THE HICD FORWARD PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP SERIES

From Ambition To Operating Reality | Article 1 of 8

Why Institutional Performance Problems Rarely Start Where They Show Up

Most reform efforts chase the visible symptom before they understand the conditions producing it.

> Leaders usually meet performance problems at the point where the problem becomes visible.

A service is delayed. A system is not being used. A reform plan is behind schedule. A dashboard shows weak results. A new process is creating frustration. A policy has been approved, but the work has not changed. A modernization effort is active, but the institution does not feel more capable.

At that moment, the pressure is usually immediate. Something needs to be fixed. Someone needs an answer. A donor wants progress. A board wants assurance. A minister wants movement. A client wants results. A leadership team wants to show that the institution is acting.

So the organization reaches for what is visible.

It asks for training. It creates a committee. It revises a procedure. It launches a dashboard. It buys a system. It restructures a unit. It adds a reporting requirement. It sends another communication. It schedules another workshop. Each response may be reasonable. Each may even be useful.

But the visible problem is rarely where the performance problem actually starts.

That is one of the most important leadership lessons in institutional reform, modernization, and organizational change. The place where a problem appears is often only the place where deeper conditions finally become observable.

A delayed permit may look like a staff productivity issue, but the real cause may sit in unclear decision rights, duplicated approvals, poor handoffs, missing data, or political caution. A digital system may look underused, but the real issue may be that the system does not fit the workflow, managers still ask for information through informal channels, or staff do not trust the data. A reform program may look slow, but the deeper issue may be that leadership has not aligned on what performance result must actually improve.

The symptom is real. It matters. But it is not always the source.

The visible problem is usually downstream

Institutions produce performance through systems of work, not through isolated activities.

A ministry does not deliver service only because a policy exists. A utility does not improve reliability only because a system has been installed. A company does not improve customer experience only because a platform has been launched. A donor supported reform does not become sustainable only because activities have been completed.

Performance is produced through the way people work, decide, coordinate, govern, learn, and adapt.

That means visible problems often sit downstream from a wider operating reality. By the time leaders see the issue, the problem may have already passed through several layers of institutional conditions.

The workflow may not match the formal process. Roles may be unclear. Decision rights may be distributed across units that do not coordinate well. Incentives may reward compliance rather than performance. Data may be unreliable or disconnected from decisions. Supervisors may not reinforce the new way of working. Staff may have been trained, but not supported in the actual job context. Leaders may receive reports, but not hold the learning conversations needed to adjust course.

When these conditions are misaligned, performance problems show up somewhere. They may show up as delays, weak adoption, rework, poor service quality, low trust, uneven implementation, or reform fatigue. But the visible expression is not the same as the institutional source.

This is why solving the visible problem too quickly can make the situation worse.

Figure 1. Visible symptoms often reflect deeper conditions in workflow, governance, capability, data, and learning.

The danger of the fast answer

Leaders are often rewarded for action. Reform environments create pressure to move. Modernization programs create timelines. Technology projects create launch dates. Donor activities create deliverables. Public institutions face scrutiny. Private enterprises face market pressure. Nobody wants to appear slow or indecisive.

The result is a familiar pattern: the organization moves from concern to activity before it has moved from concern to clarity.

A problem is named, a solution is selected, and implementation begins. The activity creates momentum. It also creates the appearance of control. But if the activity is not connected to the actual performance gap, it may only add more motion to a system that is already unclear.

Training is the classic example.

When performance is weak, training is often requested first. Sometimes training is exactly what is needed. People may lack knowledge, skill, confidence, or task specific capability. But training does not clarify decision rights. It does not redesign workflow. It does not fix broken handoffs. It does not create data ownership. It does not change incentives. It does not build governance. It does not make managers reinforce new routines.

Training helps when the performance gap is caused by capability. It disappoints when the performance gap is caused by the conditions around capability.

The same is true for dashboards. A dashboard may improve visibility, but it does not automatically create learning. A committee may create a forum, but it does not automatically create accountability. A system may create functionality, but it does not automatically create adoption. A policy may create authority, but it does not automatically create changed work.

This is why institutions can become very active without becoming more effective.

They are doing things. They are producing outputs. They are holding meetings. They are launching tools. They are reporting progress. But the conditions that shape performance remain largely unchanged.

Performance problems need performance questions

HICD Forward changes the starting point.

It begins with the performance gap, not the preferred activity.

That shift sounds simple, but it changes the leadership conversation. Instead of asking, what should we do, leaders first ask, what must improve.

What is happening now? What should be happening? What evidence shows the gap? Who is affected by the gap? What value is at stake? Where does the problem begin? Where does it become visible? What conditions are producing the current result? What would need to change for improvement to hold?

These questions slow the rush to solution just long enough to protect the institution from solving the wrong problem.

They also create discipline. A performance gap is not a complaint. It is not a general concern. It is not a political slogan. It is not a reform theme. It is a clear statement of the difference between current performance and required performance, supported by evidence and connected to value.

That clarity matters because reform language can hide disagreement.

One leader may think the goal is faster service. Another may think the goal is stronger compliance. Another may think the goal is better reporting. Another may think the goal is improved accountability. Another may think the goal is system adoption. All of them may support the same reform, while quietly expecting different results.

Without performance clarity, alignment is fragile. Activity begins before the institution has agreed on what improvement actually means.

The deeper work is seeing the conditions

Once the performance gap is clear, the next question is not simply, what is the solution.

The better question is, what conditions are producing this result.

This is where institutional performance work becomes different from ordinary problem solving. It does not assume the cause sits with individual effort or technical design. It looks at the full operating environment in which people are trying to perform.

The issue may sit in workflow. Work may move through too many steps, too many approvals, or too many informal detours. It may sit in decision rights. People may not know who can decide, who must review, or who owns escalation. It may sit in governance. Oversight may exist on paper, but not in the routines of actual management. It may sit in incentives. People may be rewarded for avoiding risk rather than improving results. It may sit in capability. Staff may know the concept, but not have the tools, authority, or practice needed to perform under real conditions.

It may also sit in leadership behavior. Leaders may announce priorities, but fail to reinforce them in meetings, decisions, and follow through. Or it may sit in learning. Reports may be produced, but no one is using them to ask what is working, what is not working, and what needs to change.

The HICD Forward premise is that organizations improve when the conditions that shape performance improve.

This is why performance problems rarely start where they show up. A weak result is often the visible edge of a deeper system.

A simple example

Imagine a public institution that launches a new digital case management system to improve service speed. The system is technically sound. Staff receive training. Leaders announce the launch. Reports show that users are logging in.

But service delays remain.

The same pattern can appear in a utility maintenance system, a finance approval workflow, or a private sector customer platform when the formal solution is introduced before the real work is redesigned around it.

The visible problem might be described as poor system adoption or weak staff compliance. The first response might be more training or stronger enforcement. But a closer look may show something different.

Managers may still request updates through informal messages because they do not trust the system data. Staff may enter information into the system and then duplicate it in spreadsheets because the old reporting routine was never retired. Supervisors may not know which decisions should now be made inside the system. Data fields may not match the way cases actually move. Escalation rules may be unclear. Performance reviews may still focus on activity volume, not service resolution.

In that case, the system is not the whole problem. The institution has not yet redesigned the work around the system.

The solution is not simply more training. It may include workflow redesign, decision rights clarification, data ownership, supervisor routines, revised performance signals, and leadership review practices. The goal is not system access. The goal is changed work that improves service performance.

That is the difference between implementation as delivery and implementation as institutional performance.

What leaders should do differently

The first leadership move is to resist the premature solution.

This does not mean delaying action indefinitely. It means making sure action is aimed at the right problem.

Before approving a new activity, leaders should ask whether the institution can clearly answer three questions.

> **First, what performance result must improve?**
>
> **Second, what evidence shows the gap between current and required performance?**
>
> **Third, what conditions are most likely producing the current result?**

If those questions cannot be answered, the organization is not yet ready to choose the solution. It may be ready to investigate. It may be ready to align. It may be ready to map the workflow, review decision rights, examine incentives, test data reliability, or listen to the people closest to the work. But it is not yet ready to pretend that the preferred activity is the answer.

This is where HICD Forward helps leaders move from ambition to operating reality.

It gives institutions a practical way to begin with performance, examine the system, design feasible interventions, and build learning routines that allow improvement to hold. It does not replace sector expertise, policy design, technology, or reform leadership. It strengthens the institutional conditions those solutions depend on.

HICD Forward lens

> When a performance problem appears, do not stop at the place where it becomes visible. Look upstream. Ask what work process produced the result. Ask who made which decisions. Ask what data was available. Ask what incentives shaped behavior. Ask what capability was required. Ask what managers reinforced. Ask what leaders reviewed. Ask what the institution learned, and what it ignored. The visible problem matters, but it is only the beginning of the inquiry. The deeper question is this: what must change in the way the institution works, decides, governs, learns, and builds capability for the intended improvement to hold? That is where real reform begins.

Practical leadership test

Before approving the next reform activity, modernization step, training program, dashboard, system enhancement, or governance meeting, ask:

Leadership questions before approving the activity	
1	What performance gap will this close?
2	What evidence confirms that gap?
3	Who is affected by the gap?
4	What conditions are producing the current result?
5	What must change in the institution for improvement to last?

If the answers are unclear, the first task is not implementation. The first task is performance clarity.

Closing bridge to Article 2

The next article looks at the danger of solving symptoms instead of systems, and why institutions often create more reform activity without producing real institutional change.

Source foundation: adapted from the HICD Forward white paper, Turning Reform Ambition, Modernization Pressure, and Future Change into Real Operating Capability.