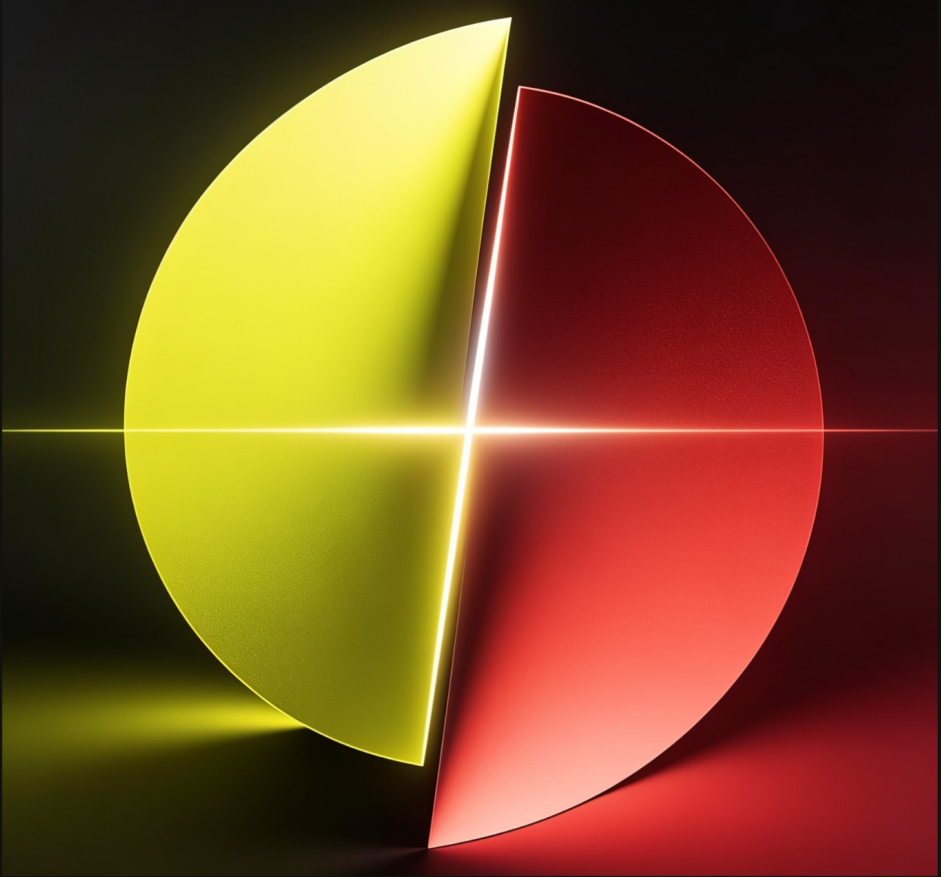


THE HIDDEN GAP



Solving the Human Alignment
Problem Behind Conflict,
Behaviour and Culture

Mark Buchan MSc.

The Hidden Gap

Solving the Human Alignment Problem

How operating values drive behaviour,
conflict and culture

Mark Buchan MSc.

What Readers Are Saying

"Mark Buchan has written a thoughtful and insightful book that challenges us to look beyond what people say and examine the deeper forces that drive behaviour. The Hidden Gap offers valuable perspectives on leadership, culture, change and human systems, while also providing practical advice for recognising and addressing the gaps that can emerge between intention and action. It will leave many readers reflecting on their own assumptions long after they have finished the final chapter."

Jason Wright

Director, Agile Business Consortium

"Exposes a shortfall in organisations testing their capability to implement proposals and improve performance. A valuable subject."

John Wilson

Transformation and Change Leadership Advisor, Coach and Author

"Organisational issues hiding in plain sight — a read that would benefit many organisations and leaders. Turns the light on. Leads you through the mistakes that resonate before unwrapping the reasons they are being made."

Mick Power

Programme & Transformation Leader

"A great insight that truly resonates, both personally and professionally."

Tina Harris

Senior Project Manager/Onboarding Specialist

"Great at raising awareness and providing practical tools to be more true to yourself and how you work with others."

Paul Underdown
Senior Product Owner

"Sat in the park reading — a real treat. Values being exercised not compromised. I can look back at my own career and see this clearly now."

Becky Davis
Head of PMO, Financial Services

"What do you need right now? What does humanity need right now? This book starts to answer both."

Anonymous
Senior Test Analyst

The Hidden Gap

Solving the Human Alignment Problem

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For Penny, Sean, James and Mikey - tomorrow's leaders.

May the world we hand to you be a little more honest, a little more aligned, and a little less broken than the one we inherited.

We're working on it.

Acknowledgements

Books are rarely written alone. This one certainly wasn't.

To my wife, Catherine who lived through every version of this book, from my first tentative ideas, waking up at 2.30am, to the full first draft, written in our campervan, and to the final version, and all the mood-swings in between! I couldn't have done it without you and nor would I have wanted to ... Thank you for picking up the slack with our fur-baby Tommy too, who has provided us so many moments of joy. "Thank you" will never quite cover it, but it's a good start.

To my brother Tony, even in your dark hour you were there for us with invaluable help when needed. I love you bro; know that I will always be there for you too.

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To John, my grumpy old partner in crime. We have shared a lot on our journey together and you will recognise many of the stories here ... mum's the word ;) But seriously, thanks for your insights presented without agenda. Now go enjoy a beer ... my round next when I see you

To Nick, thanks for the friendship and honesty and for the support as well in the dark days of the start-up. As I have said before - I may not have many friends but the ones I do have are quality!

To Jason, my agile partner-in-crime. You always seem to have a way to lighten a heavy moment and get me to laugh at myself. I look

forward to our next event together. Who knows - it may even involve Lego!

To the people whose stories appear in these pages. You may know who you are even if the names have been changed. You brought your honest experience into rooms with me and trusted me to handle it carefully. This book exists because of what you were willing to see about yourselves as difficult as that might have been in the moment.

And to the hundreds of individuals, teams and organisations I have had the privilege of working with over more than twenty years — you are the real research behind everything in this book. Every workshop, every coaching session, every uncomfortable conversation that went somewhere honest rather than somewhere safe.

To all of my reviewers - a big thank you to you too.

Stay Awesome.

MB 05/2026

PREFACE

Why This Work Matters to Me

Like many people, I did not start my career thinking about values.

I began as a software engineer, focused on code, writing system requirements, developing code and testing said code. Later, as I moved into consulting and coaching, the scope widened. The problems became less technical and more human. Projects did not fail because people lacked intelligence or effort. They failed because something harder to name kept getting in the way.

Over more than twenty years working inside organisations, I saw the same pattern again and again.

Teams would agree that collaboration, trust, openness, customer focus mattered. Leaders would articulate clear intentions. The language was often thoughtful and sincere, and yet, under pressure, something else would take over. Difficult conversations were avoided. Risks were softened or hidden. Decisions quietly contradicted what had been agreed.

At first, I treated them as isolated issues: a difficult stakeholder, a misaligned team, a leadership challenge. But over time, a deeper pattern began to emerge.

There was a consistent gap between the values organisations said they held and those that actually guided behaviour when it mattered most.

That gap is as much human as it is organisational.

As my work shifted into leadership coaching, I began to see the same dynamics play out at an individual level. People who cared deeply about honesty would still avoid difficult truths. Leaders who valued empowerment would still default to control under pressure. Intelligent, well-intentioned people find themselves participating in

systems they don't fully believe in. Fear, loyalty, identity and unexamined assumptions consistently override stated intentions. That's the real mechanism — and it's far more common than anyone admits.

My academic work in executive coaching gave me language and frameworks to understand these patterns. But it was the lived experience, my own and that of the people I worked with, that made their impact impossible to ignore.

Over time, this work became more than a professional interest. It became a question I could not set aside:

Why is it so difficult for individuals and organisations to live the values they so clearly articulate?

And what becomes possible when that gap begins to close?

This book is my attempt to answer those questions in a way that is both honest and practical.

It is not written as a set of quick fixes. It reflects the reality that meaningful change in individuals, teams, or organisations, requires more than new language or surface-level adjustments. It requires a willingness to look more closely at what is actually driving behaviour.

At this stage in my life and career, this work feels like part of what I want to pass on. Not as a final answer, but as a contribution, a way of making sense of patterns that many people experience but struggle to name.

If you have ever sat in a meeting where everyone agreed but nothing changed...

If you have ever felt the tension between what is said and what is done...

If you have ever wondered why intelligent, capable people still create dysfunctional outcomes...

Then you have already encountered the gap this book explores.

What follows is an invitation to understand the gap more clearly, and work with it differently.

INTRODUCTION

The Hidden Gap

In most organisations, declared values are clear, such as trust, collaboration, openness, integrity, customer focus.

These are familiar words, often carefully chosen and widely communicated. They appear in strategy documents, leadership frameworks, and company communications, and are usually well intended.

And yet, in practice, something different occurs.

When pressure increases, difficult conversations are often avoided. Risks are softened or left unspoken. Decisions drift away from what was agreed. People align in meetings but act differently afterwards.

Over time, a consistent pattern emerges that most organisations recognise but struggle to fully explain.

This consistent pattern is what I call **The Hidden Gap**.

The Hidden Gap is the persistent difference between an organisation's declared values (what it says it believes) and its operating values (what is actually expressed through behaviour, especially under pressure, uncertainty, or trade-offs).

It exists because organisations do not operate only through stated intentions. Behaviour is shaped just as much by what is reinforced, rewarded, avoided, or left unchallenged in real situations. What people do is influenced less by what is written or said, and more by what is experienced as safe, rewarded, or necessary in the moment.

The Hidden Gap helps explain why cultures drift, why change initiatives stall, and why capable, well-intentioned people can still produce outcomes that feel misaligned with what they believe the organisation stands for.

At an individual level, the same pattern appears again. People who genuinely value honesty but still avoid difficult truths. Leaders who believe in empowerment but still default to control under pressure. The drivers are often fear, identity, loyalty, habit and social pressure – deeper forces that consistently override stated intention.

This is the Hidden Gap that this book is about. Once you begin to see The Hidden Gap clearly, many familiar organisational problems start to look different. What once appeared as resistance or poor execution often reveals itself as something more structural, a predictable response to competing pressures and unspoken rules.

This book is about learning to see this pattern and working with it more consciously.

This is about what actually drives operating behaviour in human systems, and how that interacts with the values organisations claim to hold.

Until The Hidden Gap is understood, most attempts at change remain incomplete.

Who this book is for

This book is for people who want to understand what is really driving behaviour in the organisations they work in and discover what to do about it.

It is for those who have seen the gap between what is said and what happens in practice, and want a clearer way of making sense of it.

You may be leading a team, trying to implement change, or trying to navigate a system that does not behave as predictably as it appears on the surface.

What this book offers is not a set of quick fixes, but a more accurate lens.

It offers a way of seeing how values operate, within individuals, between people, and across organisations, and how that

understanding can be used to make better decisions, have more effective conversations, and work with complexity more consciously.

Once you can see the The Hidden Gap clearly, you are able to consciously work with it.

Why I wrote this book

I have spent over twenty years helping leaders of organisations close the gap between what they say they stand for and how they actually behave. I have sat in boardrooms where the declared values were admirable, and the operating reality was something else entirely. I have coached leaders who genuinely wanted to change and watched as the system slowly absorb them. I have seen capable, well-intentioned people produce outcomes that would have been shocked them if you had described them in advance.

I've also invested in my own personal and professional development during the twenty years. I know my values. I live my values to the best of my abilities. I believed I fully understood what I now call The Hidden Gap.

And then something happened.

Last year I was a co-founder in an AI start-up.

I can honestly say I have never worked so hard or committed so much. I gave my heart and soul to it.

I was fully aware from the beginning that it was a big risk, personally and professionally, but I believed totally in the vision of my co-founder, the opportunity it presented and in the partnership that we were building together.

Initially, it was intense, working flat out, but we coped. But, then the pressure of the workload, and the looming first deadline, began to take its toll. Reality started to dawn on us. We were actually trying to do the work of 16 people!

This extreme pressure meant that suddenly our hidden values, the values really driving our venture, started to become exposed,

including our conflicting ones. And the gap between our declared and operating values steadily began to have a negative impact.

I spent ten months inside a system where the gap between our declared values and our operating values was wider than almost anything I had encountered professionally — and I still stayed. Why? Because knowledge can get forgotten in periods of extreme stress.

I believe, this is partly why, not once during that highly pressurised time, did we as co-founders address the issue of our values conflict.

It was never discussed. It was simply the underground rule that governed everything — the real working agreement beneath the stated one. And I, who had spent twenty years helping organisations surface exactly these kinds of unspoken rules, had absorbed it without fully naming it.

Until the cost became impossible for me to ignore. The gap I had spent two decades helping others navigate, I had now fallen foul of, and I had not seen it coming!

The experience provoked me to ask questions of myself, and deeper questions about values work with people and within organisations. A lightbulb went off for me, and the result of which is this book.

How this book is structured

This book is organised in four parts, moving from understanding the pattern, to recognising it in yourself and others, to working with it in real organisational life, and finally to exploring its wider implications.

Part 1 explores what is really driving behaviour inside organisations and why The Hidden Gap exists in the first place.

Part 2 turns inward, examining how these dynamics operate at an individual level.

Part 3 looks at how values interact when people work together in teams and systems.

Part 4 focuses on recognising and responding to The Hidden Gap in real time, as it appears in everyday decisions and conversations.

Taken together, these reflect a progression: from seeing the gap, to understanding it, to learning how to work with it.

How to use this book

This is not a book to rush.

It moves between explanation and application, drawing on experience, research, and reflection. To support that, you will encounter four types of material:

Quote boxes highlight key ideas worth pausing on.

From the Trenches offer real examples from organisational life.

Organisational Psychology Insights connect ideas to research and theory.

Reflection boxes and Exercises invite you to test the ideas against your own experience.

These are not interruptions. They are part of the thinking process the book is inviting you into.

Where this begins

We begin with a simple but uncomfortable idea:

Much of what we call organisational behaviour is not driven by declared values at all but by operating values that emerge under real-world pressure.

This is The Hidden Gap.

Understanding it is the first step toward working with it.

PART 1:

What's Really Running the Show

All organisations and individuals have values, whether they have named them or not. They reveal themselves not in statements or slogans, but in patterns: what gets rewarded, what gets tolerated, what creates anxiety, and what disappears when pressure rises.

This first part of the book explores what is actually running the show beneath the surface – not to assign blame, but to establish the core premise of this work: why people clash, teams fracture, and change so often stalls.

Along the way, we will examine why behaviour looks the way it does, why values that sound right can still fail to guide action, and why the hidden gap between what is said and what is lived matters so much.

By the end of this section, you will have a clearer sense of why values – approached honestly and rigorously – matter more than most people realise, and why they hold the key to everything that follows.

Chapter 1 - When Values Compete

When Declared Values Meet Operating Reality

Most organisational values are not lies. They are unexamined wishes. They sound good, they feel right and almost everyone agrees with them — until the moment living by them actually costs something.

I was reminded of this in 2012 while working with a large UK insurance firm. You would recognise the brand. They were everywhere at the time: heavy television advertising, a strong public profile, all the outward signs of success.

Inside the organisation, though, the story was more complicated.

The invitation

I had been brought in to help improve collaboration across teams. That was it. No grand cultural mandate. No request to overhaul leadership identity or rewrite values statements. Just a fairly common brief: help teams work together better, communicate more effectively, and reduce some of the friction slowing things down.

At first, the work went well.

Teams were engaged. Conversations opened up. People started thinking differently about how they worked with one another — and about their role within the wider organisation. Word spread. The work expanded. People asked to attend the two-day course I was delivering.

From the outside, it looked promising.

But alongside the progress, I started to hear something else.

The unease

The same frustrations surfaced again and again across different teams: a reluctance to speak openly inside the organisation — though not in the training room, a sense that collaboration was encouraged in principle but constrained in practice, a feeling that some things could be said safely, and others could not.

And woven through these conversations was a phrase that kept cropping up, usually with a fair bit of dark humour attached:

"Man up, tool up."

I asked what it meant. It turned out to be the name of the leadership team, abbreviated to MUTU.

At that point, I had not met the leadership team. All of my work had been with the teams themselves. But in those sessions I started to hear a question that would follow me throughout much of my career:

"Have the leaders been on this course yet?"

The honest answer was no. I usually added, "Not yet."

Moving up the system

At first, I treated the phrase as a joke — the sort of internal shorthand every organisation develops. But as the work expanded into project and portfolio management, and as I began coaching more senior managers, it became clear that MUTU was doing more than raising a laugh.

It was carrying a message.

Strength meant endurance, maturity meant not pushing back. Discomfort was something to absorb quietly and compensate for by becoming more efficient, more resilient, more capable.

Some of the managers I worked with were open to exploring this. They engaged seriously with coaching, reflected on their behaviour, and made genuine shifts in how they behaved in practice.

And then, inevitably, word reached senior leaders.

There was genuine curiosity from leaders about the impact the work was having. I was invited into what were described as casual conversations. Some of those conversations developed into formal coaching contracts. For a while, it felt as though the work might finally be moving where it needed to go.

When the mirror appears

Eventually, I was invited to speak with the CEO.

The conversation was meant to cover progress, observations, and the possibility of extending the work further — perhaps even into collective coaching with the executive team.

During the conversation, I raised the subject of the executive team's name.

It had become clear to me that "Man up, tool up" was not neutral. It carried an expectation about how people were meant to behave, what emotions were acceptable, and how dissent was handled. It framed struggle as a personal shortcoming rather than a signal that something systemic might need attention.

The reaction was immediate.

His face flushed.

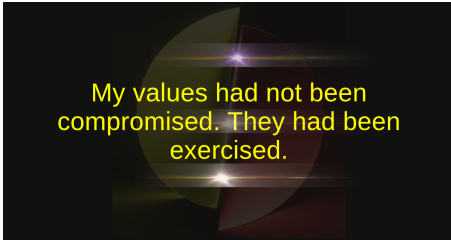
This was not the conversation he had expected to have. In that moment, two things happened inside me: one part wanted to retreat, to soften it, to find a way back to safer ground. Another part was quietly, almost guiltily, fascinated. That response told me something important.

The atmosphere shifted. It became clear, very quickly, that I was not delivering the report he had assumed was coming.

I was not there to accuse or blame anyone. I was holding up a mirror - but it did not land that way.

Endings

Shortly afterwards, my contract was not renewed. Up until then, it had been extended on a rolling basis without question. This time it ended politely, professionally, and without much follow-up.



I will not pretend I was not disappointed. I had invested in the work and cared about the people it affected. But what struck me afterwards was how quickly that disappointment passed.

My values had not been compromised. They had been exercised.

In the years since, I have stayed in touch with several people from that organisation. Later, I heard about dismissals and HR cases involving members of the senior leadership team. The issues had not disappeared, they had simply surfaced later, once the damage was harder to contain.

Looking back, the outcome feels almost inevitable.

Every leadership team I have worked with has placed words such as honesty, openness, and truth somewhere near the top of its declared values. Very few are prepared for what follows when those values begin to implicate them.

The things left unsaid in that organisation were not left unsaid because they were unimportant. They were left unsaid because naming them had consequences.

Over time, I have come to understand my role in these situations differently. I do not see myself as the cause of conflict. More often, I act as a kind of lightning rod — attracting the charge that already exists in a system under pressure, and grounding it before it does more damage elsewhere.

That role is not especially comfortable. It rarely comes with applause. But it is honest.

And it raises the question at the heart of this book:

What happens when the values we say we stand for are not the ones actually running the show?

What happens when declared values meet operating reality?

Next

In the next chapter, I will explore why that hidden gap matters so much — and why unclear or misaligned values create the very clashes, team fractures, and stalled change that so many organisations recognise but rarely name.

Dear Reader,

If this has resonated and if, like me, you may have sat in those meetings where everyone agreed and nothing changed, then the book will have even more to offer you. The book is out now on Amazon Kindle, with the paperback now also released: [Buy now on Amazon](#)

If you would prefer to support me directly you can purchase the pub or pdf versions here at markbuchan.co.uk/book.

If you'd rather talk about specifics in your organisation, a free diagnostic conversation usually surfaces something useful. [Book a diagnostic conversation here](#).

And if you want to keep reading as the thinking evolves, From Our Trenches, my Substack, is where that happens: [Subscribe to my Substack here](#).

Again, my thanks for your time and support.

Warm regards,

Mark

Author of The Hidden Gap.