

A LOOP MODEL OF VALUE ALIGNMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

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Purpose: This paper aims to reframe value alignment from a state to be assessed into a property that organizational systems continuously generate and regulate, and to develop a conceptual model of how that production unfolds during the employment relationship.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper is conceptual. It develops the model through an integrative analysis of two prior qualitative studies conducted in Poland — one of employees, one of HR managers — using an abductive procedure that moves iteratively between empirical patterns and systems-theoretical concepts drawn from systems thinking and organizational learning.

Findings: The analysis identifies four recurrent loops. Three are trajectory-generating: a Relational Reinforcement Loop, an Adaptation Erosion Loop, and a Misfit Escalation Loop. The fourth, a Responsiveness Breakdown Loop, is meta-regulatory: it governs whether the organization can still detect and correct the trajectories the others produce. What most decisively shapes an organization's trajectory is not which conditions are present, but whether the system retains the capacity to recognize and respond to what it is generating.

Research limitations/implications: The model is a conceptual reconstruction across two prior qualitative studies; the loops are analytical reconstructions of recurrent dynamics rather than longitudinally observed sequences. Future research should examine the loops empirically across institutional contexts and over time.

Originality/value: The paper reframes value alignment from an entry-stage condition into a problem of organizational detection and response, and proposes responsiveness as a meta-regulatory capacity that determines whether alignment can be sustained.

Keywords: value alignment, person–organization fit, early employment, organizational responsiveness, organizational learning.

Category of the paper: Conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

The literature on person–organization fit rests on a quiet but consequential assumption: that value alignment between an employee and an organization is a state — a condition of congruence that can be assessed, often at entry, and treated as established. Three decades of scholarship have refined how this state is measured, what predicts it, and what follows from it (Chatman, 1989; Cable, DeRue, 2002; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Edwards, Cable, 2009). The construct has been remarkably productive. Yet the assumption that organizes it deserves to be questioned, because it carries a hidden cost: it makes alignment something organizations possess rather than something they do, and it places the explanatory burden on individual fit rather than on the organizational arrangements that produce, sustain, or erode alignment over time.

This assumption becomes harder to maintain when one looks at what happens after entry. Employees who began with substantial value congruence can be drawn into trajectories of misfit through nothing they brought with them; organizations that operate with formally adequate alignment practices can still fail to detect misalignment until it has hardened beyond repair (Schneider, 1987; Morrison, Milliken, 2000). Recent reviews of person–organization fit research themselves identify the static, entry-focused framing as a persistent limitation of the field (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). Treating alignment as a state assessed at one point makes it difficult to explain either of these outcomes. The state-based view also leaves a more uncomfortable possibility unexamined: that misfit may not always be a property of the misfitting employee, but a product of the system in which that employee is embedded — and one that the system may be progressively less able to recognize.

This paper takes that possibility seriously. Its aim is to reframe value alignment from a state to be assessed into a property that organizational systems continuously generate and regulate, and to develop a conceptual model of how that production unfolds during the employment relationship. From this premise, the paper argues that alignment is better understood as a system-level property — something organizations generate, sustain, or fail to regulate through recurrent arrangements that link early experience, interpretation, and organizational response. The model identifies four recurrent loops: three that generate distinct trajectories of alignment, erosion, or escalation, and a fourth — the Responsiveness Breakdown Loop — that operates at a different level, governing whether the organization remains able to detect and act on what the other three produce. This fourth loop carries the paper's central claim: what most decisively shapes an organization's trajectory is not which conditions are present, but whether the system retains the capacity to recognize and respond to what it is generating.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Person–organization fit and its limits

The study of value alignment has developed largely within the person–organization fit tradition. This body of work established that the compatibility between an employee and an organization — particularly the congruence of their values — is consequential for attitudes and behavior, and it produced a substantial evidence base linking alignment to commitment, satisfaction, and retention (Chatman, 1989; Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Conceptually, this tradition gave value alignment a clear definition and made it measurable, and that clarity is part of why the construct has been so durable.

Yet the dominant operationalization of fit has tended to treat alignment as a property that can be located and assessed: a degree of congruence held by an employee at a given point. This approach answers the question of whether alignment is present and what follows from it, but it is less equipped to explain how alignment arises, holds, or deteriorates within the organization. The fit tradition has, in this sense, theorized the consequences of alignment more fully than its production.

An important corrective came early, from within the fit tradition itself. Schneider's (1987) attraction–selection–attrition framework argued that organizations are not neutral containers into which fitting or non-fitting individuals are placed; rather, the people who define an organization are themselves the outcome of a process. Individuals are differentially attracted to organizations, differentially selected by them, and differentially retained, so that organizations become more homogeneous over time through the cumulative operation of these three forces. Schneider's framework was significant precisely because it refused to treat fit as a static attribute and located it instead in an ongoing organizational process.

The attraction–selection–attrition framework, however, locates that process at the boundary of the organization — in who is drawn toward it, admitted into it, and retained or lost. It explains how an organization comes to be composed of certain kinds of people, but it says comparatively little about what happens to alignment among those who remain. It does not specify the internal arrangements through which an organization sustains, erodes, or fails to notice alignment once an employee is inside. In particular, it contains no account of how an organization detects that alignment is deteriorating and acts to correct it. Attrition, in Schneider's model, is the mechanism by which misfit is resolved — the misfitting employee leaves — rather than something the organization registers and addresses. More recent attempts to address the temporal dimension of person–environment fit have begun to systematize what little is known about how fit unfolds over time, while at the same time documenting that this dynamic perspective remains underdeveloped relative to static formulations (Vleugels et al., 2023).

This is the specific limit that the present article takes as its point of departure. The fit tradition, including its most process-oriented formulations, has theorized alignment as something to be assessed, or as something resolved through who enters and exits, more fully than as something organizations continuously generate and regulate from within. Explaining that internal generation and regulation requires a different conceptual vocabulary — one capable of describing how organizational arrangements produce alignment, how they reproduce it, and whether they remain able to detect when it is being lost. The following section turns to that vocabulary.

2.2. Systems thinking and organizational learning

Explaining how organizations generate and regulate alignment requires a vocabulary built not around discrete attributes but around relations among elements. Systems thinking provides such a vocabulary. Its central premise is that the behavior of a system arises less from the properties of its individual parts than from the structure of relations connecting them, and that much of this behavior is organized by loops in which an outcome feeds back to alter the conditions that produced it (Senge, 1990; Sterman, 2000). Two kinds of loop are conventionally distinguished. In a reinforcing loop, a change is amplified: the outcome strengthens the conditions that generate it, so that the process gathers force in the same direction. In a balancing loop, a change is counteracted: the outcome activates conditions that work against it, so that the process is dampened or held in check. What makes a loop analytically distinct from a simple sequence of events is recursion — the outcome does not merely conclude the sequence but returns to reshape its starting conditions.

This vocabulary is well suited to the problem identified above. If value alignment is generated within the organization rather than resolved at its boundary, then it is generated through recurrent organizational arrangements in which early experiences, their interpretation, and subsequent organizational responses are linked in self-reinforcing or self-correcting ways. A recursive account makes it possible to ask not only what conditions affect alignment, but how those conditions reproduce themselves — why a supportive beginning can consolidate into a stable trajectory, and why an early difficulty can deepen rather than resolve.

Systems thinking alone, however, describes the form of recursive processes without specifying what allows an organization to act on them. For that, the literature on organizational learning is needed. Argyris and Schön's (1978) distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning is particularly relevant. In single-loop learning, an organization detects a deviation and corrects it within existing assumptions and routines. In double-loop learning, the organization additionally examines and revises the assumptions that generated the deviation in the first place. The capacity for either kind of learning depends on a prior condition: the organization must register that something is occurring. Argyris and Schön's account of organizational defensive routines describes precisely the situation in which this prior condition

fails — arrangements that, often unintentionally, keep problematic information from becoming organizationally visible, so that the system loses access to the very signals it would need in order to correct itself.

This is the conceptual basis for treating the regulation of alignment as a question of organizational learning. An organization does not only generate trajectories of alignment and misfit; it also does, or does not, retain the capacity to detect those trajectories and respond to them. A system in which problematic signals do not become visible is not merely a system with a local problem; it is a system that has lost part of its capacity to learn about itself. This distinction — between generating a trajectory and remaining able to detect it — becomes central to the model developed below, where it differentiates the loop that governs detection and correction from the loops that generate trajectories in the first place.

The two bodies of work are therefore complementary. Systems thinking supplies the form of the model: recursive loops in which outcomes reshape their own conditions. Organizational learning supplies its regulative dimension: the capacity, unevenly distributed across organizations, to detect and correct the trajectories those loops produce. Together they provide the vocabulary that the fit tradition lacks — but they remain general, developed without reference to any particular organizational moment. The model proposed here locates them in a specific and especially revealing setting: the early period of employment.

2.3. Early employment as a formative site

The recursive processes described above can, in principle, operate at any point in the employment relationship. They are, however, especially consequential and especially visible during the early period of employment, and this makes early employment a particularly revealing setting for examining how alignment is generated and regulated.

Research on organizational socialization has long established that early experiences carry disproportionate weight. The initial months in an organization are when role expectations, relational norms, and judgments about belonging take shape, and the patterns formed in this period have lasting consequences for adjustment and retention (Ashforth et al., 2008; Bauer et al., 2007; Louis, 1980). This disproportionate weight is what makes early employment recursively potent: arrangements established at entry do not simply describe a starting state but set conditions that subsequent experience tends to confirm. A small early advantage or difficulty is therefore more likely than a later one to be amplified into a durable trajectory.

Work on sensemaking explains why this is so. During early employment, the organization is still substantially ambiguous to the newcomer, and ambiguity is not interpretively neutral. Newcomers actively read the cues available to them — how they are treated, what is responded to, what is overlooked — and use these cues to construct an operative understanding of what the organization is and what it expects (Maitlis, Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Because this understanding is built from limited evidence, early signals are weighted heavily,

and the interpretation a newcomer forms then shapes how subsequent signals are read. Interpretation, in other words, is itself part of the recursive process: an early reading of the organization conditions later readings.

Psychological contract research adds that these early interpretations are not only descriptive but evaluative. Newcomers assess whether what they encounter is consistent with what was promised or implied, and whether the organization appears reciprocal and credible (Morrison, Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1995). Experiences interpreted as breaches do not remain isolated judgments; they alter the basis on which the employee evaluates the organization thereafter. This evaluative dimension is what connects interpretation to trajectory: an early experience read as a violation reorganizes subsequent interpretation around mistrust, while an early experience read as support does the opposite.

Taken together, these literatures establish early employment as a formative site in a specific sense. It is the period in which organizational arrangements, employee interpretation, and organizational responses are most tightly coupled, and in which the resulting loops are still being established rather than already settled. This is what makes early employment not only consequential but analytically tractable: the recursive processes that generate and regulate alignment are, at this stage, close enough to the surface to be reconstructed. The model developed in the following section draws on two qualitative studies of early employment to do precisely that.

3. Method

This article develops a conceptual model of how value alignment and misfit are generated, interpreted, and addressed during early employment. The study is qualitative in its evidentiary basis and abductive in its analytical logic: rather than testing predefined hypotheses, it reconstructs recurrent organizational dynamics by moving iteratively between empirical patterns and systems-theoretical concepts. Its aim is theory development — the articulation of a loop model — grounded in qualitative material rather than the reporting of a new empirical study.

The model integrates evidence from two qualitative studies conducted within a broader multi-stage research programme on value alignment across the employment relationship in Poland. One study addressed the employee perspective; the other addressed the perspective of HR managers. The two studies were designed and analysed separately, each with its own research questions. The present article draws on their findings as the basis for an integrative analysis: it does not re-open the original transcripts or narratives and does not re-code the primary material, but re-examines the already-analysed results of both studies in order to reconstruct the systemic dynamics that connect them. In methodological terms, this is

a secondary analysis of qualitative data — the re-examination of material gathered and analysed for related but distinct purposes.

3.1. Empirical basis: two qualitative studies

The employee perspective derives from a qualitative study of early-tenure employees' critical experiences of organizational adaptation (Paleń-Tondel, 2026). That study used an adapted, questionnaire-based form of the Critical Incident Technique to collect written narrative accounts from employees who had joined their current organization within the preceding twelve months and had completed at least three months of tenure. Participants ($N = 300$) were recruited through a professional research agency from an established online panel; after exclusion of responses without experiential content, the analysed corpus comprised 457 narratives. The original analysis followed an interpretive, inductive strategy and identified a set of relational interpretive mechanisms through which employees evaluate early organizational signals as affirming or violating the employee–organization relationship.

The HR perspective derives from a companion interview study of how HR managers operationalize, interpret, and respond to value alignment (Paleń-Tondel, n.d.). That study drew on a pool of twelve in-depth interviews with HR managers and HR business partners; the analytic sample was narrowed to the ten interviews conducted with respondents in internally embedded HR roles, with two interviews representing agency-based external recruitment excluded to avoid conflating internally mediated organizational practice with staffing-agency logic. The interviews were conducted in Poland in 2023, in organizations with an established HR function. The analysis followed an abductive qualitative strategy and reconstructed how value alignment is operationalized in everyday practice, how signals of alignment and misfit are interpreted, and what shapes organizational response. The present article draws on the findings of that ten-interview analysis as its account of the organizational, practice-based side of value alignment.

The two studies are not treated as a matched sample. Employees and HR managers were not linked within shared organizations, and the analysis does not compare paired cases. The two sets of findings are used instead as complementary vantage points on the same class of organizational processes: the employee study shows how early experiences are lived and interpreted, while the HR study shows how organizations assess, interpret, and act upon alignment-related signals.

3.2. Rationale for an integrative analysis

Each of the two studies illuminated one side of value alignment in early employment, but neither could capture the recursive relationship between employee experience and organizational response. The employee study showed how interpretation stabilizes into divergent trajectories, yet could not observe the organizational handling that conditions those

trajectories. The HR study showed how organizations operationalize and respond to alignment, yet could not access how those efforts are experienced and interpreted by employees. The systemic dynamics of interest — how experience, interpretation, response, and non-response connect into recurrent patterns — fall in the space between the two studies. An integrative analysis was therefore adopted to reconstruct those dynamics across the two perspectives.

3.3. Analytical procedure

The four-loop model was developed in four steps.

First, the findings of both studies were re-read for recurrent process patterns rather than discrete themes. The guiding question was not which issues appeared in the material, but how an early organizational condition was interpreted and how that interpretation shaped a subsequent trajectory of adaptation, erosion, withdrawal, or failed correction. This re-reading crystallized a processual core common to both perspectives: early experience → interpretation → trajectory. At this stage the unit of analysis was no longer the individual theme or incident, but the recurrent process pattern linking an early condition to its interpretation and downstream consequences.

Second, these patterns were abstracted into higher-order process mechanisms. Four recurrent mechanisms were identified across the combined material: supportive relational conditions that foster safety, adaptive effort, and relational embedding; operational strain that consumes the resources required for adaptation; normatively salient violations that reorganize interpretation around incompatibility and withdrawal; and weak responsiveness that undermines the organization's capacity for correction.

Third, each mechanism was examined for recursive structure. A pattern was treated as a loop only when its downstream consequences did not simply terminate the sequence but altered the conditions under which subsequent experiences would be encountered and interpreted — that is, when the end state increased the likelihood of reproducing or intensifying the originating dynamic. This closure criterion distinguished loops from linear sequences and from static themes, and yielded four loops: a Relational Reinforcement Loop (R1), an Adaptation Erosion Loop (B1), a Misfit Escalation Loop (R2), and a Responsiveness Breakdown Loop (B2).

Fourth, the loops were integrated into a single model organized around the shared processual core. R1, B1, and R2 were classified as trajectory-generating loops, because each describes a distinct pathway through which early experience becomes stabilized into a durable developmental trajectory. B2 was classified as a meta-regulatory loop, because it does not generate a further substantive trajectory but governs whether the system retains the capacity to detect and correct the trajectories it produces. This distinct status of B2 was traceable to the material, in which weak responsiveness consistently operated differently from the other

mechanisms; its conceptualization as meta-regulatory was sharpened through theoretical interpretation rather than derived from the data alone.

3.4. Role of the systems-thinking framework

Systems thinking did not function as an a priori coding template. The analysis did not begin by imposing a loop diagram on the material and populating predetermined slots. The systems perspective operated first as a sensitizing frame, shaping the broader problem formulation: alignment understood as something organizations generate, sustain, erode, or derail, and early employment understood as a systemically consequential phase rather than a discrete onboarding stage. The more specific vocabulary of reinforcement, erosion, escalation, and breakdown entered decisively only after recurrent process patterns had been identified across the two studies. Work on system dynamics (Senge, 1990; Sterman, 2000) and on organizational learning (Argyris, Schön, 1978) thus provided the conceptual language through which already-recognized patterns were interpreted as loops and integrated into a systemic model, rather than an operational instrument that drove the analysis itself.

3.5. Methodological reflexivity

This analytical strategy has a clear strength and a clear limitation. Its strength is integrative: by bringing two independently analysed perspectives into dialogue, it reconstructs recursive dynamics that neither study could capture alone. Its limitation is that it inherits the analytical boundaries of the two primary studies; the model is bounded by what those analyses made visible, and the loops are analytical reconstructions of recurrent dynamics rather than longitudinally observed sequences. The model is therefore offered as a theoretically generative account, to be examined and tested in future research.

4. Findings

The integrative analysis of the two studies indicates that early organizational trajectories are not the cumulative sum of isolated experiences. They are produced by a limited set of recurrent organizational arrangements that link early conditions, their interpretation, and subsequent organizational responses, and that progressively stabilize particular pathways. The analysis identifies four such loops. Three generate distinct trajectories of alignment or misfit; the fourth governs whether the system remains able to correct any trajectory at all. This section presents the four loops in turn and then integrates them into a single model.

4.1. The Relational Reinforcement Loop (R1)

The first loop arises from supportive relational conditions. When newcomers encounter accessible colleagues, coherent guidance, psychologically safe interactions, and managerial responsiveness, they are more likely to interpret the organization as trustworthy, navigable, and worth adapting to. That interpretation increases their willingness to engage, ask questions, tolerate ambiguity, and invest effort in becoming part of the system. Successful adaptation in turn strengthens early relationships, making further support more likely. Through this loop, alignment reproduces itself: support generates safety, safety sustains adaptive effort, adaptive effort strengthens relational embedding, and stronger embedding increases the likelihood of further support. Over time, the loop stabilizes a trajectory in which alignment becomes progressively easier to reproduce, because the system repeatedly confirms the employee's interpretation that it is coherent, responsive, and relationally credible.

Both studies show this pattern. On the employee side, affirming early experiences are described as situations in which support, recognition, and responsiveness made adaptation feel possible and legitimate. On the HR side, the same dynamic appears in accounts emphasizing accessible managers, structured follow-up, and sustained relational support as conditions that stabilize alignment beyond entry. The analytic point is that alignment is not simply detected once it exists; it is progressively produced through recurring relational reinforcement.

4.2. The Adaptation Erosion Loop (B1)

Not every problematic trajectory begins with overt conflict or explicit value violation. A second loop arises from operational strain. Here the early environment is marked by overload, ambiguity, fragmentation, or weakly coordinated support. Rather than enabling adaptation, the system begins by consuming the very resources adaptation requires. As pressure rises, cognitive and relational capacity declines; reduced capacity increases confusion, errors, and friction; and these in turn intensify pressure. The organization does not necessarily produce immediate rejection, but it erodes the conditions under which alignment could otherwise emerge.

This loop matters because it shows that misfit does not always begin as a moral rupture. It can begin as depletion. In such trajectories the organization is not first experienced as violating values, but as difficult to inhabit, difficult to understand, and difficult to keep up with. Over time, persistent strain weakens an employee's ability to make constructive sense of the environment, even in the absence of dramatic conflict.

Both studies show this pattern. Employee narratives describe chaos, absent onboarding, lack of guidance, and settings in which uncertainty was treated as a burden rather than a normal part of entry. On the HR side, the same dynamic appears where alignment is undermined not by hostility but by limits of coordination, diagnostic reach, or managerial bandwidth. The loop

therefore captures a distinct pathway: the erosion of adaptation through systemic strain rather than overt relational violation.

4.3. The Misfit Escalation Loop (R2)

A third loop appears when the early environment crosses from strain into normatively charged disruption. Here employees no longer experience the organization merely as demanding or confusing, but as violating expectations of dignity, fairness, reciprocity, or integrity. Such experiences do more than produce dissatisfaction: they reorganize interpretation. Once value violations become salient, employees withdraw emotionally and relationally from the system, and that withdrawal reduces openness, trust, and willingness to interpret ambiguous signals generously. As relational capacity declines, sensitivity to negative signals rises. Events that might otherwise have been absorbed are instead read as further evidence of incompatibility, and perceived misfit intensifies, making subsequent violations more visible and more consequential. Misfit, in this loop, escalates by changing the interpretive conditions through which organizational life is read.

This is the most overtly destructive of the trajectory-generating loops, because it transforms episodic negative experiences into a self-reinforcing structure of estrangement. Once that structure stabilizes, the organization is no longer encountered as merely uneven or demanding, but as normatively unsafe, and the environment becomes difficult to interpret outside the logic of disrespect, exclusion, or bad faith.

Both studies show this pattern. Employee narratives describe humiliation, mobbing, exclusion, broken promises, symbolic inconsistency, and severe lack of recognition. On the HR side, it appears in accounts of situations that have crossed interpretive thresholds and are no longer treated as local friction, but as consequential breakdowns requiring response. The crucial point is that misfit here does not simply exist; it gains momentum by recursively reorganizing how subsequent signals are interpreted.

4.4. The Responsiveness Breakdown Loop (B2)

The fourth loop differs from the others in kind. It does not generate one more trajectory alongside the others; it governs whether the system remains capable of correcting any trajectory at all. The loop begins when employees signal concern, confusion, overload, exclusion, or value-related tension, and the organization responds weakly, inconsistently, too late, or not at all. In a responsive system, such signals make emerging problems visible and allow corrective action before trajectories harden. In a non-responsive system, the signal does not return as correction; it dissipates.

That dissipation has consequences beyond the unresolved issue itself. When early signals are met with silence, symbolic acknowledgement, delay, defensiveness, or weak follow-through, employees learn something about the system: signalling may not be worth its cost. As willingness to signal declines, fewer signals enter the organization; as fewer signals enter, organizational blindness increases; and as blindness increases, the underlying problem persists and often deepens without being clearly named or addressed. The system does not simply fail to respond on one occasion; it progressively loses the informational conditions required for self-regulation.

This is why responsiveness breakdown is the model's critical failure loop. Strain and value violations can occur in organizations that remain broadly capable of self-correction. But once responsiveness collapses, the system loses the very mechanism through which correction, learning, and stabilization are possible. At that point misfit becomes not only more likely, but harder to detect, harder to interrupt, and harder to reverse.

This loop also explains a paradox visible across both studies: why organizations containing multiple warning signs can later describe problems as if they had appeared suddenly, unexpectedly, or without sufficient evidence. The issue is not the absence of signals. It is that the erosion of responsiveness transforms existing signals into organizational non-knowledge. By that point the problem is no longer only misfit; it is the system's declining ability to know that misfit is occurring.

4.5. One system with multiple trajectories

Considered individually, each loop captures a distinct mechanism through which early experiences are reinforced, eroded, escalated, or left uncorrected. Considered together, they describe not four separate organizational realities but one system with multiple possible trajectories. Figure 1 presents this model.

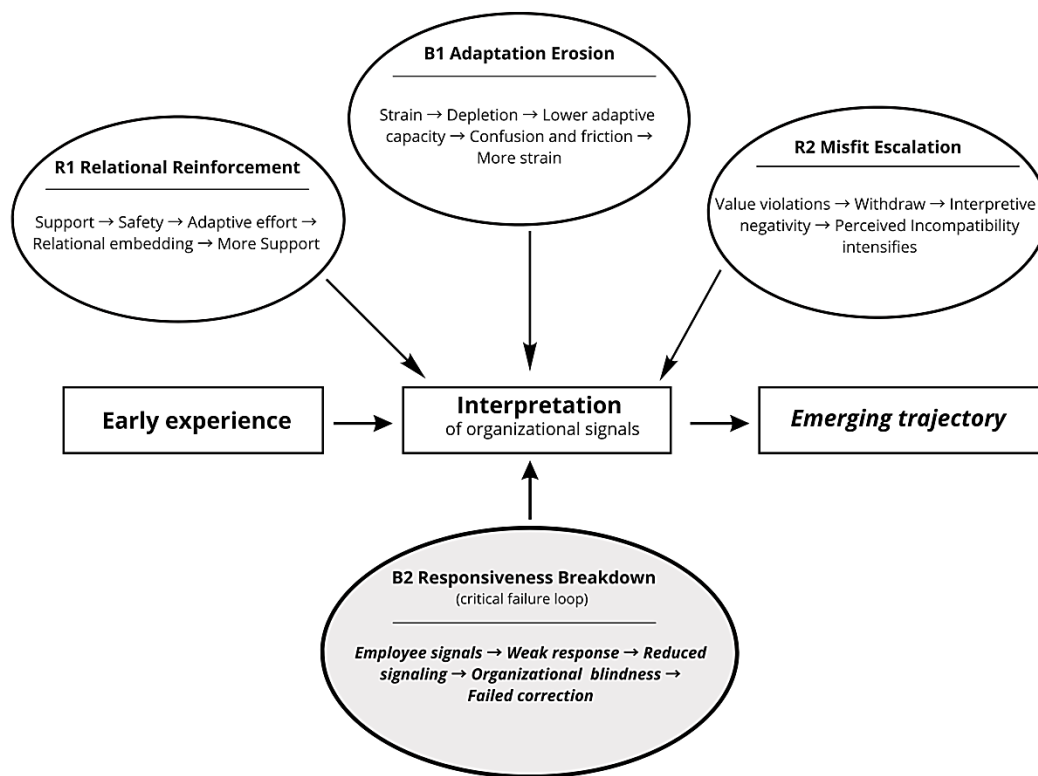


Figure 1. A loop model of value alignment and misfit in early employment.

Source: Author's own work.

At the centre of the model is a process common to all four loops: early experience → interpretation → trajectory. What differs across organizations is not whether employees experience the organization, but how the system processes those experiences. Supportive interactions may be translated, through R1, into safety, adaptive effort, and stronger relational embedding. Workload pressure and fragmentation may instead be translated, through B1, into depletion, confusion, and declining adaptive capacity. Value violations may reorganize interpretation, through R2, around disrespect, exclusion, or incompatibility. In each case, early experiences do not remain isolated events; they enter recurrent structures that make some trajectories progressively more likely to deepen.

This is what makes the four loops a model rather than a typology of conditions. The model does not classify experiences into positive and negative categories; it explains how organizations generate divergent trajectories from early conditions. Alignment emerges when reinforcing relational dynamics become dominant and are not overridden by strain, violation, or failed correction. Misfit emerges when erosive and escalating mechanisms gain traction and shape interpretation more powerfully than support and repair.

Within this model, R1, B1, and R2 are trajectory-generating loops: each describes a distinct pathway through which early organizational membership is progressively confirmed, weakened, or redefined. As Figure 1 indicates, all three operate by feeding into how early

experience is interpreted. B2, the Responsiveness Breakdown Loop, occupies a different position. It is not one more trajectory alongside the others but a meta-regulatory loop: it governs whether the system retains the capacity to correct any trajectory at all. This is why Figure 1 places B2 beneath the interpretive core rather than alongside the other three — it acts on the system's capacity to register and respond to what the other loops produce. Strain and value violations can occur in organizations that remain broadly capable of self-correction; but once responsiveness collapses, the system loses the mechanism through which correction, learning, and stabilization remain possible.

The model therefore consists of three trajectory-generating loops and one critical failure loop. This distinction clarifies that organizations do not fail only because they contain strain or value conflict. They fail more fundamentally when they lose the capacity to process those conditions and act on them.

Seen this way, value alignment is not the product of a single fit mechanism, nor is misfit the consequence of a single disruption. Both are emergent properties of the interplay among reinforcing, erosive, escalating, and corrective processes — emergent in the sense established earlier: properties that arise from the configuration of organizational arrangements rather than from any single trait of the employee. Some systems stabilize alignment because R1 is reinforced while B2 remains intact enough to support correction. Others drift toward erosion because B1 consumes adaptive capacity faster than it is replenished. Others escalate into misfit because R2 reorganizes interpretation around recurring normative injury. And some become especially vulnerable because B2 erodes the organization's capacity to recognize and interrupt the very trajectories it is helping to produce. What the model offers is not the claim that all organizations work alike, but an explanation of why they can generate very different outcomes from seemingly ordinary beginnings.

5. Discussion

5.1. What the model contributes

This article set out to answer a single question: how do organizational systems generate value alignment and misfit during early employment? The loop model is the answer it offers. Rather than treating alignment as a condition to be assessed, the model specifies the organizational arrangements through which alignment and misfit are produced, and it identifies four recurrent loops through which early experiences are stabilized into divergent trajectories.

The model's central claim is not that support, strain, or value violation each matter — the fit and socialization literatures have established that. Its claim is that what most decisively shapes an organization's trajectory is not which of these conditions is present, but whether the

organization retains the capacity to register and act on what it is producing. Three of the loops generate trajectories; the fourth governs whether those trajectories can still be detected and corrected. This distinction reorganizes the explanatory problem. The question shifts from what an organization contains to what an organization can still know about itself.

The sections that follow develop this contribution by situating the model in relation to three bodies of work — research on fit, on early employment and the psychological contract, and on voice, silence, and organizational learning — and then consider what the model contributes methodologically. In each case, the aim is not to restate those literatures but to specify what the loop model adds to them.

5.2. The model and research on fit

The person–organization fit tradition established that value congruence is consequential, and more recent process-oriented work within it has shown that fit is not fixed: it shifts over time and is shaped through ongoing interaction between employees and organizations (Jansen, Kristof-Brown, 2006; Shipp, Jansen, 2011). The loop model is consistent with this process-oriented turn, but it specifies something that process accounts have tended to leave open. Showing that fit varies is not the same as explaining what produces the variation. The model locates that explanation in organizational arrangements: early experiences do not simply accumulate or fluctuate, they are amplified, dampened, or redirected through recurrent loops that stabilize particular trajectories.

This sharpens the contribution of process-oriented fit research in a specific way. The relevant question becomes not only that fit changes, but how an organization generates the conditions under which some trajectories become self-reproducing while others become fragile. A supportive beginning is consequential not because early impressions linger, but because, through R1, it can establish a loop in which support makes further support more likely. A difficult beginning is consequential not because first impressions are negative, but because, through B1 or R2, it can establish a loop in which difficulty reproduces difficulty. The model thus moves the fit literature from documenting variation toward explaining its organizational production.

It also relocates where the explanation of misfit sits. In much fit research, misfit is understood as a property of the employee–organization pairing — a degree of incongruence. The loop model does not deny that incongruence matters, but it treats misfit additionally as something an organization can generate and sustain through its own arrangements, independently of any initial mismatch. An employee who began with substantial value congruence can still be drawn into a misfit trajectory if strain erodes adaptive capacity or if violations reorganize interpretation. Misfit, in this account, is not only a starting condition but a possible organizational product.

5.3. Early employment and the psychological contract

Research on newcomer socialization has long shown that early employment is consequential because it shapes role clarity, relational expectations, and adjustment (Ashforth et al., 2008; Bauer et al., 2007; Louis, 1980). The loop model is consistent with this work but specifies why entry carries such weight. Early employment matters not only because it comes first, but because it is the period in which loops are still being established rather than already settled. An organizational arrangement encountered at entry does not act on a stable relationship; it acts on a relationship whose trajectory is not yet fixed, and it can therefore set conditions that subsequent experience tends to confirm. Entry is consequential, in this account, because it is the point of greatest loop sensitivity — the moment when small differences are most readily amplified into durable pathways.

The model also speaks to psychological contract theory, and reframes one of its central ideas. Psychological contract research has shown that employees interpret organizational action against perceived obligations, and that unmet expectations can be experienced as breach or violation (Morrison, Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1995). This work established that the employment relationship is interpretive and normatively charged. The loop model complements it by suggesting that value misfit is not reducible to discrete breach events. A breach, in the model, is rarely self-contained. Through R2, a normatively salient violation can reorganize interpretation itself: it heightens sensitivity to subsequent cues, lowers the threshold at which later events are read as further violations, and draws the employee into an escalating trajectory. What psychological contract research often captures as a discrete episode, the model re-situates within a loop that explains how such episodes become amplified — or, alternatively, interrupted before they harden into durable misfit.

This reframing has a further implication. If misfit escalates through interpretation rather than through the simple accumulation of breaches, then whether a violation hardens into misfit depends heavily on what the organization does next. A breach met with credible response need not initiate an escalating loop; a breach met with silence or symbolic acknowledgement is far more likely to. This is the point at which the analysis of early employment and the psychological contract connects to the model's central concern: organizational responsiveness.

The empirical material on which Loop R2 was reconstructed includes experiences that extend well beyond ordinary value incongruence: humiliation, mobbing, exclusion, broken promises, and the withholding of recognition. Such experiences are addressed in their own right by distinct literatures — workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020), psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018), and organizational injustice (Colquitt et al., 2023) — each providing specific theoretical apparatus for analysing them. The loop model operates at a different level. It describes the regulatory architecture through which experiences of any severity — ordinary perceived incongruence or grave organizational pathology — pass through the same trajectory of interpretation, response, and detection. Severe experiences enter R2 with greater intensity

and can collapse the responsiveness loop more rapidly, but they do not bypass it; they move through it. What the model adds to accounts of bullying, injustice, or psychological safety is therefore not a redefinition of those phenomena, but a description of the conditions under which they become visible to the organization or are lost before correction is possible.

5.4. Responsiveness as a meta-regulatory capacity

The model's central contribution concerns the fourth loop. Research on organizational voice and silence has shown that employees' willingness to raise concerns depends on perceived risk, expected efficacy, and the responsiveness they anticipate, and that organizations can suppress upward communication and thereby lose access to corrective information (Morrison, 2014; Morrison, Milliken, 2000). More recent work consolidates these findings and identifies how accumulated experiences of ignored input can crystallize into a generalized expectation that voice is futile (Morrison, 2023). This work explains why concerns are often not voiced or not heard. The loop model builds directly on it, but extends it from the fate of individual signals to the condition of the system as a whole.

What B2 describes is what happens when weak responsiveness becomes self-reproducing. When early signals are met with silence, delay, or symbolic acknowledgement, employees revise their expectation of efficacy downward and signal less; as fewer signals enter, the organization's view of what it is producing narrows; and the narrowed view makes weak response easier to sustain, because there is less visible reason to respond. Voice and silence research identifies the conditions under which a signal is or is not expressed. The model adds that, once those conditions become recursive, an organization can lose not only particular signals but the standing capacity to register emerging misfit at all. Responsiveness, in this account, is not one moderating condition among others. It is a meta-regulatory capacity: it determines whether the organization can still convert what it produces into something it can act on.

This is also where the model connects to organizational learning theory. Argyris and Schön's (1978) distinction between organizations that detect and correct deviations and those that become trapped in defensive routines describes, in general terms, exactly the vulnerability that B2 specifies in the domain of early employment and value alignment. What B2 identifies is not a failure to respond well on a given occasion, but the progressive erosion of an organization's capacity to know what it is generating. Misfit then persists not only because an underlying problem is unresolved, but because the organization's capacity to learn about itself has itself begun to degrade. A system in this condition does not merely contain misfit; it loses the ability to see it.

This reframing also clarifies what is distinctive about the model's account of misfit. Earlier work on fit has tended to treat misfit as resolved through exit: in the attraction–selection–attrition account, the misfitting employee eventually leaves, and the organization returns toward

homogeneity (Schneider, 1987). The loop model describes a different and more troubling possibility. An organization in responsiveness breakdown does not resolve misfit through attrition so much as fail to register it — it loses the signals that would tell it correction is needed before exit becomes the only remaining outcome. Misfit, in this case, is not cleared from the system; it becomes invisible to it.

The four loops, taken together, therefore support a single theoretical claim. What most decisively distinguishes organizational trajectories is not which conditions — support, strain, or violation — happen to be present, but whether the organization retains the capacity to detect and act on what those conditions are producing. Trajectory-generating loops explain how alignment and misfit form. The meta-regulatory loop explains whether the organization can still do anything about them. This is the sense in which value alignment is best understood not as a condition an organization possesses, but as a property its system continually generates and regulates — or fails to regulate.

If responsiveness is treated as a meta-regulatory capacity, it becomes important to consider how it might be observed and assessed in practice. The model implies several indicators. The first is response speed — the interval between an employee signal (a complaint, a question, a withdrawal cue) and the organization's first acknowledgement, and then between that acknowledgement and substantive action. The second is follow-through — whether initial responses translate into durable change or dissipate after the immediate incident. The third is managerial accessibility — whether employees experience legitimate channels through which signals can travel upward without retaliation or dismissal. The fourth is signal escalation — whether unresolved concerns have routes for review beyond the immediate supervisor, and whether those routes are used. The fifth is retention of signal in the system — whether information acquired through one episode informs later organizational learning, or whether it dissipates once the immediate case is closed. These indicators do not exhaust what responsiveness might mean, but they offer a starting framework for empirical work that could test the four-loop model in specific organizational settings.

5.5. Methodological contribution

The model's contribution is also methodological. It was built by bringing two independently conducted qualitative studies — one of employees, one of HR managers — into a single analysis, not as a matched comparison but as complementary vantage points on the same class of processes. This design has an analytical consequence worth drawing out.

Organizational systems became most visible at the points where the two perspectives did not coincide. From the HR side, an organization could appear to possess routines, channels, and responses for handling alignment-related concerns. From the employee side, those same arrangements could appear delayed, symbolic, fragmented, or effectively absent. This divergence between intended and experienced organizational action echoes a distinction

long recognized in HR research, between practices as designed and practices as enacted and perceived (Nishii et al., 2008; Wright, Boswell, 2002). Treating that discrepancy as a finding rather than as inconsistency to be resolved is what made it possible to see responsiveness as a system property rather than as either a managerial intention or an employee perception. An organization can sincerely intend to respond and still, from the point at which signals actually enter, fail to do so. Neither perspective alone reveals this; it becomes visible only in the gap between them.

This suggests a broader methodological point. Where formal and experiential accounts of the same organization diverge, the divergence need not be treated as measurement error or as one perspective correcting the other. It can be treated as evidence about the organization itself — specifically, about whether what it intends and what it enacts have come apart.

5.6. Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations bound the claims advanced here, and each points toward further work.

The model is a conceptual contribution developed by reconstruction across two prior qualitative studies. It is therefore bounded by what those studies were designed to capture, and the loops are best understood as analytical reconstructions of recurrent dynamics rather than sequences observed directly. The model specifies how early experiences may be reinforced, eroded, escalated, or left uncorrected, but it does not establish the frequency of these pathways or the conditions under which one rather than another becomes dominant. Establishing that would require research designed to trace loops as they unfold — in particular, longitudinal designs following employees and organizational responses across the early period of employment, able to observe when a given loop begins to consolidate and whether a trajectory can still be redirected once underway.

The two studies were also conducted in a single national context. Institutional conditions plausibly shape both the salience of value-related experiences and the organizational forms through which support, strain, and responsiveness are expressed. The loops are proposed as a general account of how alignment is generated and regulated, but how they operate across institutional and sectoral settings is an empirical question. Comparative research would help establish whether responsiveness breakdown, in particular, takes different forms in organizations facing different labour-market pressures, governance arrangements, or HR architectures.

A further direction concerns the boundary of the model. This article has examined the four loops in early employment, where loop sensitivity is highest. The underlying logic, however, is not in principle confined to entry. Whether the same loops operate later in the employment relationship — and whether responsiveness breakdown is as consequential beyond the early period as within it — is a question the present model raises but does not settle. Examining the

loops across the longer arc of the employment relationship would test how far the account extends.

Finally, the model treats responsiveness as the meta-regulatory capacity that governs whether trajectories can be corrected, but it does not specify what allows some organizations to sustain responsiveness while others lose it. Identifying the conditions that protect or erode this capacity — structural, relational, or managerial — is perhaps the most consequential question the model opens, since it bears directly on whether responsiveness breakdown can be anticipated and interrupted.

6. Summary

This article asked how organizational systems generate value alignment and misfit during early employment, and answered with a model of four loops. Three generate trajectories of alignment, erosion, or escalation. The fourth governs whether the organization can still detect and correct what the others produce. The argument that organizes the model is a single one: what most decisively shapes an organization's trajectory is not which conditions it contains, but whether it retains the capacity to register and act on what it is generating.

This reframes what misfit is. Organizations often locate misfit in the employee — as resistance, oversensitivity, poor adjustment, or a simple absence of fit. The model suggests something less comfortable. Misfit can also be a property the organization produces, and, where responsiveness has broken down, a property it can no longer see. Read this way, a case of misfit is not only a fact about one employee. It can be a signal about the system that generated it — and, in the organizations most at risk, a signal the system has lost the capacity to receive.

This is what an organization misses when it misses misfit. Not only a dissatisfied employee, and not only a relationship that has gone wrong, but evidence about its own condition: evidence of whether it is still able to learn from what it produces. Value alignment, in the end, is not something an organization simply has. It is something a system continually generates and regulates — and the most consequential question is not whether misfit appears, but whether the organization can still recognize it when it does.

The model also carries operational implications for human resource practice, particularly for the early detection of trajectories before they become invisible to the system. For B1 (Adaptation Erosion), organizations can monitor early indicators of workload accumulation and adaptive depletion during the first months of employment — for example, sustained overtime patterns, declining engagement responses on short pulse surveys, or rising frequency of help-seeking that goes unmet. For R2 (Misfit Escalation), early channels for reporting value violations matter most when they are perceived as confidential and credible; complementary diagnostics include skip-level meetings and structured exit interviews focused

specifically on withdrawal patterns rather than on stated reasons alone. For B2 (Responsiveness Breakdown), the most consequential indicators concern the organization's own capacity to respond: time between signal and substantive action, follow-through rates on raised concerns, and periodic review of whether existing channels are merely available or actually used. The point of these diagnostics is not to replace careful interpretation with metrics, but to make visible the dynamics that the model identifies as most easily lost — those occurring at the boundary between what employees signal and what the organization registers.

Acknowledgements

This research was financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland under the “Regional Initiative of Excellence” Programme (project number 015/RID/2018/19).

Use of AI tools

The author used Claude Opus 4.7 (Anthropic) for editing and language proofing during the preparation of this manuscript in May 2026.

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