INTRODUCTION

The work between the work

We often picture work as a chain of tasks. But every transition also transfers context, expectations, responsibility, and uncertainty. A deliverable can be finished while the next person is not yet able to use it.

A useful distinction

TASK COMPLETION: The current contributor has produced an output.

HANDOFF COMPLETION: A receiving person or function has what they need to take the next meaningful action.

The central question

What must become mutually understood so that work can move reliably across a boundary?

How to use this guide

Start with a real transition: a report sent to a decision maker, a service case passed to another team, or a completed feature awaiting release. Trace the handoff without assigning blame. Test the framework on page 2; apply it on page 3; complete the exercises on page 4.

EPISTEMIC STATUS: This is an original interpretive framework. It is not a validated diagnostic tool, a statistical model, or proof of what causes a particular team outcome.

Explore the interactive laboratory

FRAMEWORK

Three agreements, one boundary

A practical handoff makes three questions answerable. Each agreement can help, and each can create costs if applied rigidly.

01 RECEIVER

Who knows that the next action belongs to them? A named receiver prevents a vague destination from masquerading as ownership.

Tradeoff: a single owner can become a bottleneck or suppress shared responsibility.

02 READINESS

What makes the output usable for the next stage? Explicit acceptance criteria can carry necessary evidence and assumptions.

Tradeoff: overspecification can increase overhead and discourage adaptation.

03 RETURN PATH

What happens if information is missing or the situation changes? A route for clarification reduces the cost of an exception.

Tradeoff: feedback takes attention, time, trust and a willingness to revise.

Do not mistake the map for the territory

High-trust teams may coordinate informally. Formal procedures can help or harm depending on urgency, task novelty, workload and organisational culture. The goal is not to maximise documentation: it is to make the next meaningful action possible.

APPLICATIONS

Three situations, three questions

THE RELEASE

A developer finishes an implementation. Quality review, approval and communication still depend on several roles.

ASK: Who owns the release decision, what evidence is required, and how does a failed check return?

THE RESEARCH BRIEF

An analyst creates a careful synthesis, but caveats may disappear when the findings become a decision.

ASK: Who receives the argument, what uncertainty must travel with it, and how can a decision maker clarify a claim?

THE SERVICE REQUEST

A frontline colleague transfers a customer request to a specialist unit. The customer sees one continuous journey.

ASK: Who acknowledges receipt, what counts as resolution, and how do missing facts return without repeated storytelling?

A compact handoff note

Receiver: _____

Next action: _____

Ready when: _____

Open uncertainties: _____

Return channel: _____

EXERCISES

A five-minute field exercise

Choose a recent transfer of work. Use role descriptions rather than personal names; do not include confidential information. The goal is to see the structure, not to diagnose people.

1. What exactly did the first person consider finished?

2. Who was expected to notice and receive the result?

3. What did the receiver need in order to proceed?

4. Which assumptions were left unstated?

5. When reality differed from the plan, what happened?

6. Which ONE agreement might have reduced ambiguity?

7. What new cost or risk would that agreement introduce?

A contrasting thought experiment

Run the same situation twice: once with explicit ownership and once with a shared, rotating receiver. Compare the likely tradeoffs rather than declaring one universally superior.

LIMITATIONS AND ATTRIBUTION

What this framework cannot tell you

The three agreements are a design prompt, not exhaustive organisational theory. They cannot estimate completion times, determine causation, score teams, or identify a person responsible for failure. Human relationships, power, expertise, motivation and incentives also shape coordination. Cases in the interactive laboratory are fictional composites and carry no claimed research findings.

Relevant reading

Karl E. Weick (1995), Sensemaking in Organizations. Sage. A foundational perspective on the construction of meaning in organisational settings.

Edwin H. Schein (2013), Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling. Berrett-Koehler. A discussion of questions and relationships in working together.

James D. Thompson (1967), Organizations in Action. McGraw-Hill. Classic work addressing interdependence and coordination.

These works are suggested conceptual context. They are not cited as empirical validation of this three-part framework.

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