement and whether limited corrective mechanisms improve its performance.

Governed selectivity and contestable selectivity are complementary principles. The first makes institutional selection more deliberate; the second keeps that deliberateness from hardening into closure. The first asks how scarce attention should be organised; the second asks how the institution can recognise when that organisation needs correction. Together they define an architecture in which priorities can be sufficiently stable to guide action without becoming immune to changing evidence, and in which entry can remain sufficiently permeable to admit consequential exceptions without collapsing into indiscriminate openness.

The resulting intervention is deliberately less ambitious than a comprehensive attention-management system. It does not attempt to specify a universally correct set of priorities, guarantee early recognition of every important development or establish a single organisational model for allocating attention. It seeks instead to create the institutional conditions under which necessary selectivity can remain deliberate, proportionate and revisable. How far an institution should formalise those conditions depends on the failure it is trying to correct and on whether it possesses the authority, capacity, information and legitimacy required to make the intervention work. The next question is therefore not what additional mechanism should be added, but how much attention architecture a particular institution actually needs.

Figure 2. A Governed and Contestable Institutional Attention Lifecycle

A stylised representation of how institutional attention can be allocated, sustained, reconsidered and released through governed and contestable processes.



Note: This figure provides an illustrative institutional architecture for a governed and contestable attention lifecycle. It is not a universal model, does not imply a fixed sequence, and does not suggest that all institutions require the same formal processes.

6. Implementing Attention Governance Proportionately

The case for governing institutional attention does not imply that every institution should build a formal attention-governance system. The first implementation question is whether a material attention failure actually exists. High informational demand, organisational complexity or the presence of multiple competing priorities may create difficult working conditions without demonstrating that attention is being systematically misallocated. Intervention is more clearly justified where consequential concerns repeatedly struggle to enter consideration, become stranded across organisational boundaries, lose significance as they move towards decision authority, remain crowded out by accumulated priorities or cannot re-enter attention when relevant conditions change. Diagnosis should therefore precede architecture. Institutions should identify where in the attention process the failure occurs and whether that failure is sufficiently consequential to justify introducing additional governance.

This distinction matters because the same visible symptom can originate from different institutional problems. A decision-maker who encounters an issue too late may be facing an attention failure, but the underlying cause could instead be the absence of relevant information, weak coordination between units, unclear decision authority or insufficient analytical capacity. A proliferation of unresolved issues may reflect poor prioritisation, but it may also reflect resource constraints that no attention mechanism can remove. Attention governance is appropriate when the problem can plausibly be traced to the arrangements through which issues enter, compete for, move through or lose organisational attention. Where another capability failure is primary, adding an attention process risks treating the manifestation rather than the cause. The purpose of diagnosis is therefore not merely to justify intervention but also to establish when intervention should not occur.

Even where attention governance is applicable, the institution may not yet be ready to implement it. **Applicability and readiness are different questions.** Applicability concerns whether a proposed institutional change addresses the diagnosed failure; readiness concerns whether the organisation possesses the conditions required for that change to function without generating disproportionate countereffects. An institution can have a strong need for better escalation while lacking clarity about who has authority to receive and act on escalated concerns. It can need portfolio reconsideration while lacking any actor capable of reducing or terminating established commitments. It can benefit from greater contestability while operating in an environment in which challenging prevailing priorities carries substantial organisational cost. Under such conditions, the intervention may be relevant but premature.

Several preconditions are particularly important. Decision rights must be sufficiently clear for actors to know where consequential attention claims can legitimately move. Escalated concerns require an accountable recipient capable of interpreting, redirecting or otherwise dispositioning them rather than simply acknowledging receipt. Portfolio reconsideration requires genuine authority to alter attention commitments; otherwise review becomes discussion without reallocation. Some minimum review capacity is necessary if reconsideration is to occur without simply adding another unmanaged demand to existing workloads. Finally, challenge must possess enough organisational legitimacy that exception pathways and re-entry can function in practice. These conditions need not be embodied in separate offices or elaborate governance structures, but their functions must exist somewhere in the institutional architecture (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2025).

Readiness should therefore be assessed behaviourally rather than inferred from formal adoption. An institution is not ready for attention governance merely because it has written procedures, a prioritisation framework, a dashboard or a recurring meeting. The relevant question is whether people can actually raise consequential concerns through legitimate routes, whether recipients accept responsibility for determining what happens next, whether established priorities can genuinely lose attention and whether challenge can occur without requiring extraordinary personal or organisational risk. Conversely, an institution may possess substantial readiness without using any dedicated attention-governance terminology. Existing planning, risk, operational or executive processes may already perform several of the necessary functions. Implementation should build on those capacities rather than duplicate them.

This leads to a principle of **minimum sufficient configuration**. Attention governance should add institutional structure only where that structure performs a necessary function that existing arrangements cannot perform reliably. At a minimum, an institution facing a material attention-allocation failure needs a legitimate way for consequential issues to enter consideration, a visible basis for comparing competing claims, an identifiable recipient when issues need wider attention, a genuine opportunity to reconsider existing commitments and some possibility of challenge or re-entry when circumstances materially change. These functions constitute a minimum viable architecture, not a standard organisational design. One institution may perform them through existing management routines; another may need explicit cross-unit pathways or portfolio review; a third may already be highly formalised and require less structure rather than more.

Implementation can consequently proceed as a sequence of functional questions rather than as the installation of a predefined model. The first step is to **diagnose the attention failure**: identify where consequential issues are being lost, delayed or locked out and distinguish that failure from neighbouring problems such as information absence or coordination weakness. The second is to **clarify authority and responsibility**: determine who may legitimately raise concerns, who receives them, who can alter their attention status and who has authority to reconsider existing priorities. The third is to **improve entry, comparison and escalation** where the diagnosis shows those functions to be weak. The fourth is to **make priorities genuinely revisable**, ensuring that institutional attention can be maintained, elevated, reduced or released rather than merely accumulated. Only after these first-order functions are sufficiently stable should the institution **evaluate and, where justified, test mechanisms for correcting the architecture itself**.

The sequence is directional, not rigid. Institutions need not reach an ideal state at one stage before moving to the next, and implementation should be capable of moving backwards when experience reveals that an earlier assumption was wrong. A new entry pathway may expose weaknesses in recipient responsibility; portfolio review may reveal that formal authority to reprioritise exists on paper but not in practice; an experiment in self-correction may show that the institution lacks sufficient information to distinguish systematic exclusion from ordinary selectivity. These discoveries should trigger adaptation rather than encourage continued expansion of the architecture. Functional sufficiency, not procedural completion, should determine progression.

Different institutional contexts will require different levels of formalisation. In a small organisation, several attention-governance functions may be performed through a small number of existing roles. A lightweight routine that allows concerns to be surfaced, compared and periodically reconsidered may provide more value than a dedicated structure whose maintenance consumes scarce capacity. In a large, fragmented or multi-level institution, the same functions may require more explicit routing because organisational distance makes it harder for issues to cross boundaries or reach appropriate authority. The capability logic remains the same even where the organisational form differs. Institutional size changes the configuration problem; it does not change the underlying requirement for permeability, discrimination, escalation and revisability.

Highly formalised institutions present a different challenge. Where extensive reporting, categorisation and review already exist, the problem may not be insufficient structure but excessive closure. Adding another formal prioritisation process can reinforce the very filters that prevent consequential exceptions from receiving attention. In such environments, implementation may need to emphasise non-exclusive criteria, legitimate exception routes, cross-boundary movement and the capacity to challenge inherited attention patterns. The relevant intervention could therefore involve simplifying or opening an existing architecture rather than adding another layer to it. More attention governance is not necessarily better attention governance (Adler and Borys, 1996; Kaufmann, Borry and DeHart-Davis, 2019).

Conditions of high uncertainty similarly change the appropriate configuration. When issue significance is difficult to estimate and circumstances can change rapidly, rigid scoring systems or highly specific escalation thresholds may create false confidence. The value of reversibility becomes greater because the institution must make attention choices before it can know with certainty which concerns will prove consequential. This does not imply that every weak or emerging signal should receive sustained attention. It means that initial decisions should remain capable of revision and that an issue whose significance changes should have a legitimate route back into consideration. Under uncertainty, the capacity to correct an allocation can matter more than increasing the sophistication with which the initial allocation is calculated.

There are also circumstances in which implementation should stop at precondition-building. If no actor possesses authority to change attention commitments, portfolio review cannot perform its intended function. If recipients of escalated issues bear no responsibility for determining what happens next, increasing the volume of escalation can create congestion rather than attention. If organisational challenge is routinely punitive, an exception pathway may exist formally while remaining unusable. If the institution lacks even basic information needed to compare competing concerns, explicit selection criteria may create an appearance of rationality without improving judgement. And if the proposed governance architecture consumes substantial attention simply to operate, its burden may outweigh the capability gain it is intended to produce. These are reasons to redesign or sequence the intervention differently, not evidence that attention governance is permanently impossible (George et al., 2021; Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2025).

Technology should be treated according to the same functional logic. Digital tools can help institutions make attention claims visible, route issues across organisational boundaries, record changes in attention status or identify patterns in a large portfolio. Artificial intelligence may eventually support some forms of classification, summarisation or signal triage. None of these technologies can by itself establish the institutional conditions on which attention governance depends. A system can route an issue without determining who is responsible for judging it; a dashboard can display priorities without giving anyone authority to change them; an algorithm can rank information without establishing whether the criteria embedded in that ranking are institutionally legitimate. Technology may support attention governance, but it cannot substitute for authority, responsibility, contestability or judgement.

This distinction is especially important because technological solutions can make an attention architecture appear more mature than it is. A sophisticated interface may conceal unclear decision rights, while automated prioritisation can harden selection criteria that the institution has never adequately examined. Tools can also increase informational supply faster than the institution's capacity to absorb it, reproducing overload at a different point in the process. Technology should therefore follow governance function rather than define it. The institution should first identify what attention failure needs to change and which mechanism is expected to produce that change; only then should it ask whether a technological instrument can perform part of that function more effectively.

Institutions should not seek to build the most comprehensive attention architecture they can support. They should establish the least burdensome architecture capable of correcting the diagnosed failure, observe whether the intended mechanisms actually operate and expand only where additional structure produces additional capability. If a new process merely generates meetings, documentation or reporting without changing how consequential issues enter, move through or leave institutional attention, it should be simplified or removed. Attention governance succeeds only if the capacity it creates is worth the attention it consumes.

This brings implementation back to the central purpose of the paper. The recommendations are not intended to produce a visible architecture for its own sake. Their value depends on whether institutional behaviour changes: whether consequential concerns have viable routes into consideration, whether competing attention claims can be compared more deliberately, whether material issues can reach appropriate authority, whether priorities can genuinely change and whether the institution can recognise when its own selection arrangements are creating persistent exclusion. Assessing those changes requires moving beyond implementation outputs to the underlying capability that the intervention is intended to strengthen.

7. Evaluating Institutional Attention Capability

The implementation of an attention-governance arrangement is not evidence that institutional attention has improved. An institution can introduce new entry channels, adopt prioritisation criteria, establish escalation procedures or schedule portfolio reviews while leaving the underlying allocation of attention largely unchanged. Formal processes may exist but remain unused; escalation may occur without meaningful recipient responsibility; review may take place without any priority ever losing attention; and exception pathways may be technically available while organisational norms make them difficult to use. Evaluation must therefore begin by separating the existence of an intervention from the institutional behaviour that the intervention was intended to change. The relevant question is not simply whether attention governance has been installed, but whether its mechanisms are functioning.

A useful evaluation sequence begins with **structural adoption**. At this level, institutions can ask whether the intended arrangements exist: whether legitimate entry routes have been established, comparative criteria articulated, escalation responsibility assigned and opportunities for portfolio reconsideration created. These observations are necessary because an intervention cannot operate if it has not been implemented sufficiently to activate its mechanisms. They are not, however, evidence of capability gain. Counting submissions, meetings, escalations or completed reviews can show that a process is active while revealing little about whether consequential concerns are receiving more appropriate attention. Activity indicators should therefore be treated as implementation evidence rather than as measures of success in themselves.

The next question is whether the intended **mechanisms are actually operating**. For entry governance, this means examining whether multiple legitimate routes genuinely broaden the range of concerns capable of reaching consideration rather than merely creating additional channels through which the same established issues travel. For comparative selection, it means asking whether explicit criteria help actors reason about competing attention claims while leaving room for justified exceptions. For escalation, the key test is whether materially significant concerns can reach an appropriate locus of judgement and receive an accountable disposition. For portfolio reconsideration, it is whether review can genuinely alter attention status rather than simply reconfirm the existing portfolio. And for bounded self-correction, the question is whether examination of attention patterns generates usable evidence about exclusion or displacement without creating disproportionate procedural burden.

If these mechanisms function, institutions can then examine **proximal changes in attention behaviour**. Greater diversity in the origin of issues reaching consideration may indicate that entry has become more permeable. More intelligible explanations for why some issues receive attention over others may indicate that comparative selection has become more explicit. Reduced ambiguity about what happens after escalation may indicate stronger connection between recognition and authority. Actual changes in the status of established priorities can indicate that portfolio reconsideration is functioning rather than ritualised. Evidence that previously excluded concerns can re-enter when conditions materially change may indicate that attention decisions have become more revisable. These behavioural changes are closer to the intended intervention than broad organisational outcomes and can therefore provide a more credible basis for assessing whether the architecture is working as expected (Van der Voet and Lerusse, 2024; Lerusse and Van der Voet, 2026).

The central evaluation object, however, is **Institutional Attention Capability**. In this paper, that capability means that **the institution becomes better able to allocate scarce attention towards materially decision-relevant issues while preserving routes for**

consequential exceptions and correcting that allocation as evidence, conditions and competing demands change. This capability has three closely connected dimensions. The first is allocation quality: whether attention is directed through more deliberate comparison rather than being determined predominantly by temporary salience, organisational position or accumulated priority. The second is exception permeability: whether materially consequential concerns can still enter and travel when they do not fit normal attention pathways. The third is correctability: whether the institution can reconsider and alter attention allocations when experience shows that previous choices or the architecture supporting them are no longer adequate.

None of these dimensions can be demonstrated through a single indicator. Attention allocation takes place under uncertainty, and there is rarely an objective benchmark showing exactly how much institutional attention each issue should have received. Evaluation should therefore combine observable patterns with institutional judgement rather than attempt to construct a universal attention score. An institution might examine whether the basis for major attention decisions has become more explainable, whether relevant issues are less likely to become stranded between organisational units, whether escalated concerns receive meaningful disposition, whether portfolio reviews result in genuine reallocation and whether materially changed conditions can reopen earlier decisions. The aim is not to quantify an ideal allocation of attention but to determine whether the institution has become more capable of governing and correcting its inevitable selectivity.

Evaluation should also distinguish capability gains from **wider institutional outcomes**. Better attention allocation may help an institution recognise some consequential issues earlier, reduce avoidable delays in bringing concerns to decision authority or decrease the likelihood that certain preventable blind spots persist unchallenged. These are plausible downstream benefits, but they should not be treated as automatic consequences of attention governance. Crisis frequency, policy quality, strategic performance and organisational responsiveness are shaped by many capabilities beyond attention, including interpretation, decision-making, coordination, resources and implementation. An institution can notice and prioritise an issue appropriately and still respond poorly to it. Conversely, a successful outcome can occur despite a weak attention process. Evaluation should therefore resist attributing broad institutional performance directly to the intervention when the causal pathway passes through multiple other institutional functions (McConnell and 't Hart, 2019).

The same discipline is necessary when assessing apparent failures. An issue that later proves important but received limited attention does not automatically demonstrate that the attention architecture failed. Institutional judgement is exercised under uncertainty, and hindsight can make previously ambiguous information appear more decisive than it was. A more appropriate question is whether the institution had a reasonable process for recognising the issue, comparing it with competing claims, escalating it where warranted and revisiting the allocation when materially relevant evidence changed. Attention governance cannot guarantee correct anticipation. Its contribution lies in making the institutional process through which uncertainty is handled more deliberate and more capable of correction.

Finally, evaluation must consider **countereffects**. Every mechanism designed to improve attention consumes some of the resource it seeks to govern. Additional entry routes can increase signal volume. Explicit criteria can encourage gaming or favour what is readily measurable. Easier escalation can generate inflation and congestion. Portfolio review can become ritualised or consume substantial senior attention. Release mechanisms can prematurely displace long-term concerns. Self-correction can generate defensive documentation, retrospective blame or excessive instability. An intervention should therefore be judged not only by whether its intended mechanism operates but by whether the resulting capability gain exceeds the organisational burden and distortions it creates. A process that makes attention marginally more explicit while consuming large amounts of institutional capacity may have a negative net effect even if it functions exactly as designed (Adler and Borys, 1996; George et al., 2021).

This net-effect perspective guards against progressive over-formalisation. If evaluation reveals that a lighter arrangement produces the necessary behavioural change, additional structure should not be regarded as evidence of maturity. If an existing mechanism already performs the required function, creating a parallel process may weaken rather than strengthen institutional capability. Conversely, where a lightweight arrangement repeatedly fails because responsibility remains unclear or consequential concerns continue to become stranded, greater structure may be justified. Evaluation should therefore feed back into configuration, allowing the institution to simplify, strengthen or redirect its attention architecture according to observed function rather than institutional fashion.

The ultimate test is whether the institution has become more capable of exercising selective attention without becoming captive to the mechanisms through which that selectivity is produced. A capable institution will still ignore many signals, defer many concerns and concentrate attention unevenly. It must do so. The difference is that its attention patterns are less dependent on unexamined organisational filters, consequential exceptions have credible routes into consideration, established priorities can be reconsidered and the architecture retains some capacity to recognise its own persistent exclusions. Institutional Attention Capability is therefore not comprehensive awareness. It is the capacity to select under scarcity while remaining sufficiently permeable and correctable to learn when that selection needs to change.

Conclusion

Institutions cannot attend to everything. Any serious approach to institutional attention must begin from that constraint rather than treating it as a defect that can be overcome through greater information supply, more monitoring or increasingly sophisticated technology. Goals, categories, specialisation, hierarchy and prioritisation all reduce complexity so that institutions can act. Yet those same mechanisms shape what becomes visible, what can travel, what reaches decision authority and what remains outside sustained consideration. When their effects become persistently misaligned with materially relevant concerns, necessary selectivity can become preventable institutional blindness.

The appropriate response is therefore neither comprehensive awareness nor the construction of a universal prioritisation system. It is to govern selectivity. Institutions experiencing material attention-allocation failures should create sufficiently plural and legitimate routes for consequential concerns to enter consideration, make the basis for comparing attention claims more explicit without converting criteria into rigid gates, connect recognition to appropriate authority through accountable escalation and ensure that established attention commitments can be reconsidered rather than simply accumulated. Where these first-order arrangements are sufficiently mature, institutions can also test bounded forms of self-correction that help reveal persistent exclusion or displacement. Throughout, the architecture should remain proportionate: additional structure is justified only where it performs a necessary attention-governance function that existing arrangements cannot perform reliably.

Designing institutional attention therefore means accepting a permanent tension rather than seeking to eliminate it. Institutions need filters, but those filters must not become impermeable. They need priorities, but priorities must not become irreversible. They need escalation, but escalation must not become indiscriminate centralisation. They need stability, but stability must remain open to evidence that the allocation of attention should change. **The objective is not an institution that notices everything. It is an institution that can choose what deserves attention without losing the capacity to recognise when its own choices need to be reconsidered.**

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