



From Idea to Enterprise: The Strategic Role of The Wheeler Manager in Organizational Development

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Abstract

In contemporary business ecosystems, startups face unique challenges as they transition from innovative ideation phases to structured organizational maturity. Traditional hierarchical models often restrict the necessary agility and innovation inherent to startups, creating a demand for novel managerial roles. This paper explores the strategic role of the Wheeler Manager: a facilitator who significantly enhances organizational effectiveness within flat and circular structures. Drawing upon current research, practical case studies, and original theoretical insights, this article demonstrates how Wheeler Managers bridge critical communication gaps, optimize resource allocation, and strategically manage organizational conflict and collaboration. The findings underline the Wheeler Manager's role as integral to maintaining startup agility while scaling effectively and sustainably.

Keywords: Wheeler Manager; Organizational Development; Startups; Flat Organizations; Circular Organizations; Communication; Resource Optimization; Conflict Resolution; Scalability; Innovation Management

Introduction

Start-ups are widely recognized as crucibles of innovation, capable of redefining entire industries by challenging entrenched incumbents with disruptive technologies, agile development cycles, and radical business models. Their strength lies in structural minimalism: flat hierarchies, informal processes, high adaptability, and a strong culture of experimentation. These attributes allow new ventures to move fast, attract risk-tolerant talent, and pivot strategically in response to changing markets.

However, these same characteristics that fuel early-stage agility often become liabilities as the organization grows. With team expansion, diversified product lines, increasing investor oversight, and more complex customer demands, start-ups inevitably face challenges related to coordination, accountability, and strategic alignment. Informal norms that previously held everything together (ad-hoc meetings, founder-led decisions, overlapping responsibilities) begin to strain under the weight of scale. Founders must then confront the paradox: how to scale without bureaucratising, how to maintain agility while building sustainable systems.

Traditional organizational theory would suggest the introduction of hierarchy, defined roles, and formalized routines. However, such measures risk stifling creativity, demotivating autonomous teams, and undermining the very culture that made the start-up thrive in the first place. Conversely, approaches that attempt to preserve flatness (such as holacracy or sociocracy) often falter when complexity outpaces self-organization. As coordination costs rise, many start-ups find themselves caught in a governance limbo: too complex for informality, too dynamic for rigid structure.

This is the context in which the figure of the WM emerges: the term, first introduced in early practitioner literature [1] and now increasingly debated in theoretical circles [2,3], refers to a boundary-spanning, facilitative role designed to bridge informal collaboration with emergent structure. Rather than acting as a decision-maker or performance controller, the WM acts as a sense maker, integrator, and enabler wheeling knowledge, feedback, priorities, and coordination across the micro-systems of an evolving start-up.

The Wheeler Manager does not “own” any particular function, team, or output. Instead, their remit is relational and strategic: they enable alignment across silos, surface latent tensions, catalyze dialogue around difficult trade-offs, and support the organization’s capacity to reflect and adapt. The role sits at the intersection of strategy, operations, and culture operating transversally without traditional authority, but with high influence and visibility.

The Wheeler Manager’s emergence responds to at least three distinct tensions:

- i. the Autonomy vs Alignment Dilemma: as teams specialize, the risk of local optimization increases. WMs help integrate strategic direction across units while preserving team autonomy.
- ii. the Learning vs Delivery Trade-Off: in fast-paced environments, the pressure to execute often crowds out time for retrospection and learning. WMs protect reflective spaces and build learning capacity into delivery cycles.
- iii. the Informality vs Scalability Constraint: startups rely on informal networks for speed and adaptability, but these become unreliable as scale introduces complexity. WMs professionalise coordination without bureaucratising it.

From a theoretical standpoint, the WM role is grounded in a synthesis of three major frameworks:

- i. Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS): organizations are dynamic ecosystems in which outcomes emerge from interactions among distributed agents [4]. The Wheeler Manager enables coherence through relationship-centered intervention rather than control.
- ii. Dynamic Capabilities Theory: as defined by Teece [5], organizations must be able to sense, seize, and transform in response to change. The WM contributes by enhancing the sensing capacity of leadership through horizon scanning, reflection, and networked knowledge flows.
- iii. Social Capital Theory: building on Burt [6] and Cross & Parker [7], the WM occupies structural holes, brokers weak ties, and enhances the quality and reach of informal coordination networks improving collaboration, trust, and knowledge transfer.

The Wheeler Manager’s function is not codified in existing job roles. It does not map cleanly onto project manager, operations lead, or product strategist. It is a hybrid, integrative function, one that supports the health of the system rather than delivering a specific output. As such, it requires a new understanding of what effective management looks like in high-complexity, high-autonomy environments.

This article seeks to develop a comprehensive conceptual model of the Wheeler Manager, grounded in the existing academic literature, management theory, and insights from related roles (e.g., agile coaches, systems conveners, internal facilitators) and it

will explore the following research questions:

- i. What are the core capability clusters that define the WM role in theory?
- ii. How does the WM contribute to coordination, learning, and cultural coherence in scaling organizations?
- iii. What are the typical risks associated with the WM role, and how can they be mitigated?
- iv. How does the WM compare to existing managerial roles across dimensions of power, scope, and function?
- v. What future directions can research take in theorizing and applying this role across organizational contexts?

By answering these questions, we aim to expand the vocabulary of post-bureaucratic coordination, propose a rigorous theoretical framework for a role increasingly recognized in practice, and offer guidance for organizations seeking to structure without stifling, align without controlling, and grow without losing their founding soul.

Methodology

This paper is grounded in a qualitative, integrative literature review designed to develop a conceptual understanding of the WM role. Rather than conducting empirical fieldwork or collecting primary data, the objective was to synthesize diverse bodies of literature that relate to coordination in dynamic organizations, facilitative leadership, post-bureaucratic governance, and organizational development in high-growth environments.

The choice of a literature-based approach reflects both a methodological and epistemological stance. Methodologically, it allows for a broad exploration across multiple disciplines (including organizational theory, leadership studies, systems thinking, and innovation management) without being limited by sector, geography, or sample size. Epistemologically, it recognizes that the WM is an emergent construct still lacking standardized definitions or job classifications, making it more suitable for conceptual development than hypothesis testing.

The literature review followed the principles of qualitative meta-synthesis and integrative theory-building [8,9]. The search strategy was iterative and abductive, and articles were selected based on relevance, theoretical rigor, and their capacity to inform one or more of the five research questions listed in the introduction. Practitioner literature (e.g., Harvard Business Review, McKinsey Quarterly) was included selectively, especially when it provided conceptual models or role archetypes not yet codified in academic journals.

The final corpus included over 90 peer-reviewed articles, 12 books, and a selection of grey literature (e.g., organizational playbooks, manifestos, design frameworks) that explicitly referenced boundary roles, strategic facilitation, or coordination at scale.

Following data collection, the literature was thematically coded using a conceptual coding framework. This involved:

- i. Descriptive coding to group references by primary topic (e.g., dynamic capabilities, agile roles, sensemaking).
- ii. Axial coding to identify cross-cutting themes (e.g., relational influence, emergent alignment, psychological safety).
- iii. Theoretical integration to map how constructs from different traditions (e.g., organizational learning and sociotechnical systems theory) could be woven into a unified account of the Wheeler Manager.

A central aim of this synthesis was to identify where different frameworks overlapped or diverged in explaining the functions, influence mechanisms, and contextual enablers of coordination roles. For example, while agile literature emphasizes rituals and cadence, leadership literature focuses more on dialogue, reflection, and identity work. The WM concept intersects both, suggesting that structure and meaning are co-produced.

Five bodies of literature proved especially generative:

- i. Sensemaking Theory [10,11]: WMs act as distributed agents of sensemaking, helping teams interpret complexity and uncertainty through language, metaphors, and reframing.
- ii. Dynamic Capabilities [5,12]: WMs play a supporting role in organizational sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring, especially by mobilizing informal networks and horizontal awareness.
- iii. Social Capital Theory [6,7]: WMs occupy structural holes in organizations, brokering connections and creating bridges across otherwise disconnected units or mental models.
- iv. Post-Bureaucratic Organization [13,14]: As traditional hierarchy weakens in start-ups, WMs represent a new form of authority—based not on control, but on clarity, trust, and facilitation.
- v. Facilitative Leadership and OD [15,16]: The WM enacts leadership as a process of enabling others, rather than directing them, through container-building, inquiry, and dialogic practices.

While literature-based theory building offers breadth, it has limitations. First, it cannot validate the effectiveness of the WM role empirically; it can only propose plausible mechanisms based on theory. Second, there is a risk of construct proliferation because many adjacent roles in the literature may use different labels for similar behaviors (e.g., integrator, systems convener, collaboration lead), requiring careful distinction.

To mitigate these limitations, the review was deliberately integrative rather than exhaustive: its aim is to generate a model that can be tested in future research, rather than to close the debate. The WM role, as it currently exists, lacks formal recognition in most organizational charts, job frameworks, or HR taxonomies. As such, attempting to study it empirically without first clarifying its theoretical contours and functions risks circularity. Building on

the calls of Whetten [17] and Van de Ven [18] for more rigorous conceptual research, this paper contributes to establishing a clear, literature-based foundation upon which future case studies, surveys, and experimental research can be designed.

Wheeler Manager Capabilities

One of the central questions driving this inquiry is: what exactly does a Wheeler Manager (WM) do? If the WM is not defined by a department, deliverable, or direct report structure, then what are the actual behaviors and skills that constitute their value to an organization?

Drawing on an extensive review of the literature across organizational design, leadership, facilitation, and complexity science, this section proposes a framework of six interdependent capability clusters that define the Wheeler Manager role. Each capability is described conceptually and linked to relevant academic theory, illustrating how WMs operate not as functionaries but as organizational integrators.

Cognitive Spanning

This refers to the WM's ability to move across mental models, functions, and timescales synthesizing perspectives that are often siloed within teams.

The concept draws from systems thinking and transdisciplinary reasoning [19], wherein actors are able to reframe problems by accessing and integrating multiple knowledge domains. WMs often operate at the interface of strategy and execution, translating the abstract into the actionable, and vice versa.

Illustrative function:

- i. helping engineering teams understand the implications of customer service feedback.
- ii. aligning short-term delivery goals with long-term strategic objectives.
- iii. spotting cognitive blind spots in how different departments interpret the same KPI.
- iv. This echoes the role of "boundary spanners" in innovation research [20], who help bridge interpretive frames and align disconnected groups.

Dialogic Framing

WMs are skilled facilitators of sensemaking. They enable conversations that go beyond problem-solving into meaning-making, using language intentionally to create alignment and shared understanding.

This draws on dialogic organizational development [16], which sees change as emerging from shifts in how people talk about their work and context. The WM helps teams reframe conflict as signal, ambiguity as opportunity, and tension as a chance for co-learning.

Illustrative function:

- i. facilitating cross-functional retrospectives that expose systemic causes, not individual blame.
- ii. asking catalytic questions in strategy meetings to surface assumptions.
- iii. hosting learning reviews to narrative both wins and failures.

In doing so, the WM embodies a form of narrative stewardship, curating the stories that an organization tells about itself.

Resource Choreography

In growing organizations, coordination failures are rarely about lack of effort and they're about mismatched timing, unclear dependencies, or overcommitment. The WM acts as an informal orchestrator of organizational attention and capacity.

This capability connects to literature on attention-based theory of the firm [21], which highlights that what organizations notice and act on is shaped by their communication and structure.

Illustrative function:

- i. mapping which teams are pulled into too many initiatives at once.
- ii. noticing redundant projects across teams and fostering unification.
- iii. recommending pacing adjustments to avoid burnout or dependency bottlenecks.

Unlike operations managers who enforce delivery, the WM protects system bandwidth.

Conflict Transmutation

In complex systems, conflict is inevitable. The WM's role is not to suppress it, but to transmute it into learning and relational growth. They operate upstream of HR, surfacing issues before they escalate, and reframing interpersonal friction as a coordination signal.

This is aligned with relational coordination theory [22], which sees performance improvements as emerging from shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect across roles.

Illustrative function:

- i. helping two teams realize they are operating from incompatible definitions of "done".
- ii. mediating tensions by surfacing the emotional drivers underneath technical disagreements.
- iii. encouraging reflection on decision-making loops and their unintended consequences.

The WM builds what Edmondson [23] calls psychological safety, making it easier to address the undiscussables that block progress.

Temporal Pacing

Organizations often struggle not with "what" to do, but "when" to do it. The WM is responsible for modulating timing (not just accelerating or decelerating) but syncing cadences across teams and initiatives.

This draws on theories of rhythmic leadership [24] and agile delivery, where effectiveness is as much about timing as execution.

Illustrative function:

- i. calibrating OKR cycles to match product maturity stages.
- ii. introducing reflective pauses between high-output sprints.
- iii. ensuring long-term goals are not lost in short-term urgency.

Here, the WM is both a calendar designer and a ritual steward shaping not just work, but the rhythm of work.

Ecosystem Navigation

As start-ups scale, their external touchpoints multiply like investors, regulators, communities, suppliers. The WM helps integrate these externalities into internal strategy without overwhelming the core.

This role is conceptually adjacent to the boundary role person in open systems theory [25], responsible for balancing internal-external alignment.

Illustrative function:

- i. preparing founders for critical board conversations by summarizing internal trade-offs.
- ii. acting as a bridge between engineering and compliance when regulatory updates impact codebase.
- iii. cultivating peer relationships with other companies to enable pre-competitive learning.

Ecosystem navigation enables organizations to scale reputationally and relationally, not just operationally.

Although presented discretely, these six capabilities are often enacted simultaneously and iteratively. A single strategic off-site may involve dialogic framing, cognitive spanning, and conflict transmutation. The WM's strength lies in the ability to switch lenses, translate languages, and mediate between systemic levels.

Rather than owning a deliverable, the WM shapes the conditions under which deliverables emerge via improved clarity, better timing, and more humane conversations.

Their presence acts as a kind of organizational acupuncture, relieving tension and restoring flow without imposing hierarchy or command. In this way, the WM activates adaptive capacity: the ability of the organization to respond intelligently to both internal misalignments and external shocks.

Archetypes and Moderators of Effectiveness

While the Wheeler Manager role is conceptually unified through its core capabilities, its enactment varies significantly depending on the individual's background, organizational maturity, and strategic context. Based on comparative synthesis of literature in leadership roles, hybrid positions, and facilitation archetypes [14,15,26], we identify three ideal-type WM archetypes. These are not mutually exclusive but offer distinct lenses to understand how WMs operate in different environments.

The Architect

Profile: often a senior operator or ex-COO with systems thinking skills and an affinity for structure. Typically brought in after product-market fit, when scaling pressures intensify.

Primary function: the Architect excels at making the invisible visible, translating abstract strategy into coherent routines, building interfaces between teams, and codifying emerging behaviors into artefacts (e.g., rituals, templates, information flows).

Capabilities emphasized:

- i. cognitive Spanning
- ii. temporal Pacing
- iii. resource Choreography

Strengths:

- i. introduces systemic clarity without rigidity
- ii. brings credibility with technical and business teams
- iii. aligns structure to strategy with minimal friction

Risks:

- i. may over-formalize too early
- ii. needs founder buy-in to avoid being misperceived as "bureaucratic"

Theoretical link: aligned with the institutional designer described in organizational learning literature [27], who helps build second-order learning mechanisms into structures.

The Catalyst

Profile: often a mid-career professional from consulting, coaching, or people operations. Charismatic, emotionally intelligent, and oriented toward enabling collaboration and reflection.

Primary function: the Catalyst holds space for difficult conversations, unblocks communication across silos, and models adaptive leadership by how they show up, more than what they control.

Capabilities emphasized:

- i. dialogic Framing

- ii. conflict Transmutation
- iii. temporal Pacing

Strengths:

- i. builds psychological safety
- ii. sparks cultural rituals and shared language
- iii. trusted as a neutral convener

Risks:

- i. can become over-relied upon as "the only one who listens"
- ii. may lack strategic clout with more analytical stakeholders

Theoretical link: resonates with the concept of the process consultant in OD literature [28], whose role is to intervene in how work is done, not what work is done.

The Scout

Profile: typically, an internal talent (someone who grew with the company) rotated across functions, and demonstrates curiosity, trust, and contextual fluency.

Primary function: the Scout integrates perspectives from across the organization, often before others even realize coordination gaps exist. They are intuitively trusted because they "speak all dialects."

Capabilities emphasized:

- i. ecosystem Navigation
- ii. resource Choreography
- iii. cognitive Spanning

Strengths:

- i. low ego, high trust
- ii. embedded in informal networks
- iii. bridges legacy culture with growth needs

Risks:

- i. may lack external legitimacy
- ii. needs development support to avoid becoming a "helper" rather than a strategic actor

Theoretical link: closely resembles the boundary Bridger in social capital theory [29], who connects otherwise disconnected clusters and enables novel combinations of knowledge.

Moderators Of WM Effectiveness

Beyond archetypes, the effectiveness of the WM role is also shaped by contextual moderators. These are structural or cultural conditions that influence how successfully the role can be enacted.

Organizational Complexity

WMs thrive in organizations where coordination costs are high: multiple teams, product lines, integrations, or regulatory layers. In simpler environments, their contributions may be harder to distinguish from those of product owners or delivery managers.

Insight from literature: Tushman & Nadler [30] argue that boundary roles become valuable only when differentiation increases; otherwise, coordination can be handled informally.

Leadership Style and Founder Philosophy

The WM requires psychological safety, reflexivity, and sponsor commitment. In founder-centric cultures with a heroic or top-down style, the WM may struggle to gain influence without authority.

Literature link: Heifetz [31] distinguishes between technical and adaptive leadership. WMs thrive in adaptive contexts where authority is shared, and learning is valued.

Culture of Dialogue and Reflection

The WM role depends on the organization's willingness to talk about process, to name tensions, and to slow down enough for sensemaking. In hyper-growth settings that fetishise velocity over awareness, the role risks being marginalized.

Link to theory: Edmondson [23] and Kegan & Lahey (2016) emphasize that growth requires not just output, but developmental capacity. WMs support this by embedding reflection into action.

Infrastructure and Tooling

Although not a tech role, WMs benefit from digital tools that enhance visibility (e.g., work graphs, team health diagnostics, knowledge systems). These enable more accurate sensing and support systemic insight.

Connection to theory: Lee et al. [32] show that IT capabilities can enhance organizational agility. WMs use such tooling not for control, but for pattern recognition.

A key insight from this analysis is that no single WM archetype is "best": the effectiveness of each depends on matching the person to the phase, pain point, and philosophy of the organization.

- i. Early scaling (30–80 employees) with unclear rituals? → Catalyst
- ii. Multi-product environment with interdependent teams? → Architect
- iii. Legacy company undergoing cultural renewal? → Scout

Leaders designing or evolving the WM role must therefore assess both the external complexity and the internal readiness. Misalignment (e.g., placing a Catalyst in a rigid top-down org) can result in burnout, confusion, or organizational rejection.

Comparative Analysis: The Wheeler Manager and Related Roles

One of the most frequently asked questions regarding the WM is how the role compares to more traditional or well-known positions within organizations. Is it a rebranding of the Agile Coach? A softer version of a Project Manager? A cultural extension of an Operations Lead? While overlaps exist, a closer conceptual examination reveals that the WM occupies a distinct strategic and structural space.

In this section, we provide a theoretical comparison between the Wheeler Manager and five commonly referenced organizational roles: the Agile Coach, the Product Manager, the People/HR Business Partner, the Project Manager, and the COO (Chief Operating Officer). The aim is to identify where convergence occurs, and more importantly, where divergence is essential to understanding the WM's unique contribution.

Agile Coach vs Wheeler Manager

The Agile Coach emerged in response to the rise of agile methodologies in software development. This role focuses on enabling teams to adopt and sustain agile practices through coaching, facilitation, and support for continuous improvement.

While both roles prioritize team health, learning rituals, and cross-functional alignment, their scopes are fundamentally different. The Agile Coach is often embedded at the team or program level, supporting squads within a defined delivery model. The Wheeler Manager, by contrast, operates transversally, usually without anchorage to one team or framework. Their concerns are systemic rather than procedural: how the entire organization coordinates and makes sense of itself in periods of growth and complexity.

The WM, unlike the Agile Coach, is not constrained by a particular methodology. Their work may draw from agile, but also from systems thinking, change management, or organizational development. The WM exists outside delivery pipelines, freeing them to observe and influence dynamics that agile frameworks may not surface.

Product Manager vs Wheeler Manager

The Product Manager (PM) is arguably one of the most strategic roles in tech-driven organizations. PMs act as stewards of customer value: they define product roadmaps, prioritize features, and coordinate with design, engineering, and marketing to ship solutions that solve real problems.

Both the PM and WM must think systemically and communicate across disciplines. However, the PM is market-facing and output-driven: their success is measured in releases, adoption, and customer satisfaction. The WM is internally focused and process oriented: its value lies in fostering healthy collaboration, alignment, and continuous learning throughout the organization.

Moreover, the PM owns a product backlog and drives delivery through structured ceremonies. The WM owns no deliverables, no backlog, and no direct authority. Their legitimacy stems from trust, influence, and their ability to create coherence across competing narratives and priorities.

HR Business Partner vs Wheeler Manager

The HR Business Partner (HRBP) supports talent strategy, leadership development, employee relations, and sometimes organizational design. In theory, this role also has a cross-cutting mandate: to align people strategy with business needs.

In practice, however, HRBPs often find themselves limited by policy, compliance constraints, and transactional responsibilities. The WM, by contrast, is unburdened by HR formalism. Their interactions are informal, emergent, and embedded within the daily life of the organization.

Furthermore, while HRBPs may facilitate conflict resolution or feedback cycles, the WM actively pre-empts friction by sensing misalignments early, reframing issues, and holding reflective space before escalation. In many ways, the WM acts as a complement to HR offering early diagnostics and cultural insight that can inform more formal people processes.

Project Manager vs Wheeler Manager

The Project Manager (PM) ensures that a specific scope of work is delivered on time, on budget, and with defined quality standards. Their work is structured, milestone-driven, and often supported by tools such as Gantt charts, risk registers, and resource allocation matrices.

Unlike the Wheeler Manager, the Project Manager operates within a clear accountability framework. They hold authority to escalate issues, assign resources, and enforce timelines. The WM, on the other hand, holds no command over budgets, teams, or plans. Their interventions are subtle: influencing how priorities are negotiated, how learning is shared, how dependencies are surfaced.

Theoretically, this aligns the WM more with adaptive coordination than with classic project control. If the Project Manager is the conductor of a predefined symphony, the WM is the facilitator of a jazz ensemble, tuning conditions so that improvisation still results in harmony.

Chief Operating Officer (COO) vs Wheeler Manager

The COO has a broad mandate to ensure operational excellence, implement strategy, and drive execution across the business. It is a powerful role, often second only to the CEO, and focused on scale, process, and performance.

While both roles may appear concerned with alignment, the key difference lies in power, scope, and time horizon. The COO

holds formal executive authority and is accountable for delivering results. The WM holds informal influence and is accountable for ensuring that the organization remains healthy, coherent, and capable of learning.

The COO works through authority, the WM works through relationship, reflection, and resonance. The COO might design systems, the WM ensures those systems are inhabited with intelligence.

The Wheeler Manager is not meant to replace these existing roles: they supplement the system's adaptive intelligence, filling the coordination void that often emerges between functions, across silos, and beyond reporting lines.

In organizations without WMs, the work they do often falls between the cracks (or gets distributed inefficiently) across roles not designed for it: a tech lead may try to coach a team in conflict, a founder may be pulled into mediating interdepartmental confusion, a PM may stretch to facilitate difficult retrospectives. Over time, these hidden roles drain capacity and clarity.

The WM reclaims this invisible work and makes it intentional, professional, and strategic. They create coherence without control, hold tension without collapse, and ensure the organization can move quickly without tearing itself apart.

Risks and Mitigation Strategies

As with any novel or hybrid role, the introduction of the WM into an organizational system is not without risks. While the literature on facilitative roles, systems leadership, and organizational change consistently underscores the benefits of boundary-spanning actors, it also warns of failure modes that arise when such roles are poorly scoped, misunderstood, or structurally unsupported.

This section identifies the primary theoretical and practical risks associated with the WM role and offers strategies for their mitigation, drawing on insights from organizational development (OD), human systems dynamics, and leadership psychology.

Role Dilution ("The Everything-Bagel Syndrome")

Because the WM operates without a rigid scope and is often positioned to "help wherever needed" there is a high risk of role drift. WMs may become involved in too many initiatives, offering feedback on product strategy in the morning, running a culture workshop at lunch, and resolving interpersonal conflict in the afternoon. Over time, this leads to burnout, lack of strategic focus, and declining influence.

Theoretical Insight: Mintzberg [33] warned of the dangers of ambiguous managerial boundaries. Similarly, Schwarz [15] highlights that facilitators must clarify their role to be effective. When boundaries are unclear, the system fails to learn what to expect from the role.

Mitigation:

- i. define a WM charter that specifies core responsibilities and decision spaces.
- ii. revisit the role regularly (e.g., quarterly) to ensure alignment with evolving needs.
- iii. establish a “not-my-job” list to clarify boundaries and protect the WM’s attention.

Positional Ambiguity and Power Vacuum

Unlike traditional managers, WMs hold no formal power, budget authority, or direct reports. This can lead to confusion (both for the WM and those they interact with) about what the role can enforce versus influence. In cultures with a strong bias toward hierarchical authority, the WM may be marginalized or perceived as peripheral.

Theoretical Insight: the literature on informal authority [31] suggests that leading without power requires relationship capital and clear sponsorship. Without explicit endorsement from senior leaders, informal roles struggle to gain traction.

Mitigation:

- i. publicly introduce and legitimize the WM role in leadership forums.
- ii. pair the WM with a sponsoring executive who can reinforce their strategic remit.
- iii. include the WM in decision-making spaces (e.g., leadership meetings, all-hands) to make their presence normative.

Organizational Immunity to Dialogue

Some organizational cultures are allergic to reflection, vulnerability, or complexity. They may reward velocity over thoughtfulness, clarity over nuance, or output over insight. In such settings, the WM’s efforts to hold space for learning and tension may be misread as unnecessary or even subversive.

Theoretical Insight: Kegan & Lahey [34] describe such resistance as “immunity to change” where systems unconsciously defend against growth. The WM, acting as a mirror, may trigger discomfort in systems unaccustomed to surfacing their own contradictions.

Mitigation:

- i. begin with small, low-risk experiments that demonstrate the value of reflection (e.g., post-mortems, listening circles).
- ii. co-create rituals that embed learning into delivery cycles, rather than positioning it as extra work.
- iii. use data and stories to build legitimacy for systemic insights (e.g., team health metrics, alignment heatmaps).

Identity Confusion and Peer Tension

Because the WM’s remit overlaps (or appears to overlap) with multiple functions (product, ops, HR, strategy) there is a risk that others will perceive them as encroaching or duplicating effort. This can lead to turf wars or passive resistance from peers.

Theoretical Insight: role ambiguity is a well-documented cause of organizational conflict [25]. Boundary-spanning roles, unless clearly articulated, risk triggering territorial defense from incumbents.

Mitigation:

- i. co-design the WM role with input from affected peers, reducing surprise and resentment.
- ii. emphasize collaboration, not competition: the WM complements, rather than replaces, functional ownership.
- iii. create artefacts (e.g., a responsibility matrix or role map) to visualize the WM’s space in the system.

Misuse as a Tactical Firefighter

Under pressure, organizations may deploy the WM as a fixer-of-last-resort, tasking them with solving urgent conflicts, rescuing broken projects, or coaching struggling teams. While this speaks to the WM’s versatility, it can also degrade the strategic value of the role, turning it into a reactive patch rather than a proactive integrator.

Theoretical Insight: according to Quinn [35], effective leadership requires toggling between different mindsets: facilitator, producer, innovator, monitor. If the WM is overly associated with operational rescue, their developmental and strategic potential is lost.

Mitigation:

- i. define a strategic scope for the WM that includes both immediate and long-term priorities.
- ii. educate leadership on the difference between firefighting and system design.
- iii. protect the WM’s time with clear priorities, buffers, and reflection rituals.

The Wheeler Manager holds promise as a role that can rebalance coordination, deepen strategic learning, and hold systems together during growth. But like any integrative function, it risks becoming everything to everyone (or nothing to anyone) if introduced without care.

To maximize its effectiveness, organizations must clarify scope, ensure sponsorship, align culture, and treat the WM as an investment in systemic coherence and not just another operational layer.

As the next section will argue, the very value of the WM lies in what is otherwise left invisible: the conversations that don't happen, the tensions that fester, and the assumptions that go unchallenged. The WM brings these into the light, not with authority, but with presence, pattern recognition, and a commitment to learning.

Conclusion

This article has explored the Wheeler Manager as a conceptual innovation in organizational design, one that responds to the growing complexity, ambiguity, and coordination demands faced by modern start-ups and scale-ups. Through an integrative literature review, we have shown that the WM is neither a derivative of traditional middle management nor a glorified project coach. Rather, it is a purpose-built response to the organizational needs of the post-bureaucratic age: adaptive alignment, distributed leadership, and systemic learning.

The Wheeler Manager operates not by commanding, allocating, or delivering, but by sensing, connecting, reframing, and enabling. The WM's tools are language, relationship, facilitation, and insight. Their outcomes are not deliverables in the classical sense, but clarity, cohesion, cadence, and coherence (essential but often unmeasured variables in organizational health).

Where hierarchy centralizes and agile fragments, the WM integrates. Where roles tend to specialize, the WM generalizes. Where conflict divides, the WM frames. Their greatest contribution is not what they "do" in the operational sense, but what they make possible by removing friction and amplifying reflection.

At its core, the WM reframes coordination not as control, but as a form of learning. In organizations that move fast and grow unpredictably, the real risk is not slowness but fragmentation: WMs counter this by stitching together the learning loops that allow the organization to make sense of itself while it is still in motion.

They act as custodians of meaning, guardians of reflection, and facilitators of rhythm. This turns them into "system stewards," a term used in sociotechnical systems theory to describe actors who ensure that technological, human, and structural components remain in dialogue rather than drift apart.

As such, the WM should be recognized not as a temporary fix for dysfunction, but as a long-term investment in adaptive capacity.

A Role for Post-Industrial Leadership

The emergence of the Wheeler Manager is symptomatic of a broader transition in leadership theory. In place of charismatic, top-down figures who "hold the vision," we are seeing the rise of distributed leadership ecosystems in which meaning, strategy, and decision-making are collectively generated.

In this context, the WM serves as a node of coherence, a bridge

between the emergent and the intentional. Their legitimacy does not stem from formal authority but from relational capital, systemic insight, and the ability to navigate ambiguity gracefully.

Rather than managing people, the WM manages patterns: how teams relate, how decisions flow, how cycles sync, how cultures speak to themselves. It is leadership without domination, design without rigidity, and support without dependency.

Strategic Implications

For founders, the WM offers a way to scale culture before structure, and to professionalise coordination without losing agility. Rather than rushing into heavy org charts or top-down processes, they can empower WMs to build clarity, cadence, and coherence from the middle-out.

For HR leaders, the WM introduces a new competency model: one rooted in facilitative practice, systems thinking, and developmental coaching. Designing onboarding pathways, career ladders, and peer learning networks for WMs can enhance internal mobility and leadership depth.

For investors and board members, the WM provides a signal of organizational maturity: a sign that the company understands complexity not as a threat to be tamed through bureaucracy, but as a challenge to be navigated with intelligence, intention, and care.

While this article has focused on the role as enacted by individuals, the Wheeler Manager should also be seen as a pattern of coordination that can be embedded across a system. Multiple people can share WM-like responsibilities (across design, product, operations, and leadership) so long as they adopt a similar mindset: reflective, integrative, boundary-crossing.

In this way, the WM is not just a job title, but a cultural vector: a way of organizing that prioritizes connection over control, dialogue over escalation, and insight over output. Whether enacted by one person or many, the value lies in making the invisible visible (the loops, gaps, and tensions that define complex work).

Contributions and Limitations

This paper contributes to the literature on organizational design and leadership in several ways:

- i. it offers a new conceptual model for a role that is increasingly present in high-growth organizations but under-theorized in academia.
- ii. it synthesizes frameworks from sensemaking, dynamic capabilities, social capital, and post-bureaucratic theory to explain the WM's systemic function.
- iii. it proposes six core capability clusters that define how the WM creates value beyond deliverables.
- iv. it outlines archetypes and contextual moderators to help organizations decide how and when to introduce the role.

However, the study is also subject to limitations:

- i. being literature-based, it does not include empirical data or case studies.
- ii. the WM role remains loosely defined in practice, and its interpretation may vary across industries, cultures, and organizational stages.
- iii. further research is needed to quantify the WM's impact, trace its career path, and explore how it evolves over time.

Future Research Scenarios

While this paper has laid a conceptual foundation for the WM as a strategic, boundary-spanning role in modern organizations, its theoretical nature opens rather than closes the conversation. In this final section, have been identified a set of future research directions that could deepen, diversify, and challenge our current understanding of the WM role. These directions fall under five overarching categories: role evolution, comparative theory, socio-technical integration, cultural embeddedness, and normative reflection.

One promising avenue for future inquiry is to explore how the WM role adapts to different organizational forms. While this article has focused primarily on start-ups and scale-ups, many other settings (cooperatives, NGOs, platform organizations, creative studios) may also benefit from WM-like functions. Research could build on work by Mintzberg [33], Laloux [36], and Alvesson [14] to explore the interplay between organizational form and the viability of hybrid, facilitative roles.

With the increasing digitization of organizational life, a fascinating question is how technology (especially artificial intelligence (AI) might augment or reshape the WM role.

The WM could be among the first roles to interface heavily with organizational knowledge graphs, decision-support tools, and conversation analytics platforms. Rather than replacing WMs, these technologies might amplify their diagnostic capabilities, allowing them to sense patterns, tensions, or blind spots faster and more broadly.

Could be explored further emerging fields like human-AI teaming and algorithmic facilitation [37] and deserve rigorous exploration.

We can say that the WM role as described in this article draws implicitly from organizational cultures that value dialogue, decentralization, and learning. However, not all cultures, national or organizational, share these values to the same extent.

Future conceptual work could explore how the WM is perceived in high power-distance cultures, where informal authority is rare, or if his functions could be codified into formal roles in collectivist societies, where facilitation is already culturally embedded.

Here, the work of Hofstede [38], Lloyd & Trompenaars [39], and Gelfand et al. [40] offers a valuable lens: comparative cultural studies could illuminate how the cultural assumptions of the WM model enable or inhibit its adoption.

As boundary roles become more common, scholars may also need to turn a normative lens on the WM's ethical dilemmas. Questions around identity, authority, and agency are central to the role's practice. Future philosophical or critical theory-based research might ask what power the WM does really hold, and what responsibilities come with it... This line of inquiry might draw from critical leadership studies [41], feminist organizational theory [42], or dialogic ethics [43] to interrogate the relational consequences of facilitative influence.

All these directions suggest that the Wheeler Manager is not just an organizational curiosity but a living laboratory for who is interested in the future of coordination, leadership, and learning. The WM role touches on nearly every fault line in modern organizing: hierarchy vs. autonomy, speed vs. reflection, centralization vs. emergence.

By engaging with the WM not only as a role, but as a lens on complexity, future research can advance both theory and practice. This would honor the very spirit of the WM: a commitment not to impose answers, but to hold space for better questions and to help organizations evolve in their capacity to face them.

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