A FIELD GUIDE

Reading the Absence

Taking a leadership seat in an older, under-documented organisation

by Patrick Connolly

> The fact that a long-established organisation has almost no documentation is itself the most important datum you have.

For the situation: you have joined the leadership of an organisation that has been running for many years, where people come and go, and where the work runs on knowledge that lives in people rather than documents. You cannot see the processes, the goals, the structure, the roles, or the assets.

0. Read the absence as information

The instinct is to launch a documentation programme. Resist it for now, because the fact that a long-established organisation has almost no documentation is *itself the most important datum you have*, and it needs interpreting before it can be fixed.

Documentation is cheap. If it were merely absent through oversight, years of work and several leadership generations would have produced some. Its absence means one of these is true, and you need to know which:

If the real cause is…	The symptom you'll see	What actually fixes it
Knowledge is job security: tenure is the most reliable form of standing in a place where much else changes	Warm, helpful people who will explain anything verbally and never write it down	Change what earns status. Credit, never extraction ($5)
Nobody has slack: everyone is at 100% delivering	"Yes, we should document that" said sincerely, forever	Documentation as a byproduct of work already happening ($7)
Turnover outruns the writing: the typical tenure is shorter than the payback period	Half-finished wikis from three different eras	Capture at the exits and entrances ($6)
It was tried and punished: someone wrote it down and got overruled or ignored	A veteran who says "we did this before" with an edge in their voice	Find that person. They are your best ally ($5)

Usually it is two of the four. Naming which two, out loud, in your first 90 days is worth more than any artifact you could produce in the same period.

The corollary that matters most: an organisation that has resisted documentation for years will defeat a documentation project. It will not defeat documentation that arrives as a side-effect of something it already wants.

1. The reframe: trace the work, don't map the org

Do not start from the org chart, the goals, or the asset list. Those are all *outputs* of something more basic, and in an organisation like this the formal versions are fossils, accurate as of a reorganisation several leaders ago.

Start from the flows. Pick the five to eight recurring things the organisation actually does that create or destroy value: the sequences that repeat. Trace each one end to end by following *one real live instance*, not a description of the general case.

Examples of the unit you're looking for:

- A prospect enquires → is qualified → is sold → is delivered to → renews or doesn't.
- A programme is proposed → approved → budgeted → staffed → run → invoiced → reviewed.
- A partner agreement is negotiated → signed → delivered against → renewed or lapses.
- A staff member is hired → onboarded → paid → developed → exits.

- Money: committed → spent → reconciled → reported.

Every handoff inside a flow hands you, for free, the five things you said you were missing:

What you can't see	Where it actually lives	How the flow trace surfaces it
Processes	In the sequence of handoffs, not in any manual	The trace *is* the process: you're recording it as you go
Roles & responsibilities	In who touches the instance, not the job description	Whoever's hands it passes through owns something; ask what
Org structure	In who has to be asked before it moves	The real structure is the approval graph, not the reporting line
Assets	In whatever gets used or produced at each step	Every system, licence, template, contract and contact list appears here
Goals	In where money and senior hours actually go (§4)	Which flows are lavishly resourced and which are starved

The one question that does the work: *"Show me the last one you did."* Not "how does this work": that gets you the idealised version people believe. An artifact that already exists costs the person nothing to hand over, and reveals the real path, including the workarounds. It is the same behavioural-recall discipline good interviewers rely on: ask about a real instance rather than prescribing, because people cannot reliably introspect their own process.

2. Your four instruments

Keep the standing artifact set brutally small. Four registers, each of which a busy person can read in one screen. A fifth would kill all of them.

1. The confusion log: start today, it expires in 60 days. Every time you have to ask a human something that should have been findable, log it: what you needed, who you had to ask, how long it took. You are, right now, the most sensitive instrument the organisation will have for years, and the sensitivity decays to nothing as you acclimatise. **This is the highest-value thing you can do in week one and it is almost always skipped**, because it feels like an admission of ignorance rather than a measurement.

2. The flow map. One page per flow. Steps, owner at each step, systems touched, where it stalls. Five to eight pages total, forever. If it grows past that, you're documenting instead of leading.

3. The single-point-of-failure register. For each flow, name the one person who can actually execute it. Then two columns: *what stops if they're unavailable* and *is it written down anywhere*. **Bus factor = 1 is the entry condition.** Where people come and go, this is the real risk register: it is small, it is alarming, and it is the single artifact that unlocks budget and attention from a president or board, because it converts "we should document things" (a goal, which bores most people) into "we cannot run next quarter's main event without one specific person" (a problem, which engages them). Bobb Biehl's 80/15/5 rule of thumb makes the same point: most people are moved by problems to solve, far fewer by goals or dreams.

4. The contested-ownership list. Ask the same handful of questions, verbatim, to everyone. The value is *not* the consensus. It's the places where two confident, competent people give incompatible answers about who owns something or who decides. Those contradictions are the actual design defects in the organisation, and

nobody inside can see them, because each person only hears their own answer.

3. The asset sweep

"Assets" is where long-established organisations hide their worst surprises, because assets are acquired by people and the people have moved on. Run this early: it is fast, concrete, and produces visible wins that buy you credibility for the slower work.

Digital estate: do this in week one or two. Where people come and go, a startling share of the following tends to be registered to the personal email or personal card of someone who left years ago: domain names, DNS, SSL certificates, the website CMS, the Google or Microsoft tenancy super-admin, social accounts, mailing-list and CRM platforms, the design-file account holding every brand asset, payment processors, the analytics property. **Assume at least one critical renewal depends on a departed person until proven otherwise.** It is one of the most common latent catastrophes in organisations of this kind, and it has a hard deadline you cannot see.

Contractual and commitment register. Years of partner agreements, licences, grants, sponsorships and auto-renewing subscriptions, many signed by people long gone, some carrying obligations the organisation has quietly stopped meeting or is still meeting for no reason. For each: who signed, what it obligates you to, when it renews or expires, who owns it *now*.

Intellectual property: ask the ownership question nobody has asked in a decade. Content, training material, research outputs, methodologies, brand, publications, software. In organisations that use contractors, visiting experts, seconded staff or partner institutions, ownership is frequently *not* what everyone assumes. Get this in writing from whoever holds the founding contracts before you build anything new on top of it.

Relational assets. The network of former members, partners, donors and customers that lives in individual inboxes and personal LinkedIn connections rather than in any system. This is usually the organisation's most valuable asset and the one with the highest evaporation rate per departure.

Financial reality. Restricted vs unrestricted funds, contracted backlog vs pipeline vs hope, what is actually committed for the next 12 months. In an older organisation, ask specifically what is funded by something that will not recur.

4. Goals: separate the stated from the revealed

There will be a strategy document. It will be sincere and it will be partly fictional: not through dishonesty, but because years of accumulation happen faster than anyone rewrites the story.

Roger Martin's point applies: strategy is what you do, not what you say. So reconstruct the *revealed* strategy from three sources that cannot lie:

1. **The budget.** Where does the money actually go, by flow?
2. **The senior calendar.** Where do the top five people's hours actually go?
3. **The hiring.** What roles has the organisation actually backfilled and protected through lean years?

Put the revealed strategy beside the stated one. **The gap between them is the most valuable single document you will produce in your first 90 days**, and it is the conversation the incumbent leadership structurally cannot have on its own, because they are inside it. It is also the one piece of work that

unambiguously justifies hiring you.

Hunt the zombies. A long-established organisation carries commitments nobody would start today: the conference attended because it has always been attended, the programme kept alive for one long-standing sponsor, the partnership whose champion left years ago. Find them with *"what would happen if we stopped doing this?"*, and watch for hesitation. The hesitation is the real answer: it tells you the commitment is load-bearing for a reason not written anywhere.

And every weird process is a scar. Before you remove one, ask what it was a response to. Often the original problem is genuinely gone and the process should go with it, but a good share of the time you will find the process is the only thing standing between the organisation and a repeat of something expensive. **Asking "what happened that made us start doing this?" is also the single most effective way to get a long-serving colleague to talk freely**, because it invites them to be the historian rather than the suspect.

5. Why nothing is written, and how to ask anyway

Understand how you look from the other side. A new leader arriving and asking for processes to be documented can reasonably be read as someone proposing to turn hard-won, privately held knowledge into public infrastructure. Where people come and go, long tenure and that knowledge are much of what gives the people who stayed their standing. You are asking them to share it before you have earned the trust to ask.

Six rules that defuse this:

1. **Never ask for someone's knowledge. Ask for their help on a live problem.** Pull, don't extract. "I have to sign off on this Thursday and I don't understand the risk. Can you walk me through it?" gets you the real map. "Can you document your process?" gets you a delay.
2. **Credit the source, permanently and in public.** Put a name and date on every document: *"Captured from [name], [month and year]."* This costs nothing, and it turns knowledge-sharing from a loss of standing into a durable form of recognition. It is the cheapest, most reliably effective move in this entire guide.
3. **Say early and publicly that you are not restructuring anything for six months**, and then don't. Candour is impossible while people are calculating whether talking to you costs them their job. Buying that candour is worth more than the six months of speed you give up.
4. **Ask for what already exists, not for something to be created.** "Show me the last one" is a request for a file. "Write me a process" is a request for unpaid work from someone at capacity.
5. **Find the frustrated reformers.** Most long-established organisations have two or three people who have tried to fix exactly this, were not heard, and have gone quiet. They will hand you the entire map in one afternoon and be grateful to be asked. Find them by asking *"what did you try to fix here and give up on?"*
6. **Find the historian.** Usually not senior, often in finance, administration or facilities: someone with many years in post who knows where everything is and why. They are rarely consulted by leadership and almost always willing.

The truth to hold in both hands: the long-serving people are your single greatest asset, and the organisation's reliance on what they carry in their heads is also why so little is written down. Both are true, and the second is not their fault. Treating them as an obstacle loses you the people; treating the situation as fine loses you the institution.

6. Make the turnover work for you

You cannot stop people moving on. You can change what happens at each end of it, and these two policies, together, are the structural fix. Everything else in this guide is diagnosis; this is the cure.

At the exit: a successor-facing handover, as a condition of departure. Not an exit interview: that is an HR ritual pointed at the past. A handover document written in the final three weeks, to a fixed one-page template, addressed to *whoever does this next*: live commitments and their state, who to call for what, credentials and where they live, what is about to break, what you'd do first. Make it a required step in the offboarding checklist alongside laptop return. **Where turnover is high, this is the single highest-leverage policy change available to you**, because it converts your worst structural weakness, frequent departure, into your documentation engine. Every leaver becomes a writer.

At the entrance: the new joiner's first deliverable is their function's gap list. Every new hire keeps the confusion log described in §2 for their first 30 days, and hands it in. It is not extra work: they are already suffering the gaps; you are only asking them to write down what they already had to ask. Their motivation is real and it expires: after about 60 days they will have absorbed the unwritten knowledge and stopped noticing the gaps. **The newcomer is the only free, self-renewing documentation instrument an organisation has, and virtually nobody uses it.**

Run both and, without ever launching a documentation project, the organisation documents itself at exactly the rate people move through it.

7. Documentation as byproduct: four rules

1. **Nothing gets documented in the abstract. It gets documented the next time it is done.** "Let's do it together and write it as we go": the writing costs 20 extra minutes on work that was happening anyway.
2. **One page, or it doesn't exist.** Length is not thoroughness; it is a guarantee of non-reading and non-maintenance.
3. **Decisions produce memos, and only forward.** Every decision from today: what was decided, by whom, why, what it obligates you to. Half a page. Do not attempt archaeology on past decisions: you will never finish, and the value is almost entirely in the forward record.
4. **The Tuesday test is the acceptance criterion.** Could a competent person who has never done this execute it next Tuesday from the document alone, without calling anyone? If not, it is a reminder, not documentation.

8. Sequence: 30 / 60 / 90

Days 1–30: instrument yourself and sweep. Keep the confusion log from day one. Run the fixed-question interviews (appendix) across as many people and as many *levels* as you can reach, deliberately including long-serving people who are not senior. Trace two flows end to end. Run the digital-estate and credential audit. Announce the no-restructuring-for-six-months commitment. Produce nothing public yet.

Days 31–60: publish something deliberately wrong. Draft the flow map, the org chart *as you actually observe it*, and the single-point-of-failure register, and circulate them explicitly labelled as wrong, asking for correction. **This is the most reliable single technique in this guide.** A request for information gets

ignored by busy people; an incorrect diagram of their own work is almost physically difficult to leave uncorrected. Correcting is cheap, creating is expensive, and you will learn more in one week of corrections than in a month of asking. Alongside this, reconstruct the revealed strategy from budget, calendar and hiring.

Days 61–90: convert to standing practice, and prove it once. Institute the exit handover and the new-joiner gap list. Start the decision log. Present the stated-vs-revealed strategy gap to leadership with the single-point-of-failure register attached: the risk register is what makes the strategy conversation actionable rather than philosophical. Then pick exactly *one* flow and actually fix it end to end, so the method has a demonstrated result attached to it rather than being a proposal.

9. What not to do

- **Don't commission an external org audit.** It produces a document the organisation did not ask for, in a vocabulary it does not use, and it marks you as an outsider auditing rather than a leader learning.
- **Don't buy a tool first.** A new wiki, Notion or SharePoint in an organisation that has never documented is a graveyard with a search bar. Tooling is never the bottleneck; incentive and slack are.
- **Don't reorganise before you can draw the current organisation accurately.** You will optimise a diagram rather than the work, and you will discover the load-bearing wall by removing it.
- **Don't try to be comprehensive.** Most of the institutional risk sits in a handful of flows and a handful of people. Cover those completely and the rest can wait.
- **Don't mistake the most fluent explainer for the most accurate one.** The person who explains the organisation best is often explaining it as it was when they learned it.
- **Don't let this become your job.** You were hired to lead, not to be the organisation's librarian. The four registers plus two policies are the whole standing commitment; if it grows beyond that, you have accepted a different role than the one you took.

10. Exit conditions: how you know it worked

Two falsifiable measures. Report the second one upward, monthly.

1. **The Tuesday test**, per flow: can a competent newcomer execute it from the document alone?
2. **The bus-factor count**: how many of your critical flows have exactly one person who can run them? It is a single integer, it is probably higher than anyone wants to admit, and it should fall every quarter. **It is also the only metric in this guide that a board will understand instantly and act on**, which makes it the one to lead with.

11. If the organisation spans borders

Everything above is harder across borders, in specific ways worth naming:

- **The same "process" is executed differently in every location, and each location believes theirs is the standard.** Trace every critical flow in at least two sites before believing any description of it.
- **Silos are physical, not merely social.** Where time zones barely overlap, the informal corridor knowledge-transfer that partially compensates for missing documentation does not happen at all. The undocumented organisation is *more* undocumented across a time-zone gap, not equally so.

- **Local legal, tax, employment and data regimes mean a documented process is only valid per jurisdiction.** A single global procedure that ignores this is worse than none, because it will be confidently followed into a compliance breach.
- **Language.** Knowledge held in a second language by its holder is systematically under-documented, because writing it down is far more expensive for them than saying it. Where this is happening, accept documents in whatever language they come in and translate afterwards.
- **Establish which legal entity actually employs whom, owns what, and signs what.** Older organisations that span borders often have entities, branches or affiliates whose relationship to each other nobody currently on staff can fully explain. Resolve this before it is discovered by an auditor or a dispute.

Appendix: the fixed question set

Ask these *verbatim* and to everyone, so answers are comparable and contradictions become visible (§2, instrument 4). Twenty to forty minutes each. Take notes in their words, not your summary.

On the work

1. Walk me through the last one you did, from it landing on you to it leaving you.
2. Show me the actual file or system you used. Where does that live?
3. In doing it, what did you have to ask a person for because you couldn't find it yourself? Who?

On the structure (this trio is the contradiction detector: expect incompatible answers)

4. Who decides this? And who has to be asked before it can move?
5. What's your part of it, and where does your part stop?
6. If this goes wrong, who hears about it first?

On the institution

7. What do people get wrong about your area in their first year here?
8. What used to be true here that isn't anymore, but people still act like it is?
9. What are we still doing that nobody would start today?
10. What happened that made us start doing it this way?

On risk and allies

11. If you were unreachable for a month starting tomorrow, what breaks?
12. What did you try to fix here and give up on? What stopped you?
13. If you left in three months, what's the one thing you'd worry nobody else knows?

Q12 finds your allies. Q13 populates the single-point-of-failure register faster than any audit, and people answer it honestly because it flatters rather than threatens.

Where this fits

Michael Watkins's five conversations for a new leader's first 90 days (situation, expectations, resources, style, personal development) remain correct and are complementary: they cover your relationship with the person you report to. This guide covers the institution, which is the harder half in an organisation like this. Planning

frameworks that align a team around a plan belong to the phase *after* this guide: used in the first 90 days, they would produce a tidy picture of an organisation nobody yet understands. Diagnose first, then plan.

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