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When Productivity Mandates Backfire:

Why Leadership Alignment Is the Chief of Staff's Real Test

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Project Director
Stephanie Larson, PhD

Designer
Mary Thrift

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The Productivity Reckoning

Productivity has become a defining leadership concern in 2026. Nearly 50 percent of CEOs now rank it as their top priority at a moment when hybrid work has weakened visibility and generative AI has increased output faster than organizations can interpret it (HBR, 2025; IBM,2023). Under pressure to do more with less, leaders are reevaluating expectations—yet many productivity mandates, while giving the appearance of performance, are quietly backfiring in practice.

Instead of focus, leaders are seeing **friction**.

Instead of acceleration, they're seeing **confusion**.

Instead of buy-in, they're seeing **quiet resistance**—or the loss of high-performers they cannot afford to lose.

Put differently, initiatives intended to accelerate performance are being revisited, clarified, and quietly reworked—pulling senior leaders back into problems they believed were solved and consuming scarce executive bandwidth.

What makes this moment especially difficult is the widening gap between executive anxiety about productivity and what the evidence actually shows. Large-scale research consistently demonstrates that productivity has largely held steady in hybrid environments—and in many cases improved. According to McKinsey, 83 percent of employees say flexible work allows them to work more efficiently and productively. An *MIT Sloan Management Review* survey found that 61 percent of HR leaders believe hybrid work has improved productivity, while only 15 percent perceive a decline. Finally, in a six-month study with more than 1,500 hybrid employees, Stanford researchers found that hybrid work improved job satisfaction, increased retention rates by one-third, and demonstrated productivity rates equal to those of in-office models when compared over two years of review.

Complicating matters further, many executive teams are turning to AI as a fast fix for perceived productivity gaps only to introduce a new set of execution and judgment problems. Forty-two percent of companies have already abandoned at least one AI initiative, and as many as 95 percent of GenAI pilots fail to deliver meaningful ROI (MIT Sloan, 2025; S&P Global, 2025). As low-quality output scales faster than organizations can assess it, error rates rise, review burdens grow, and downstream decisions suffer, creating what many now describe as the AI productivity paradox: more activity, less value.

In other words, what looks like a productivity problem is increasingly an alignment problem at the top—between leaders and employees and within executive teams themselves. When executives are not aligned on what "productive" means, decisions are slowed, exceptions are multiplied, and issues are resurfaced for re-adjudication, eroding decision velocity and consuming leadership attention.

What's more, many organizations are still relying on productivity signals built for a pre-pandemic, in-office era—time in seat, visible activity, and responsiveness—even as value creation increasingly depends on focused work, collaboration, and quality assessment. Because these drivers of productivity are rarely measured, leaders are forced to infer performance from what they can see rather than what actually creates value (Deloitte, 2024; HBR, 2021). That inference gap widens the risk of miscalibration: Leaders overcorrect based on incomplete signals, then spend months repairing downstream consequences.

Most productivity pushes fail not because expectations are unreasonable but because leaders are misaligned on the fundamentals:

- What outcomes matter most
- How people and AI are meant to work together
- Which trade-offs are acceptable
- How work actually gets done day to day
- What norms leaders will—and will not—model themselves

When those answers are unclear or inconsistent, productivity initiatives feel arbitrary to employees, even when leaders believe they've communicated clearly.

In today's labor market, misalignment carries real financial and execution risk. Productivity expectations can function as signals about trust and surveillance, but they also shape how quickly teams act on decisions. When those signals are inconsistent or poorly grounded in how work actually happens, employees hedge, duplicate effort, and escalate issues upward—quietly slowing execution. Misaligned productivity strategies are also linked to higher preventable attrition among highly skilled employees and leaders (Time, 2025). In an AI-enabled environment, that talent loss—combined with rising rework and review costs—turns what appears to be a productivity push into a **material revenue and decision-velocity risk**.

When Productivity Misalignment Becomes Revenue Risk

- **Over $4 trillion in global economic value is at stake annually as AI adoption scales**, but realization of that value depends on redesigning work, clarifying decision rights, and exercising human judgment—not simply deploying technology (McKinsey, 2023; McKinsey, 2025).
- AI is increasing operational load as often as it reduces it, with **77 percent of employees reporting that AI tools have added to their workload** due to added review and correction demands (Upwork, 2024).
- When **AI accelerates output faster than organizations align affiliated accountability and work design**, revenue risk accumulates quietly long before dashboards reflect the damage (HBR, 2025).
- **Poorly designed return-to-office and productivity mandates are linked to higher rates of attrition**, particularly among highly skilled employees and leaders—driving replacement costs and leadership pipeline risk (Bloom et al., 2024)

This is where Chiefs of Staff become pivotal.

Chiefs of Staff understand what leaders are trying to achieve, and they see where those ambitions collide with the constraints of real work: overloaded calendars, duplicated effort, ambiguous expectations, and uneven leadership modeling. As a result, they are often the first to recognize when productivity pressure is being interpreted as risk rather than opportunity.

As one Chief of Staff we interviewed put it plainly:

"You need the **chief-of-staff kind of mind** to figure out the process, the plan, who needs to be involved, what might get **in the** way, and then **see it all the way through**."

That reality is difficult to see from the top—but impossible to ignore in practice.

Productivity cannot be mobilized through messaging alone. It requires clarity about outcomes, consistency in norms, and credibility in how leaders show up. It requires someone to pressure-test assumptions before mandates are rolled out and to monitor actively how employees experience transition during the change in order to course-correct before progress gets completely derailed. In other words, Chiefs of Staff are often the linchpin in productivity transformations because they foresee execution and ask:

- What work will this displace, explicitly and implicitly?
- Where is this most likely to break in practice?
- Who will experience it differently—and why?
- What do early warning signs of failure look like?

This paper examines why productivity is now a leadership alignment challenge and why Chiefs of Staff are uniquely positioned to help organizations get it right. Drawing on current research, market evidence, and in-depth interviews with Chiefs of Staff across industries, it surfaces the hidden friction leaders often miss and shows how Chiefs of Staff enable ongoing alignment, translating insight into execution without losing trust, talent, or time that leaders no longer have.

The Productivity Trap

When productivity comes under scrutiny, leaders tend to reach for familiar levers. These responses are logical, well-intentioned, and—in today's conditions—often counterproductive.

The pattern is remarkably consistent:

- Announce new expectations.
- Add tools or training.
- Increase meetings to drive alignment.
- Measure activity more closely.

What happens next? Adoption stalls, resistance grows, and leaders double down.

This trap isn't caused by poor leadership. It's caused by a mismatch between how leaders try to create control and how work actually gets done in complex, hybrid, AI-enabled work environments.

Each step in the trap feels reasonable in isolation. However, when combined, they amplify friction:

- New expectations land without clarity about what should stop.
- Tools increase output but raise review and correction costs.
- Meetings crowd out focus time.
- Activity becomes a proxy for progress, while overall execution slows.

From the top, this looks like underperformance. On the ground, it feels like miscalibration. The hidden cost is executive reengagement. Leaders find themselves clarifying expectations, revisiting trade-offs, and reopening decisions, precisely the kind of work that fragments strategic focus and slows enterprise momentum.

The more leaders push without alignment, the less control they actually have. This is the moment where Seramount insights diverge from legacy models:

- The problem is not that employees are unwilling to adapt.
- The problem is that mandates are being layered onto systems that were never redesigned to support them.

To understand why productivity initiatives so often fail—despite effort, investment, and intent—leaders need to look at the hidden friction they rarely see.

The Hidden Friction Leaders Don't See

Once leaders fall into the productivity trap—tightening expectations, adding tools, increasing meetings—the results can be confusing. Activity is increased. Calendars are filled. People appear busy, responsive, and engaged. In some cases, output is even increased in the short term. Yet execution still feels sluggish, coordination is degraded, and confidence in performance erodes rather than improves.

The cause is not resistance or waning motivation. It is structural friction—the accumulation of design flaws in how work is prioritized, coordinated, and evaluated as systems scale.

Across organizations, the same friction points surface again and again. They rarely show up in dashboards or status updates, and they are easy to misread from the top. But they quietly determine whether productivity initiatives translate into real performance gains or stall under their own weight. The sections that follow examine four of the most common—and most costly—forms of friction leaders overlook.

Bandwidth Saturation: When Nothing New Fits

Most productivity initiatives fail before they begin because they assume unused capacity exists. It doesn't.

Employees are already at full bandwidth, even as organizations adjust expectations and ask teams to do more with less. Research shows that collaboration demands have been expanded in hybrid environments, and work calendars remain saturated with meetings, messages, and coordination tasks even as teams straddle RTO mandates and hybrid work environments (HBR, 2024; Romney et al., 2025).

When new expectations, tools, or mandates are layered on top of existing demands without removing anything else, execution is slowed rather than accelerated. Deep work—the uninterrupted focus time most closely associated with high-value output—is crowded out by additional coordination and oversight demands. What looks like momentum on the surface often reflects redistribution of attention, not increased capacity.

"I'm constantly navigating between senior leaders who want to push for more and employees who are already at capacity, so every decision becomes a strategic trade-off about what actually moves the work forward and what just adds noise. **Something has got to go before something else can be added.**"

—Chief of Staff, consulting industry

When productivity initiatives add structure without any subtraction, activity levels rise but execution quality falls. Until capacity constraints are acknowledged and designed around, these productivity strategies will continue to create motion without progress.

Cognitive and Communication Overload: When More Guidance Creates Less Clarity

When productivity stalls, leaders often respond by communicating more: more emails, more documentation, more town halls, more training. The intent is clarity. But often, the result is increased confusion.

Employees experience this surge not as support, but as distraction. Messages arrive faster than they can be interpreted or prioritized, making it harder—not easier—to discern what actually matters.

"Leaders think they've communicated it. **But how people hear it—and what actually sticks—can be very different.**"

—Chief of Staff, technology industry

So, what's the solution? When expectations are translated into concrete implications for roles, teams, and workflows, communication becomes enabling rather than overwhelming. Research shows that rising communication volume without clear prioritization increases decision latency and reduces execution quality, creating more work about work rather than progress (Deloitte, 2024).

The gap is not about attention or engagement; it is about meaning. Leaders focus on whether a message was delivered. Employees are trying to understand what success looks like—what to prioritize, what can wait, and how their work will be evaluated.

Where communication does succeed, it looks different.

"There's only so much you can accomplish through central communication. You have to couple that with **local-level contextualization**."

—Chief of Staff, technology industry

From the top, this behavior looks like inertia. On the ground, it is **risk management**.

Duplication and Siloed Effort: When Activity Masks Waste

One of the most persistent—and least visible—sources of productivity loss is duplication.

From the executive level, teams often appear busy and responsive. Work is getting done. Deliverables are being produced. Research shows, however, that beneath that activity, often in the absence of awareness or coordination across teams, the same types of problems are emerging among teams (HBR, 2021; Jeske and Olson, 2024).

"**Sometimes the work is already being done by a different team.** Part of my job can be just chasing down who's already done what, which is so frustrating."

—Chief of Staff, consulting industry

This is not inefficiency in the traditional sense. It is a structural outcome of complex, hybrid, and AI-enabled organizations where priorities are clear at the top but **connection points are unclear in the middle**. Teams optimize locally, only to discover late that overlapping analyses, initiatives, or decisions were already underway elsewhere.

The result is quiet waste:

- multiple versions of the same work,
- parallel initiatives competing for resources,
- rework when outputs collide late, and
- frustration when effort doesn't translate into visible impact.

The paradox is that activity increases while productivity declines. Until duplication is exposed and coordination is deliberately designed, productivity initiatives will continue to generate motion without progress—exactly the kind of friction Chiefs of Staff are uniquely positioned to see, because it lives between teams, not within them.

Emotional Drag: A Hidden Productivity Cost

Not all productivity loss shows up as missed deadlines or duplicated work. Some of it shows up as emotional drag—the cognitive and psychological load created when work is poorly designed and expectations lack clarity.

This drag is easy to misread because the level of effort often remains high. People keep working, attending meetings, and responding to requests. But execution slows as confidence erodes and decision-makers become cautious. Caution lengthens decision cycles, increases escalation, and reduces the speed at which leaders can move the organization forward.

"**When people are not feeling good or nervous or not confident, it really hurts our productivity.** And my boss doesn't always want to hear that but it's a reality of how change impacts employee engagement."

—Chief of Staff, finance industry

Research reinforces that this is not an individual resilience problem. *MIT Sloan Management Review* argues that burnout and disengagement are work design failures, driven by unclear priorities, constant interruptions, and a lack of control over how work gets done. When employees operate in systems where success criteria shift or trade-offs are implicit, they conserve energy by hedging decisions and limiting risk, behaviors that slow execution rather than stop it outright.

Until leaders treat emotional drag as a structural productivity cost—one shaped by clarity, prioritization, and work design—productivity initiatives will continue to stall, even when effort appears strong.

The Chief of Staff as a Productivity Architect

Chiefs of Staff do not own productivity. They rarely set targets or define performance metrics. But they determine whether productivity initiatives endure—or are returned to the executive leadership for revision.

In environments where executive teams are under pressure to move faster, the real test is not whether initiatives are launched but whether leaders must revisit them. Productivity levels are reduced when alignment gaps force decisions back to the top.

Rather than acting as administrators or messengers, effective Chiefs of Staff function as productivity architects: shaping how leadership intent is interpreted, absorbed, and translated into real work.

Across interviews, three roles consistently emerged. Together, they form a repeatable alignment cycle—one that allows leaders to mobilize productivity without triggering friction, mistrust, or attrition.

The Translator: Turning Employee Reality into Decision-Ready Insight

Chiefs of Staff are often the first to hear how productivity mandates are actually landing. Employees share concerns, frustrations, and workarounds with them—not because they expect policy change but because they trust the Chief of Staff to understand both sides of the system.

"I'll let the team vent to me, and then I translate that for my leader. A big part of this role is really understanding the work and being a great listener—talking people through things while staying calm. **Being calm around people who are feeling the pressure—feeling the weight—is probably my professional superpower.**"

—Chief of Staff, finance industry

That translation is not about relaying complaints. It is, however, about converting lived experience into insights leaders can act on—filtering noise, surfacing patterns, and framing risks in a way that informs decisions rather than derails them.

This translation step is where alignment begins. Without it, decisions don't adequately account for employee reality, and leaders are left guessing which signals matter.

The Trust Broker: Surfacing Truth When Candor Feels Risky

Productivity pressure changes what people are willing to say out loud. As leaders work to enforce expectations, candor becomes costly—especially when signals feel punitive or surveillance-oriented.

"I talk people off ledges—and that is a **productivity gain**."

—Chief of Staff, finance industry

Stabilizing teams is the second step in the alignment cycle. Trust allows signals to surface. Without it, employees hedge—duplicating work, escalating late, or disengaging quietly—long before leaders see visible signs of failure.

Execution Designer: Making Productivity Expectations Real, Not Rhetorical

Most productivity initiatives fail not at launch, but in execution, when expectations are communicated but never translated into concrete norms, priorities, or trade-offs.

Chiefs of Staff anchor authority here by focusing on how work actually gets done.

"My job is really to make people's lives easier—so asking my staff, 'what can I do to make your workday go better?' That means you have to dig into the work, **understand people's processes—that's how the job actually gets done**."

—Chief of Staff, technology industry

This is where alignment becomes operational. Chiefs of Staff help leaders clarify:

- what changes and what does not,
- what will be de-prioritized,
- where judgment is required,
- how AI should be used, and
- which behaviors leaders will model consistently.

This step closes the loop—turning insight and trust into execution.

The Pressure Point : Why Alignment Breaks Without a Real Signal

Even the most effective Chiefs of Staff eventually hit a constraint.

Translation, trust-brokering, and execution design all depend on one thing: accurate insight into how work is actually being experienced across the organization. When that signal is incomplete or uneven, alignment efforts stall—not because the Chief of Staff's role lacks authority but because the organization lacks visibility into what execution looks like on the ground.

As one Chief of Staff from the consulting industry put it plainly:

> "If I don't understand what people are **actually experiencing**, I can't design anything that will work."

This is the pressure point in the productivity architecture. When leaders cannot or do not observe credible signals, they compensate with more oversight, more meetings, and more escalation—further consuming executive bandwidth and slowing strategic work. In matrixed, hybrid, or fast-changing organizations, friction is unevenly distributed and candor is unevenly expressed. Information that reaches leaders is often filtered, delayed, or sanitized. What surfaces informally reaches only a subset of teams.

At that point, even strong Chiefs of Staff are forced to rely on inference—connecting partial signals, anecdotes, and intuition to guide decisions that affect the entire enterprise. That approach may work at a small scale. It breaks down when productivity pressure rises and AI accelerates change faster than leaders can observe and accurately interpret its effects.

This is why productivity cannot be managed through mandates, dashboards, or intuition alone. Sustained alignment requires protected ways to surface real experience, synthesize it into decision-ready insight, and monitor how it evolves as change unfolds so that leaders can course-correct before execution is quietly derailed.

The following case study shows what changes when organizations address this pressure point directly—using employee intelligence to recalibrate productivity expectations before friction hardens into failure.

CASE IN POINT

What Changes When Leaders Align First

As one mid-sized, U.S.-based organization prepared for a high-stakes productivity reset, leadership believed the issue was straightforward: Output had not returned to pre-COVID levels, even as teams were expanded and new tools were introduced. Leaders wanted to raise productivity expectations.

But they faced a critical uncertainty: How would those expectations land across a hybrid workforce—many of whom were hired after the pandemic and had never experienced the organization's accountability norms in person?

Senior leaders—the COO, CHRO, and Chief of Staff—chose to pause before rollout and surface employee reality first.

While executives focused on raising expectations, **37 percent of managers believed their teams already had excess capacity**. Through an anonymous Employee Voice Session (EVS) conducted across leadership and manager groups, a meaningful gap between employee experience and leadership perception was identified. Employees expressed these insights:

- They were experiencing meeting overload and being given insufficient time for focused work.
- Expectations around hours and availability were unclear.
- Leadership modeling differed across teams.
- Hybrid norms varied widely, especially among post-pandemic hires.

The issue wasn't resistance. It was confusion.

As their Chief of Staff reflected:

"Even when we think we know what we're going to hear, **there's nothing that makes it more real than seeing the prevalence.**"

That prevalence forced a shift. Leaders realized they were not aligned internally on what "productive" meant in practice—nor were managers equipped to cascade it consistently.

Rather than pushing forward quickly and correcting later, leadership made a deliberate trade-off. They slowed the rollout to clarify these priorities:

- What productivity meant (focus and outcomes, not hours logged)
- How meeting and hybrid norms would be standardized
- How managers would model and reinforce expectations

With Seramount's help, they invested in communication frameworks, manager capabilities, and process improvements.

The goal wasn't more messaging. It was clarity and consistency. The impact was immediate and measurable:

- **Ninety-two percent of EVS participants reported clearer understanding of the new expectations post-rollout.**
- **Over 80 percent said they felt heard during the transition.**
- Expectations of increased productivity were met without adding headcount.
- Regrettable attrition remained flat, while non-regrettable attrition increased two to three times—enabling talent rebalancing.

According to the CEO, the success was palpable:

"This was the first time we rolled out major expectations without confusion or follow-up questions. **The clarity we gained completely changed how we approached the conversation with employees.**"

Most importantly, leaders avoided months of executive reengagement. The initiative did not boomerang back to the C-suite for reinterpretation.

It held steady.

This case underscores a critical truth for Chiefs of Staff: **Productivity initiatives do not fail because expectations are too high. They fail when alignment comes too late**—forcing executives to step back in and repair what could have been clarified up front.

Alignment first protects decision velocity.

It protects executive bandwidth.

And it prevents productivity from becoming a recurring strategic distraction.

CONCLUSION

Productivity Is a Change Initiative—Treat It like One

Productivity is not simply a measure of effort. It reflects how work is designed, how priorities are set, and how consistently expectations are aligned with reality by leaders. In an environment shaped by hybrid work, AI acceleration, and heightened executive pressure, productivity cannot be managed as a mandate or metric alone. It must be treated as a change initiative.

Chiefs of Staff are central to the success of this work. They ensure initiatives land once—rather than being sent back to the drawing board for revision. In doing so, Chiefs of Staff protect executive bandwidth, sustain decision speed, and reduce the likelihood that the goal of productivity becomes a recurring strategic drain. As translators, trust brokers, and execution designers, they help leaders convert intent into practice, surfacing friction early, pressure-testing assumptions, and ensuring expectations are clear, credible, and executable.

Leaders who recognize the existence of that duality—and design for it—are better positioned to turn productivity pressure into sustained progress.

Productivity doesn't fail because people won't work harder.

It fails when leaders misread how work actually happens—and push anyway.

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