FIELD NOTE

Positional Decay

How organizations hollow themselves out before a competitor ever beats them.

Internal politics behaves like neither friction nor a personality problem. It is a destabilization mechanism that wears the face of ambition — which is why it is applauded on its way through the organization, and why no one inside can see it while it works.

BY GREGORY POHL

AMSTERDAM · 2026

Positional Decay

No system in history was ever defeated from outside before it was first hollowed from within. The empires we remember as conquered were, almost without exception, already dying of themselves when the enemy arrived. The enemy didn't break the wall. The wall had already been abandoned by people too occupied fighting each other to man it.

This isn't a metaphor borrowed to dress up a business problem. It's the same mechanism at a different scale, and the historical cases are worth sitting with, because the shape of the thing is clearer at the scale of an empire than in the mirror of a company.

The late Ming court lost the empire to itself before it lost it to the Manchus. Its most capable officials — men who should have been governing a state under mounting fiscal and agricultural strain — were instead consumed by factional war, the reformers against the entrenched palace bureaucracy. The energy that should have answered famine and organized defense was spent answering rivals. By the time the external threat arrived, the machinery of response had already been dismantled from within, by people who were each, in their own account, simply protecting what was right. The enemy walked through a door that internal politics had already unbarred.

Late imperial Rome offers the sharper image, because it shows how far the inversion can go. The court at Ravenna had grown so expert at internal position that it engineered the murder of Aetius — the one general holding the western empire together — to settle a factional score. A courtier reportedly told the emperor afterward that he had cut off his right hand with his left. The court had become better at competing with itself than at defending its territory, and the two capacities crossed somewhere in the dark, with no one ever deciding they should.

Each system grew very good at internal competition precisely as it lost the ability to do the thing it existed for.

Neither empire was defeated in the sense we usually mean. Each was hollowed from within, and the decline stayed invisible the whole time because, at every stage, the people driving it were winning. That's the signature of the death this is about. It doesn't announce itself, and it scales down without losing its shape — from an empire to a company — because the mechanism was never about size. It was about what happens when the people inside a system start competing with each other instead of with the world.

The comforting story about internal politics is that it's friction: a tax, the cost of putting ambitious humans together, something strong cultures minimize and weak ones tolerate. That story is wrong in the specific way that lets the damage continue — it files a fatal condition under a survivable one.

Politics behaves differently than friction. Friction slows a system down and the system keeps going. Politics redirects it, taking the time, attention, and capacity meant for the mission and spending them on the contest for position instead — the engine repurposed, without anyone noticing, to drive somewhere else. The second misdiagnosis is more seductive, because it feels tough-minded: politics is a people problem, some individuals are political animals, and the answer is to find them and remove them. This is wrong too, and understanding why is the foundation of everything that follows.

Call it a destabilization mechanism, because that's its effect, though the people doing the destabilizing rarely intend anything of the kind. They aren't attacking the organization or thinking about its structural health at all. They're pursuing their own ascent and recognition — the most ordinary and human motives there are — and the damage to the structure is collateral, a byproduct they neither intend nor notice.

No one is attacking the system, because everyone is simply climbing. The structure decays as the unintended sum.

This is what makes the decay structural rather than personal: ordinary people, each pursuing something legitimate, producing a systemic effect no one authored and no one wanted. There's no saboteur to remove — only a structure that failed to point its people at anything larger than themselves, so their ambition, which had to go somewhere, went sideways into each other. Which is why you can't fire your way out of it. Remove the most visible operator and the conditions that produced them are untouched, so they produce another. The behavior belongs to the structure, not the individuals — the same logic that governs brand drift, where harm accumulates without an author from a thousand reasonable moves that never summed to a decision anyone made.

Two terms are worth keeping straight here. The behavior — the maneuvering, the currying, the contest for position that consumes an organization's capacity — is the shadow game. The condition it produces over time, the slow hollowing of a system by its own people's ambition, is positional decay. The shadow game is how positional decay happens.

It isn't caused by bad people. It's caused by something — three conditions, each of which a leader builds, usually without knowing they're building it. None of the three is exotic. Each looks, at the moment it's created, like a reasonable way to run an organization. That's precisely why the decay is so common: the conditions that produce it are the default settings of most companies past a certain size.

Underneath all three is a single human constant, worth naming plainly before the structure, because the structure only matters in relation to it. People need to matter, and to be seen to matter. Strip almost any act of political maneuvering down to its center and you find a person who no longer believes their real work registers, and who has redirected the search for significance into the one arena that still pays out. That hunger — to count for something, visibly — is the fuel. Far from a flaw, it's the most reliable feature of capable people. The three conditions are simply the ways a structure fails to give that fuel a legitimate place to burn, so it burns sideways instead.

The first condition is too many layers. Distance is what the game needs to survive, and layers are how an organization manufactures distance. Every level of management inserted between the work and the leadership is a place for the game to hide, and a translator who sits astride the flow of information with a position of their own to protect. A flat organization has nowhere to run a whisper — the person you'd maneuver against is standing next to the person you'd maneuver to, and the maneuver is visible. Depth removes that check. Each added layer creates corridors, and the shadow game lives in corridors: in the space between where something is true and where it's finally heard, there's room to shade it, delay it, attach it to the right name or the wrong one. Hierarchy doesn't merely tolerate the game. Past a certain depth, it's the game's native habitat.

The second condition, and the least understood of the three, is blurred accountability — and the most consequential, because the instinct most leaders bring to it makes it worse. The instinct is to reward the team. Shared goals, shared credit, collective wins: the vocabulary of cohesion. And it produces the opposite of cohesion, for a reason that's obvious once stated and almost never stated. When outcomes are pooled and no individual owns a discrete, legible piece, no one feels the weight of their own part. And weight that isn't located doesn't disappear — it gets assigned. In a collective where credit and blame are shared, the only way to protect your standing when something goes wrong is to make sure the failure attaches to someone other than you. This is the origin of the two most corrosive sentences in organizational life: *one person didn't do as well as they should have*, and *we could have done better if*. Both are the sound of pooled accountability searching for a place to set down a weight that was never distributed in the first place.

Pooled accountability manufactures the very blame it was meant to prevent.

The reflex, in other words, is backward. Shared reward builds a market in blame, because it removes the one thing that makes blame unnecessary — the clear location of each person's contribution. The fix is more individuation, not less, held inside a shared mission. Consider how a heist crew actually works — the Ocean's Eleven structure, if you like. Every member has one job. The pickpocket, the explosives specialist, the inside man, the driver. Each is superb at their single thing and answers for it alone. There's no ambiguity about whose part held, because the parts were never blurred together. And the crew wins the way Voltron wins: five pilots, five separate machines, each flown and owned completely, assembling into a victory that no single one of them could manage alone. The mission is shared. The roles never are. Rather than a compromise between individual and collective, it's the only arrangement in which a collective actually functions — the only one where the team win is real, built from individual excellence instead of averaged out of shared fog. Blur the roles into a genuine collective and you get the opposite of unity: the one arrangement in which assigning fault is the only available move, because when no one owns anything, protecting yourself and blaming a colleague become the same act.

The third condition is idle capacity and unseen work — two deprivations that starve a capable person into the game, and they compound: not being pushed to the limit of what they can do, and not being seen for what they did. Take the first: capacity doesn't sit idle when it goes unused. It goes somewhere, and if the work won't absorb it, the contest for position will. Unspent capability is the raw material of every internal war. This is why the most dangerous operator in an organization is rarely the incompetent one. More often it's the excellent one who was handed a problem too small to hold them. Their competence is real, and it has nowhere legitimate to go, so it turns to the only sufficiently complex problem left in the building: other people.

Now the second: a person who can't tell whether their real work landed is a person deprived of the thing the work was supposed to provide — evidence that they matter. When effort and visible outcome come uncoupled for long enough, something predictable happens: the person stops investing in the work, because the work has stopped returning the signal they need, not because they've grown lazy. And the search for that signal doesn't end. It relocates. It goes to the arena where impact is immediate and unmistakable, and in most organizations that arena is politics. A quarter of genuine contribution vanishes into a shared drive without a ripple; a single well-placed remark about a colleague's judgment reshapes a reputation by the afternoon.

When the honest channel goes silent, people find the loud one.

The two deprivations reinforce each other. An under-stretched person has spare capacity; an unseen person has unmet hunger; a person who is both is the shadow game's ideal recruit, carrying exactly the surplus and exactly the appetite it runs on. Push a capable person to the brink of what they can do, and make the result of it legible and theirs, and you've removed both the surplus and the hunger in a single move. Fully extended and fully credited, a person has nothing left over for the game and no reason to seek it. Idle and invisible, they have both.

None of these three conditions is a failure of the people subject to them. All three are properties of the structure those people were placed in, which means all three sit on the leadership side of the ledger. The politics reflects what the structure does to your people, not what they are — and, crucially, what a different structure could stop doing.

In a small, flat organization all of this is visible, which is why small organizations rarely suffer it badly. Distance is what makes the game lethal, because distance is where it launders itself — where a maneuver loses its fingerprints and a distortion loses its author. It launders itself two ways, worth holding apart because they're the same two failures at the heart of how brands lose themselves: one authored, one not.

The authored kind is destabilization by proxy. You don’t move against a rival yourself. You arrange for the concern to arrive in someone else’s voice. A peer raises it, apparently independently. A junior flags it, apparently from the ground. Your own hand is nowhere in evidence. This defeats the single defense a leader has against manipulation — considering the source — because the source now appears disinterested and clean. The most effective version is the one where the proxy doesn’t know they’re a proxy. Fed the right framing at the right moment, a person comes to believe the concern is genuinely theirs, and advances it with a sincerity the instigator could never have manufactured. The maneuver has borrowed not just another voice but another person’s honest conviction. It’s authored — someone set it in motion — though the authorship stays invisible, because the hand that moved it isn’t the hand that appears to hold it.

The unauthored kind is worse, precisely because no one decided it. Every layer of management is a translation step, and every translator has a position to protect. Information doesn’t travel up a hierarchy so much as get metabolized at each level — shaded, at each step, toward the version that makes that layer look competent and its rivals less so. Bad news softens on the way up, because no layer wants to be the one holding it. Good news gets claimed. Blame routes downward. By the time information reaches the leadership, it has passed through several interested filters and arrives pre-distorted. No one lied; each layer simply told the version that a person in that seat would naturally tell, and the sum of several locally reasonable shadings is a fiction. No one authored the fiction. It accumulated. It’s drift wearing the organizational chart as a costume. The leader isn’t reading the organization so much as a composite portrait, painted by everyone with a reason to adjust it.

Left alone, the shadow game doesn’t find a level and stay there — it compounds, and it compounds because it teaches. Every maneuver that succeeds is a lesson to everyone watching that maneuvering is the path. Every capable person who watches a rival advance by position rather than contribution learns the same lesson, and the honest ones face a choice: keep doing real work that doesn’t register, or start playing the game that does. Enough of them make the rational choice that the game stops being a deviation and becomes the culture. The decay isn’t linear. It recruits.

And through all of it, the organization keeps posting the appearance of health. This is the cruelest property of positional decay, the one that makes it so hard to arrest: the surface indicators stay green while the substance erodes. Calendars are full. People are visibly busy. Everyone can point to activity. What has stopped, without announcement, is the mission — the actual object the organization exists to advance — because the capacity that should be advancing it is now spent on position instead. Motion is mistaken for progress right up until the moment the gap between them becomes impossible to deny, and by then the erosion is structural.

The surface stays green while the substance erodes. Motion is mistaken for progress until the gap can no longer be denied.

When it finally gives way, the organization doesn't get to name the true cause. The post-mortem will say it was disrupted, or out-innovated, or that the market shifted, or that a competitor was simply faster. It will almost never say what actually happened: that the organization spent its capacity competing for position internally while the foundation it stood on went untended, and lost the mission from the inside while sincerely believing it was busy. The external cause named in the obituary is usually just the thing that arrived after the death, and got the credit for it. This is the Ming court and the Ravenna court in modern dress. No external enemy was required to explain the fall; the enemy only had to show up after the hollowing was complete and walk through a door that ambition had already unbarred from the inside. The company that loses this way was gone before the competitor ever beat it. The competitor merely witnessed the collapse and was assigned its authorship.

If the decay is this destructive and this common, an obvious question follows: why does no one stop it? The organization is full of intelligent people. The leader isn't asleep. Why does a condition that's fatal in the aggregate go uncorrected until it's too advanced to reverse?

The answer is structural. Every person inside the organization holds a position, and a position is precisely the thing that disqualifies you from seeing positional decay clearly. You can't perceive the game accurately from inside it, because your seat is one of the pieces on the board. Consider how each condition looks from within. The starved operator experiences their own maneuvering as initiative — they aren't scheming, they're showing drive. The person trapped in a blame market experiences it as accountability — they aren't deflecting, they're being rigorous about who dropped the ball. None of these people are lying, to others or to themselves. They simply have no vantage point from which to see the pattern their behavior belongs to. It's the same reason a brand can't feel its own drift while drifting: the instrument that would measure the problem is the same instrument the problem has already compromised.

And the seat with the least visibility of all is the highest one. This is counterintuitive: the leader's blindness has nothing to do with attention or intelligence. It comes from position. They occupy the single seat in the organization where the mission still reliably supplies its own meaning — their problem is sized correctly, their contribution is legible, their ascent has already happened and been ratified. So they look out at people starved of exactly the things they themselves possess in abundance, and they read the resulting behavior as a set of individual character problems rather than as a single structural hunger they're positioned never to feel. Worse, they can't fix this by paying closer attention, because attention doesn't help when the information itself arrives corrupted. Every channel that would carry the truth upward runs through someone invested in a particular version of it. The organizational chart works less like a nervous system carrying signal faithfully to the brain, and more like a chain of interested editors. The leader isn't complacent so much as continuously shown, by well-meaning people protecting their own footing, a curated reality — and then asked to govern from it. This is how the center of any large system loses contact with the ground: through the accumulated shading of every intermediary between it and the truth, rather than through any single betrayal.

The resolution follows directly from the diagnosis, and a diagnosis this complete does most of the work a prescription would otherwise have to do. You can't suppress the drive, or police ambition and the hunger to be seen out of capable people — every attempt only produces a more concealed version of the same behavior. You address the three conditions, because they're the only part of this a leader actually controls, and controlling them means building differently, not running a program or an initiative.

Give each capable person their own piece to own completely, pushed to the brink of their capability, with the result of it made legible and attached to their name — so the weight of achievement and failure is located in them rather than pooled into a fog where blame is the only currency. Let the shared victory be assembled from those owned pieces rather than averaged across them: the heist crew, the five machines that combine. Reward the achievement and not the tenure, so that survival never counterfeits itself as merit. And flatten the distance between the work and the leadership, so the game has fewer corridors to travel and the truth has fewer editors to survive.

Do this and something useful happens on its own: the same conditions that redeem the capable person expose the one who was hiding. Give people a real, legible object and the starved-but-able rise into it — they never wanted the game, they wanted to matter, and now they can. The person who was surviving on ambiguity fights the legibility, because legibility is exactly the threat to them. There's no need to hunt anyone down or diagnose motives in advance. Build the conditions and let them sort the room: watch who moves toward the light and who moves away from it.

The end state has a name. Role conviction: the state of a person so certain their work matters and so certain it's seen that the shadow game holds no appeal, because playing it would mean trading a real win for a hollow one. Conviction is the single thing boredom and unfulfillment cannot survive beside, and it's the only durable defense against a game that feeds on their absence.

But none of it can be installed against a false picture of the organization — and the false picture is the first thing positional decay produces. The inside view is the earliest casualty: metabolized by every layer, borrowable by every proxy, and dressed up as ambition, so that the very behavior hollowing the organization out reads, from within, as vitality. A leader who tries to fix the problem using the organization's own account of itself is working from the fiction the problem authored.

We've known this for over fifty years, and built an institution on the knowledge. In 1970, Penn Central — then the largest corporate bankruptcy in American history — collapsed with a board that had every reason to catch it and didn't, because the board sat too close to the thing to see it. The response, over the following two decades, was the independent director: outside-staffed audit committees, and eventually board independence as a governing principle across the corporate world. Read plainly, the independent director is a codified confession. It's corporate governance admitting, in law, that an organization can't audit itself from the inside — that past a certain point the only reliable read on a system's health must come from someone who holds no position within it, wants nothing from it, and therefore has nothing to protect. The requirement exists because the alternative was proven, at ruinous cost, not to work.

The limitation is that the independent director was built to catch fraud and financial misstatement — the hard, legible, late-stage failures that surface in the numbers. Positional decay is softer and earlier. It doesn't appear in the figures until it has already reshaped the organization, and by the time it's visible on a balance sheet it's no longer early. The confession was correct; it was simply aimed at the wrong stage of the disease.

The condition this essay describes can only be read by an eye that sits nowhere within the organization: one that holds no position, can be borrowed by no faction and shaded by no layer, and is therefore free to see the organization as it is rather than as its own interests require — aimed less at catching fraud after the fact than at naming the decay while it's still early enough to reverse. That eye has a real limitation, worth stating plainly, because it's why the outside view is a beginning and not an answer. The outsider arrives knowing nothing — no history, no context, none of the earned trust that lets a hard diagnosis land. Sight is not leverage. An organization that hears the truth from someone it has no reason to believe will do what the layers already do to inconvenient signal: absorb it, shade it, carry on. The outside eye can locate the decay; only the people inside can act on it, and only if the diagnosis reaches them in a form they can receive. Seeing the pattern is only half of it. The harder part is making what's seen impossible to keep ignoring.

That eye is the rarest instrument in any organization. By definition, it is the one thing the organization cannot grow from within.

The historical cases here illustrate a mechanism rather than settle one. The late Ming dynasty's collapse in the seventeenth century had many drivers — fiscal strain, climate, agrarian crisis, external pressure — and the point drawn from it is narrow: that factional conflict among the scholar-official class consumed governing capacity the crisis required, weakening the state independently of the threat that ultimately arrived. The killing of the Roman general Aetius in 454, and the remark attributed to a courtier afterward, are used here for the shape they capture — a court more capable at internal position than at the external defense that was its actual purpose — and accounts of the period vary enough that the anecdote should be read as illustrative, not decisive. Penn Central’s 1970 bankruptcy is cited for its documented role in the rise of independent-director governance, reforms aimed primarily at financial oversight, which is the distinction this essay draws between those late, legible failures and the earlier, softer decay it’s actually concerned with.