Why Customer-Centric Coordination Breaks as You Grow

The organizational condition that emerges when complexity outpaces coordination.

Think back to when the company was smaller, and coordinating around the customer simply happened. Nobody scheduled it. The person who ran Product sat near the person who ran Support, heard the same complaints, and adjusted. A customer problem could go from noticed to fixed in a hallway conversation, because the whole company could fit in the hallway.

You didn't have a process for keeping everyone pointed at the customer. You had proximity. And proximity did the work that process does in a larger company, invisibly and for free.

Then you grew. You added functions, layers, locations, products, segments. The head of Support no longer sits near the head of Product. The hallway conversation now needs a meeting, an invite list, and a reason to exist. The context that used to be shared by default now has to be deliberately moved from one team to another, and most of the time nobody built the thing that moves it.

Here's what makes this so hard to catch in the moment. Nothing broke. There was no failure, no outage, no day the coordination stopped working. It degraded quietly, one hire at a time, while everyone was busy and the company was succeeding. By the time the symptoms are obvious, the cause is a year or two upstream and nearly impossible to trace.

> **Growth doesn't create coordination problems. It exposes the ones that informal ways of working could no longer hide.**

The coordination was never actually built. It was improvised, and improvisation has a ceiling.

Alignment Is Not the Same as Coordination

When a leadership team senses this problem, the word they almost always reach for is alignment. We need better alignment! Get everyone aligned! Align the org around the customer.

It's worth being precise here, because these two words get used as if they mean the same thing, and the difference between them is the whole problem.

Alignment is agreement. It's everyone in a room deciding that customer retention is the priority this year, nodding, and meaning it. Alignment happens in conversations, and a good leadership team can reach it in an afternoon.

Coordination is what happens after the room empties. It's the five functions who agreed on retention going back to their own teams, their own roadmaps, their own targets, and actually acting in a way that adds up. Coordination happens in execution, over months, across boundaries, under pressure, when the agreement from the meeting collides with a deadline that was set before the meeting.

You can have complete alignment and still fail entirely at coordination. Everyone agrees. Everyone goes back to their desk. And the shared priority quietly dissolves into five reasonable local interpretations, competing for the same budget and the same quarter, with no mechanism to reconcile them when they conflict. Nobody defected. Nobody stopped caring. The agreement was real. It just had no machinery underneath it.

> **Alignment is agreement. Coordination is execution.**

Most organizations invest heavily in reaching alignment and almost nothing in building coordination. Then they are surprised when agreement does not produce action. It was never going to. Agreement about what matters is not a method for acting on it together.

The Condition Has a Name

If you recognize your own company in this, it helps to know that what you are looking at is not a flaw specific to your organization. It's a recognizable stage, common enough that it deserves a name, and most growing companies pass through it whether or not they ever name it.

I call it a Pre-Standards Organization™.

The name points to what's actually missing. Not talent, not data, not intent. What's missing are standards, and it's worth being clear about what that word means here, because it sounds more bureaucratic than it is. By standards I simply mean the shared rules and agreements a group makes about how it will work together. The words everyone uses for the same customer problem. Who owns which part of the experience. How a decision gets made when it crosses two teams. What happens when customer evidence points one way and an existing plan points the other.

A Pre-Standards Organization has the customer data. It has capable people and genuine intent. What it does not yet have are those shared agreements, built and maintained on purpose, so it runs on informal versions of them instead. Everyone improvises their own standard, and the improvised versions do not match.

This is not a diagnosis of dysfunction. It's a diagnosis of a stage. You did not skip these standards because you were careless. You skipped them because when you were small you didn't need them, and building them while you were small would have been overhead you were right to avoid. The problem is that the company outgrew the informal versions and nobody went back to build the real ones.

What It Looks Like From the Inside

The condition is abstract until you see how it shows up in an ordinary week. These are the symptoms, and each one carries a cost that is easy to miss because it never arrives as a single event.

Progress depends on specific people.

The cross-functional work that actually moves gets moved by a few individuals who care enough to push it across boundaries that are not really theirs to cross. It works, right up until one of them changes roles, burns out, or leaves. Then the thing they were quietly holding together comes apart, and nobody realizes how much depended on them until it's gone.

Customer knowledge fragments.

Each team keeps its own version of the customer. Support knows one truth, Product knows another, Sales knows a third, and none of them fully reconcile. There's more collective customer intelligence in the building than any single team can see, and no shared place where it adds up to a single picture everyone can act on.

Cross-functional work runs on negotiation.

When a customer problem needs two or three functions to move together, there is no defined way for that to happen, so it happens through influence. The outcome depends on who has more standing in the room that day, not on what the customer evidence says. Good decisions and bad ones get made the same way, by whoever pushes hardest.

Priorities drift.

What everyone agreed to in the planning session slowly erodes over the following months, not because anyone decided to change course, but because there was no mechanism holding the agreement in place against the daily pressure to do something else.

Customer outcomes become inconsistent.

The experience a customer gets depends on which team touched it, in which quarter, under which manager. The company cannot deliver the same thing twice, because the same thing was never written down as a standard anyone is held to.

> **When coordination depends on people instead of systems, consistency depends on luck.**

This Is a Stage, Not a Verdict

The reason any of this matters is that a Pre-Standards Organization is not a permanent condition. It's a phase, and companies build their way out of it on purpose.

The way out is not to grow less, or to care more, or to hire a better version of the people you already have. It is to go back and deliberately build the coordination layer you skipped while you were small. The shared language. The clear ownership. The agreed ways of deciding across teams. The standards, in the plain sense of the word, that let capable people act together instead of improvising in parallel.

That is real work, and it's a different kind of work than most companies have ever done on themselves. But it is buildable, which is the entire point. You're not fighting human nature or organizational gravity. You're installing something that was never there.

> **Organizations don't outgrow customer-centricity. They outgrow informal coordination.**

If this is the stage you recognize, the useful next question is a specific one. Where, exactly, is your organization losing the thread between what it knows about its customers and what it actually does? That's where the condition stops being abstract and starts being measurable.

Groundwork CX helps growth-stage B2B SaaS companies build the organizational conditions required to act on what they already know about their customers.
