Human Evolution Lab

STONE-AGE MINDSET

An Anthropological Framework for Understanding Workplace Dysfunction

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STONE-AGE MINDSET: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE DYSFUNCTION

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Executive Summary

Recent surveys report that employee engagement stands at just 21% globally, while 82% of employees are at risk of burnout. The typical response involves more training, more professional development, and where needed, organizational restructure. While valuable, these interventions haven't moved those numbers significantly, suggesting they address symptoms rather than cause.

This white paper introduces an anthropological lens called the **Stone-Age Mindset (SAM)** to offer a different explanation, one that moves workplace dysfunction away from individual failure or cultural deficit toward a systems-level diagnosis. The central question SAM poses is this: what happens when organizations change faster than human patterns can adapt?

Stone-Age" functions here as shorthand for the long arc of human pattern formation, not as a claim that modern humans are cognitively primitive. Humans are extraordinarily adaptive as a species. The framework simply acknowledges that some patterns developed over very long timescales, while many modern organizational structures emerged in decades.

For hundreds of thousands of years, human behavioral patterns developed slowly under relatively stable conditions. Modern organizations represent a profound experiment: asking humans to adapt in decades to structures designed without considering the humanity component. That experiment has produced remarkable achievements, but also predictable costs. SAM argues those costs aren't random. They're the logical result of a speed differential between organizational change and human adaptation.

Drawing from human ethology and cross-cultural anthropological observation, SAM identifies three core mismatches where that differential creates friction:

The People Mismatch occurs when organizations require us to trust assigned strangers, accept arbitrary authority, and navigate status hierarchies disconnected from observable competence, demands that emerged over mere decades, while human social patterns developed over hundreds of thousands of years in small, face-to-face groups.

The Work Mismatch emerges when contribution becomes so abstracted across layers of process and time that the direct connection between effort and outcome, visible for most of human history, effectively disappears.

The Overload Mismatch manifests as chronic cognitive overload when organizations demand that individuals process information and complexity at scales that vastly exceed what human nervous systems were built to handle.

SAM operates as a diagnostic tool, not a prescription. It helps organizations ask better questions: Which mismatches are most acute in our context? How rapidly did these structural changes occur? Are we designing with or against human adaptation timescales? Where could we slow organizational change, or redesign structures to work with current human patterns rather than around them?

The implications of this shift in perspective are significant. Meaningful workplace improvement can then focus on the pace at which humans genuinely adapt, rather than simply developing people to override patterns built over millennia. Leaders can prioritize creating structures that respect human timescales. And organizations can treat predictable responses to rapid change as diagnostic information, not pathology.

Recognizing this pattern doesn't solve it. But it fundamentally changes what solutions we pursue.

1. The Pattern We Keep Missing

Every organization struggles with the same predictable patterns. Talented people arrive with energy and intention. Within months, something shifts. Engagement drops. Silos harden. Meetings become performances rather than genuine exchanges. The best contributors either leave or quietly disengage. Leadership responds with familiar interventions: communication training, engagement surveys, team-building offsites, new performance management systems. Sometimes these help at the margins. More often, the dysfunction persists or takes new forms.

What's remarkable isn't that these patterns exist. It's how consistent they are across wildly different organizations. The technology startup struggling with founder-employee dynamics. The hospital where nurses won't speak up about safety concerns. The university where researchers won't collaborate across departments. The corporate team that nods in agreement but never implements.

Different industries, different sizes, different cultures. Same patterns.

We've been treating this as a people problem. What if it's not?

The Limits of Current Explanation

Organizational behavior research has given us sophisticated tools for diagnosing workplace dysfunction (Robbins & Judge, 2022). We can measure engagement, map toxic dynamics, identify leadership gaps, assess culture. We know what a healthy organization looks like. We have frameworks for getting there.

Yet despite decades of increasingly sophisticated management theory, workplace dysfunction remains remarkably persistent. Employee engagement stands at 21% globally (Gallup, 2025). Burnout continues to rise, with 82% of employees now at risk (Meditopia for Work, 2026; World Health Organization, 2019). "Quiet quitting" becomes a cultural phenomenon. The most educated, resourced, well-intentioned organizations still struggle with basic human coordination.

The usual explanations point to individual deficits. Leaders need more emotional intelligence. Teams need better communication skills. People need to be more resilient. The underlying assumption is that we're failing at something humans should naturally be able to do: work together effectively in formal organizations.

What if that assumption misses something fundamental?

What if the difficulty isn't a bug in human psychology but a predictable result of asking humans to adapt faster than behavioral patterns actually change?

A Different Lens

That question points toward a different kind of explanation. If human behavioral patterns genuinely change slowly, and organizational structures are changing faster than they ever have, then the friction we keep observing isn't a people problem. It's a speed problem.

Human ethology, the study of how humans as biological beings function in groups across cultures and contexts, offers tools to examine this dynamic. Rather than prescribing how people should behave in organizations, it observes how humans do behave, and asks why certain patterns prove so persistent despite our best efforts to change them.

What that lens reveals is something organizational behavior research tends to overlook. For the vast majority of human history, roughly 300,000 years, humans lived and worked in small-scale bands of 25 to 150 people who knew each other face to face (Dunbar, 1992, 1998). Trust developed through repeated interaction. Contribution was visible and immediate. Status reflected observable competence. Problems were manageable in scale and complexity.

The reference to “Stone-Age” throughout this paper points to the long evolutionary arc over which many human social and cognitive patterns formed. It refers to timescale, not primitivism.

These patterns didn't emerge by design. They developed gradually over hundreds of thousands of years under relatively stable conditions. Whether you understand this process as divine creation unfolding slowly or as long-run adaptation, the result is the same: human behavioral patterns change across generational timescales, not organizational timescales.

Modern organizations, by contrast, evolved rapidly. The bureaucratic structures we now take for granted emerged largely in the past 200 years. The knowledge economy developed in mere decades. Digital transformation happened in years. Each wave of organizational innovation asks humans to function in fundamentally new ways, but human patterns don't adapt that quickly (van Vugt & Ahuja, 2011).

Here's the deeper dynamic. When many minds collaborate to innovate, whether it is organizational structures or new technology, the pace of design can be remarkable. Collective intelligence can iterate fast (Taylor, Fernandes, & Wright, 2021). But individual humans must then inhabit those innovations, adapting at biological speed. And biological adaptation, including our neurological wiring, doesn't come with instructions.

This isn't a moral judgment about modern societies or organizations. They exist for good reasons and enable coordination at scales previous generations couldn't imagine. But when organizational structures evolve without considering how fast humans can actually adapt, friction becomes predictable. And predictable friction has predictable costs.

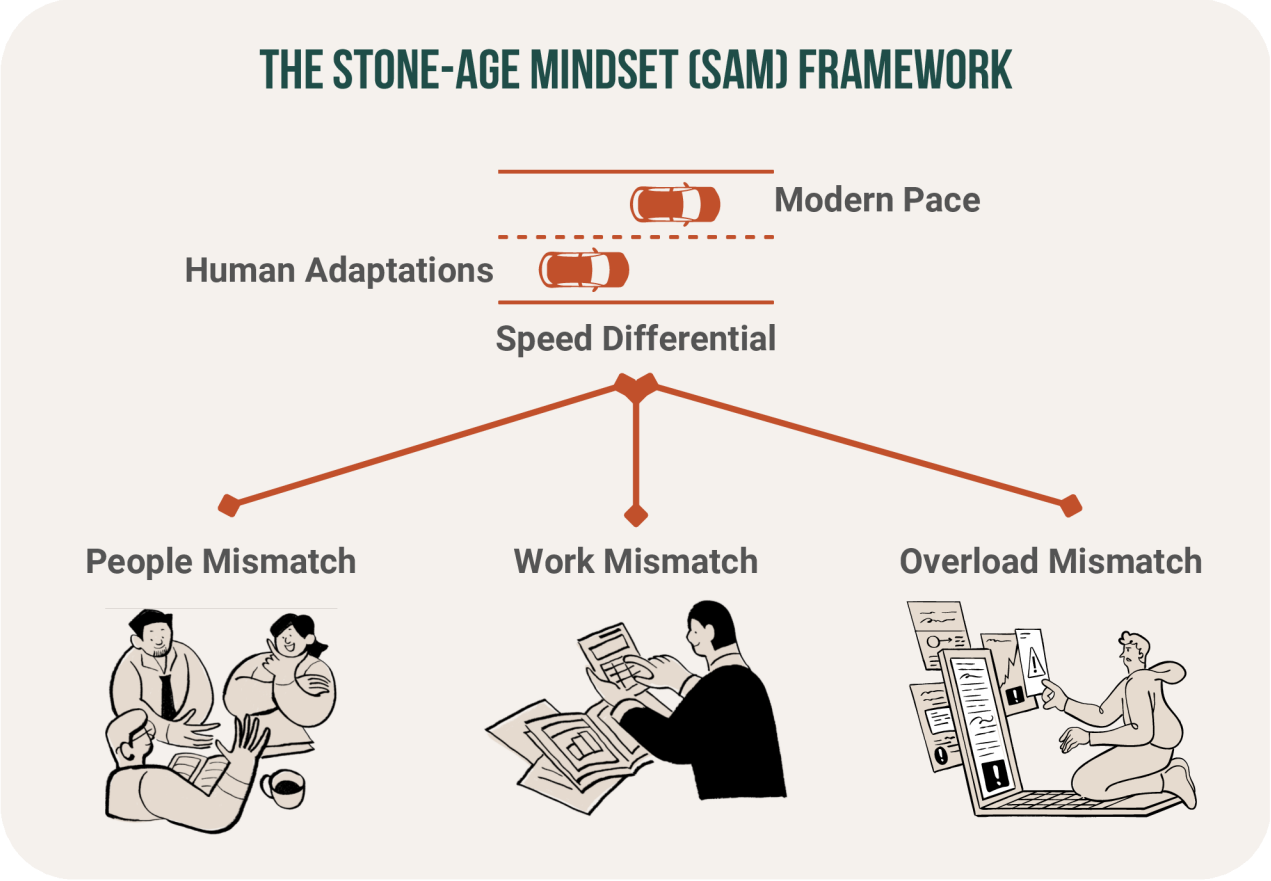
Introducing the Stone-Age Mindset Framework

The Stone-Age Mindset (SAM) framework provides a diagnostic tool for understanding this friction. Not as judgment of human limitation but as recognition that much of what we call workplace dysfunction is humans responding predictably when change happens faster than adaptation.

SAM identifies three core mismatches, each characterized by a speed differential between organizational evolution and human adaptation:

1. **The People Mismatch:** When social structures change faster than trust patterns adapt
2. **The Work Mismatch:** When contribution systems change faster than meaning-making adapts
3. **The Overload Mismatch:** When information demands change faster than processing capacity adapts

Each mismatch creates predictable friction. Understanding these patterns is the first step. What's more, with technological advancement continuing to accelerate organizational change, understanding this speed differential becomes increasingly critical.



Why This Matters

Current responses to workplace dysfunction aren't wrong. Training, engagement initiatives, and organizational redesign all have value. But when SAM is absent from the diagnosis, even well-designed interventions operate without a complete picture.

Consider what changes when SAM enters the equation. Communication training becomes more targeted when we recognize that trust patterns developed over millennia can't instantly adjust to assigned-stranger hierarchies invented decades ago. Engagement initiatives land differently when we acknowledge that contribution systems became abstracted faster than human meaning-making could adapt. Resilience programs look different when we accept that cognitive demands have accelerated beyond what human nervous systems can process without chronic stress.

This lens also illuminates individual experience. The disengagement that puzzles managers, the resistance that derails change initiatives, the chronic stress that persists despite wellness programs, these aren't character flaws or failures of will. They are legible responses to structural conditions that outpaced human adaptation. When we understand that, we stop asking "what's wrong with these people?" and start asking "what's wrong with this design?"

The interventions don't disappear. But the questions we ask before designing them change fundamentally. Are we designing with or against human adaptation timescales? How rapidly did this structural change occur? What would it look like to slow organizational change, or redesign structures to work with current human patterns?

That shift in question is what SAM makes possible.

2. The Gap SAM Fills

Building on the mismatch framework articulated by van Vugt and colleagues (Giphart & van Vugt, 2018; Li, van Vugt, & Colarelli, 2018), SAM offers a framework that moves us away from treating organizational dysfunction as individual failure or cultural deficit. SAM asks: Under what conditions did current human patterns develop? How rapidly did organizational structures change? Where does the speed differential create friction? But to understand what that friction actually means, we first need to be clear about what "fast" and "slow" look like in this context.

A Note on Timescales

Two timescales run through everything that follows.

Human behavioral adaptation operates on generational timescales. Patterns that feel instinctive today developed gradually over hundreds of thousands of years. Meaningful behavioral shifts require at minimum centuries under new conditions, and often far longer (Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Kline, 2015).

Organizational evolution operates on an entirely different scale. Bureaucratic hierarchies emerged largely in the past 200 years. Matrix management in the past 50 years. Remote-first organizations in the past 20 years. Some structural changes happen in months (Kline, 2015; Waring & Wood, 2021).

Human history has included previous waves of structural transformation: the shift to agriculture, the rise of kingdoms, industrialization. Each introduced new forms of social strain. What distinguishes the present moment is not that mismatch exists, but that the pace of structural change has accelerated dramatically. The gradient has steepened.

SAM doesn't require commitment to any particular theory of how human patterns change. It simply observes the rate at which they change, and examines what happens when organizational structures evolve faster than that rate allows.

The Speed Differential

Throughout history, when many minds collaborate to design organizational innovations, we can iterate rapidly. Ideas combine, compete, and spread at the speed of communication. Research demonstrates that cultural evolution proceeds significantly faster than biological evolution, even when controlling for generation time (Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Kline, 2015; Waring & Wood, 2021). This collective intelligence, operating through what researchers call "collective cognitive search," has produced remarkable advances (Taylor, Fernandes, & Wright, 2021), often driven by motives like profit, efficiency, and competitive advantage that themselves accelerate the pace of change.

But individual humans don't live at that speed. Single brains must inhabit the innovations that collective intelligence designs, and biological adaptation doesn't work like organizational innovation. It happens slowly, across generations, without clear instructions or conscious direction. We can't decide to adapt our stress response or trust mechanisms the way we can decide to implement a new product or way of working.

This is the territory SAM claims: the gap between how fast we can collectively design new organizational forms and how fast individual humans can genuinely adapt to living in them.

A Note on Nuance

While SAM emphasizes the speed differential, it recognizes that not all patterns change at the same rate, and that individual variation, design quality, and organizational context all influence how people experience mismatch. For instance, some human patterns are deeply biological (cognitive processing limits, stress physiology) and change extremely slowly across many generations. Others are cultural or learned (specific collaboration skills, technology adoption) and can adapt within a lifetime with appropriate support.

Pace alone doesn't guarantee good design. Even if we respect human adaptation timescales, we can still design poorly if we optimize for the wrong outcomes or exclude the people most affected by change from the design process. The "humanity component" includes not just pace but also values, power dynamics, and whose voices shape organizational structures.

SAM doesn't claim to explain everything, but it does identify a pattern that existing frameworks often miss. In addition, SAM does not argue that human patterns are fixed or that adaptation is impossible. Humans are highly plastic and capable of remarkable cultural learning. The framework focuses on friction that emerges when change outpaces adaptation, not on limits to human potential.

3. The Three Core Mismatches

The speed differential between organizational change and human adaptation doesn't create friction uniformly. It concentrates in three predictable areas: how we relate to people, how we find meaning in work, and how we manage cognitive load. Research on basic human psychological needs identifies relatedness, meaning, and cognitive manageability as core to how humans function in groups (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dunbar, 1992; van Vugt & Ahuja, 2011). SAM examines what happens when organizational structures evolve faster than the patterns supporting each of these needs can adapt. In what follows, we examine each of the three core mismatches in detail.

The People Mismatch: When Social Structures Change Faster Than Trust Patterns Adapt

How human social patterns developed

Human patterns for navigating social relationships developed over hundreds of thousands of years in small bands where everyone knew everyone. Trust developed through repeated interaction and observed behavior. Status reflected demonstrated competence and contribution. Belonging came from mutual recognition and shared survival. Conflicts resolved through direct exchange rather than formal process.

These patterns emerged gradually under conditions that remained relatively stable for most of human history. They feel instinctive because they developed across countless generations.

How modern workplaces evolved

Organizational structures for managing strangers emerged rapidly, largely in the past few centuries. They require us to trust people based on job titles rather than observed behavior. Accept authority from people we've never seen in action. Contribute alongside colleagues whose competence we can't directly assess. Navigate status hierarchies disconnected from observable skill. Belong to teams assembled by organizational logic rather than mutual choice. Resolve conflicts through HR processes rather than direct relationships.

These structures weren't designed to be difficult. They were designed to enable coordination at scales small-band societies couldn't achieve. But they evolved in decades, not millennia.

The speed differential

When forced to grant trust without the conditions that allowed trust patterns to develop, repeated interaction over time, humans default to older patterns. We become defensive (LeDoux, 2015; Sapolsky, 2017). We assess potential threats rather than opportunities for collaboration. Status games emerge as people compete for recognition using patterns that evolved for small groups where contribution was visible. Silos form as teams default to tribal-scale trust because broader organizational trust hasn't had time to develop as instinct. Toxic dynamics appear as people run ancient threat-detection scripts in environments that changed too quickly for those scripts to update.

Pattern Recognition

We experience the People Mismatch when:

- Teams don't collaborate across organizational boundaries despite structural mandates
- Leadership changes trigger defensive responses regardless of the individual's competence
- People trust their immediate team but view other departments with suspicion
- Status anxiety runs high despite formal egalitarian culture
- Conflicts escalate rather than resolve through direct conversation
- New members struggle to establish credibility even with demonstrated expertise

The Work Mismatch: When Contribution Systems Change Faster Than Meaning-Making Adapts

How human meaning-making patterns developed

Human patterns for deriving meaning from work developed over hundreds of thousands of years under conditions where the connection between effort and outcome was direct and visible (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Pink, 2009). Gather food, everyone eats. Build shelter, the tribe stays dry. Heal the injured, lives are saved. Contribution was visible, impact was immediate, and meaning emerged naturally from seeing how efforts mattered.

These patterns created deep satisfaction when we could directly observe our impact. They developed gradually over countless generations.

How modern work systems evolved

Organizations abstracted contribution across layers of process, geography, and time. This happened rapidly, largely over the past century. We now produce reports no one may read. Attend meetings disconnected from visible outcomes. Contribute to systems so complex we can't see our individual impact. Work on projects that may be canceled before completion. Navigate constant urgent demands that turn out not to matter.

These systems weren't designed to be meaningless. They emerged to enable complex coordination and specialized expertise. But they evolved faster than human meaning-making patterns could adapt.

The speed differential

When contribution becomes abstract faster than meaning-making patterns can adjust, humans lose the intrinsic motivation that comes from seeing direct impact. Engagement becomes something organizations must manufacture rather than something work naturally produces. People either disengage entirely or manufacture artificial urgency to create the feeling that something matters, because the patterns that evolved for finding meaning in work require visible cause-and-effect that modern systems often obscure. Burnout increases as people pour energy into work using patterns designed for immediate feedback but receiving none.

The question "does my work matter?" becomes genuinely difficult to answer, not because the work doesn't matter but because the timescale between contribution and visible outcome stretched beyond what our meaning-making patterns adapted to handle.

Pattern Recognition

We experience the Work Mismatch when:

- Talented people disengage despite interesting work
- Teams can't articulate how their work connects to organizational outcomes
- Everything feels urgent but nothing feels important
- People burn out while questioning if their contribution matters
- Motivation requires constant external reinforcement (recognition, rewards, praise)
- Employees leave citing lack of meaning or purpose despite good pay and conditions

The Overload Mismatch: When Information Demands Change Faster Than Processing Capacity Adapts

How human information processing developed

Human capacity for processing information developed over hundreds of thousands of years at the scale of direct sensory experience. Ancestral complexity was manageable: track weather patterns, monitor game movement, navigate social dynamics in a known group of 25 to 150 people, learn established skills. Problems were concrete and solutions testable within observable timeframes.

Our nervous systems adapted gradually to this level of complexity over countless generations.

How modern information demands evolved

Organizations now require us to process information at scales that vastly exceed ancestral conditions. This escalation happened rapidly, especially in recent decades. Track hundreds of projects simultaneously. Monitor constant digital communication across multiple channels. Make decisions with incomplete information under artificial time pressure. Stay current in fields changing faster than we can learn. Navigate competing demands from multiple stakeholders with conflicting priorities. Manage complexity no individual system can fully hold.

These demands weren't designed to be overwhelming. They emerged from our collective ability to create increasingly complex systems. But they escalated faster than human processing capacity could adapt.

The speed differential

Cognitive overload becomes the default state when information demands increase faster than our processing capacity adapts. People either shut down, disengagement, reduced initiative, minimum compliance, or ramp up, overwork, inability to prioritize, burnout. Decision quality deteriorates as mental resources deplete. Innovation suffers as people lack capacity for creative thinking beyond immediate demands. The ancient stress response, which developed to handle acute physical threats over short timescales, activates chronically, leading to health consequences. Our bodies respond using patterns that evolved for temporary overload, but modern complexity is constant.

Pattern Recognition

We experience the Overload Mismatch when:

- People can't focus despite trying
- Everything feels urgent and nothing can be deprioritized
- Teams are too busy for strategic thinking
- Quality declines as volume increases
- Physical health issues (insomnia, headaches, digestive problems) correlate with work demands
- People describe feeling overwhelmed as their baseline state
- Innovation and improvement work never happens because capacity doesn't exist

4. Recognition and Diagnosis

Understanding the three core mismatches opens a new diagnosis angle of workplace dysfunction. Rather than defaulting to "we need better leadership" or "our culture needs fixing," we can ask more targeted questions: *Which mismatches are we experiencing? How rapidly did these structural changes occur? Are we designing with or without considering human adaptation timescales?*

The following self-assessment offers a starting point for that diagnosis.

Self-Assessment Framework

Consider your own organizational experience through the SAM diagnostic lens:

The People Mismatch

- Do you find yourself trusting your immediate team but viewing other departments with suspicion?
- Does organizational change trigger anxiety regardless of its potential merit?
- Do you spend significant energy managing relationships that should be straightforward?
- Does politics feel more important than performance for getting ahead?
- Do you hesitate to be fully honest about challenges or concerns?

The Work Mismatch

- Can you articulate how your work connects to meaningful outcomes?
- Do you feel intrinsically motivated by the work itself or only by external factors?
- Would you struggle to explain to someone outside your organization why your work matters?
- Do you experience frequent "what's the point?" moments?
- Does urgency feel manufactured rather than genuine?

The Overload Mismatch

- Do you end most days feeling mentally exhausted despite not doing physical work?
- Is "I don't have time" your default response to new requests?
- Do you struggle to focus even when you want to?
- Have you noticed physical symptoms (headaches, insomnia, digestive issues) tied to work periods?
- Does strategic or creative thinking feel impossible given current demands?

Distinguishing Development from Pace Problem

A critical distinction: SAM helps differentiate between "I need to develop capacity" and "this change happened faster than adaptation allows."

When it's primarily a development opportunity:

- You can see a clear path to building the necessary skills
- Others in similar roles manage the demands sustainably
- The challenge feels stretching but not impossible
- You have resources and support available
- The structure has been stable long enough for genuine adaptation

When it's primarily a pace problem:

- The demands seem unsustainable regardless of individual capability
- High performers burn out or leave at predictable rates
- The structure changed recently (months or a few years ago)
- The patterns appear across different people in similar roles
- "Working harder" or "being more resilient" doesn't resolve the underlying friction

This distinction matters because the interventions required are fundamentally different. Development challenges call for skill-building, mentorship, and practice. Pace problems call for either structural redesign or patience while adaptation occurs.

Making SAM Actionable

SAM serves as a diagnostic tool for understanding speed differentials. The questions it opens are different from "how do we get people to adapt faster?" They shift focus from changing people to examining the pace of structural change itself, and whether we're considering the humanity component in our designs. The answers will depend on context. Some patterns can adapt with scaffolding and transition support. Others represent harder constraints requiring structural redesign. Still others may need organizational or regulatory guardrails that limit how fast change can occur. SAM provides the diagnostic framework; the specific interventions belong to your context.

Closing Thoughts

For the vast majority of human history, human behavioral patterns developed slowly under relatively stable conditions. There was no mismatch to diagnose because the pace of environmental change roughly matched the pace at which humans could adapt.

Modern organizations represent a profound experiment. We're asking humans to adapt in decades to structures that evolved without considering how fast behavioral patterns actually change. When many minds come together to design organizational efficiency, productivity, and scale, we can innovate rapidly. Collective intelligence operates at memetic speed, ideas combining and spreading faster than ever (Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Kline, 2012). But individual humans must inhabit these innovations at biological speed, adapting slowly without conscious instructions for how to change. When we design without considering this fundamental asymmetry, we create predictable friction.

That friction has predictable costs: disengagement, burnout, dysfunction. The Stone-Age Mindset framework suggests those costs aren't random. They are the logical result of a speed differential between how fast we change our organizations and how fast humans can genuinely adapt. Recognizing this pattern doesn't solve it, but it changes what solutions we pursue.

Rather than working to make people adapt faster to systems that keep changing, we might ask different questions: What would organizations look like if designed with human adaptation timescales in mind? Where could we slow organizational change to allow genuine adaptation? Which structures could we redesign to work with current human patterns rather than against them?

The answers will vary by context. Some patterns can adapt with appropriate scaffolding. Others represent harder constraints requiring fundamental redesign. What matters is that we're finally asking the right questions - not "how do we get people to adapt faster?" but "are we designing with or against human timescales?"

SAM is the beginning of that inquiry, not the end. This white paper introduces the framework and its three core mismatches. The deeper work, understanding how these patterns show up in daily workplace experience, how to recognize them in yourself and your organization, and how to navigate them, is the subject of a forthcoming book. That book goes further into the lived reality of ancient-modern mismatch: what it looks and feels like from the inside, and what it means for how we work, lead, and design organizations worth working in.

The conversation SAM invites is an urgent one. Human patterns won't change to match the pace of organizational innovation. But organizational design can change to account for human patterns. That shift, from adapting people to designing better, is where the real work begins.

DISCLAIMER

This white paper presents the Stone-Age Mindset (SAM) framework as an emerging diagnostic lens for understanding workplace dysfunction. It draws on established research in human ethology, anthropology, and organizational behavior, but SAM itself represents an original theoretical framework under ongoing development. As with any theoretical framework, the propositions advanced here require empirical investigation and systematic testing before definitive conclusions can be drawn. The framework is intended to support reflection and open new diagnostic questions, not to replace professional organizational, psychological, or medical consultation. Readers are encouraged to apply these ideas critically and in context.

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