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Purpose Capture: How Corporate Purpose Is Controlled by the Very Actors It Was Intended to Constrain

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Abstract

Corporate purpose is commonly presented as a means of broadening organizational responsibility beyond short-term shareholder value. Yet purpose does not enter practice intact. It must be interpreted, translated into routines, converted into indicators, and assigned to organizational functions. This paper develops a process theory of purpose capture to explain how the actors charged with operationalizing a broad purpose can acquire authority to redefine it around their own priorities, measures, and constraints. Purpose capture is defined as the progressive concentration of semantic, operational, and evaluative authority through which a morally plural purpose is transformed into a narrower organizational program while retaining the legitimacy of the original aspiration. The process unfolds through moral articulation, interpretive competition, operational translation, metric ownership, stakeholder narrowing, and purpose inversion. Six generative mechanisms explain movement across these phases: moral underspecification, jurisdictional advantage, tractability selection, metric enclosure, representational filtration, and justificatory reversal. The theory distinguishes purpose capture from decoupling, purpose-washing, mission drift, goal displacement, and hybrid-organizing tensions. It also identifies four implementation configurations and develops propositions concerning purpose specificity, functional power, measurement concentration, stakeholder voice, board custodianship, and temporal pressure. The resulting framework recasts purpose implementation as a contested governance process over who may define organizational value, whose claims remain visible, and which forms of evidence determine whether purpose has been realized.

Keywords: corporate purpose; purpose capture; stakeholder governance; translation; performance measurement; institutional work; organizational power

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1. Introduction

Corporate purpose has moved from the margins of management discourse to the center of debates about the corporation, stakeholder governance, and the public responsibilities of business. Purpose is increasingly expected to explain why an organization exists, what forms of value it seeks to create, and whose interests should count in strategic decisions. Contemporary scholarship treats purpose as more than a mission statement. It can operate as an organizational objective, a moral orientation, a source of meaning, a governance device, and a framework for allocating value among stakeholders (George et al., 2023; Morrison & Mota, 2023; Ocasio et al., 2023). Recent reviews nevertheless show that purpose research remains fragmented across strategy, organizational behavior, business ethics, sustainability, and corporate governance, with different streams emphasizing statements, experiences, decisions, or societal consequences (Chua et al., 2024; Durand & Huynh, 2024).

The growing attention to purpose reflects dissatisfaction with organizational models that treat financial growth as the primary criterion of success. Calls for purposeful management ask corporations and management systems to contribute to public goods, address environmental and social problems, and consider a wider set of stakeholders (Hollensbe et al., 2014; Mayer, 2021; Markman et al., 2025). Purpose can also change the meaning of everyday work when leaders connect local tasks to a credible larger contribution (Carton, 2018). Purpose can alter how organizations define success because goals and performance are never neutral. They express judgments about which outcomes deserve priority, whose welfare matters, and which trade-offs are acceptable (Aguilera et al., 2024). Purpose therefore has the potential to broaden the organizational objective function and challenge inherited assumptions about value creation and appropriation.

That promise creates a difficult implementation problem. Purpose is typically articulated in broad moral language: improving lives, advancing inclusion, protecting the planet, creating shared prosperity, or serving communities. Such formulations are valuable partly because they can accommodate plural values and mobilize diverse constituencies. Yet an organization cannot act through aspiration alone. Strategy teams must define priorities, finance functions must allocate resources, legal units must identify obligations, human resource departments must translate purpose into roles and incentives, communications teams must produce narratives, and measurement specialists must design indicators. The movement from aspiration to action is therefore also a movement through specialized organizational jurisdictions.

Existing research often interprets implementation failure as a gap between talk and action. Research on integrated and decoupled ethics programs demonstrates that formal commitment and operational integration can vary independently (Weaver et al., 1999). Decoupling theory explains how organizations adopt formal policies while practices remain unchanged, while research on corporate hypocrisy, greenwashing, and purpose-washing examines discrepancies between public claims and actual conduct (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Crilly et al., 2012; Wickert et al., 2016). These perspectives are essential when purpose is symbolic or ignored. They are less able to explain a different and potentially more consequential outcome: the organization may genuinely implement purpose, devote resources to it, create routines and measures around it, and still transform its meaning in the process.

Consider a company that adopts a purpose centered on dignified employment. Human resources may operationalize dignity through engagement scores, finance may restrict implementation to initiatives with measurable productivity returns, legal may define dignity as regulatory compliance, and communications may emphasize awards and external rankings. Each function can act in good faith. The organization may spend money, redesign policies, and report improvements. Yet employees' concerns about insecurity, workload, collective voice, or distributive fairness can gradually fall outside the recognized meaning of dignity. Purpose is not decoupled from practice. It is translated into a narrower form that is more manageable for the functions controlling implementation.

This paper conceptualizes that process as purpose capture. Purpose capture occurs when actors responsible for operationalizing a broad organizational purpose acquire the authority to redefine that purpose around their own priorities, measures, and constraints. The result is not necessarily abandonment. Purpose remains active and organizationally consequential, but its moral breadth is reduced, its stakeholder field is narrowed, and its evaluative criteria become concentrated. In the limiting case, purpose inversion occurs: the purpose begins legitimizing the same decisions, priorities, or distributions that it was originally intended to challenge. The central research question is therefore: How does a morally broad corporate purpose become controlled and transformed by the actors responsible for implementing it? Addressing this question requires connecting corporate purpose research with translation theory, performance measurement, stakeholder governance, institutional work, and organizational power. Translation scholarship shows that ideas do not travel unchanged. They are edited, contextualized, and reconstructed as they move into practice (Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). Adaptation pressures create variation as practices diffuse (Ansari et al., 2010), while discursive devices help translators stabilize some meanings and marginalize others (Mueller & Whittle, 2011). Measurement scholarship shows that indicators do not simply record priorities; they create visibility, organize attention, and reshape behavior (Espeland & Stevens, 1998; Miller & Power, 2013). Stakeholder theory asks whose claims receive recognition and how governance arrangements distribute voice and value (Mitchell

et al., 1997; Harrison & Wicks, 2013). Power research explains why some organizational functions are better positioned than others to define reality and make their interpretations appear necessary (Fleming & Spicer, 2014).

The theory makes four moves. First, it distinguishes purpose capture from familiar concepts such as decoupling, purpose-washing, mission drift, and goal displacement. Second, it identifies three forms of implementation authority: semantic authority over what purpose means, operational authority over what counts as action, and evaluative authority over what counts as achievement. Third, it develops a six-movement process model comprising moral articulation, interpretive competition, operational translation, metric ownership, stakeholder narrowing, and purpose inversion. Fourth, it identifies governance arrangements that can preserve purpose as a plural and revisable commitment rather than allowing implementation expertise to become moral ownership.

Purpose capture matters because implementation is often treated as a technical stage that follows normative agreement. The theory developed here reverses that assumption. Implementation is where the moral content of purpose is redistributed. Decisions about indicators, budgets, legal categories, reporting boundaries, and strategic priorities determine which stakeholder claims remain intelligible. Corporate purpose is therefore not governed only when boards adopt it. It is governed repeatedly through the mundane organizational work that decides what can be counted, funded, assigned, audited, and defended.

2. Corporate Purpose, Translation, and Organizational Control

Purpose scholarship has developed along several partially connected lines. A goal-based view treats purpose as an overarching organizational objective, while duty-based approaches emphasize values, stewardship, and contributions to society (George et al., 2023). A social-actor view asks how an organization forms and sustains collective intentionality (Morrison & Mota, 2023). Experience-based research examines how employees perceive organizational purpose and connect it to meaningful work (Jasinenko & Steuber, 2023). Governance perspectives focus on the legal and institutional arrangements that determine whose interests inform corporate decision-making (Aguilera, 2023; Davis, 2021). These approaches differ, but each implies that purpose must shape organizational choices rather than remain a statement.

Ocasio et al. (2023) describe corporate purpose as a sensemaking problem involving values, stakeholder relations, and strategic leadership. Purpose must provide enough coherence to orient action while remaining responsive to contested social expectations. Almandoz (2023) distinguishes inside-out purpose, rooted in organizational identity and commitments, from outside-in purpose, which begins with societal needs. The distinction is useful because many corporate purposes combine both directions. Organizations seek to remain authentic to an internal identity while claiming relevance to external problems. That combination increases interpretive complexity because internal functions and external stakeholders may disagree about what the purpose requires.

Purpose implementation is consequently not the execution of a fixed instruction. It resembles translation. Organizational translation research rejects the view that ideas diffuse as stable packages. Ideas are edited as actors make them locally intelligible and practicable (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). Recipients select elements, attach new rationales, combine the idea with existing routines, and discard features judged incompatible with local arrangements. Translation can increase adoption because it reduces distance between an abstract idea and a specific context, but it can also preserve existing practices under the appearance of change (Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Waldorff & Madsen, 2023).

The translation of purpose is especially consequential because purpose is not an ordinary management technique. It contains claims about organizational ends. Translating a quality-management system may change procedures while leaving the organization's basic objectives intact. Translating purpose can alter the objectives themselves, the relative standing of stakeholders, and the moral grounds used to justify decisions. The translator therefore does not merely adapt means. The translator can redefine ends.

Translation also occurs through material and calculative devices. Strategy maps, budgets, dashboards, scorecards, incentive systems, risk registers, reporting standards, and key performance indicators make purpose operational. Such devices can coordinate attention across large organizations, but they do so by selecting what is representable. Commensuration transforms different qualities into a common metric and makes comparison possible, while simultaneously removing contextual differences that do not survive the conversion (Espeland & Stevens, 1998). Contemporary quantification research emphasizes that numbers are social technologies whose authority depends on classification, expertise, and institutional use (Mennicken & Espeland, 2019). Rankings and indicators can become reactive because actors reorganize behavior around the measure, changing the phenomenon supposedly being observed (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Sauder & Espeland, 2009).

Performance measures are not necessarily hostile to purpose. Beer et al. (2022) show that measurement can help employees see impact and experience work as worthy. Strategic performance systems can coordinate objectives while also producing paradoxes when partial indicators are treated as comprehensive representations (Micheli & Manzoni, 2010). Visual devices such as the Balanced Scorecard actively organize dialogue and interpretation rather than merely displaying neutral information (Busco & Quattrone, 2015). Yet measures can also constrain how mission is understood. Jordan and Messner (2012) demonstrate that incomplete indicators may initially be tolerated as useful guides but become problematic when external pressure turns them into comprehensive judgments. Townley et al. (2003) similarly show that performance measures rationalize organizations by imposing categories and comparisons. The issue is therefore not whether purpose is measured, but who controls the movement from moral aspiration to measurable representation and whether unmeasured claims retain organizational standing.

Stakeholder governance adds a second source of complexity. Freeman's (1984) foundational formulation treats the firm as a system of relationships, while Phillips et al. (2003) clarify that stakeholder theory does not imply equal treatment of every claim. Corporate purpose therefore requires justified differentiation rather than indiscriminate inclusion. The political role of business further complicates implementation because corporate decisions increasingly affect domains once governed primarily through public institutions (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Purpose is often justified as a commitment to create value for multiple stakeholders rather than only shareholders. Stakeholder salience, however, depends on power, legitimacy, and urgency, which are unevenly distributed (Mitchell et al., 1997). Issue salience is also cognitively mediated, so managers prioritize concerns that resonate with strategic frames and organizational identity (Bundy et al., 2013). Even well-intentioned managers face conflicting claims and may prefer stakeholders whose expectations are easier to measure, negotiate, or align with strategy. Bridoux and Stoelhorst (2014) show that stakeholder cooperation depends on governance arrangements and reciprocal behavior, while Bacq and Aguilera (2022) emphasize value creation, appropriation, and distribution. Purpose implementation therefore involves political choices about which stakeholders participate in defining value and which are treated mainly as recipients of organizational decisions.

Recent evidence from certified B Corporations suggests that organization-specific purpose can help firms select supportive stakeholders, reduce conflict, and foster collaboration (Klettner et al., 2026). That finding also reveals a governance tension. Purpose can coordinate stakeholder relations, but the organization may use purpose to select stakeholders rather than allowing stakeholders to shape purpose. A broad commitment can thus become a boundary device separating supportive claims from claims considered obstructive, unrealistic, or outside scope.

Institutional work provides a third lens. Meaning and legitimacy are constructed through multilevel processes in which organizational claims interact with collective judgments (Suchman, 1995; Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Institutions are sustained and changed through purposive activities that create, maintain, or disrupt meanings and practices (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009). Purpose implementation involves such work because it requires embedding new values in organizational categories, routines, and governance arrangements. Studies of symbolic institutional work show that meanings are not secondary to practice; they are actively translated through stories, categories, and artifacts that connect institutional ideals with local action (Zilber, 2002, 2006). The actors doing this work possess unequal resources and positions. Strategy,

finance, legal, and communications functions often control valued expertise, access to senior decision-makers, and the organizational devices through which purpose becomes actionable. Their interpretations can gain authority not because they are normatively superior, but because they are administratively indispensable.

Power is thus embedded in implementation. Resource dependence gives functions influence when they control critical resources or manage uncertainty (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Discursive and systemic power operate when particular vocabularies and procedures define what can be said and done (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). A finance team can narrow purpose through investment criteria; legal can narrow it through liability categories; strategy can narrow it through competitive positioning; communications can narrow it through reputational narratives; measurement specialists can narrow it through indicator design. These functions need not conspire. Capture can emerge from the cumulative effects of reasonable local decisions.

Existing concepts illuminate parts of this pattern but do not fully explain it. Decoupling concerns separation between formal structures and practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012). Purpose-washing concerns misleading claims that overstate substantive commitment. Mission drift concerns movement away from an organization's founding mission, often under commercial or institutional pressures (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Grimes et al., 2019). Hybrid-organizing research examines sustained tensions among competing logics and goals (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Battilana et al., 2022). Reviews of social enterprise emphasize the persistent risk that hybrid forms privilege one mission under resource and accountability pressures (Doherty et al., 2014), while comparative studies show that governance arrangements shape whether institutional plurality remains productive or becomes dominated by one logic (Mair et al., 2015). Ashforth and Reingen (2014) further demonstrate that organizational dualities can generate both dysfunction and useful tension rather than requiring immediate resolution. Goal displacement describes means becoming ends. Purpose capture differs because it can occur while purpose remains formally central, implementation remains substantive, and organizational actors believe they are advancing the purpose. The transformation occurs inside implementation itself.

3. Conceptualizing Purpose Capture

Purpose capture is defined as the progressive concentration of semantic, operational, and evaluative authority through which actors responsible for implementing a broad organizational purpose redefine it around their own priorities, measures, and constraints while retaining the legitimacy of the original aspiration. Three elements are essential. First, capture concerns authority, not merely interpretation. Organizations always interpret purpose, but capture occurs when some interpretations acquire privileged power to determine action. Second, the purpose remains organizationally active. Capture is not abandonment. Third, the narrowed version continues to borrow legitimacy from the broader purpose, allowing the organization to present technical or strategic choices as moral realization.

Semantic authority is the recognized capacity to define what the purpose means. Broad purposes contain unavoidable ambiguity. Terms such as dignity, sustainability, inclusion, community benefit, and responsible innovation support multiple interpretations. Semantic authority determines which interpretation becomes official and which are dismissed as peripheral. It can be exercised through strategy documents, policy definitions, legal opinions, leadership communications, and approved narratives.

Operational authority is the capacity to determine what activities count as implementation. A purpose can be defined broadly while operationalized narrowly. For example, a commitment to community well-being may become a portfolio of charitable initiatives rather than changes to employment, tax, pricing, or environmental practices. Operational authority decides which organizational domains must change, what resources are allocated, and which trade-offs are considered legitimate.

Evaluative authority is the capacity to determine what evidence counts as purpose achievement. Indicators, ratings, audits, targets, and impact reports confer visibility on selected outcomes. Evaluative authority becomes concentrated when one function or measurement system can declare success despite unresolved stakeholder claims. The importance of evaluative authority follows from the fact that goals and performance

form a coupled system. What counts as success depends on which goals are recognized and how outcomes are assessed (Aguilera et al., 2024).

Purpose capture can be intentional, opportunistic, or emergent. Intentional capture occurs when actors deliberately reshape purpose to protect established priorities. Opportunistic capture occurs when functions use ambiguity to expand jurisdiction or resources. Emergent capture occurs without a single controlling actor as local translations cumulatively narrow the purpose. The emergent form may be most common because each decision can appear technically justified while the overall transformation remains unplanned.

Capture also varies in completeness. Partial capture narrows one dimension of purpose while leaving others open. A company may retain broad semantic language but restrict operational scope. Metric capture concentrates evaluative authority even when stakeholder participation remains strong during interpretation. Full capture combines concentrated semantic, operational, and evaluative authority. Under full capture, the organizational function that defines the purpose also selects the activities and judges the results.

The concept is relational. Capture is not a property of a purpose statement alone. It arises from relationships among purpose custodians, implementing functions, governance bodies, stakeholders, and evaluative devices. A specific indicator is not inherently capturing. It becomes part of capture when alternative interpretations and evidence lose standing. Likewise, specialist expertise is not problematic by itself. Capture occurs when expertise becomes exclusive authority over moral meaning.

Purpose capture is also temporal. Early implementation choices can create path dependence. Once purpose is embedded in budgets, data systems, reporting templates, executive incentives, and stakeholder narratives, alternative interpretations become costly to restore. Material devices stabilize particular translations, and subsequent organizational learning occurs within the narrowed frame (D'Adderio, 2008; Miller & Power, 2013). The organization can then mistake the durability of the implementation system for evidence that the interpretation was inevitable.

Table 1 distinguishes purpose capture from adjacent constructs. The distinctions matter because purpose capture can be overlooked when researchers search only for inconsistency between claims and actions. A captured purpose may display strong internal consistency. The problem is that the consistent system implements a transformed purpose.

Table 1. Purpose capture compared with related constructs.

Concept	Primary concern	Typical pattern	Distinctive feature of purpose capture
Decoupling	Formal structures or claims are separated from practice	Practice may remain unchanged	Purpose capture can involve extensive, internally consistent implementation
Purpose-washing	Purpose claims overstate substantive commitment	Credibility gap between communication and conduct	Capture can occur without deceptive intent and with real resource commitment
Mission drift	An organization moves away from its original mission	External pressure or internal evolution changes priorities	Capture transforms the mission through implementation while preserving its formal authority
Goal displacement	Means become treated as ends	Procedures or indicators replace substantive goals	Capture includes displacement but also explains who gains authority to redefine the end
Hybrid-organizing tension	Competing logics or goals coexist	Organizations manage persistent plurality	Capture explains how one coalition narrows plurality while claiming to integrate it
Purpose capture	Implementation authority reshapes moral meaning	Semantic, operational, and evaluative authority become concentrated	Purpose remains active but becomes narrower and may ultimately legitimate inherited priorities

4. A Process Theory of Purpose Capture

Purpose capture unfolds through six connected movements. The sequence is analytical rather than mechanically fixed. Interpretation, measurement, and stakeholder narrowing can overlap, and organizations

may move backward when contestation reopens purpose. The model nevertheless identifies a recurrent logic: moral breadth creates implementation ambiguity; ambiguity creates demand for specialist interpretation; specialist interpretation privileges tractable actions; tractable actions become stabilized by metrics; metrics narrow the recognized stakeholder field; and the narrowed system ultimately justifies the priorities the original purpose was expected to question.

4.1. Moral Articulation and Moral Underspecification

The process begins with moral articulation. Organizational leaders, boards, founders, employees, or external stakeholders formulate a purpose that links the organization to a higher-order contribution. Moral articulation is often broad because purpose must bridge identities, business units, and stakeholder groups. Hollensbe et al. (2014) argue that purpose should connect business with the common good and values such as dignity, solidarity, plurality, subsidiarity, and reciprocity. Broad language can inspire commitment precisely because it does not reduce moral value to one operational formula.

Broad articulation creates moral underspecification. Moral underspecification is the gap between an attractive higher-order commitment and the concrete rules needed to resolve conflicts among values, stakeholders, and time horizons. Underspecification is not necessarily a flaw. A fully specified purpose might be too rigid to guide action across uncertain conditions. Yet underspecification makes implementation dependent on subsequent interpretation. Whoever is authorized to fill the gap can influence the practical meaning of the purpose.

Inside-out and outside-in purposes generate different forms of underspecification. Inside-out purpose may be clear about identity but vague about social consequences, while outside-in purpose may identify societal needs but leave unclear how deeply the business model must change (Almandoz, 2023). Purpose that combines both directions can create ambiguity about whether organizational authenticity or external impact should dominate when the two conflict.

Proposition 1. The broader and more morally plural the articulated purpose, the greater the interpretive discretion available during implementation unless the organization also specifies decision principles for resolving stakeholder and value conflicts.

Proposition 2. Moral underspecification is more likely to initiate purpose capture when the actors participating in articulation are different from the actors controlling implementation.

4.2. Interpretive Competition and Jurisdictional Advantage

Once articulated, purpose enters interpretive competition. Organizational functions propose different accounts of what the purpose requires. Strategy may frame purpose as differentiation and long-term positioning. Finance may frame it as disciplined allocation to projects that create measurable enterprise value. Legal may frame it as fiduciary, regulatory, and liability-compatible conduct. Human resources may frame it as culture and employee experience. Communications may frame it as narrative credibility. Sustainability professionals may frame it as impact and stakeholder accountability.

Interpretive competition is not simply a battle of ideas. Functions possess unequal jurisdictional advantage. Jurisdictional advantage is the capacity to make an interpretation appear authoritative because the function controls resources, expertise, or access required for implementation. A purpose interpretation linked to the capital-budgeting process may prevail over one supported by community deliberation because the former can authorize spending. A legal interpretation may become decisive because it can define exposure. A strategy interpretation may dominate because senior governance routines are organized around strategic plans.

Institutional complexity research shows that actors respond to competing logics according to position, identity, and available practices (Pache & Santos, 2010; Reay & Hinings, 2009). Purpose adds another layer because the conflict concerns organizational ends. Actors may sincerely support the same purpose while

attaching it to different logics. Interpretive competition therefore often appears as coordination rather than contestation, making power less visible.

Proposition 3. Purpose capture is more likely when implementing functions possess greater jurisdictional advantage than the stakeholders or governance bodies that participated in moral articulation.

Proposition 4. Interpretive competition will produce greater narrowing when one function can translate its preferred meaning directly into resource-allocation or risk-approval processes.

4.3. Operational Translation and Tractability Selection

The third movement is operational translation. Purpose must be connected to activities, routines, products, employment practices, sourcing decisions, investment criteria, and partnerships. Translation can preserve moral ambition when it creates multiple pathways and leaves room for revision. It can also produce tractability selection, the systematic preference for interpretations that can be assigned, funded, standardized, and monitored using existing organizational systems.

Tractability selection narrows purpose without requiring opposition to it. Managers face deadlines, limited attention, and demands for accountability. Actions that fit existing structures appear feasible, while actions requiring business-model redesign, stakeholder redistribution, or new capabilities appear uncertain. Translation scholarship shows that ideas are rendered locally appropriate through editing rules and change interventions (Morris & Lancaster, 2006). In purpose implementation, appropriateness often means compatibility with existing responsibilities and technologies.

Selective coupling in hybrid organizations demonstrates that actors can combine elements of competing logics rather than choose one completely (Pache & Santos, 2013). Purpose capture can emerge when selective coupling becomes asymmetrical. Social or moral elements are included only where they complement established commercial practices. Elements that question pricing, ownership, labor relations, or distribution are excluded as impractical. The organization can therefore claim integrated purpose while the terms of integration protect one logic.

Operational translation also creates scope boundaries. A company may define purpose as applying to products but not taxation, to philanthropy but not supply-chain contracting, or to innovation but not workforce restructuring. Such boundaries are rarely neutral. They determine where moral commitments can challenge core activities and where they remain supplementary.

Proposition 5. Operational translation will narrow purpose when existing routines and capabilities are treated as fixed constraints rather than as objects that the purpose may require the organization to change.

Proposition 6. Tractability selection is more likely to produce capture when the organization rewards rapid implementation and visible initiatives more strongly than difficult changes to value distribution or governance.

4.4. Metric Ownership and Metric Enclosure

The fourth movement is metric ownership. Once initiatives are selected, organizations seek indicators that demonstrate progress. Measurement can make purpose credible, support learning, and connect mission with everyday work (Beer et al., 2022). Yet measurement also allocates authority. The designers and owners of indicators decide which outcomes are visible, how trade-offs are aggregated, and what threshold constitutes success.

Metric enclosure occurs when the measured representation of purpose becomes the exclusive or dominant basis for organizational judgment. Under metric enclosure, values that lack stable indicators lose influence, even if they were central to the original purpose. Commensuration makes heterogeneous outcomes

comparable, but comparison requires assumptions about equivalence and weighting (Espeland & Stevens, 1998). A single purpose score can conceal distributive questions by aggregating gains to one stakeholder with losses to another.

Measures also create feedback. Rankings and targets alter behavior as units optimize what is counted (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). Incomplete indicators can become comprehensive when they are tied to incentives, budgets, or external reporting (Jordan & Messner, 2012). Purpose becomes increasingly identified with the data infrastructure created to assess it. This can generate an epistemic inversion: instead of indicators serving purpose, purpose is defined by what indicators can show.

Metric ownership is especially powerful when purpose performance is integrated into executive compensation or investment screening. Such integration may strengthen accountability, but it also raises the stakes of indicator design. Actors have incentives to select targets that are controllable, auditable, and attainable. Ambitious stakeholder claims can be transformed into proxy measures that demonstrate improvement without resolving the underlying concern.

Proposition 7. Purpose capture is more likely when evaluative authority is concentrated in a single measurement system whose indicators are tied to resource allocation, incentives, or external legitimacy.

Proposition 8. Metric enclosure will increase stakeholder narrowing when stakeholder claims differ in measurability and the organization treats measurement difficulty as evidence of lower relevance.

4.5. Stakeholder Narrowing and Representational Filtration

The fifth movement is stakeholder narrowing. Purpose may initially invoke a wide stakeholder community, but implementation requires concrete channels of representation. Some stakeholders participate through boards, advisory panels, employee forums, partnerships, or consultation. Others are represented through surveys, ratings, risk models, market research, or managerial assumptions. Representation is never complete. Representational filtration is the process through which stakeholder claims are selected, reformatted, or excluded as they pass through organizational channels. Claims compatible with approved categories survive more easily. Stakeholders able to provide data, access decision-makers, or impose resource dependence are more likely to remain salient (Mitchell et al., 1997). Diffuse, future, marginalized, or nonmarket stakeholders often depend on intermediaries whose interpretations can be challenged as subjective.

Stakeholder governance can reduce conflict by attracting aligned stakeholders and creating collaborative processes (Klettner et al., 2026). Yet alignment can become filtering when the organization privileges stakeholders who endorse the operationalized purpose. Dissenting stakeholders may be treated as misunderstanding the purpose rather than contesting its captured form. Purpose then becomes a criterion for stakeholder legitimacy rather than an object of stakeholder governance.

Narrowing can also occur through aggregation. A stakeholder category such as employees, communities, or customers is represented by an average score. Internal differences disappear, and benefits to more visible groups can offset harms to less visible groups. The organization gains a coherent account while plural experiences are compressed.

Proposition 9. Stakeholder narrowing is more likely when participation is advisory while implementing functions control the categories and evidence through which stakeholder input enters decisions.

Proposition 10. Purpose capture will deepen when organizations use alignment with the operationalized purpose as a basis for selecting legitimate stakeholders, thereby excluding actors who challenge the translation itself.

4.6. Purpose Inversion and Justificatory Reversal

The final movement is purpose inversion. Purpose inversion occurs when the narrowed implementation begins legitimizing the priorities that the original purpose was intended to broaden, constrain, or challenge. The purpose may have been adopted to shift attention beyond short-term shareholder returns, but its metrics become evidence that financial discipline already serves stakeholders. A commitment to inclusion may justify standardized talent systems because they improve aggregate diversity indicators, even when affected groups question voice or advancement. A sustainability purpose may legitimize growth because efficiency measures show declining impact per unit while total impact rises.

The mechanism is justificatory reversal. The organization no longer asks whether inherited priorities are consistent with purpose. Instead, the existence of purpose systems is used to validate inherited priorities. Purpose functions as a moral certificate attached to strategy, finance, or reputation. The stronger the implementation apparatus becomes, the easier it is to claim that decisions passing through that apparatus are purposeful.

Aspirational talk can be productive because commitments create expectations that later pressure organizations to act (Christensen et al., 2013). Purpose inversion represents a different trajectory. The aspiration does not merely exceed practice; it is reinterpreted so that established practice satisfies the aspiration. The organization becomes less exposed to criticism because disagreement is framed as a dispute over implementation detail rather than a challenge to organizational ends.

Purpose inversion is self-reinforcing. Reports and metrics generated by the captured system reshape later articulations of purpose. Leaders cite measured achievements to refine the purpose, and stakeholder engagement is organized around approved categories. The captured translation becomes the historical evidence of what the purpose has always meant. Figure 1 shows the process theory of purpose capture, while Table 2 summarizes process movements, mechanisms, and authority effects.

Proposition 11. Purpose inversion is more likely when the same actors possess semantic, operational, and evaluative authority and can use evidence generated by implementation to redefine the original purpose.

Proposition 12. Once purpose inversion occurs, subsequent challenges to established priorities are more likely to be framed as threats to purpose coherence than as efforts to restore the purpose's moral breadth.

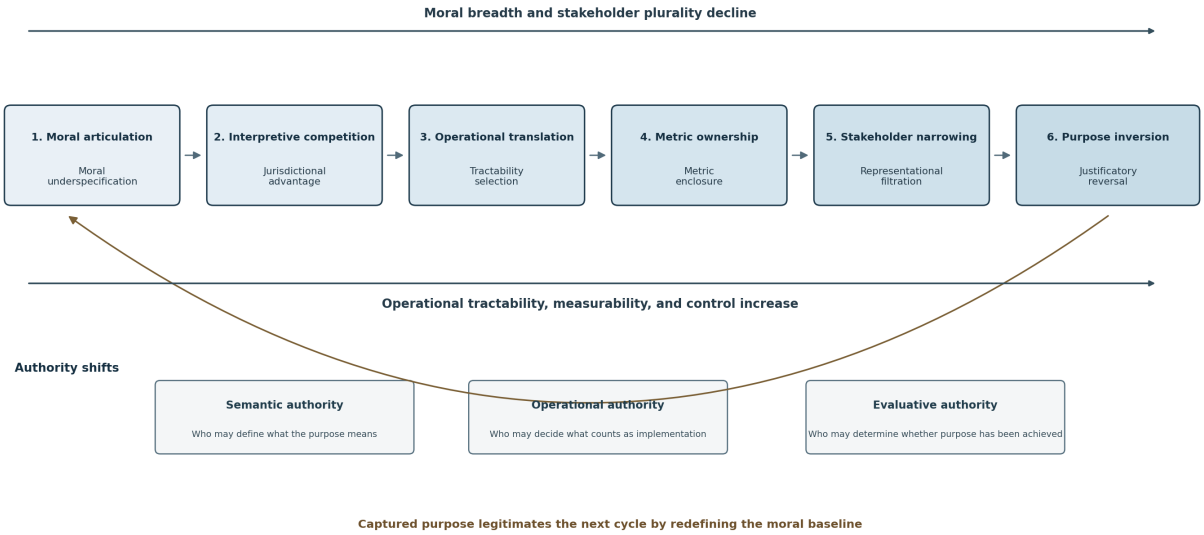


Figure 1. A process theory of purpose capture.

Table 2. Process movements, mechanisms, and authority effects.

Process movement	Generative mechanism	Organizational work	Authority effect
Moral articulation	Moral underspecification	Purpose is broad enough to unite multiple constituencies	Interpretive discretion is created
Interpretive competition	Jurisdictional advantage	Functions advance different meanings tied to expertise and resources	Some interpretations become organizationally authoritative
Operational translation	Tractability selection	Purpose is converted into assignable initiatives and scope boundaries	Difficult or redistributive implications are excluded
Metric ownership	Metric enclosure	Indicators, targets, and assurance systems define progress	Measured proxies become the recognized purpose
Stakeholder narrowing	Representational filtration	Claims are reformatted through approved categories and channels	Less measurable or less powerful stakeholders lose standing
Purpose inversion	Justificatory reversal	The implementation apparatus validates established priorities	Purpose legitimates what it was expected to challenge

5. Purpose-Implementation Configurations and Countervailing Governance

Purpose capture is not inevitable. The distribution of semantic and evaluative authority creates different implementation configurations. Two dimensions are especially important: the concentration of interpretive authority and the concentration of evaluative authority. Interpretive authority concerns who may define the purpose; evaluative authority concerns who may judge progress. Operational authority usually follows from their interaction because functions that define purpose and control evidence can strongly influence resource allocation.

Distributed stewardship combines plural interpretation with plural evaluation. Stakeholders, boards, employees, and specialist functions participate in defining purpose, while multiple forms of evidence remain legitimate. This configuration can be slow and conflictual, but it preserves purpose as a living commitment rather than a settled formula. Distributed stewardship does not eliminate managerial authority. It requires managers to justify choices across several evaluative communities.

Guided translation combines concentrated interpretation with plural evaluation. A board, founder, or purpose council provides a relatively stable meaning, while stakeholders and independent evaluators assess implementation through diverse evidence. This can protect coherence, but the interpretation may become paternalistic if those affected cannot contest its meaning. Metric enclosure combines plural interpretation with concentrated evaluation. Many actors may debate purpose, but one scorecard or assurance system determines success. Discussion remains symbolically open while performance judgment is technically closed. This configuration can produce capture even when participation is extensive.

Full purpose capture combines concentrated interpretation and concentrated evaluation. A small coalition defines purpose, selects initiatives, owns measures, and communicates results. The system may be efficient and internally consistent, but it becomes difficult to distinguish implementation from self-validation. Countervailing governance begins with purpose custodianship. Purpose custodianship is a continuing responsibility to preserve the moral breadth, stakeholder plurality, and revisability of purpose across translation. A custodian is not necessarily the original author. Boards, cross-functional councils, employee representatives, external trustees, or multistakeholder bodies can perform the role. The central requirement is independence from the functions whose performance is being evaluated.

A second safeguard is translation traceability. Organizations can document how broad commitments were converted into priorities, indicators, and boundaries. Traceability makes excluded alternatives visible and allows stakeholders to identify where narrowing occurred. It treats translation as a series of contestable judgments rather than an invisible technical process. A third safeguard is evaluative pluralism. Purpose performance should be assessed through multiple forms of evidence, including quantitative indicators, stakeholder testimony, distributional analysis, and case-based examination of trade-offs. Evaluative pluralism prevents a single metric from becoming the purpose itself. It also recognizes that different stakeholders may experience the same aggregate result differently.

A fourth safeguard is stakeholder appeal. Stakeholders need channels not only to provide input but also to challenge the categories, metrics, and scope boundaries through which their claims are represented. Appeal differs from consultation because it can reopen implementation decisions. Without such authority, participation may legitimate rather than constrain capture. A fifth safeguard is periodic purpose reopening. Organizations should revisit purpose after implementation experience, but reopening must not be controlled only by evidence produced by the existing system. Independent review, counterfactual analysis, and participation by excluded stakeholders can reveal whether purpose has been narrowed or inverted. Table 3 illustrates purpose-Implementation configurations and safeguards.

Proposition 13. Purpose custodianship will reduce capture when custodians possess authority to reopen operational definitions and measurement systems rather than merely advise implementing functions.

Proposition 14. Evaluative pluralism and stakeholder appeal will weaken the self-reinforcing relationship between metric ownership and purpose inversion by preserving alternative accounts of value and harm.

Table 3. Purpose implementation configurations and safeguards.

Configuration	Interpretive authority	Evaluative authority	Governance pattern	Primary safeguard
Distributed stewardship	Distributed	Distributed	Plural meaning and plural evidence; high contestability	Purpose custodianship and deliberative coordination
Guided translation	Concentrated	Distributed	Stable purpose meaning with multiple evaluators	Independent stakeholder review and appeal
Metric enclosure	Distributed	Concentrated	Open discussion but technical closure at evaluation	Metric plurality and qualitative evidence
Full purpose capture	Concentrated	Concentrated	Meaning, action, and judgment controlled by a small coalition	Separation of powers, translation traceability, periodic reopening

6. Conditions Shaping Purpose Capture

Purpose specificity affects capture in a non-linear way. Highly vague purpose creates broad interpretive discretion, while excessively specific purpose can privilege the actors who control technical definitions. Moderate specificity may be most protective when purpose identifies substantive commitments and decision principles but leaves implementation open to stakeholder learning.

Organizational centralization increases capture risk when senior strategy, finance, or legal functions can impose a single translation across units. Decentralization can preserve local responsiveness, but it may also fragment purpose into incompatible versions. The critical issue is whether local interpretations are connected through deliberation rather than simply standardized or left isolated.

Financial dependence shapes the balance among functions. Organizations facing short investment horizons, debt constraints, or volatile markets are more likely to privilege translations that demonstrate near-term financial compatibility. Battilana et al. (2022) argue that financial and social trade-offs in dual-purpose companies are filtered by governance arrangements and institutional settings. Purpose capture is likely when financial trade-offs are translated into fixed constraints before stakeholders can contest them.

Professional status also matters. Legal, financial, strategy, and measurement professionals can claim neutrality through technical expertise. Sustainability, community, or employee representatives may be treated as advocates rather than experts. This asymmetry permits value-laden choices to appear technical while moral counterclaims appear political.

Temporal pressure accelerates capture because rapid implementation favors existing routines and measurable interventions. Crisis, leadership transition, investor scrutiny, or public controversy can create demand for visible proof. Under such conditions, organizations are more likely to select tractable actions and close interpretive debate. The purpose system may then be designed for immediate reassurance rather than long-term transformation.

External accountability can either constrain or intensify capture. Independent assurance, regulation, and stakeholder scrutiny can expose narrow translations. Standardized reporting frameworks can also intensify metric enclosure if compliance indicators become substitutes for purpose. The effect depends on whether external accountability broadens evaluative authority or merely adds another technical owner.

Ownership and governance forms influence purpose custodianship. Benefit corporations, foundations, cooperatives, and stakeholder-oriented governance arrangements can embed broader commitments in formal structures. Yet legal form does not eliminate capture. Formal purpose clauses still require interpretation, and boards may use broad mandates to exercise greater discretion without greater accountability (Davis, 2021; Aguilera, 2023).

Finally, purpose history matters. Founder-led purposes may enjoy strong identity coherence but be vulnerable to founder control. Inherited purposes may have symbolic legitimacy but weak operational ownership. Newly adopted purposes may be especially open to capture because implementation infrastructure is not yet established. Mature systems may resist capture if they preserve stakeholder memory, or deepen it if the existing translation has become taken for granted.

7. Theoretical Contributions

The first contribution is to corporate purpose research. Current frameworks emphasize framing, formalization, realization, experience, governance, and decision-making (George et al., 2023; Durand & Huynh, 2024). Purpose capture identifies an endogenous risk inside formalization and realization. The key theoretical problem is not only whether purpose is embedded, but who gains authority through embedding. Strong implementation can narrow purpose more effectively than weak implementation because routines and metrics stabilize a transformed meaning.

The second contribution is to decoupling and purpose-washing research. These literatures focus on inconsistency between formal claims and substantive practice. Purpose capture explains internally consistent systems whose practices align with an operationalized purpose that no longer preserves the moral scope of the original commitment. This shifts analysis from claim-practice consistency to translation fidelity and authority distribution.

The third contribution is to translation theory. Translation research emphasizes editing, localization, and variation as ideas travel. Purpose capture adds a theory of unequal translation rights. When the idea concerns organizational ends, the authority to translate is also authority to govern. Translation is not only adaptation to context; it can be appropriation of moral meaning by actors controlling implementation devices.

The fourth contribution is to performance measurement. Measurement research demonstrates that metrics shape behavior, identity, and organizational reality. Purpose capture specifies how measurement can become a jurisdiction over organizational ends. Metric ownership is not merely control over information. It is a form of evaluative authority that can determine which values and stakeholders remain visible.

The fifth contribution is to stakeholder governance. Stakeholder theory usually asks which stakeholders matter and how value is created and distributed. Purpose capture shows that stakeholders can lose influence after purpose articulation even when they were included initially. The decisive governance question is whether stakeholders retain authority to contest operational definitions and evaluative categories.

The sixth contribution is to institutional work and power. Purpose implementation is often presented as alignment work. The theory recasts it as political institutional work over meaning, categories, and evidence. Capture does not require overt conflict or bad faith. It can arise from mundane expertise, resource dependence, and the organization-wide desire for tractability. This explains why purpose can be narrowed by actors who genuinely identify with it.

8. A Research Agenda for Purpose Capture

Empirical research should first examine the microprocesses through which purpose moves across organizational jurisdictions. Longitudinal studies could follow a purpose from board adoption through strategic planning, budgeting, policy design, indicator construction, and reporting. Researchers should compare successive documents and decisions to identify where meanings are added, removed, or reweighted. A second priority is to study authority. Research can map who participates in articulation, who controls implementation, and who judges results. Network analysis, meeting observation, and process tracing could reveal whether authority shifts from stakeholders and governance bodies toward specialist functions. Formal titles may be less important than control over critical devices such as budgets, risk systems, and dashboards. A third priority concerns measurement. Studies should examine how different indicator portfolios affect purpose breadth. Experiments could test whether managers make different trade-offs when shown aggregate purpose scores, disaggregated stakeholder outcomes, qualitative testimony, or distributional consequences. Field research could investigate when indicators remain provisional and when they become constitutive definitions.

A fourth area is stakeholder contestation. Researchers should distinguish participation in defining purpose from authority to challenge implementation. Comparative cases could examine organizations with advisory stakeholder forums, stakeholder board representation, grievance mechanisms, independent purpose trustees, or no formal appeal. Outcomes should include not only purpose performance but also whose claims disappear from organizational records.

A fifth area is capture coalitions. Capture may be driven by a single dominant function or by coalitions among strategy, finance, legal, and communications. Different coalitions may produce different narrowed purposes. Financial capture may emphasize return-compatible initiatives, legal capture may emphasize compliance, reputational capture may emphasize visible signals, and strategic capture may emphasize differentiation. Configurational methods could identify combinations of authority and context associated with each pattern. A sixth area concerns governance forms. Researchers can compare conventional corporations, B Corps, cooperatives, family firms, foundation-owned companies, state-owned enterprises, and social enterprises. Formal purpose protections may reduce some forms of capture while creating others. For example, strong board discretion may protect purpose from short-term investors but weaken democratic stakeholder influence. A seventh priority is temporal dynamics. Purpose capture may accelerate during crises and reverse during scandal, leadership succession, litigation, or stakeholder mobilization. Event-history and longitudinal qualitative designs can investigate whether reopening purpose produces genuine re-pluralization or merely updates the captured system. An eighth area is cross-national comparison. Corporate governance regimes, labor institutions, civil-society strength, and reporting requirements shape who can claim custodianship. Aguilera (2023) emphasizes that purpose is embedded in comparative governance arrangements. Purpose capture should therefore vary across institutional settings rather than operate as a universal internal process.

A ninth priority concerns consequences. Capture may improve coordination, reduce ambiguity, and support credible action in the short term. It may also create stakeholder exclusion, moral complacency, and strategic rigidity. Research should avoid assuming that all narrowing is harmful. The empirical question is when simplification becomes capture, meaning when the organization forecloses legitimate alternatives while retaining the authority of the broader purpose. Finally, scholars should examine resistance and repair. Employees, communities, investors, regulators, and professional groups may challenge captured meanings. Counter-metrics, shadow reports, stakeholder narratives, and legal claims can reopen purpose. Research can investigate which forms of contestation restore plural authority and which are absorbed into the existing system.

9. Conclusion

Corporate purpose is often treated as an answer to the question of why an organization exists. Purpose capture reveals a second question that becomes decisive after adoption: who owns the authority to interpret that answer? A purpose can begin as a broad commitment to stakeholders and society, yet its implementation

requires organizational actors to define priorities, allocate resources, design measures, and report outcomes. Those tasks create opportunities for meaning to be narrowed and authority to be concentrated. The theory developed here explains how moral articulation can move through interpretive competition, operational translation, metric ownership, stakeholder narrowing, and purpose inversion. The process is powered by moral underspecification, jurisdictional advantage, tractability selection, metric enclosure, representational filtration, and justificatory reversal. Capture is complete when purpose no longer challenges inherited priorities but supplies them with moral legitimacy. The practical implication is not that purpose should remain vague or unmeasured. Purpose without implementation cannot govern. The implication is that implementation itself requires governance. Organizations need purpose custodianship, translation traceability, evaluative pluralism, stakeholder appeal, and periodic reopening. These arrangements preserve the possibility that technical expertise serves purpose rather than becoming its owner. Corporate purpose becomes credible not when every ambiguity is eliminated, but when the organization remains accountable for how ambiguity is resolved. The central test of purposeful management is therefore not simply whether purpose appears in strategy, culture, or metrics. It is whether those affected retain a meaningful capacity to contest what purpose has become.

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