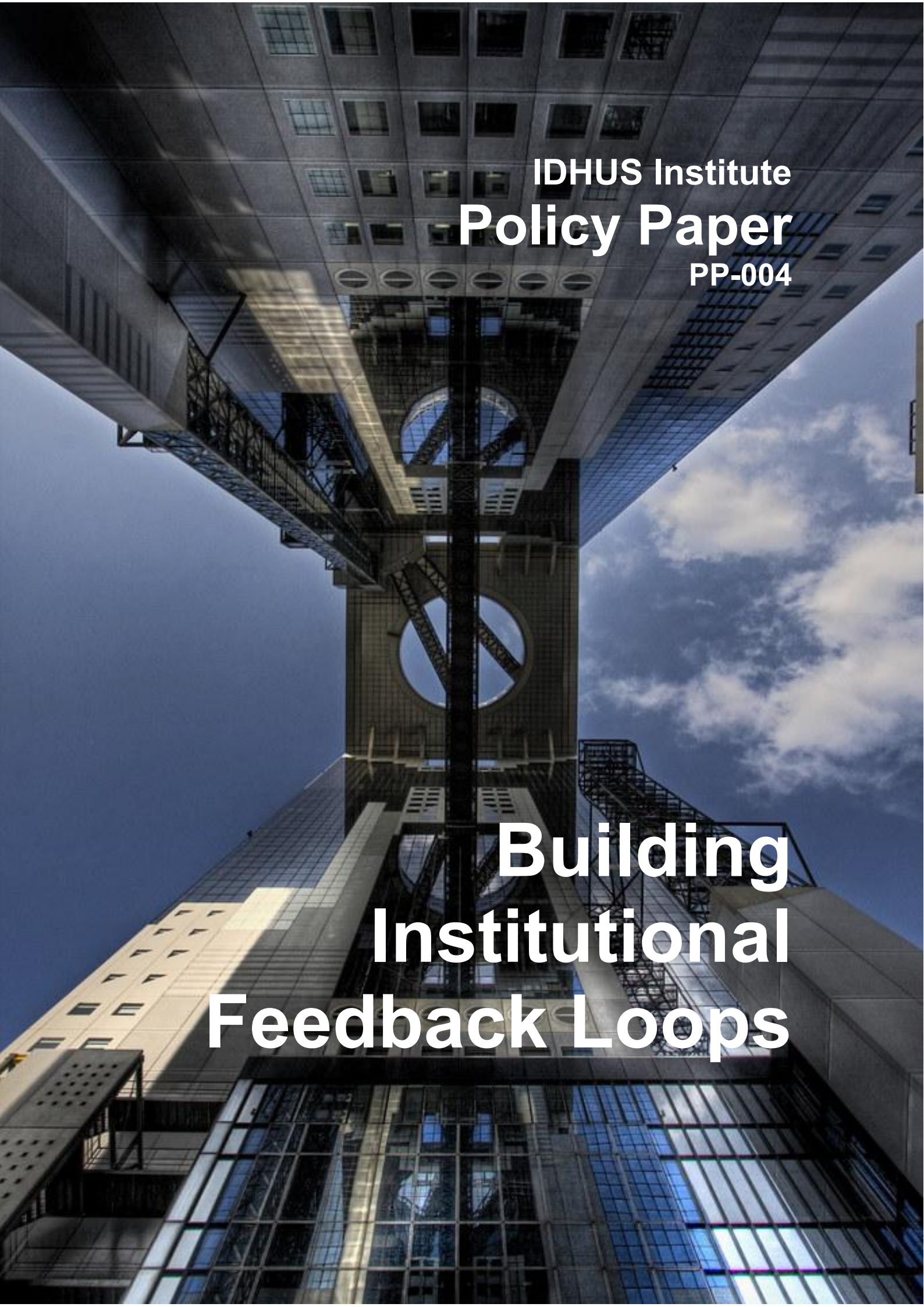


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Policy Paper

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# Building Institutional Feedback Loops

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# Executive Summary

Public institutions continuously generate information about how their decisions work in practice. Implementation produces operational signals; frontline staff encounter recurring problems and adaptations; service users experience consequences that may remain difficult to observe from within administrative structures; and monitoring, complaints and reporting processes provide further evidence about institutional performance. Yet the existence of this information does not mean that an institution possesses effective feedback capability. **The central problem is often not that experience is unavailable, but that it fails to return to the people or processes capable of responding to it.**

This paper defines **Institutional Feedback Capability** as the institutional capacity to move material information generated through implementation, frontline experience, operations and stakeholder interaction into timely and consequential review, connect that review to appropriate response authority, and produce traceable institutional disposition without disproportionate burden or systematic suppression. This distinguishes feedback capability from information collection. Channels and instruments may help information enter an organisation, but none constitutes feedback capability by itself. **Feedback is not collection; it is a governed return relationship between institutional experience and consequential response.**

That relationship can break at several points. Signals may lack a viable pathway towards substantive review, arrive after opportunities for correction have narrowed, enter the institution without meaningful examination, lose identifiable responsibility, fail to reach sufficient response authority, or circulate without receiving substantive disposition. Filtering and organisational hierarchy can compound these failures by preventing relevant signals from remaining visible. Feedback disconnection is therefore better understood as a loss of institutional connectivity between experience and response than as a generic shortage of information.

These failures matter because institutions act under incomplete knowledge and continually encounter differences between formal intention and operational reality. When relevant experience cannot return to consequential review, opportunities for correction can be lost. Feedback disconnection can contribute to implementation drift and, through more mediated pathways, repeated institutional error. In some circumstances, it may also leave institutions more dependent on late or episodic indications of emerging problems. Stronger feedback does not guarantee successful implementation, better decisions or proactive governance; its more bounded contribution is to improve the institutional conditions under which divergence can be recognised and correction becomes possible.

The paper argues that a minimum feedback capability requires four connected functions: **viable pathway, identifiable review responsibility, sufficient response authority and substantive disposition**. Material experience needs a credible route into substantive review; responsibility must remain identifiable as feedback moves across organisational boundaries; review must connect to actors able to respond or to an accepted escalation path; and consequential signals must reach an explicit institutional disposition. Such disposition does not require accepting or acting on every signal. It requires that material feedback entering substantive review does not disappear between institutional awareness and institutional response.

Institutions should build these functions through **governed feedback connectivity**. Feedback should normally be handled at the lowest appropriate level possessing sufficient authority and capacity, while escalation should remain available when issues exceed that level or require wider coordination. Local resolution should not become local containment: individually manageable cases may collectively reveal patterns requiring broader visibility. As scale and complexity increase, institutions therefore need proportionate arrangements for selection, aggregation and escalation without assuming that every signal deserves identical review or system-wide attention.

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This architecture also imposes a constraint. **Institutions should not increase feedback activity faster than their capacity to review and respond consequentially.** Additional pathways, reporting requirements and governance arrangements consume institutional resources. Where intake expands without sufficient review and response capacity, apparent responsiveness can instead produce backlog, superficial processing, excessive filtering or administrative closure. Feedback architecture should therefore be matched to review capacity, source viability, authority accessibility and the institution's ability to produce meaningful disposition.

Implementation should begin with diagnosis rather than comprehensive system design. Institutions should identify where consequential signals currently disappear or lose connection, establish a **minimum viable feedback relationship** for at least one important signal class, test that relationship under real conditions and verify that its mechanisms function before expanding it. More elaborate filtering, aggregation, escalation or federated oversight should be introduced only when demonstrated need justifies additional complexity. **Scale should follow verified function, not implementation activity.**

Evaluation must make the same distinction. Channels created, staff trained, submissions received or cases closed can demonstrate activity and adoption, but they do not establish Institutional Feedback Capability. The stronger test is whether consequential signals more reliably reach substantive review within decision-relevant time, connect to appropriate authority and receive traceable disposition without disproportionate burden, congestion, distortion or suppression. **The object of measurement should be the feedback relationship, not merely the feedback activity surrounding it.**

Institutional Feedback Capability is ultimately an enabling capacity rather than a guarantee of particular policy outcomes. It does not replace institutional judgement, evaluation, learning or implementation capability, nor does it prescribe a particular technology or organisational structure. Its contribution is more fundamental: preserving a governed connection between what an institution experiences and what it remains capable of reconsidering. **An institution begins to possess feedback capability when material experience is no longer merely collected or recorded, but can reliably return to consequential review and response.**

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# 1. The Feedback Gap

Public institutions generate experience continuously. Policies encounter conditions that could not be fully anticipated during design; frontline staff observe recurring frictions, adaptations and unintended effects; service users encounter the practical consequences of administrative choices; and implementation produces operational information about where institutional intentions and actual conditions begin to diverge. Monitoring systems, complaints processes, staff reporting and other formal arrangements can make parts of this experience visible. Yet the presence of information does not establish that an institution possesses effective feedback capability.

The distinction matters because collection is not the same as institutional return. An organisation can receive large quantities of information while remaining poorly connected to what that information reveals. Reports may be submitted, complaints recorded, operational data accumulated and concerns communicated without the resulting signals reaching a process capable of examining their significance and determining what should happen next. Information can therefore be present within an institution while remaining functionally disconnected from institutional response.

For the purposes of this paper, institutional feedback is understood as a return relationship through which material information generated by operational activity, implementation or stakeholder experience becomes available to an institutional process capable of consequential review or response. The emphasis on return is important. Feedback is not simply information moving into an organisation. It requires a connection between experience and a part of the institution able to consider that experience in relation to ongoing action.

Disconnection can begin before information formally enters the institution. The existence of a reporting route does not mean that people will necessarily use it to communicate what they know. Research on employee voice and silence has shown that organisational actors may withhold concerns, observations or suggestions even where formal opportunities for expression exist, and that decisions to speak or remain silent are shaped by organisational and interpersonal conditions (Lotfi Dehkharghani et al., 2023; Nechanska et al., 2020; Guarin et al., 2025). Evidence from this literature cannot simply be transferred wholesale to public institutions, but it establishes an important functional point: source viability cannot be inferred from channel availability. A technically open route may still fail to surface relevant experience if those expected to use it judge expression to be ineffective, costly or unsafe.

The feedback gap can also emerge after information has been captured. Complaints provide a useful public-service example because they create direct records of people's experience of institutional action. Guidance and practice developed by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman emphasise not only receiving and handling complaints, but also governance arrangements through which organisations review what complaints reveal, identify themes, assign responsibility and connect findings to improvement (Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, 2020; Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, n.d.-a). The distinction is instructive beyond complaints management itself. Recording an experience establishes that information has entered the organisation; it does not establish that the information has entered a consequential institutional relationship.

The same distinction applies to operational and implementation information. Monitoring can reveal changes in performance, emerging delivery problems or differences between intended and actual implementation, but information becomes useful for correction only if it can enter processes through which institutional action can be reconsidered while a meaningful opportunity to respond remains. Public-governance guidance that emphasises monitoring and early feedback during implementation similarly treats information as valuable when it can feed planning, decision-making and adjustment, rather than as an end in itself (OECD, 2020). The relevant institutional

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question is therefore not simply whether information is available, but whether it can travel far enough to matter.

This is why the presence of a feedback instrument should not be mistaken for the presence of feedback capability. A portal, survey, reporting process or meeting may provide an entry point or support part of the relationship, but the instrument cannot determine whether material information reaches substantive review, whether anyone remains responsible for it, whether sufficient response authority can be reached or whether the signal ultimately receives meaningful institutional treatment. The capability resides in the relationship that connects experience to consequential review and response, not in the mechanism through which information is initially collected.

Feedback should also be distinguished from institutional learning. A functioning feedback relationship can provide material from which an institution may subsequently learn, but returning experience to consequential review does not itself determine whether that experience will be retained, generalised or incorporated into future institutional knowledge and practice. Those are further institutional functions. PP-004 is concerned with the prior problem: whether experience can return at all to actors and processes capable of responding to it.

The resulting feedback gap is therefore primarily a deficit of connection rather than a deficit of information. Institutions may possess numerous sources of potentially useful experience and still remain weakly connected to them in practice. Building Institutional Feedback Capability begins by recognising this distinction. The next question is consequently not how to collect more feedback, but where the return relationship between experience and institutional response is being broken.

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# 2. Where Feedback Breaks

If institutional feedback is understood as a return relationship rather than as a collection activity, the next question is where that relationship fails. The pathway is straightforward in principle. Experience generated through implementation, operations or stakeholder interaction must enter a viable institutional route, reach substantive review while correction remains possible, retain identifiable responsibility, connect to sufficient response authority and ultimately receive substantive institutional disposition. **Feedback can fail at any of these connections even when information itself is abundant.**

The first point of failure is routing. A material signal may be recognised locally yet lack a credible path towards a relevant review point. Frontline observations can remain within the team experiencing a problem; service-user concerns can enter processes designed primarily to resolve individual cases; implementation anomalies can appear in operational reporting without reaching those responsible for reconsidering the decisions or assumptions behind them. Multiple channels do not necessarily solve the problem if their destinations are unclear or responsibility fragments as information crosses organisational boundaries. A signal may therefore move through an institution without moving towards a process capable of consequential review. Feedback requires more than transmission: it requires **institutional routability** between the source of relevant experience and a destination able to examine its significance.

A second failure concerns timing. A signal can reach an appropriate destination and still arrive after the useful opportunity to respond has narrowed or disappeared. This does not make speed a universal measure of feedback quality. Different signals have different correction windows: an emerging operational risk may require rapid escalation, whereas the significance of a recurring service problem may become visible only through accumulation over time. What matters is **decision-relevant timeliness** — whether information reaches review while reconsideration, investigation, adaptation or escalation can still make a meaningful difference. Public-governance work on implementation similarly connects monitoring and early feedback with the capacity to identify difficulties and adjust while policies and services are being delivered (OECD, 2020).

Information may also reach the institution without entering substantive review. Administrative receipt is easier to observe than institutional consideration. A concern can be logged, included in a report or communicated to management without anyone being responsible for examining what it means for institutional action. Under these conditions, organisations may demonstrate that feedback has been processed while remaining unable to show that it has been substantively considered. The failure can arise from overloaded review arrangements, fragmented reporting, ambiguous responsibilities or processes that reward administrative completion more readily than consequential examination. **Receipt is therefore not the same as review.**

Even substantive review can remain inconsequential if it is disconnected from response authority. Those closest to a problem may understand it well but lack authority to alter the relevant process; an analytical or review function may identify a recurring issue while having no control over the units required to address it; or a matter may require budgetary, regulatory or cross-organisational decisions unavailable at the point where feedback first arrives. Responsibility without sufficient authority leaves the return relationship incomplete. This does not imply that feedback should routinely be centralised or escalated upwards. It means that substantive review must either possess sufficient authority for the matter concerned or connect to a legitimate route through which that authority can be reached.

A further failure occurs at disposition. Material feedback can be transmitted, reviewed and escalated yet remain indefinitely unresolved within the institution. Discussion, acknowledgement or transfer does not by itself establish what the institution has decided to do with a consequential

signal. Substantive disposition requires the matter to reach an explicit institutional state — for example, action, further investigation, escalation, aggregation with related signals, continued monitoring, deferral or reasoned rejection. **Disposition does not mean that every signal must be accepted or acted upon.** Its purpose is to prevent material feedback from remaining suspended between institutional awareness and institutional response.

Across these failure points lies the cross-cutting problem of selection and suppression. No institution can subject every incoming signal to identical review intensity, particularly where information volume is high. Some form of selection is therefore necessary. Yet the processes through which complexity is reduced can also make consequential information disappear. Signals may be discounted because they originate from low-status actors, fit existing categories poorly, appear individually minor or challenge established assumptions. Relevant experience may also fail to enter formal channels in the first place. Research on organisational voice and silence shows that whether people express concerns or knowledge is shaped by organisational context, managerial behaviour, perceived efficacy and anticipated consequences, not simply by the formal availability of a channel (Lotfi Dehkharghani et al., 2023; Nechanska et al., 2020).

That evidence does not justify treating silence as inherently dysfunctional or every filtered signal as valuable. Some research indicates that withholding information can be strategic where timing, relevance or other considerations make immediate expression inappropriate (Parke et al., 2022). The design implication is therefore not that institutions should eliminate selection or attempt to surface every possible observation. It is that **governed selection should reduce information complexity without becoming an opaque mechanism of systematic suppression**. Institutions need enough visibility to recognise material exceptions, recurring weak signals and patterns whose significance may emerge only in aggregate, while retaining the ability to disregard information that does not warrant further institutional treatment.

These failure modes show why feedback disconnection cannot be reduced to poor communication. A signal can be transmitted yet arrive too late; arrive on time yet receive no substantive review; receive review yet remain disconnected from authority; or reach authority without receiving substantive disposition. Conversely, efficient routing can still produce weak feedback if relevant information is suppressed before it becomes visible. **The failure is relational: material experience loses one or more of the connections required to become institutionally consequential.**

This diagnosis changes what institutions should examine. The existence of channels, reporting processes or collected information is only the beginning. The more revealing questions concern where consequential signals disappear, stall, lose visibility or become detached from responsibility as they travel through the organisation. Those points of disconnection matter beyond the feedback relationship itself because they can remove opportunities to recognise divergence and reconsider action while correction remains possible. The next section therefore examines the institutional consequences of losing that return path.

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# 3. Why Disconnection Matters

A broken feedback pathway matters because institutions act under conditions of incomplete knowledge. Policies, programmes and services are designed around assumptions about how problems work, how people will respond and what implementation will require, some of which will inevitably prove incomplete when decisions encounter operational reality. Institutional correction therefore depends partly on whether relevant experience can become visible while there is still an opportunity to respond. Feedback does not eliminate uncertainty or ensure that signals will be interpreted correctly. Its more bounded function is to make consequential experience available to processes capable of reconsidering institutional action. When that return relationship is weak, institutions lose part of their capacity to compare intention with experience and recognise where correction may be required.

The most immediate consequence is a greater risk of **implementation drift**. Formal decisions do not reproduce themselves automatically in practice: implementation is shaped by organisational capacity, coordination, resources, professional judgement, local conditions and the behaviour of those translating policy into action. Public-governance work on implementation consequently emphasises monitoring and early feedback as ways of identifying difficulties and enabling adjustment during delivery (OECD, 2020). Feedback disconnection does not itself cause implementation drift, which can arise from many other conditions. But when relevant operational signals cannot reach consequential review, institutions become less able to recognise divergence and respond while implementation is unfolding. Feedback capability therefore contributes to the conditions for institutional correction rather than guaranteeing implementation success.

Drift can remain locally visible while institutionally obscure. Frontline staff may know that a procedure is routinely adapted because it does not fit operational conditions; service users may repeatedly encounter a difficulty not visible in aggregate indicators; managers may work around an implementation constraint without that constraint travelling back towards those responsible for the underlying process or decision. Such observations do not establish that the original decision was wrong. They indicate that the relationship between formal intention and operational experience may warrant review. Where the return path is weak, potentially valuable opportunities for correction can remain confined to the places where divergence is experienced.

Over time, persistent disconnection can also contribute to **repeated institutional error**, although the relationship is more mediated. Repetition may result from organisational incentives, political constraints, turnover, weak institutional memory, limited analytical capacity, resource conditions or deliberate choices. Feedback disconnection is nevertheless one plausible part of that architecture. If recurring difficulties are repeatedly experienced but fail to be routed, aggregated, reviewed or connected to authority, the institution has fewer opportunities to recognise that apparently separate events form a persistent pattern. Public-service complaint evidence illustrates the mechanism: complaint information becomes more institutionally useful when organisations examine themes across cases and connect those findings to accountable action, while recurring failures can remain obscured when experience is treated only as a sequence of individual matters (Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, 2020; Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, n.d.-b).

This creates an important distinction between **case closure and pattern visibility**. A complaint can be appropriately resolved as an individual case; an operational anomaly may genuinely be exceptional; a frontline concern may prove unsupported after examination. None necessarily requires wider intervention. Yet the institutional significance changes when similar signals recur across teams, locations, time periods or user groups. Arrangements organised exclusively around individual resolution can allow each case to disappear administratively before the collective pattern becomes visible. **A case can be closed while the pattern remains open.** Preserving pattern visibility does not require every local issue to enter system-wide review; it

requires sufficient connectivity for recurring or distributed signals to become recognisable when their aggregate significance exceeds that of any individual case.

At a greater causal distance, weak feedback relationships **may also contribute to more reactive forms of governance**, although this proposition requires greater caution. Institutions that fail to recognise emerging implementation problems through routine feedback may encounter some of them later, when they have become more visible, costly or difficult to address. Correction can then become more episodic. Yet feedback capability is only one influence among many: political incentives, external shocks, institutional mandates, resources, media attention and the wider decision environment all affect whether governance becomes anticipatory or reactive. Stronger feedback loops cannot by themselves make an institution proactive or prevent crises. The narrower proposition is that earlier access to consequential operational and stakeholder signals can preserve opportunities for correction that might otherwise be lost.

Nor does feedback automatically produce **institutional learning**. Feedback returns experience to processes capable of review and response; learning requires further processes through which experience, evidence and evaluation can be interpreted, retained, generalised and incorporated into future institutional knowledge and action. An institution may improve its ability to route an operational concern to appropriate authority and correct a current process without becoming systematically better at retaining or generalising what the episode reveals. Conversely, sophisticated analytical or evaluative arrangements can coexist with weak pathways for frontline or stakeholder experience to influence ongoing action. The capabilities are connected but distinct. PP-004 concerns the prior connection: whether material experience can return to consequential review and response in the first place.

The same discipline applies to wider institutional outcomes. Stronger feedback capability may support correction, but it cannot guarantee better policy, higher public trust, improved service performance or more reliable implementation. Such outcomes depend on institutional judgement, resources, authority, implementation conditions and many other factors beyond the feedback relationship. A functioning feedback loop can help make a consequential signal available to actors capable of responding; it cannot ensure that they will reach the right substantive decision. **Institutional Feedback Capability is therefore an enabling capacity: it improves the conditions under which correction can occur without predetermining the result of correction.**

This bounded account of consequence also clarifies the intervention problem. If material experience is already being generated and the principal loss occurs when it cannot return to consequential review and response, simply increasing collection addresses the wrong part of the problem. The design challenge is to preserve the institutional connections through which consequential signals can travel from experience towards possible correction. The next section therefore turns from failure and consequence to the positive capability those connections must create.

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# 4. What Institutional Feedback Capability Requires

The preceding analysis suggests that Institutional Feedback Capability should be defined by what happens to material experience after it emerges, rather than by the number or sophistication of mechanisms through which information is collected. **Institutional Feedback Capability is the institutional capacity to move material information generated through implementation, frontline experience, operations and stakeholder interaction into timely and consequential review, connect that review to appropriate response authority, and produce traceable institutional disposition without disproportionate burden or systematic suppression.** The definition is deliberately functional. It describes an institutional relationship that different organisations may realise through different structures, technologies and procedures.

At its minimum, that relationship requires four connected functions: **a viable pathway, identifiable review responsibility, sufficient response authority and substantive disposition**. These functions are analytically distinct but operationally interdependent. A pathway without responsibility can deliver information into institutional ambiguity. Responsibility without authority can produce review without response. Authority without disposition can leave matters unresolved despite their having reached actors capable of acting. The capability emerges from the connection among the functions rather than from the isolated presence of any one of them.

The first requirement is a **viable pathway**. Material experience must be able to reach a destination capable of substantive review through a route that is sufficiently accessible, usable and timely for the signals concerned. Viability is more demanding than formal availability. A route that is difficult to use, routinely bypassed, directed towards an irrelevant destination or too slow for the applicable correction window provides only nominal connectivity. Nor must every source use the same pathway. The institutional requirement is functional: relevant experience needs a credible means of reaching consequential review.

The second requirement is **identifiable review responsibility**. Once material feedback enters substantive review, responsibility for determining what happens next should remain identifiable. This does not mean that a single individual must retain ownership throughout the process. Signals may legitimately move between teams, functions or levels as their significance becomes clearer. What matters is that transfer does not create an institutional orphan: where responsibility moves, the receiving actor or process should accept the role required to continue review, escalation or disposition. Without this continuity, information can remain present in the organisation while no part of it is effectively responsible for carrying the feedback relationship forward.

The third requirement is **sufficient response authority**. Review becomes consequential only if it can reach an actor or process capable of making the relevant response. The necessary authority will vary with the matter. Some operational problems can be resolved locally; others require budgetary decisions, regulatory interpretation, cross-unit coordination or intervention at a wider institutional level. The objective is therefore not to move feedback automatically upwards, but to ensure an appropriate fit between the responsibility for review and the authority required for response. Where that authority is not available at the initial review point, the architecture needs a legitimate and accepted route through which it can be reached.

The fourth requirement is **substantive disposition**. Material feedback entering substantive review should reach an explicit institutional state rather than remain indefinitely acknowledged, discussed or transferred. Disposition may result in action, further investigation, escalation, aggregation, monitoring, deferral or reasoned rejection, depending on the nature of the signal and the institution's judgement. The requirement is not that every signal produce

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change. It is that consequential feedback does not disappear after entering review and that the institution can determine what substantive treatment it received.

These four functions form the minimum causal core of Institutional Feedback Capability:

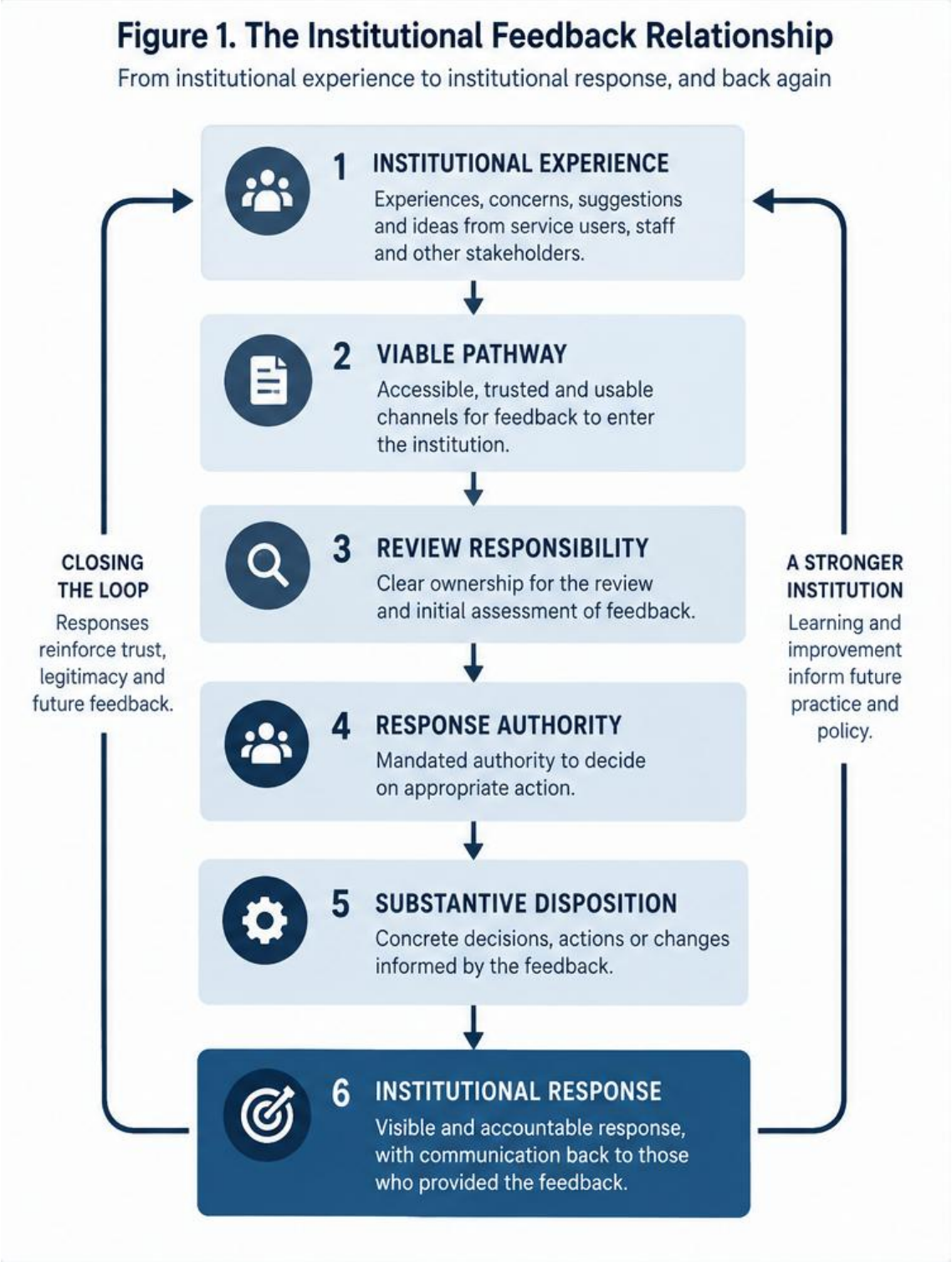
**PATHWAY → REVIEW RESPONSIBILITY → RESPONSE AUTHORITY → SUBSTANTIVE DISPOSITION**

**A feedback pathway becomes consequential only when transmission is connected to responsibility, responsibility to authority and authority to disposition.** The sequence should not be read as a rigid administrative workflow. Review and escalation may iterate; several actors may participate; some signals may be aggregated before their significance becomes clear; and authority may be distributed across organisational boundaries. What must remain intact is the functional connection between experience and an institutional process capable of bringing that experience to a consequential state.

Several additional properties affect how well this core performs. Feedback must reach review with sufficient **decision-relevant timeliness**; responsibility and transfers need enough **traceability** to prevent material signals from becoming institutionally orphaned; and the overall architecture must remain **proportionate** to the significance and volume of the information being handled. Source viability also matters because formal pathways provide little functional value if relevant actors cannot or will not use them. These properties strengthen or constrain the core relationship, but they should not be mistaken for additional constitutive stages. In particular, traceability supports responsibility and disposition rather than becoming a fifth component of the causal core.

This distinction between constitutive function and supporting arrangement protects the paper from an instrument trap. Different institutions may realise the same feedback functions through ordinary management relationships, complaints arrangements, operational review processes, protected reporting routes, cross-unit structures or digital systems. None of these forms is inherently the capability. The relevant test is whether the arrangement preserves the required relationship from material experience to consequential institutional treatment. **Function is stable; organisational form is contingent.**

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Institutional Feedback Capability can therefore be understood as a form of **governed feedback connectivity**. Its purpose is not to maximise the amount of information entering the institution or to ensure that every signal produces action. It is to preserve a viable and accountable return relationship through which consequential experience can reach review, remain attached to responsibility, connect to sufficient authority and receive substantive disposition. Once this minimum architecture is clear, the design question becomes how institutions should establish and govern those connections under different conditions of scale, complexity and organisational distribution.

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# 5. Designing Governed Feedback Connectivity

If Institutional Feedback Capability depends on connecting material experience to consequential review and response, the design task is not simply to create more opportunities for information to enter the institution. It is to build **governed feedback connectivity**: arrangements through which relevant signals can travel through viable pathways, remain attached to identifiable review responsibility, reach sufficient response authority and receive substantive disposition. The institutional form may vary, but these functions must remain connected if feedback is to become consequential.

The first priority is to **establish viable feedback pathways**. Institutions should identify the principal sources of operational, implementation, frontline and stakeholder experience relevant to the activity concerned and determine whether consequential signals from those sources possess credible routes into substantive review. This does not require a separate channel for every source or issue. Existing arrangements may already provide adequate connectivity if they are usable, reach an appropriate destination and operate within a meaningful correction window. New pathways are justified where relevant experience otherwise lacks a viable institutional route, not simply because greater collection appears desirable.

Second, institutions should **make review responsibility explicit**. Material feedback entering substantive review should remain attached to an identifiable actor or process responsible for determining its next institutional state. Where a signal must move between organisational units, responsibility should not disappear at the point of transfer. The receiving function should accept the role required to continue review, escalation or disposition. This is particularly important where feedback crosses administrative boundaries, because transfer without accepted responsibility can make a signal formally visible while leaving it institutionally orphaned.

Third, substantive review should **connect to sufficient response authority**. The appropriate authority will differ according to the signal. Many matters should be resolved where they arise when local actors possess the knowledge, mandate and resources required to respond. Others will exceed local authority or require coordination across organisational boundaries. The design principle is therefore not centralisation but authority fit. **Handle feedback at the lowest appropriate level, but do not allow local resolution to become local containment.** Where sufficient authority is unavailable at the initial review point, a legitimate and traceable escalation route should allow the matter to reach a level or function capable of responding.

Fourth, institutions should **require substantive disposition** for material feedback that enters substantive review. This is the strongest requirement in the architecture because a return relationship remains incomplete when consequential signals can be acknowledged or discussed indefinitely without reaching an institutional state. Disposition does not require agreement with the source or a decision to act. It requires a substantive determination of what happens to the signal, including where appropriate further investigation, escalation, aggregation, monitoring, deferral or reasoned rejection. The distinction protects feedback capability from becoming a system of automatic responsiveness while preventing administrative acknowledgement from substituting for institutional treatment.

Disposition at the level of an individual case should not necessarily terminate the wider feedback relationship. Similar signals may recur across teams, locations, services or time periods even where each can legitimately be resolved locally. Institutions therefore need sufficient visibility to recognise when the significance of an aggregate pattern exceeds that of its constituent cases. **A case can be closed while the pattern remains open.** This does not mean that every local issue should enter central review. It means that local resolution should coexist, where necessary, with arrangements capable of preserving wider pattern visibility.

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As feedback volume and organisational complexity increase, institutions should also **govern selection and escalation**. Equal review intensity for every signal is neither feasible nor desirable. Institutions need ways to distinguish matters that can remain within ordinary handling from those requiring greater scrutiny, aggregation, alternative review or wider authority. Materiality criteria, prioritisation and escalation rules can support this function, but they also create risks of suppression, congestion and distortion. Selection should therefore be sufficiently reviewable to preserve routes for consequential exceptions and recurring weak signals rather than becoming an opaque mechanism through which inconvenient information disappears.

Escalation should likewise be selective. Routing every matter towards senior or central authority can overwhelm precisely the decision capacity the feedback architecture is intended to reach, while excessive local containment can prevent cross-boundary problems from becoming visible. The appropriate arrangement is therefore one in which signals are normally dispositioned at the lowest level possessing sufficient authority and capacity, while legitimate escalation remains available for matters requiring broader authority, independence, coordination or pattern recognition. Escalation may also be lateral rather than hierarchical where another organisational function possesses the relevant expertise or mandate.

Institutions may additionally **close feedback loops communicatively** where doing so strengthens accountability, credibility or the continued willingness of sources to provide relevant information. Informing a source that a matter was reviewed, transferred, acted upon or otherwise dispositioned can reinforce the feedback relationship, particularly where future reporting depends on confidence that signals do not simply disappear. Yet communicative closure is not universally required and should not be confused with substantive disposition. Individual communication may be impractical, inappropriate or unnecessary in some settings, and a polished response to a source cannot compensate for the absence of meaningful institutional treatment. Communicative closure is therefore a reinforcing mechanism to be applied proportionately, not a constitutive requirement of every feedback loop.

These recommendations define institutional functions rather than a single organisational model. In a relatively small or bounded setting, a simple arrangement may be sufficient: a viable route, clear review responsibility, accessible authority and explicit disposition. Greater signal volume, organisational fragmentation or distributed authority may require tiered arrangements in which most feedback remains locally handled while selected matters enter broader review. More complex institutions may require a federated architecture that preserves local disposition while providing shared arrangements for escalation, aggregation, cross-unit visibility and oversight.

Such an architecture avoids a false choice between complete decentralisation and a central hub through which every signal must pass. The objective is **distributed disposition with governed connectivity**: local handling where appropriate, wider institutional visibility and authority where necessary. Because relevant authority may sit beside rather than above the initial review point, feedback architecture is better understood as a network of legitimate response relationships than as a single upward reporting line.

The design problem is therefore one of connection and restraint. Institutions need enough openness for relevant experience to enter, enough selection to keep substantive review workable, enough distribution to preserve local knowledge and responsibility, enough escalation to reach wider authority and enough visibility to recognise patterns that exceed individual cases. These properties cannot simply be maximised simultaneously. The objective is the **least complex arrangement capable of preserving consequential feedback function under the institution's actual conditions**.

That qualification matters because every additional pathway creates potential review obligations, every escalation route consumes response capacity and every governance requirement adds administrative work. A feedback architecture can weaken its own purpose if it expands faster than the institution's ability to review and respond. Designing governed connectivity is therefore only part of the task. The next question is how to preserve that

connectivity without turning feedback capability into overload, symbolic responsiveness or another layer of institutional bureaucracy.

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# 6. Building Feedback Capability Without Building Bureaucracy

The case for stronger feedback capability can easily produce the wrong institutional response. Once an organisation recognises that relevant experience is being lost, the intuitive solution is often to create more channels, request more reporting, establish additional review structures or require more extensive documentation. Each measure may be justified in particular circumstances. Taken together without regard to institutional capacity, however, they can make consequential feedback harder to identify and act upon. **Institutions should not increase feedback activity faster than their capacity to review, route and respond to consequential signals.**

This makes **review capacity a design condition rather than an implementation detail**. Every new pathway creates the possibility that additional information will enter the institution, while every commitment to substantive review creates a corresponding obligation to interpret and disposition some part of it. Where intake grows faster than review capacity, backlogs increase, response times lengthen and selection becomes more aggressive. Under sustained pressure, institutions may begin to optimise for processing rather than consequence: cases can be acknowledged quickly, records closed administratively and information compressed into categories that are easier to handle. An apparent expansion in feedback provision can therefore produce a decline in the quality of the feedback relationship.

The appropriate response is not necessarily to add staff whenever volume rises. Institutions can also improve routing, clarify materiality criteria, redistribute review responsibility, narrow unnecessarily broad intake or remove reporting that generates little institutional value. The relevant capacity is functional rather than numerical: can the institution examine the information it has invited, distinguish what requires consequential treatment and reach substantive disposition within a useful timeframe? Feedback architecture should therefore carry an implicit **burden budget**. Additional collection, documentation, review or escalation should earn the administrative effort it creates rather than being treated as evidence of institutional maturity in itself.

Capacity also begins at the source. A formally accessible pathway can remain functionally weak if those expected to use it do not regard reporting as safe, worthwhile or usable. Organisational research on employee voice and silence indicates that decisions to raise concerns are shaped by factors including perceived efficacy, managerial behaviour and anticipated consequences, rather than simply by the formal existence of an opportunity to speak (Lotfi Dehkharghani et al., 2023; Guarin et al., 2025). This does not imply that silence always reflects fear or that every withheld observation would be institutionally valuable. It establishes the narrower design point that **source viability cannot be assumed from channel availability**. A pathway systematically avoided by those possessing relevant experience provides only nominal connectivity.

The implications depend on the type of signal and the risks surrounding it. Routine operational matters may be handled effectively through ordinary reporting relationships. Where feedback concerns misconduct, safety, serious failure, conflicts of interest or problems implicating the normal management chain, however, the ordinary pathway may itself create a risk of suppression. Alternative or protected routes, confidentiality arrangements or review outside the usual hierarchy may then be necessary. Such safeguards should respond to identifiable risks rather than proliferate indiscriminately. Their purpose is to preserve a viable route when the ordinary route is itself part of the problem.

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**Selection requires similar discipline.** No feedback architecture can sustain unlimited review, and filtering, prioritisation and aggregation are legitimate ways of matching institutional attention to signal significance and available capacity. Yet the same mechanisms can suppress atypical, inconvenient or initially weak signals. Selection arrangements should therefore be sufficiently reviewable to reveal whether particular sources, categories or types of concern are systematically disappearing. Institutions may also need exception routes where ordinary classification or escalation criteria would otherwise prevent a consequential signal from receiving appropriate treatment. The objective is not maximal openness, but governed selection capable of reducing complexity without making material experience systematically invisible.

Escalation presents the opposite but related risk. A system designed to prevent local containment can become congested if too many matters are transferred towards scarce central or senior authority. Escalation should therefore be based on functional need: insufficient local authority, requirements for independence or cross-boundary coordination, or evidence that individually manageable signals form a wider pattern. Capacity constraints matter at every level. An escalation route that formally exists but routinely delivers matters into an overloaded destination does not preserve consequential connectivity; it merely relocates the point of disconnection.

Responsibility and traceability must also remain proportionate. Enough information should accompany a material signal to establish where it is, who is responsible for its next institutional state and whether an accepted transfer or disposition has occurred. Excessive documentation, however, can create its own friction, especially where staff must spend substantial time recording procedural movements that add little to substantive review. Traceability is valuable because it protects continuity and accountability, not because every movement through the architecture needs exhaustive documentation. **The objective is sufficient visibility to prevent institutional orphaning without turning traceability into an administrative end in itself.**

These pressures create the possibility of **pseudo-capability**: visible feedback activity increases while the underlying institutional function does not. An organisation may introduce additional channels, receive more submissions, hold more review meetings, create dashboards or close cases more quickly while consequential signals remain poorly routed, weakly connected to authority or substantively unresolved. Activity indicators can then improve even as feedback connectivity stagnates or deteriorates. This is why implementation metrics should never be interpreted as direct evidence of capability gain.

Feedback measures should instead be read alongside **counter-metrics** capable of revealing whether apparent improvement is producing new forms of disconnection. Rising reporting volume can be examined alongside substantive-review capacity and backlog; faster closure alongside disposition quality, recurrence or reopening; greater escalation alongside congestion and the proportion of matters that reach sufficient authority; and stronger standardisation alongside evidence that relevant sources or atypical signals are being excluded. Counter-metrics cannot eliminate gaming or measurement error, but they make it harder to mistake improvement in an administrative indicator for improvement in the feedback relationship itself.

The appropriate architecture also depends on **institutional readiness**. A simple feedback relationship may be sufficient where responsibilities are clear, authority accessible and signal volume manageable. Tiered or federated arrangements may become useful where organisational fragmentation, distributed authority or cross-unit patterns make additional coordination necessary. Complexity should not, however, be interpreted as maturity. A more elaborate architecture is not inherently more capable; the appropriate form is the least complex arrangement that reliably preserves the required feedback functions under actual institutional conditions.

Readiness also means recognising when expansion should not proceed. An institution should be cautious about inviting substantially more feedback when credible review capacity is absent, establishing escalation where no receiving authority is prepared to accept responsibility,

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encouraging sensitive reporting where material risks to sources remain unmanaged, or expanding intake when existing volume already exceeds the institution's ability to identify and disposition consequential signals. This does not mean ignoring the underlying feedback problem. It means that the immediate intervention may need to strengthen review capacity, authority connectivity, source protection or selection before additional intake is introduced. **Non-expansion can therefore be an active design decision rather than a failure of responsiveness.**

Finally, the feedback architecture itself must remain **correctable**. Routes can begin directing signals to unsuitable destinations; materiality criteria can suppress emerging issues; responsibility arrangements can become obsolete; escalation structures can congest; and reporting requirements can impose burdens that discourage relevant sources. Institutions therefore need enough visibility to recognise when the architecture is repeatedly losing, delaying, distorting or orphaning consequential information, together with sufficient authority to modify the arrangements responsible. This does not require constructing a second-order feedback bureaucracy. It requires treating the architecture as an institutional design that can itself fail and must remain open to adjustment.

The central lesson is one of restraint as much as connectivity. A capable feedback architecture is not the one that captures the greatest possible volume of experience, creates the most elaborate reporting structure or documents every institutional movement. It is the one that preserves consequential connections under realistic conditions of scarcity, hierarchy, uncertainty and organisational friction. **Feedback capability should expand only as fast as the institution can preserve meaningful review, sufficient authority and substantive disposition.** Once this constraint is accepted, implementation can proceed from a different premise: establish the minimum functional relationship, verify that it works and allow complexity to grow only when demonstrated function justifies it.

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# 7. From Feedback Architecture to Institutional Capability

Building Institutional Feedback Capability should not begin with the design of a comprehensive feedback system. The architecture developed in this paper suggests a different implementation logic: establish the smallest viable relationship through which material experience can reach consequential review, determine whether that relationship actually functions and add complexity only when institutional need and demonstrated performance justify it. **Scale should follow verified function, not implementation activity.** This shifts implementation away from asking whether the intended structures have been installed and towards the more demanding question of whether they are producing the feedback relationship they were designed to create.

**Diagnose where feedback currently disappears**

The first step is diagnostic. Institutions should map how relevant operational, implementation, frontline and stakeholder signals currently move rather than beginning from an assumption that no feedback architecture exists. Most organisations already possess formal and informal pathways through which experience enters institutional activity. The task is to determine what happens to consequential signals within and between those arrangements.

A useful diagnosis therefore **follows the signal rather than the organisational chart**. It asks where relevant experience originates and whether it can enter a viable route; where substantive review occurs and whether it does so within a meaningful correction window; who becomes responsible for what happens next; whether sufficient response authority is available or reachable; and what disposition the signal ultimately receives. Where information changes hands, the diagnosis should examine whether responsibility is accepted and traceable; where selection or aggregation occurs, it should examine what may become invisible. The purpose is to locate the actual point of disconnection rather than respond generically by adding another channel.

Diagnosis should also distinguish isolated failures from structural ones. A single delayed response may reflect exceptional circumstances, while recurring delay at the same review point may indicate insufficient capacity. One unsuccessful escalation may be case-specific, while repeated escalation failure can reveal a mismatch between responsibility and authority. Similar issues repeatedly resolved within separate units may indicate a pattern that local handling cannot see. Diagnostic sufficiency is reached not when every imperfection has been catalogued, but when the institution can identify where consequential feedback repeatedly loses connectivity, timeliness, authority connection, disposition or traceability and can determine which function requires intervention.

**Establish a minimum viable feedback relationship**

Once the point of disconnection is understood, the institution should establish the smallest arrangement capable of repairing it. A **Minimum Viable Feedback Relationship** is a functioning institutional relationship in which at least one material signal class can travel through a usable pathway to identifiable review responsibility, reach sufficient authority or accepted escalation and receive substantive traceable disposition.

The purpose of starting at this level is not to create a temporary or inferior version of a future comprehensive system. It is to make the core feedback relationship observable before additional complexity obscures whether it works. Existing institutional arrangements should be used where they can perform the required functions; new structures should be introduced only where a genuine functional gap requires them. The relevant implementation question is therefore not how much architecture has been installed, but whether the minimum relationship from experience to consequential response has been established.

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**Test the relationship with real signals**

A feedback arrangement that appears coherent on paper may behave differently under operational conditions. The next step is therefore to activate the relationship using real signals and observe whether its mechanisms perform as intended. Can relevant experience enter the pathway in practice? Does it reach substantive review? Does responsibility remain identifiable across transfers? Can the review process access sufficient authority or accepted escalation? Does the matter reach substantive disposition within a decision-relevant timeframe?

Testing should also look for the failure risks identified earlier in the paper. A pathway may be formally accessible but avoided by relevant sources; selection rules may remove unusual signals; transfers may detach information from responsibility; escalation may stall at a destination without capacity; and documentation requirements may create disproportionate burden. Early implementation should be treated as a test of the feedback relationship itself rather than as confirmation that the intended design has been successfully delivered.

**Verify function before expansion**

Expansion should depend on evidence that the minimum relationship is functioning. Verification should therefore examine whether the institution has improved along the dimensions that define capability: **connectivity, timeliness, consequentiality, traceability and proportionality**. The relevant evidence concerns whether consequential signals are more reliably reaching substantive review, doing so within useful correction windows, connecting to sufficient authority and receiving explicit disposition without introducing unacceptable congestion, burden, distortion or suppression.

These dimensions should be interpreted together. Faster processing has limited value if substantive review deteriorates; higher reporting volume may indicate greater reach or simply greater intake pressure; more escalation may reveal improved access to authority or a failure to resolve matters at appropriate levels. Counter-metrics are therefore useful where administrative indicators could otherwise conceal deterioration in the underlying relationship. **No increase in feedback-related activity should be treated as capability gain unless there is evidence of improved feedback function.**

**Scale only when complexity is earned**

Once core function has been demonstrated, the institution can consider whether additional pathways, review levels, aggregation arrangements or escalation mechanisms are necessary. The appropriate direction depends on the problem revealed through implementation. Greater volume may require stronger selection or redistributed review capacity; recurring issues across units may require pattern aggregation; fragmented authority may justify tiered or federated arrangements; and sensitive signals may require alternative routes. Complexity should respond to observed functional need rather than to an assumption that a mature feedback architecture must be elaborate.

Scaling should preserve the principle of distributed disposition. Matters should continue to be handled at the lowest appropriate level where sufficient authority and capacity exist, while wider review remains available when the significance of a signal exceeds local boundaries. This protects local knowledge and response capacity without sacrificing institutional visibility. It also creates a practical scale ceiling: expansion should pause, simplify or regress where additional intake or governance complexity begins to undermine timely review, authority access or substantive disposition.

**Integrate case handling with pattern visibility**

As feedback arrangements mature, institutions may need to connect individual disposition with wider visibility of recurring signals. This does not require transferring every case into central review. It requires enough aggregation and cross-unit visibility to recognise when individually manageable matters collectively indicate a broader institutional issue. The appropriate level of

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integration will vary according to signal volume, organisational structure and the significance of the patterns concerned.

Integration should therefore preserve two capabilities simultaneously: local actors must retain enough responsibility and authority to resolve matters appropriately, while the institution must retain enough visibility to recognise patterns that no single local unit can observe. This is the practical expression of the principle that **a case can be closed while the pattern remains open**. Pattern visibility remains part of the feedback architecture; converting recognised patterns into retained organisational knowledge or systematic learning requires further institutional functions beyond the scope of this paper.

**Measure the relationship, not merely the activity**

Evaluation should distinguish several levels of evidence. At the most basic level, institutions can measure **activity**: pathways created, submissions received, reviews conducted or cases processed. They can then examine **adoption and reach**: whether intended sources actually use the arrangements and whether relevant signals enter them. Neither establishes that feedback capability has improved.

The stronger tests concern **mechanism function** and **proximal behavioural change**. Institutions should examine whether signals complete viable routes, enter substantive review, reach appropriate authority, receive disposition and move through the relationship within useful timeframes. They can then ask whether institutional behaviour has changed in ways consistent with improved feedback function: responsibility is less frequently lost, escalation reaches appropriate destinations more reliably, recurring signals become visible earlier, or consequential matters are less likely to remain administratively unresolved.

Evidence of **Institutional Feedback Capability gain** exists when these improvements amount to a more reliable institutional ability to move consequential experience into timely review, connect that review to appropriate response authority and produce traceable disposition without disproportionate burden or systematic suppression. Wider outcomes — such as improved implementation, service performance, public trust or policy effectiveness — may eventually be examined, but they should remain analytically separate. They are influenced by many capabilities and contextual conditions beyond feedback itself.

The resulting hierarchy is:

**ACTIVITY → ADOPTION & REACH → MECHANISM FUNCTION → PROXIMAL BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE → INSTITUTIONAL CAPABILITY GAIN → WIDER OUTCOMES**

**Measure the feedback relationship, not merely the feedback activity.**

**Adapt, simplify or stop where necessary**

Implementation should remain reversible. If evidence shows that a feedback arrangement is functioning, the institution may retain it or expand it where additional need is demonstrated. If the relationship is producing excessive burden, congestion, suppression or weak authority connection, the appropriate response may instead be to simplify, rebalance or redesign it. Some pathways or governance arrangements may need to contract or stop altogether if they add activity without improving consequential feedback.

Controlled regression is therefore compatible with capability building. Removing an ineffective reporting requirement, narrowing an overloaded intake route or returning responsibility to a more appropriate level can strengthen feedback function even though the visible architecture becomes smaller. Institutional maturity should not be inferred from the accumulation of mechanisms. The relevant question remains whether the architecture preserves the relationship it exists to support.

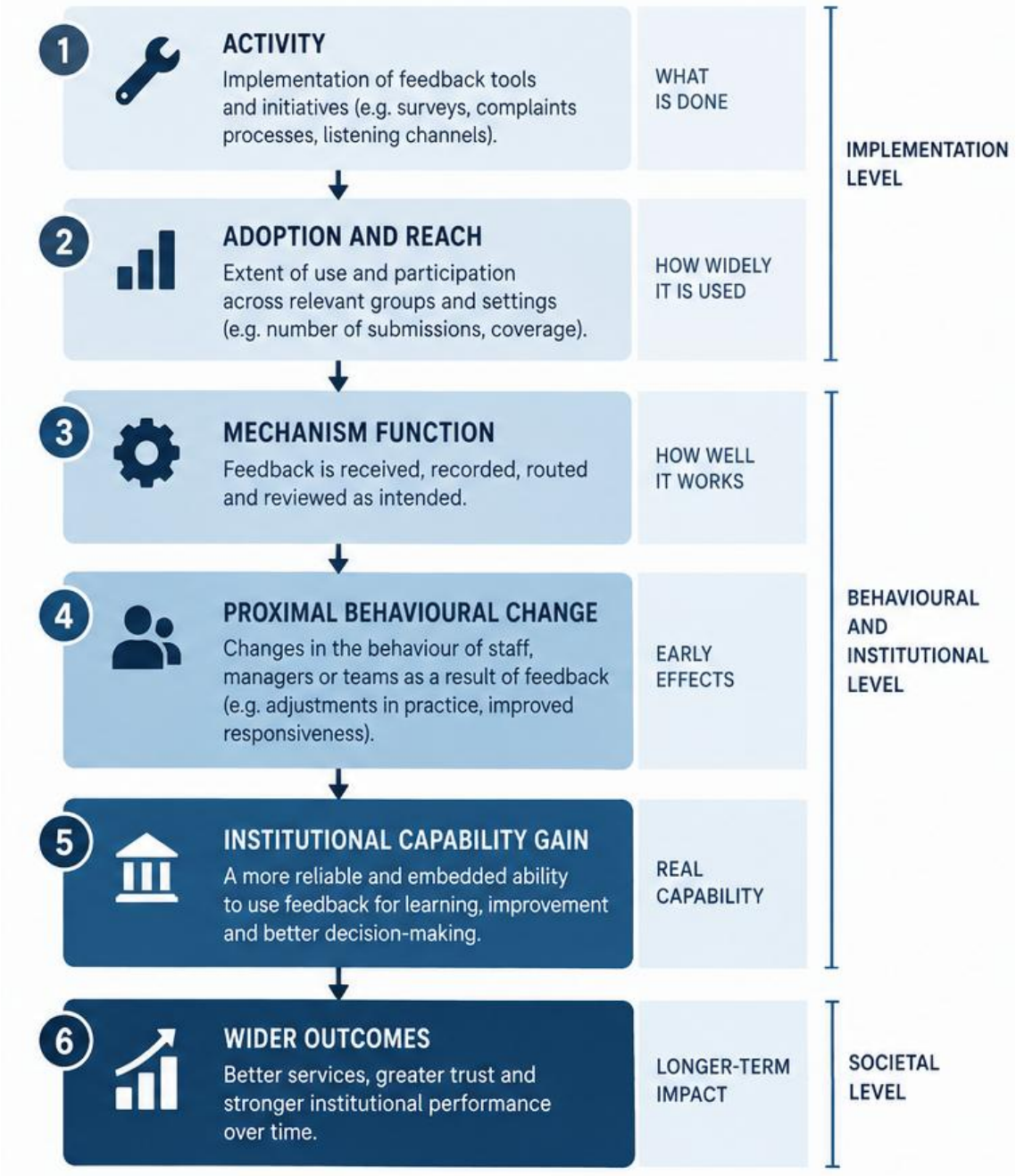
Implementation can therefore be understood as a disciplined sequence:

**DIAGNOSE → ESTABLISH → TEST → VERIFY → SCALE → INTEGRATE → ADAPT**

The sequence is functional rather than mechanically linear. Diagnosis may need to be revisited, scaling may expose new disconnections, and adaptation may require deliberate simplification. What remains constant is the progression rule: **function precedes scale, and evidence of capability must precede claims of success.** Building Institutional Feedback Capability means progressively strengthening a return relationship whose performance can be observed, challenged and corrected rather than installing a finished system and assuming that institutional feedback has thereby been achieved.

**Figure 2. From Feedback Activity to Institutional Capability**

A hierarchy of change, from implementation to long-term outcomes



# Conclusion

Public institutions continuously generate experience about how their decisions work in practice. The harder institutional question is whether that experience can return to the actors and processes capable of responding to it. Information may be collected, recorded and circulated without becoming consequential feedback. **Feedback is not collection.** It is the institutional return relationship through which relevant experience can reach substantive review and remain connected to possible response.

That relationship can fail in different ways. Signals may lack viable routes, arrive after useful opportunities for correction have narrowed, enter the institution without substantive review, lose identifiable responsibility, remain disconnected from sufficient authority or fail to receive substantive disposition. These failures do not imply that institutions need to collect everything, review every signal equally or respond by changing action whenever feedback is received. They show instead that feedback capability depends on preserving the connections through which consequential experience can receive appropriate institutional treatment.

The minimum architecture is therefore functional rather than instrumental: **viable pathway, identifiable review responsibility, sufficient response authority and substantive disposition**. Different institutions can realise these functions through different organisational arrangements. As volume and complexity increase, governed selection, aggregation and selective escalation may be required to preserve those connections without overwhelming review capacity or allowing local resolution to become local containment. The appropriate architecture is not the most elaborate one, but the least complex arrangement capable of maintaining consequential feedback under the institution's actual conditions.

Implementation should follow the same discipline. Institutions can begin by identifying where consequential signals currently disappear, establishing a minimum viable feedback relationship and testing whether it functions under real conditions. Complexity should be added only where demonstrated need justifies it, and arrangements that create burden without improving feedback function should be simplified, redesigned or stopped. **Scale should follow verified function, not implementation activity.**

Evaluation must consequently distinguish visible activity from institutional capability. More channels, submissions, reviews or completed cases may show that a feedback arrangement is being used, but they do not establish that consequential experience is reaching timely review, appropriate authority and substantive disposition. Capability gain exists when the institution becomes more reliable at preserving those connections without disproportionate burden, congestion, distortion or suppression. **Measure the feedback relationship, not merely the feedback activity.**

The contribution of stronger feedback capability should remain bounded. It cannot guarantee better decisions, successful implementation, organisational learning, public trust or improved policy outcomes. Those depend on other institutional capabilities and conditions. What feedback capability can do is preserve something more basic but indispensable: the possibility that experience generated through institutional action can return to processes capable of reconsidering that action while a meaningful opportunity for correction remains.

**Institutional feedback capability begins when experience is no longer merely recorded, but can reliably return to consequential review and response.**

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