



SST 30 Role Differentiation and Cultural Fragmentation



The Society That Forgot What It Was For

The Heritage Preservation Society had existed for more than fifty years. Its purpose was simple: preserve and promote the history of the local area.

For many years the organisation functioned effectively. Some members researched local history. Some organised events. Some managed finances. Some maintained the society's archives.

Although members occasionally disagreed, they generally shared a common understanding of the society's purpose.

Over time, however, things began to change. New members joined with different interests. Some wanted the society to focus on education. Others preferred campaigning. Others saw it primarily as a social organisation. Others wanted to develop tourism projects.

None of these ideas were unreasonable. Yet members increasingly disagreed about priorities. At the same time, several long-serving volunteers retired. The treasurer stepped down. The archivist left. The events coordinator became less active. Finding replacements proved difficult.



The organisation continued holding meetings and discussing new ideas, but many of the practical tasks required to maintain the society received less attention. Archives became disorganised. Events were cancelled. Financial reporting was delayed. Membership administration deteriorated. Arguments about the future became increasingly common. The society had not lost enthusiasm. It had lost both shared purpose and effective role allocation. As cultural coherence declined, productive coordination became increasingly difficult.

Formal Description

Role differentiation failure occurs when essential functions within a system are inadequately performed, poorly allocated, or insufficiently recognised.

Examples include:

- skills shortages;
- loss of expertise;
- vacant leadership positions;
- overloaded key personnel;
- declining institutional competence.

Within the Enhanced Morphogenetic Cycle (EMC), structures allocate responsibilities required for system viability. Instability emerges when critical functions are not effectively fulfilled.

Cultural fragmentation occurs when shared meanings, assumptions, values, or priorities become increasingly divergent.

Examples include:

- political polarisation;
- organisational factionalism;
- identity conflicts;
- competing narratives.

As cultural coherence declines, coordination becomes more difficult because participants no longer share sufficient assumptions regarding goals, priorities, or appropriate actions.

The combination of role differentiation failure and cultural fragmentation can significantly reduce a system's capacity for productive coordination.

Plain English Explanation

Every organisation depends upon two things.

- First, important jobs must be performed.
- Second, people must broadly agree on what they are trying to achieve.

Problems emerge when either condition begins to fail. An organisation may have enthusiastic members but lack people willing or able to perform essential tasks.

Alternatively, it may have capable people but lack agreement about priorities.

When both problems occur simultaneously, instability often follows.

Disagreements become harder to resolve because people no longer share common assumptions.

At the same time, practical tasks receive less attention because responsibility becomes unclear or competence is missing.

The result is often frustration, declining performance, and organisational drift.

The key diagnostic questions are:

"Are essential functions being adequately performed?" and

"Do participants still share sufficient assumptions to coordinate effectively?"



FUNCTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION AND CULTURAL COHERENCE

Effective roles and shared meaning support stability. Their absence creates instability.

FUNCTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION IN AN ORGANISATION

ALL KEY ROLES PRESENT – SYSTEM STABLE



CHAIR
Provides leadership, sets agenda, facilitates decisions

SECRETARY
Records decisions, manages communication, keeps the system organised

TREASURER
Manages finances, keeps accounts, ensures accountability

✓ All key functions performed.
Coordination is effective.
Organisation is stable.

ONE KEY ROLE ABSENT – SYSTEM STRAINED



CHAIR
Provides leadership, sets agenda, facilitates decisions

SECRETARY
Records decisions, manages communication, keeps the system organised

TREASURER
Manages finances, keeps accounts, ensures accountability

⚠ Important functions are missed or delayed.
Work overloads others.
Coordination becomes difficult.
Organisation becomes unstable.

MULTIPLE ROLES ABSENT – SYSTEM FAILING



CHAIR
Provides leadership, sets agenda, facilitates decisions

SECRETARY
Records decisions, manages communication, keeps the system organised

TREASURER
Manages finances, keeps accounts, ensures accountability

✗ Critical functions are not performed.
Decisions are delayed or poor.
Trust declines. Organisation fails.

CULTURAL COHERENCE

SHARED PURPOSE AND VALUES – COHERENT CULTURE

- ✓ Shared understanding of purpose
- ✓ Aligned values and priorities
- ✓ Trust and respect
- ✓ Willingness to cooperate
- ✓ Productive coordination



✓ People pull in the same direction.
Coordination is effective.
System is stable.

DIVIDED PURPOSE AND VALUES – FRAGMENTED CULTURE

- ✗ Different priorities
- ✗ Conflicting assumptions
- ✗ Mistrust and suspicion
- ✗ Reluctance to cooperate
- ✗ Coordination breaks down



✗ People pull in different directions.
Conflict increases.
Coordination fails.
System becomes unstable.



KEY MESSAGE: Organisations depend on both functional roles being performed and people sharing enough meaning to work together. When either fails, coordination breaks down and instability emerges.

Example 1 – Skills Shortages

A sector experiences increasing difficulty recruiting individuals with essential expertise. Critical functions become underperformed. Performance declines despite continued demand. Result: Role differentiation failure.

Example 2 – Organisational Factionalism

Members increasingly disagree about priorities and future direction. Shared assumptions weaken. Decision-making becomes more difficult. Result: Cultural fragmentation reduces productive coordination.

Provenance and Links

The concepts of role differentiation and cultural coherence emerged from the application of systems theory and morphogenesis to organisational and social stability. General Systems Theory highlighted the importance of functional differentiation, while sociological traditions emphasised the role of shared norms and meanings in maintaining social order. During the development of Constraint Analysis it became apparent that many organisational and social crises involve a combination of declining competence and declining coherence. Systems



require both effective performance of essential functions and sufficient shared understanding to coordinate those functions productively.

The module draws upon:

- General Systems Theory (Ludwig von Bertalanffy)
- Structural Functionalism (particularly functional differentiation)
- Margaret Archer's Morphogenesis
- Organisational Theory
- Social Cohesion and Collective Action research

Practical Exercise – Student Response Area

Think of an organisation, community, or group that you know well.

1. What are its most important functions?
2. Are these functions being adequately performed?
3. Are any critical roles vacant, overloaded, or under-recognised?
4. Do participants broadly agree on the organisation's purpose and priorities?
5. Where do disagreements appear to be increasing?
6. How might competence and cultural coherence be strengthened?