



From aliena- tion to activa- tion

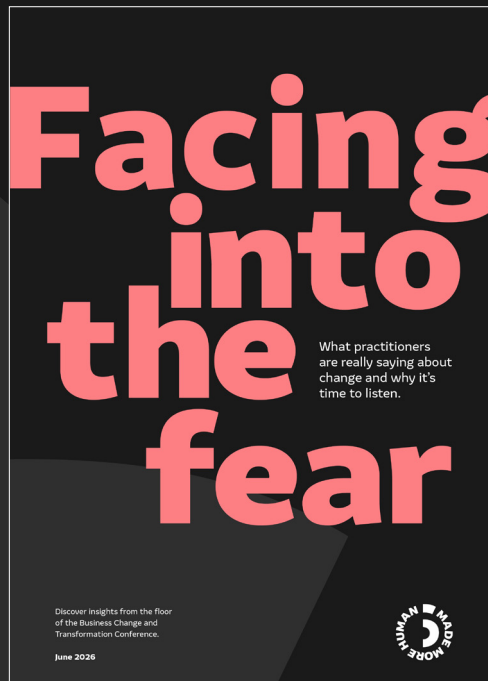
Why your strategy
needs a story that
your people can see
themselves in.

October 2026

Alienation is not disengagement or resistance; it is something more structural.

This report is built on a research partnership between Six and Bristol Business School, University of the West of England (UWE), exploring workplace alienation as a distinct organisational condition.

It's written for CPOs, CHROs, Heads of Internal Comms and Transformation Directors navigating change in complex organisations.



If you've also read Six's conference report, Facing into the Fear, you'll recognise the research and this piece goes deeper in naming the four specific ways alienation appears, and explains what can reverse each one.

Your strategy is an invitation to your teams to collectively achieve something. Your narrative gives them the clarity, motivation and inspiration they need to play their part in it.

Across complex organisations, we see leaders noticing the same pattern: engagement scores remain lowish but steady, while executional momentum becomes harder to sustain.

While strategy is clear in the boardroom, it seems to be diluted by the time it reaches the teams who are responsible for delivering it. And, while ‘engagement’ is the term we use to indicate how teams feel about doing what’s needed, new research has rediscovered a name for the actual problem behind why they don’t: **alienation**.

Alienation is not disengagement, laziness or a lack of motivation. It’s the quiet, chronic distance people feel from their organisation, their colleagues, their work and sometimes themselves, even as they keep showing up, staying busy, and delivering.

Research from Bristol Business School at UWE, identifies four forms this takes:

Powerlessness

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Meaninglessness

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Social isolation

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Self-estrangement

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The opportunity to reverse alienation comes in the form of a strategic narrative, imbued with meaning that people co-create for themselves.

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What is work- place aliena- tion

UWE's research identifies four specific ways this disconnection shows up in the real working world:

1. Powerlessness

People feel responsibility without influence. Decisions that affect them are made without their input; they speak up and nothing changes.

“The strategy was designed by external consultants. Nobody delivering it was consulted.”

Delegate, Business Change & Transformation Conference,
May 2026

2. Meaninglessness

Alienation is quiet, often private, and usually misread by managers as a performance issue rather than a structural one.

People can't connect their work to anything that matters. Tasks feel like box-ticking, disconnected from strategy or purpose.

“Lots of information. No inspiration.”

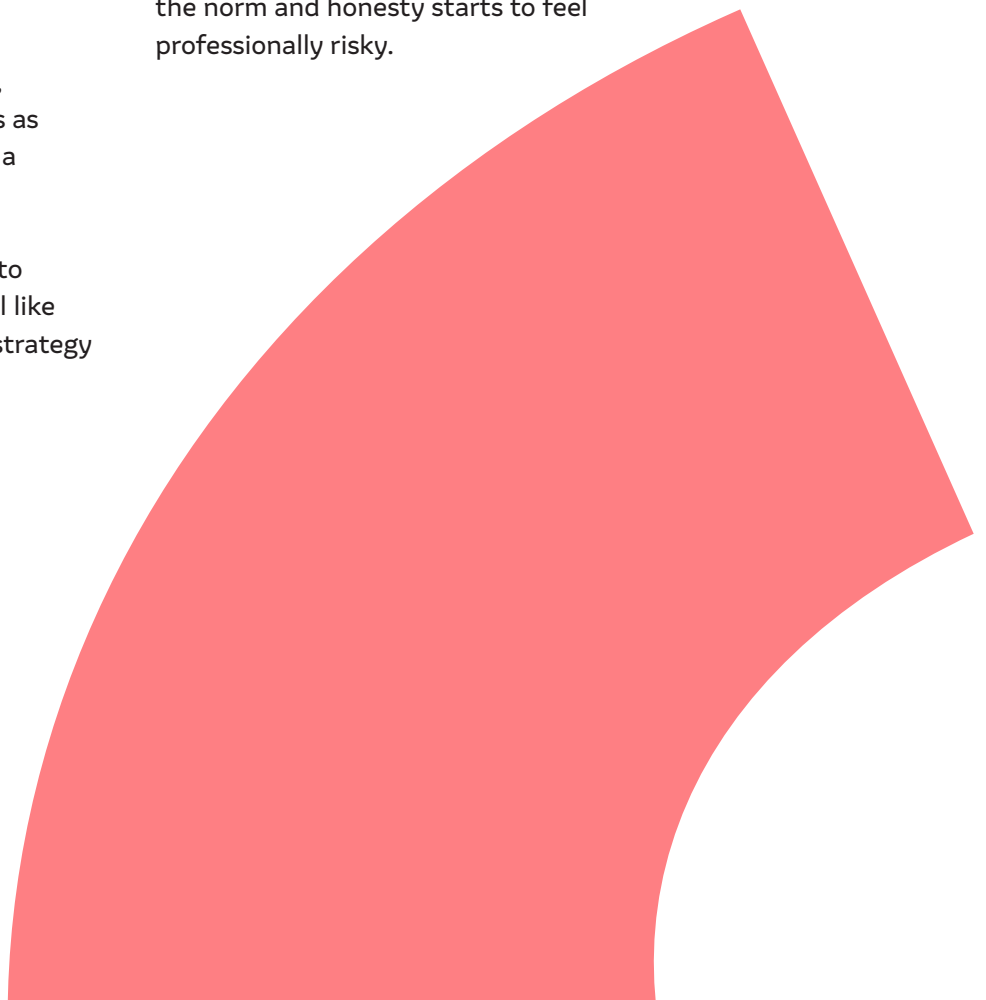
Delegate, Business Change & Transformation Conference,
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3. Social isolation

People feel alone, even when surrounded by colleagues. Hybrid work becomes transactional, stripped of informal community, with cameras off, one saturated channel and no-one holding the team together.

4. Self-estrangement

People can't recognise themselves in the organisation's ambition, values or behaviours. They feel pressure to perform a filtered version of themselves. This is where toxic positivity becomes the norm and honesty starts to feel professionally risky.



These four conditions rarely appear in isolation. Instead they seem to layer and someone who feels powerless and isolated stops contributing their ideas altogether. Someone who feels work is meaningless and self-estranged stops seeing a future in the organisation.

Someone experiencing all four may still attend every meeting and hit every deadline, but, emotionally, they've already left.

Alienation is not a personal flaw. It's an organisational signal that clarity, belonging, purpose or identity is not being supported by the environment.

Why this matters

The business cost:

Slower strategy execution and decision bottlenecks
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Discretionary effort collapse: compliance without commitment
.....

Knowledge loss and duplicated effort across isolated teams
.....

Burnout, attrition and reduced innovation
.....

Trust in senior leaders has fallen 9 points in a single year, and there is a 30-point gap between what senior leaders think has landed and what non-managers actually experience.¹

That gap isn't a communications failure so much as a proximity failure: the further people are from the decision, the less the story makes sense to them.

From alienation

The Research and our **Facing into the Fear** paper named the problem. This is what Six does, helping our clients deliver a closer affinity with storytelling, across a business, brand or team. Each driver of alienation maps to a specific phase of Activate™, our proven methodology.

Alienation driver	Business risk	Activate™ intervention
Powerlessness	Slow decisions, bottlenecks	Clarify & Align A co-created narrative built with, not cascaded to, the people delivering it
Meaninglessness	Discretionary effort collapse	Motivate & Inspire Storytelling that connects individual task to organisational purpose
Social isolation	Knowledge loss, duplication	Operationalise & Embed Middle-Manager sense making and toolkits
Self-estrangement	Burnout, attrition, low innovation	Leadership modelling Honest and empowering interventions that gives people permission to be a beginner

This is the difference between a diagnosis and an intervention. Most change programmes are designed to overcome resistance. Yet, you cannot communicate your way out of alienation, and you cannot run a workshop that fixes it in a day.

But you can build, deliberately and over time, the conditions where powerlessness becomes agency, meaninglessness becomes significance, isolation becomes belonging, and self-estrangement becomes self-realisation

To activation

At the heart of this is our capability to help our clients co-create and build a narrative.

**Why
strategic
narrative is
the lever**

A strategic narrative is neither a charismatic script or a PowerPoint deck.

It's a system for creating clarity, connection and meaning, built around Six's own IP that determines whether a strategy lands or loses energy:

**Clarity,
Alignment,
Motivation,
Inspiration,
Operationalising
and Embedding.**

A leader who can say 'this is hard but here's what it means and why it matters' is worth more than any amount of top-down communication. The organisations where change sticks treat the middle-management layer as genuine meaning-making infrastructure, not a cascade mechanism, and equip that layer with a narrative they actually believe.

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Measuring the shift

You can't fix what you can't see, and you shouldn't invest in a programme before understanding the real problem.

Six's diagnostic partner for this is Bristol Business School (UWE). Together we'll help you understand what your people are actually experiencing before it's filtered by hierarchy, before it shows up as a resignation or a programme failure.

Diagnosing before intervening creates an authentic approach from the start. It shows where alienation is building, where energy is going and where the strategy isn't landing, before you commit to solving the wrong problem.

**UWE
Bristol** | University
of the
West of
England

Alienation doesn't announce itself. It doesn't show up as rebellion or a dramatic dip in engagement scores, at least not straight away. It shows up as slower decisions, quieter rooms, and a middle layer too tired to say the real thing. Left alone, the gap between the story that leaders tell and the experience people have widens a little more with every cycle.

Naming it early is the cheaper option.

**The
risk of
not
acting.**

Two ways in

If you're not sure what's actually blocking you, find out first.

Along with Bristol Business School, we can work with you to surface what's really happening on the ground within your organisation.

If you already know what's broken and you're ready to move, come and work it through.

A taster workshop.

A half-day working session built around a real challenge you're facing right now - not a methodology presentation. We help you clarify the real problem, what the narrative needs to do, and what activation looks like in your context.



Who you'd be working with



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six.agency

Sources & references

¹ IC Index 2026: The Reality Check – Institute of Internal Communication / Ipsos Karian and Box

² Gallup State of the Global Workplace 2024

³ From Alienation to Activation – Six / Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, 2026