ALBC

The Translation Gap

Signal Report 01

SIGNAL REPORT

The Translation Gap

The best ideas don't always fail because they're wrong. Sometimes, they fail because they never reach the people who need them.

Across purpose-driven organizations, we kept seeing the same pattern: strong ideas, real substance, and meaningful ambition, but something gets lost between the work itself and the world it's meant to change.

We call that the **Translation Gap.**

This report explores why that gap exists, what keeps it open, and what organizations can do to close it. At its core is a simple argument: translation is not the final step after the real work is done. It is part of the work itself.

Because when important ideas don't translate, they don't move. And when they don't move, the people and systems they were built to serve never get the benefit.

The Translation Gap is the name. Closing it is the work.

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September 2026

SECTION 1

Opening

Across every system that matters, organizations doing genuinely important work are failing at unprecedented rates.

Climate ventures with life-changing technology that never breaks through. Health organizations with transformative approaches that never reach the people who need them most. Civic and educational organizations with ideas capable of reshaping how people live, learn, and participate disappearing before they ever fully land.

More good ideas are dying now than at any point in recent memory. For organizations doing truly important work, the pressure is real and measurable.

The 2026 Social Impact Talent Report from Echoing Green, an organization that works at the intersection of social justice and social innovation, highlighted the financial challenges purpose-driven organizations are up against.

In 2026, **53%** of fellowship applicants had not raised any funds — up from **35%** across the previous five years and the **highest rate since tracking began in 2012.**[1]

The challenges extend beyond emerging leaders. According to Candid, nonprofit leaders are facing growing financial instability.

60% report that foundation grants have become harder to secure.[2]
46% report experiencing serious burnout, a dramatic increase from **30% just one year ago.**[2]

To top it off, the Human Rights Funders Network projects a **$62 billion drop** in official development assistance for 2026, a sharp **28% decline** from 2023.[1]

Now more than ever, purpose-driven organizations doing real work to change our world for the better are failing. Not because the work they're doing isn't important. Because they continue to fall into a pattern that fails time and time again — the Translation Gap.

For years, A Little Better Co. has worked alongside purpose-driven organizations at the moments when their work is most at risk. And for years, we've seen this same pattern repeat itself over and over again: the work is important, the thinking is strong, the substance is real, but there is no movement.

The Translation Gap is the founding problem ALBC aims to address, and it is the reason our Transformation Design Studio exists in the first place. In three Signal Essays, we made the case that this failure pattern has a name and a structure based on our observed experiences. But experience alone is not enough to keep pace with the unprecedented transformations happening in our world. This report goes a step further, with evidence on how and why this pattern continues to resurface in purpose-driven organizations and stop good ideas in their tracks. Our mission is to remove the roadblocks that stop those ideas from becoming real, successful experiences in the world.

We're sharing what we've found here, because the work of making the world a little better is collective and our survival depends on sharing what we are learning, not competing on it.

What follows guides everything we do. We hope it helps you do a little better, too.

SECTION 2

The Wrong Diagnoses

The Misdiagnoses That Keep Real Work Stuck

When real, substantial work fails to land, most organizations reach for answers in the wrong places.

Some blame the message.

The story being told isn't working, so it gets rewritten. The language becomes sharper. The identity gets refreshed. A new narrative is formed. But the substance stays the same, and the result stays the same.

In 2014, Teach For America (TFA) announced the largest strategic shift in the organization's history to date with their new year-long training and retention pilot programs.[3] Matthew Kramer, co-CEO at the time, publicly framed the programs as a natural evolution rather than a response to recent criticism of the organization. Former TFA program director, Camika Royal, viewed it differently.

"I never expected it, because I felt like it would look like they were giving in to criticism."

Even with a new narrative around teacher preparation and retention, by 2022 recruitment had decreased by nearly two-thirds from its peak in 2013. That year, the incoming class was the smallest it had been in at least 15 years. While TFA placements continued to decline, for-profit alternative certification enrollment grew substantially.[4] **The substance stayed the same, and the result stayed the same.**

Other organizations determine the work is in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So, the channels change. They launch a podcast. Expand to videos. Start a newsletter. The work finds a new home, but it's still saying the same thing to the same effect. The substance stays the same, and the result stays the same.

Some organizations blame the audience.

They just don't get it. The funder is too conservative. The market isn't ready. Leadership can't see what the rest of the team sees. This diagnosis is the most comfortable — and the most dangerous — because it requires nothing to change internally. So, the substance stays the same, and the result stays the same.

Then of course, there's the budget.

Organizations conclude that the work would land if only there were more resources behind it, so they scale. They amplify work that does not connect. But the substance stays the same, and the result stays the same.

Each of these four diagnoses, at face value, feels rigorous. Each one produces a plan. Each one changes something visible. And each one locates the problem at the edge of the organization: in the wording, the placement, the receiver, or the volume.

But none of these diagnoses question what sits between the work and the world. That is where the real problem lives, and that is where this report goes next.

SECTION 3

The Real Problem: A Translation Gap Built on a Creativity Gap

The Creativity Gap Behind the Translation Gap

Each of these four diagnoses seem plausible, but they share a blind spot. None address the space between what is real inside an organization and what people are actually able to recognize from the outside. **This space is the Translation Gap.**

Not translated as in language. Not the simplification of an idea. Not marketing. Translation is the real work of carrying something intact across the distance between the people who built it and the people who need to believe in it.

The Translation Gap is much larger than most leaders realize. It does not close on its own, and it is continuing to widen.

Producing the appearance of something used to be difficult. It took time, teams, and craft. That is no longer the case.

The cost of producing the appearance of credibility has collapsed, and AI is leading this transformation:

- Anthropic research estimates that **AI reduces task completion time by 80% & document drafting time by 87%**[5]
- In the US, some creative agencies have started swapping models for digital avatars, reducing live budget shoots to just **26% of their original spend**[6]
- **Up to 86%** of global content creators now use generative AI to create content they may not have been able to produce on their own[7]

The creative industry that for decades ran on a pyramid structure with the best culture-shifting work at the top and templated, production-line output at the bottom is shifting. And the vast middle, where the majority of competent, good-enough work was created, is quickly collapsing. Audiences are now flooded with things that appear credible on the surface but lack true substance.

This makes the bar for being recognized as something real even higher. What's needed — and what AI alone cannot offer — is genuine creative judgement. As Becky McOwen-Banks, Founder at Plain:AI, says, the kind that is, "built through years of making things, failing, refining, developing an eye and an instinct that operates faster than conscious thought."[8]

The Translation Gap is a symptom of where creativity sits inside organizations.

Across the purpose-driven sector, there's a pattern that keeps showing up. Strategy is taken seriously. Capital is taken seriously. Operations are taken seriously. But creative leadership consistently sits well below executive leadership. It's funded as a project expense rather than a foundational investment. Brought in later, scoped more narrowly, and expected to make something land rather than help define what should exist in the first place.

The Translation Gap is the structural distance between work that is real inside an organization and work that can be experienced as real from outside it. Creativity is the capability that can close that distance, but only when it's treated as a foundational layer and not the finishing touch.

SECTION 4

The Anatomy of Translation

Translation has structure. Layers. Organizations that find themselves in the Translation Gap usually don't end up there because of one failure. There are four possible failures, stacked. Naming each layer specifically is how we turn a vague frustration into a solvable problem.

Layer One: Legibility

The work has to be recognizable.

Audiences must be able to look at the work and immediately understand what they are looking at, why it matters, and where it fits into how they already see the world. Recognizable does not mean simplified or diluted. And explanation alone is not enough.

This is not a new idea. How a product is positioned — its perceived dissimilarity, uniqueness, favorability, and credibility — can reliably predict downstream consumer behaviors, including perceived superiority and purchasing intent. Recognition is what drives engagement. Audiences will act based on clear, cognitively legible positioning, not attribute lists alone.[9]

A remarkable example of this is Project Drawdown's 2021 Drawdown Roadmap, which introduced a five-part strategic plan for halting climate change in our lifetimes. The substance behind this plan had already existed for years — a science-based set of technologies and practices that were available, financially viable, and able to scale. Project Drawdown consulted with scientists, policymakers, corporate executives, and funders to clearly and definitively outline how these existing solutions could be prioritized across sectors, time, and geography while also maximizing co-benefits and eliminating barriers.[10]

The results were significant, with 2023 being a pivotal year for the organization[11]:

- **4.5M impressions** on social media
- **937k users** accessed climate solutions on the organization's website
- Project Drawdown's Job Function Action Guides were embedded in LinkedIn's Sustainability Resource Hub, **reaching 900M users** and passing **100k downloads** with adoption from employers like Google

They made the work legible, and it translated for millions.

Layer Two: Credibility

The work has to be believable.

In a world where almost anyone can generate the appearance of expertise, audiences are slower to extend trust and rely on pattern recognition. People need to recognize the shape of a credible organization before they are willing to believe the claims attached to it.

The distinction between transparency and credibility is important here. A 2022 study found sustainable positioning that leveraged credible sources, such as the EPA, significantly improved brand attachment, trust, and identification for consumers — ultimately leading to electronic word of mouth and brand loyalty. Transparency alone, without credibility, showed no measurable effect. Credibility cues help shape how audiences evaluate purpose-related claims. When the source is trusted, people are more willing to believe, attach, and act.[12]

GiveDirectly is a nonprofit that sends unconditional cash transfers directly to families living in extreme poverty. It is also a clear example of how evidence alone is not enough to produce credibility.

More than 200 independent studies and multiple meta-analyses support GiveDirectly's underlying intervention: direct large sum cash with no strings attached reduces poverty, improves health and wellbeing, and improves children's lives.[13] Despite all that evidence, GiveDirectly faced what researchers at GiveWell described as, "a level of skepticism… that we haven't seen applied to anything else we've written." The pushback was not about the data. It was about the shape of the aid GiveDirectly provided. The audience already had an idea of what credible aid looked like — programs, experts, conditions — and simply giving cash directly to poor people did not match their expectations.[13,14] For GiveDirectly, this credibility gap had a measurable cost. As recently as 2023, individual Americans and U.S. foundations gave more than $30 billion to international development work. Only 0.5% of those donations went to GiveDirectly.[15]

Fortunately, GiveDirectly recognized their credibility challenge early and spent over a decade deliberately addressing it. They commissioned independent randomized controlled trials of their own program and built radical transparency into their model by publishing the good — and the not so good — results. Over time, institutional belief started to follow. In 2024, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) published a position paper stating that direct monetary transfers should be a core element of their development toolkit and the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, adopted an explicit “why-not cash” policy.[15]

As of April 2026, GiveDirectly has given **over $1 billion to over 2 million people.**[15]

Layer Three: Desirability

The work has to be wanted.

It’s not enough for the work to simply be understood. It must make the audience feel as if they are losing something meaningful by ignoring it. Understanding creates awareness. Desire creates movement.

Take the digital learning platform, Summit Learning, for example. Despite millions of dollars invested into the development, promotion, and training sessions for teachers and administrators, the organization faced tremendous pushback from the very people the program was built for.[16]

In one survey[16]:

- **70% of students** said the program should be dropped or made optional
- **72% of parents** opposed the use of the platform

Growing parent and student discontent led several school districts to eliminate use of the platform completely, while others made it optional.[16] Understanding was never the problem. Desire was.

It’s not enough for an audience to be informed about a product or platform. The ability to tell a story that transports an audience is an innate part of human life — and is also what converts awareness about a product into belief and action. Research shows that vivid, emotionally resonant narratives heighten desire by shifting cognitive focus from evaluation to immersion. When audiences are transported, they become more receptive, more motivated, and more likely to act on what the narrative promotes.[17]

Layer Four: Reachability

The work has to be actionable.

People need to know what to do next, in a form their existing decision-making systems can absorb. Strategies without paths to engagement become artifacts of unrealized intent.

When it comes to choice architecture, the most effective tool for changing an audience's behavior is to create a default. Default choice architecture shapes immediate decisions and downstream behaviors over time. Friction, salience, and sequential decision contexts can determine whether people will follow or deviate from a default path. Reachable options — those that are easy, salient, and low-friction — disproportionately guide behavior, even when preferences are weak or evolving.[18] The intent can be good, but if the pathway is not actionable, the work remains stuck.

In 2006, the nonprofit B Lab™ started with a simple idea: that a better way to do business for workers, communities, and the planet was not only possible, but necessary. They helped create verified standards to certify B Corporations™ based on social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency. The substance was always there. But the certification process was out of reach for smaller businesses. The work was right. But it wasn't reachable. So, they deliberately redesigned it.

In 2024, B Lab updated their standards to address the uneven ground aspiring B Corps are built on and make them applicable to any company's context. This included introducing size- and sector-differentiated requirements, choice within requirements, and an Equity Mechanism to address operational barriers based on geography. B Lab maintained their overall mission but adjusted to make the standards actionable and relevant for more companies worldwide.[19]

Translation Requires All Four

The layers compound. Legibility without credibility comes across as polished but hollow. Credibility without desirability reads as serious but uninspiring. You can have all three, but without a reachable path between understanding the work and acting on it, good ideas die quietly in an inbox.

The organizations moving forward are the ones holding all four layers together, on purpose, at the same time.

SECTION 5

Why Purpose-Driven Organizations Fail This Most Consistently

Why Good Work Fails to Travel

The Translation Gap exists everywhere, but it appears most consistently inside purpose-driven organizations. There are three structural reasons for that.

They distrust the work of translation itself.

In many purpose-driven organizations, there is an instinct to distrust the work of translation. They confuse translation with marketing, and because they associate marketing with manipulation, they treat the work of being understood as separate from the work of being real. So, they build the substance and leave the translation layer to chance.

They are structurally under-resourced for translation.

In a 2022 survey of communications professionals, **44%** said their organization sees communications mainly as fundraising support — up from 29% in 2017[20]

For purpose-driven organizations, it goes even deeper. Most are over-resourced for substance and under-resourced for translation. Foundations fund the program, not the framing. Boards approve the strategy, not the story. The incentive structures reward the work itself while quietly deprioritizing what's needed for that work to travel. Translation is treated as a subordinate service function, not the priority it should be.

The numbers speak for themselves.

- The largest for-profit companies hold marketing budgets near **8% of revenue**, even in lean years[21]
- Mid-sized US nonprofits spend a median of **0.66% of total expenses** on advertising, if they spend anything at all[22]

This is not a difference in discipline. It is a difference in system design. One that the nonprofit sector named in its own research more than 15 years ago: the starvation cycle. Funders expect minimal overhead. Organizations comply and underreport. And the things that help real work travel are treated as costs to cut rather than infrastructure to build.[23]*

They operate against a higher skepticism bar.

For-profit organizations have a built-in shortcut: financial success. Profitability functions as legible proof the system already understands.

Purpose-driven organizations are trying to create outcomes that don't fit neatly inside quarterly reporting structures: better health outcomes, more resilient communities, more equitable systems, better governance, longer-term planetary survival. These are harder to quantify, slower to prove, and more dependent on trust — and they are asking for trust in an environment where trust continues to decline.

According to the 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer, trust is increasing for every institutional category except non-governmental organizations (NGOs). **NGOs are trusted by 58%** globally, six points below business at 64%.[24]

Now, more than ever, purpose-driven organizations need stronger translation infrastructure than their for-profit counterparts. Yet they consistently build less of it.

That is the gap within the Translation Gap. And it is where the path forward begins.

*The two benchmarks measure related but not identical things (marketing as a percentage of revenue at large enterprises versus advertising as a percentage of total expenses at mid-sized nonprofits).

SECTION 6

What Closing the Gap Looks Like: Moving Creativity Upstream

Closing the Gap

When confronted with a translation problem, the instinctive response is to do more. More polish. More content. More visibility. More of the same surface that everyone else is generating. But more is just a polish, and polish is now the cheapest thing in the room.

The organizations that actually close the Translation Gap understand it's not about buying more creativity. It's about changing where creativity sits.

Organizations that are serious about closing the Translation Gap must make four structural shifts:

1. Creative judgment must sit at the strategy table, not the execution table.
2. Translation must be budgeted as a foundational investment, not a downstream campaign expense.
3. Creative leadership must be treated as a decision-making peer to operational and strategic leadership.
4. Creative capacity must be present at the earliest stages of program design, not the latest stages of program communication.

The Upstream Effect

We've seen organizations make this shift with great success.

In 2022, Patagonia's Founder Yvon Chouinard announced the company was "going purpose." 100% of the company's voting stock was transferred to the Patagonia Purpose Trust, which is in charge of defining the company's strategic direction and protecting its core values. 100% of the nonvoting stock was given to the HoldFast Collective, a nonprofit organization committed to fighting the environmental crisis and defending nature.[19] By integrating creative and purpose leadership at the governance level, Patagonia was able to prioritize the values they've held since their founding: environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and ethical business practices.

In the four years since restructuring, the company has[25]:

- Directed an estimated **$200 – 300 million annually** in profits to climate initiatives
- Accelerated their environmental activism, launching **12 legal challenges against anti-environmental policies**

It is the structure — not any campaign — that gives Patagonia credibility.

The Ford Foundation is another example where creativity has a seat at the leadership table. Their Creativity and Free expression program provides a strategic infrastructure for racial, gender, and disability justice narratives. The program funds artists, journalists, and filmmakers who are disproportionately underrepresented or unheard, creating opportunities for them to create meaningful, widely recognized work. The end goal? To amplify cultural narratives that reflect the diversity of their communities, to ensure field ecosystems are resilient and thriving, and to create a world where creative independence isn't just possible, but sustainable.[26]

Their impact has been seen for more than 80 years and is still strong today, with an annual budget of $28 million supporting 193 grantees across the United States.[26]

Creativity at the Table Pays Off

Organizations that move are the ones who formalize, fund, and back creative capacity at the leadership level.

In a survey of 485 people conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership[27]:

- **90%** of respondents from effective organizations said their organization had an innovation budget vs. **58%** of respondents from ineffective organizations
- **66%** of respondents from effective organizations said their organization had a formal approach to innovation vs. **20%** of respondents from ineffective organizations
- Ineffective organizations were **3x more likely** to name leadership as the roadblock

For organizations doing purpose-driven work, innovation is non-negotiable. Mission-driven companies are **30% more innovative** and show **40% higher levels of retention.**[28]

The good news is that none of this requires a larger organization. It requires a differently designed one. The Translation Gap closes upstream, in the decisions about where creative capability lives and long before any audience sees anything.

SECTION 7

The Stakes

The Invisible Part of Invisible Failure

The failures we described in section one are not isolated organizational tragedies. Across climate, health, education, civic systems, and organizations large and small, we continue to see the same pattern repeat itself. Over and over again.

The Translation Gap is where organizations doing important work with real substance get stuck. And every idea lost in this gap is a solution that the systems under the most pressure never receive — at a time when they're most needed.

Funding is disappearing. Grants are becoming harder to secure. Nonprofit leaders are experiencing unprecedented rates of burnout. Official development assistance is expected to decline by $62 billion in 2026 alone.[1,2]

All at the exact moment more high-potential work exists than ever before.

These losses do not announce themselves. There are no headlines marking the transformative ideas that quietly fail to travel. But the impact of these failures is felt. The Translation Gap persists, in part, because the cost of not addressing it goes unsaid. Which is why naming it matters.

Because once something has a name, it's possible to hold it differently. It can be budgeted for, hired for, and designed for. It can stop being treated as an unfortunate inevitability and start being treated as a solvable strategic problem.

The Translation Gap is the name. The work of closing it is what comes next.

SECTION 8

About ALBC

A Little Better Co. is a Transformation Design Studio. Not a consultancy. Not an agency. We're rigorous enough to meet the strategic complexity of what's ahead, creative enough to make transformation real, and purpose-built for the organizations doing the most important work of our time.

Every engagement begins upstream with our Transformation Design Methodology, a six-stage process designed to ensure that everything produced is grounded in genuine diagnosis, not assumption. Strategy leads. Creative translates.

Some of the most important work we do happens before any formal engagement begins:

Signal Talks	Signal Workshops	Signal Hours
The Transformation Gap argument presented live in-person.	Our methodology applied in real time to a real organization in the room.	A compressed diagnosis: you bring a problem you can't yet fully name and we'll spend the hour naming it.

Design with us.

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