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From Compliance to Responsiveness An Adaptive Compliance Framework for Public Service Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – Public service organizations must fulfill regulatory obligations while responding to changing stakeholder needs. Existing research explains dysfunctional rules, administrative burdens, managerial agency, and adaptive capabilities, but these perspectives do not by themselves specify why organizations with comparable compliance can differ in rigidity and strategic responsiveness.
Design/methodology/approach – This paper develops an Adaptive Compliance Framework through a problem-driven conceptual synthesis of the literature represented in the paper. Institutional complexity provides the interpretive lens, while research on rules, routines, learning, and reconfiguration supplies the organizational mechanisms.
Findings – The framework distinguishes regulatory compliance from procedural dominance and proposes that compliance increases rigidity under predominantly procedural implementation. Organizational rigidity provides an intervening explanation for reduced responsiveness, and bounded managerial discretion weakens the conditional compliance-rigidity relationship. A complementary pathway connects strategic flexibility to strategic responsiveness, with organizational learning strengthening that relationship. Five relational propositions specify these mechanisms, while a sixth integrative proposition describes adaptive compliance as their coordinated organizational configuration rather than an additional outcome variable. Conceptual comparison tables and a literature-based application clarify construct boundaries, accountability safeguards, and practical relevance. The contribution is a conditional explanation of how compliance can be maintained alongside adaptation through the alignment of regulatory boundaries, authorized judgment, evaluative learning, and reconfiguration capacity.
Originality/value – The framework has not been empirically validated; future research should test its relationships and configurational interpretation separately.

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1. Introduction

Public service organizations face a recurrent implementation problem: they must follow rules that protect consistency, lawful authority, and accountability while responding to changing service needs. This problem arises in welfare administration, public healthcare, licensing, and digital service delivery, where standardized requirements encounter heterogeneous cases and evolving operational conditions. The presence of rules is not itself evidence of dysfunction. Difficulties arise when an organization can demonstrate procedural fulfillment but cannot adjust legitimate implementation arrangements to address a documented problem. Research on red tape and administrative burden provides reasons to examine the contribution and costs of rules rather than assuming that greater formal compliance necessarily improves public service outcomes (Campbell et al., 2023; Halling & Bækgaard, 2024).

The distinction matters for citizens as well as organizations. Administrative burdens can discourage program participation, constrain service use among people facing health-related difficulties, and reproduce inequalities in routine interactions (Fox et al., 2023; Bell et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2024). Service design, expectations, and the values attributed to public officials also shape how services are evaluated (Chan et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022; Neo et al., 2023). These citizen-level findings establish the importance of responsive implementation. They do not, however, directly demonstrate how organizational rigidity develops or how an organization changes its strategic priorities.

Organizational research supplies complementary explanations. Adaptive capacity, managerial capabilities, and innovation routines help account for how public organizations respond to change (Zhang, 2021; Widianto et al., 2021; Gullmark, 2021). Research on flexibility and agility identifies the options and reconfiguration capabilities that make adjustment feasible (Herhausen et al., 2021; Looks et al., 2024; Atobishi et al., 2024). Institutional complexity research further shows how actors interpret and manage competing demands, including through selective responses and bureaucratic discretion (Shams, 2021; Sætre, 2023; Rahman et al., 2024). These bodies of work overlap, but address different mechanisms and levels of analysis.

Within the literature synthesized here, the unresolved issue concerns how compliance implementation and adaptive capabilities interact to produce different organizational responses under comparable regulatory obligations. Institutional complexity research explains how actors interpret competing demands; red tape and administrative burden research distinguishes regulatory purposes from dysfunctional rules and implementation costs; and capability research explains the availability of organizational options for adjustment. The present framework connects these explanations by specifying when compliant implementation becomes restrictive, how bounded discretion can weaken that tendency, and how learning supports the conversion of available options into responsive action. The question is therefore: How can public service organizations maintain regulatory compliance while developing strategic responsiveness to changing stakeholder needs?

The objective is to develop a bounded, mechanism-based explanation of adaptive compliance. The paper identifies rigidity as an intervening organizational mechanism, assigns distinct moderating roles to bounded managerial discretion and organizational learning, and integrates these relationships with strategic flexibility. The contribution is not the claim that organizational responsiveness is new. It is the specification of how lawful compliance and adaptive capabilities can operate together, and why similar compliance levels need not produce similar responses.

The paper uses a problem-driven, non-systematic conceptual synthesis. The literature represented in the manuscript forms its source base; the synthesis organizes that material by regulatory purpose, implementation constraints, interpretive agency, learning, and reconfiguration. Sources are used according to their conceptual relevance and level of analysis. Findings about citizens, employees, innovation, or performance inform the reasoning where appropriate but are distinguished from direct evidence about organizational strategic responsiveness. Definitions are compared, mechanisms are connected, and relationships are formulated as propositions. This approach does not claim an exhaustive search or empirical validation. Section 2 establishes the conceptual foundations, Section 3 develops the propositions, Section 4 integrates and illustrates the framework, Section 5 discusses contributions and practical implications, and Section 6 sets out limitations and research priorities.

2. Literature Review & Hypothesis Development

Three connected theoretical perspectives organize the review. Institutional complexity explains how public organizations encounter multiple demands and how authorized actors interpret their implementation (Shams, 2021; Sætre, 2023; Matinheikki et al., 2021). Research on red tape and administrative burden distinguishes regulatory purposes from dysfunctional implementation costs (Campbell et al., 2023; Halling & Bækgaard, 2024). Capability and learning perspectives explain how organizations develop options, interpret experience, and reconfigure action under changing conditions (Gullmark, 2021; Widianto et al., 2021; Hansen & Nielsen, 2022; Herhausen et al., 2021). Institutional complexity is the interpretive lens; the other perspectives supply mechanisms rather than interchangeable labels for adaptation.

2.1 Regulatory Compliance in Public Service Organizations

Regulatory compliance is the fulfillment of applicable legal, administrative, and organizational obligations. Its defining feature is conformity with requirements, not the number of procedures or the difficulty of changing them. Rules can clarify authority, standardize evidence, and make decisions reviewable. Red tape is conceptually different: it concerns burdensome rules that make an inadequate contribution to legitimate organizational goals. Administrative burden concerns the learning, compliance, and psychological costs experienced in administrative interactions, especially by citizens (Campbell et al., 2023; Halling & Bækgaard, 2024).

These concepts can intersect without being equivalent. A lawful requirement may impose substantial citizen costs without constituting organizational rigidity; a rigid organization may preserve obsolete internal routines that are not legally required. Similarly, adoption of a management practice under institutional pressure does not guarantee performance improvement (Andrews et al., 2021). The framework therefore separates the level of compliance from procedural dominance, defined here as implementation that prioritizes completing prescribed steps over evaluating whether authorized procedures continue to serve their substantive purpose.

Citizen burden research indicates consequences that warrant organizational attention, but the translation from citizen experience to organizational change remains an additional explanatory step. Internal decision structures, the handling of feedback, and the revisability of routines must be examined before inferring rigidity. Compliance becomes relevant to rigidity when its implementation discourages that examination, rather than merely because service users face demanding requirements.

These perspectives do not imply the same organizational diagnosis. A burdensome requirement may reflect a mandatory legal obligation, a revisable internal procedure, or an

implementation arrangement that distributes costs unevenly. Likewise, a stable routine may preserve reliable coordination or prevent a justified adjustment. The framework therefore treats citizen burden as a signal requiring investigation and restricted organizational revisability as a separate mechanism requiring organization-level evidence. This distinction allows the synthesis to accommodate both enabling and restrictive effects of rules rather than treating procedural change as inherently beneficial.

2.2 Organizational Rigidity

Organizational rigidity is a persistent limitation on an organization's ability to revise established decisions, routines, processes, or resource allocations when a relevant need for change has been recognized. It concerns restricted revisability, not stability alone. Formalization specifies procedures, centralization locates authority, and stable routines reproduce coordinated activity. Each can support reliable service delivery; each can also contribute to rigidity when it prevents legitimate adjustment.

Research on workplace voice suggests that centralized arrangements can restrict participation and the entry of operational perspectives into decisions (Jiang et al., 2022). Studies of routines and employee engagement indicate that established practices can support or inhibit innovation, while interactions can reorient routines toward public value (Gullmark, 2021; Knox & Marin-Cadavid, 2023; Pedersen & Scheller, 2024). Restrictive bureaucratic practices in innovation teams provide further reason to distinguish useful structure from constrained adaptation (Alom, 2025). These findings support a conditional interpretation of rigidity rather than a presumption that bureaucracy is inherently inflexible.

Conceptual signs of rigidity include repeated inability to revise an internal procedure after documented failures, blocked resource transfers within authorized limits, and unchanged decision routines despite relevant feedback. Such signs must be assessed against lawful mandates and operational feasibility. Refusing an unlawful adjustment is not rigidity as defined here, and maintaining a necessary safety procedure is not evidence of organizational dysfunction.

2.3 Strategic Responsiveness

Strategic responsiveness is the organizational capacity to translate recognized changes in stakeholder needs or environmental conditions into relevant and timely adjustments in priorities, processes, resources, and coordinated action. It combines interpretation with enacted response at the organizational level. Citizen satisfaction is a downstream evaluation that may reflect expectations and service experiences; it is not a substitute measure of this capacity (Zhang et al., 2022; Chan et al., 2021).

Strategic flexibility supplies alternative courses of action and reconfiguration capacity. Responsiveness concerns whether changes in demand are actually translated into appropriate action. An organization can possess resource options without deploying them in response to a relevant need. Agility emphasizes rapid, iterative adjustment, while adaptive capacity describes a broader ability to cope with environmental change (Looks et al., 2024; Zhang, 2021). These concepts overlap, but their analytical functions should remain distinguishable.

Research linking managerial capabilities to change capacity and digital capabilities to agility supports examining responsiveness as an organizational phenomenon (Widianto et al., 2021; Atobishi et al., 2024). The present framework draws on those mechanisms without claiming that studies of change capacity, innovation, or performance have already measured the proposed responsiveness construct. Its specificity lies in connecting responsive action to implementation within regulatory boundaries.

As a hypothetical illustration, a licensing office may possess an authorized option to reassign staff during a demand surge. The availability of that option indicates strategic flexibility. Its documented deployment in response to an identified backlog indicates enacted responsiveness. If reassignment remains legally and operationally feasible but established internal routines repeatedly prevent its consideration, the restriction may indicate rigidity. If reassignment would breach mandatory staffing or safety requirements, refusal alone would not establish rigidity.

2.4 Adaptive Mechanisms in Public Organizations

Bounded managerial discretion is authorized latitude to interpret requirements and select implementation arrangements within legal powers, organizational mandates, and reviewable decision processes. Throughout this paper, managerial discretion refers to this bounded form. Institutional complexity research explains why such judgment matters when multiple expectations intersect, and managerial research identifies the agency involved in organizational change (Rahman et al., 2024; Huang & Villadsen, 2023; Widianto et al., 2021; Sihotang, Ramadhan, et al., 2027).

Organizational learning is the collective acquisition, interpretation, retention, and use of information and experience to revise organizational understanding and practices. Performance information can focus managerial attention without automatically generating innovative search or change (Hansen & Nielsen, 2022). Knowledge from frontline work, collaborative exploration, and interactions across management levels can therefore become important learning inputs (Knox & Marin-Cadavid, 2023; Kurtmollaiev et al., 2024; Higgs et al., 2023).

Strategic flexibility is the availability of alternative courses of action and the capacity to reconfigure resources, processes, and priorities within an organization's mandate. Research on flexibility and strategic agility supplies related explanations of how options and reconfigurable arrangements support adjustment (Herhausen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Tsilionis & Wautelet, 2022). Discretion establishes what adjustments may legitimately be considered, learning informs which adjustments are appropriate, and flexibility determines whether alternatives can be enacted.

Individual judgment becomes an organizational mechanism when it is embedded in delegation rules, documented reasoning, shared interpretation, and arrangements for reviewing decisions. Likewise, employee knowledge becomes organizational learning when it is evaluated and incorporated into collective practices rather than remaining personal experience. Training, creativity, and knowledge exchange can support these processes, but they do not themselves establish organization-level responsiveness (Demircioglu et al., 2025; Houtgraaf, 2023; Houtgraaf et al., 2023). Table 1 consolidates the distinctions used in the propositions.

Table 1. Conceptual definitions and analytical boundaries

Concept	Working definition	Role and distinction
Regulatory compliance	Fulfillment of applicable obligations.	Institutional boundary; distinct from procedural dominance.
Red tape	Burdensome rules with inadequate contribution to legitimate goals.	Rule dysfunction; not equivalent to all regulation.
Administrative burden	Learning, compliance, and psychological costs in administrative interactions.	Citizen experience; not direct evidence of organizational rigidity.
Organizational rigidity	Persistent restriction on revising decisions, processes, routines, or resources.	Intervening mechanism; not formalization or stability alone.

Concept	Working definition	Role and distinction
Strategic responsiveness	Translation of changing needs into relevant and timely coordinated action.	Focal organizational capacity; not citizen satisfaction.
Bounded managerial discretion	Authorized, reasoned, and reviewable implementation judgment.	Moderator of conditional compliance-rigidity association.
Strategic flexibility	Available options and capacity to reconfigure resources and processes.	Enabling capacity; distinguished from enacted response.
Organizational learning	Collective interpretation and use of information and experience.	Moderator of flexibility-responsiveness association.
Adaptive compliance	Coordinated complementarity of regulatory boundaries and adaptive functions.	Integrative configuration; not an extra dependent variable.

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis of the literature discussed in Section 2. Definitions are analytical specifications, not validated scales.

3. Methodology

The propositions connect conceptual mechanisms; they do not report effects observed in this study. P1-P5 specify conditional, direct, and moderating relationships at the organizational level. P6 is an integrative proposition about how those mechanisms operate together. Evidence from adjacent outcomes is used as support for inference, with its original level and scope retained.

3.1 Regulatory Compliance and Organizational Rigidity

Compliance can contribute to rigidity when implementation becomes predominantly procedural. Under that condition, managers and employees may allocate attention to demonstrating completion, retain procedures after their purpose has changed, and discourage case-sensitive interpretation. Repeated enactment then embeds a narrow range of acceptable responses in decision routines. The mechanism is procedural dominance, not lawful conformity itself.

Research on dysfunctional rules provides the distinction between legitimate regulatory objectives and costly means of implementation (Campbell et al., 2023). Management practices adopted under institutional pressure may also introduce redundancy rather than improve performance (Andrews et al., 2021). These findings make the proposed mechanism plausible, but do not demonstrate a universal positive effect of compliance on rigidity. Evidence that routines can be reconfigured toward public value supports the alternative possibility that compliant implementation remains revisable (Pedersen & Scheller, 2024).

The relationship should therefore be interpreted within predominantly procedural implementation contexts. Goal-oriented implementation, clear authority, and accessible review can interrupt the accumulation of rigid routines. Procedural dominance is a boundary condition of P1; it is not silently treated as a measured variable or as an unavoidable property of regulation.

P1: Under predominantly procedural implementation, regulatory compliance is positively associated with organizational rigidity.

3.2 Organizational Rigidity and Strategic Responsiveness

Rigidity constrains responsiveness by limiting the organizational conversion of recognized needs into revised action. Operational information may fail to enter decision processes, existing

approval routines may block revision, and resources may remain tied to inherited priorities despite an authorized opportunity to reallocate them. The result is a gap between recognizing a problem and changing organizational action.

Research on adaptive capacity under external shocks and agility in public administration supports the importance of organizational adjustment (Zhang, 2021; Looks et al., 2024). Research on learning from performance information further indicates that problem attention alone does not guarantee change (Hansen & Nielsen, 2022). These are complementary foundations for the mechanism. Citizen burden and satisfaction studies establish the stakes of implementation, but are not offered as direct tests of this organizational relationship.

In the restrictive pathway, rigidity is explicitly an intervening mechanism connecting procedurally dominant compliance to lower responsiveness. P1 and P2 together imply an indirect pathway; this paper does not establish its statistical mediation or exclude other influences on responsiveness. Rigidity must also be separated from legitimate refusal to alter mandatory requirements.

P2: Organizational rigidity is negatively associated with strategic responsiveness in public service organizations.

3.3 Managerial Discretion as an Adaptive Mechanism

Bounded managerial discretion is expected to change the strength of the conditional compliance-rigidity relationship. Where authorized interpretive latitude is limited, procedural requirements are more likely to be applied uniformly even when implementation conditions differ. Where latitude is available, managers can distinguish mandatory obligations from revisable internal arrangements and accommodate variation without abandoning regulatory purposes.

Rahman et al. (2024) identify selective bridging as a response to competing institutional demands. Related studies of hybrid organizations explain how actors manage multiple logics through contextual organizational responses (Shams, 2021; Sætre, 2023; Matinheikki et al., 2021). This literature supports an interpretive mechanism, rather than establishing that discretion always improves public outcomes. The framework transfers that reasoning to an organization-level proposition about the availability and institutionalization of legitimate judgment.

The moderating role depends on legal authority, recorded reasons, supervisory review, and consistent treatment of comparable cases. Unreviewed personal preference falls outside the definition. The proposition concerns how discretion reduces mechanical implementation under procedural dominance; it does not require adding a separate direct effect of discretion on responsiveness to the model.

P3: Under predominantly procedural implementation, bounded managerial discretion weakens the positive relationship between regulatory compliance and organizational rigidity.

3.4 Strategic Flexibility and Strategic Responsiveness

Strategic flexibility supports responsiveness by making alternative responses feasible once a relevant change has been recognized. Options may include revising an authorized workflow, reallocating staff, changing service channels, or adjusting priorities within an existing mandate. Available options reduce dependence on a single established course of action and allow an organization to select a response suited to the problem.

The distinction between resources for change and the enactment of relevant change prevents a tautological relationship. Flexibility can exist as spare capacity, alternative arrangements, or resource mobility even when no responsive adjustment occurs. Responsiveness requires a demonstrable connection between an identified need and coordinated action. Herhausen et al.

(2021) provide evidence of context-dependent flexibility-performance associations, while Wang et al. (2021) connect flexibility with organizational performance. These findings support the capability logic without directly testing P4 in public service organizations.

Public-sector studies of capabilities, agility, and digital transformation reinforce the importance of enabling arrangements rather than technology acquisition alone (Widianto et al., 2021; Atobishi et al., 2024; Wilson & Mergel, 2022; Mergel et al., 2024). Related conceptual work on digital twins also emphasizes organizational architecture, data governance, and organizational preparedness in technology-enabled transformation (Sihotang, 2026). Reforms and innovation processes also vary with organizational context (Raudla et al., 2024; Cinar et al., 2024; Sihotang, Suhud, Handaru, Aulianto, et al., 2027). Accordingly, flexibility is expected to support responsiveness where alternatives are lawful, sufficiently resourced, and coordinated with service objectives.

P4: Strategic flexibility is positively associated with strategic responsiveness.

3.5 Organizational Learning as a Supporting Mechanism

Organizational learning is positioned as a moderator because it changes how effectively a given level of flexibility is converted into relevant response. An organization with extensive options but weak learning may alter processes repeatedly without diagnosing the problem or assessing previous adjustments. Strong learning supplies shared interpretation of feedback, comparison of alternatives, and evaluation of whether action addresses the underlying need.

Performance information research supports the distinction between receiving a signal and using it to generate change (Hansen & Nielsen, 2022). Research on organizational interactions and collaborative knowledge creation identifies practices through which experience can become a shared basis for adjustment (Higgs et al., 2023; Kurtmollaiev et al., 2024). Findings that innovation antecedents vary across stages also support continuing evaluation rather than fixed assumptions about what works (Tan et al., 2025). These studies inform the proposed interaction, rather than providing a direct empirical test of it.

Learning may also precede or follow organizational change in practice. The model does not deny those processes, but isolates its reinforcing role at the point where flexibility is translated into responsiveness. The relevant contrast is between organizations with comparable flexibility but different capacities to interpret, retain, and apply experience. Learning must remain open to disconfirming evidence; mere repetition of accepted routines would not meet this definition.

P5: Organizational learning strengthens the positive relationship between strategic flexibility and strategic responsiveness.

3.6 From Compliance to Adaptive Compliance

Adaptive compliance is an integrative organizational configuration in which regulatory boundaries, bounded managerial discretion, organizational learning, and strategic flexibility are coordinated to enable responsive implementation while preserving accountability. It is not an additional dependent variable, a synonym for flexibility, or an assumed reflective scale. Its explanatory value lies in specifying how legally authorized interpretation, informed selection, and feasible reconfiguration operate together within continuing compliance.

The configuration has a complementary logic. Options cannot be enacted legitimately without authority; authority does not produce an appropriate response without evaluation; and evaluation cannot generate adjustment when resources and processes cannot be reconfigured. Compliance supplies the continuing boundary within which these functions operate. The conceptual configuration therefore includes all four functions, but does not assert that every function must be maximized or that each is an empirically necessary or sufficient condition.

Research on combined leadership behaviors offers an analogy for complementarity, while integrative innovation research emphasizes interacting organizational and contextual conditions (Kousina & Voudouris, 2023; Liarte et al., 2026; Tan et al., 2025; Waheduzzaman, 2026). Employee-level innovation evidence does not validate an organization-level adaptive compliance configuration. It supports asking whether coordination among distinct functions explains outcomes beyond isolated capabilities.

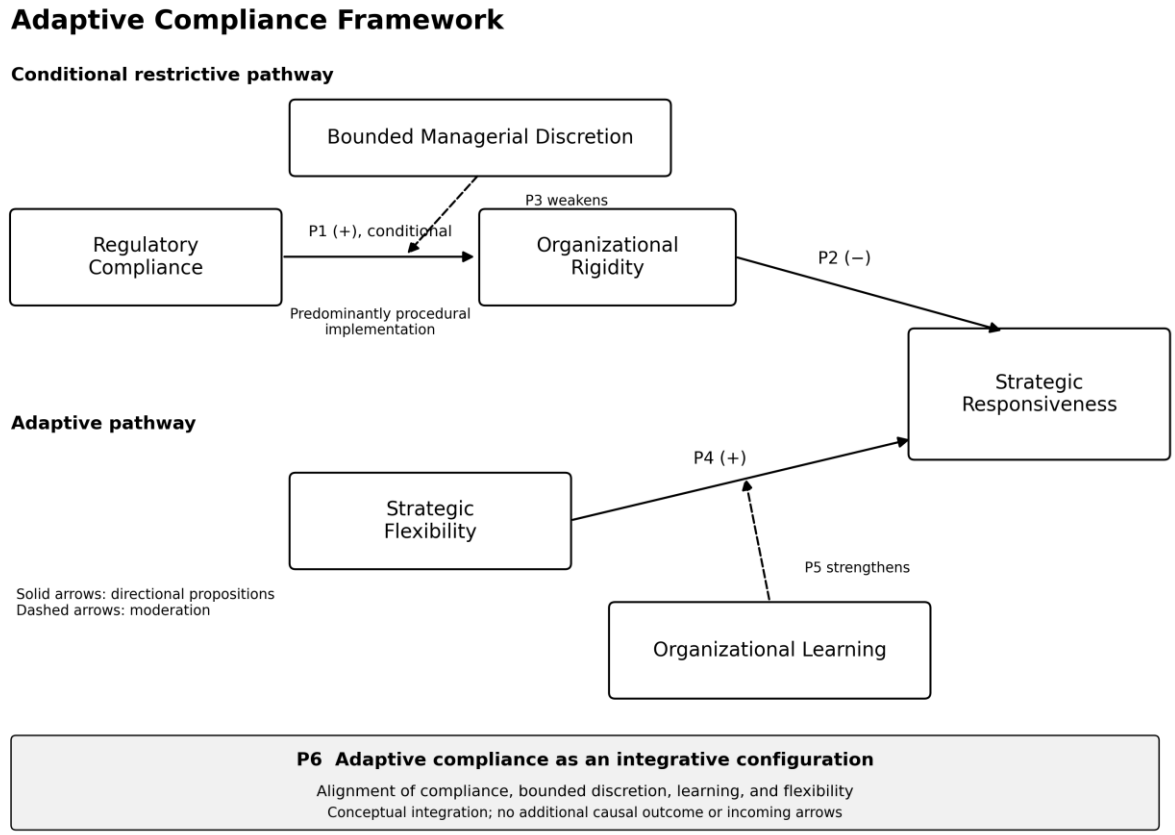
Different institutional settings may realize these functions through different arrangements. Delegated authority, collective review, or formal escalation may provide lawful interpretive space, for example. The present paper proposes functional alignment but does not establish alternative sufficient configurations or equifinality. P6 summarizes the integration of P1-P5 and requires a different empirical strategy from testing individual coefficients.

P6: Adaptive compliance consists of the coordinated alignment of regulatory compliance, bounded managerial discretion, organizational learning, and strategic flexibility, rather than the independent presence of these components.

4. Result and Discussion

Figure 1 integrates a conditional restrictive pathway with an adaptive pathway. In the restrictive pathway, compliance is associated with rigidity under procedural dominance (P1), and rigidity constrains responsiveness (P2). Bounded managerial discretion attenuates the first relationship (P3). In the adaptive pathway, strategic flexibility supplies feasible alternatives (P4), while learning strengthens their conversion into relevant response (P5). These pathways explain how comparable compliance can coexist with different organizational responses.

Figure 1. Adaptive Compliance Framework



Note: P1 and P3 apply under predominantly procedural implementation. P6 summarizes coordinated functions, not a separate dependent variable.

Source: Authors.

The model's solid arrows indicate directional propositions, and dashed arrows point to the relationships moderated by discretion or learning. The separate P6 panel summarizes functional integration and has no incoming causal arrows. Accountability is an implementation requirement of the framework, not a measured outcome demonstrated by this paper. The figure therefore distinguishes the relational model from its integrative interpretation.

The framework is most applicable to public service organizations that face variable implementation conditions and possess lawful scope to revise workflows, coordinate decisions, or reallocate resources. Regulatory intensity, delegated authority, resource availability, and uncertainty may affect its operation. Requirements governing rights, statutory eligibility, mandatory deadlines, privacy, or safety cannot be relaxed merely to improve responsiveness. Where local discretion is unavailable, adaptation may require an authorized escalation or formal rule revision. Such contexts limit local application rather than justify unlawful departures.

4.1 Literature Based Application

A documented study of Bangladesh public administration offers a useful illustration of interpretive agency under competing demands. Rahman et al. (2024) analyze 32 interviews alongside documentary material and identify selective bridging by middle-level public managers. The reported mechanism concerns how actors reconcile pressures from above with operational needs from below. It illustrates an interpretive function relevant to bounded discretion, but does not measure the complete adaptive compliance model or establish its causal effects.

Table 2 uses this study as an empirical anchor and maps the remaining framework elements as questions for organizational analysis. Those mappings are the present paper's conceptual interpretation. They do not attribute unreported learning systems, resource reallocations, or improved responsiveness to the organizations studied. The illustration shows what evidence would be needed to move from an account of discretion to an assessment of the integrated configuration.

Table 2. Mapping selective bridging to the Adaptive Compliance Framework

Framework element	Evidence boundary	Framework-derived analytical question
Regulatory obligations	Competing top-down institutional demands are documented.	Identify the applicable obligations and evidence of continuing compliance; institutional pressure alone is not a compliance measure.
Organizational rigidity	The study does not test the rigidity construct used here.	Examine whether internal arrangements block lawful revision after a need is recognized; do not infer rigidity from complexity alone.
Bounded discretion	Selective bridging identifies an interpretive response by middle-level managers.	Assess legal authorization, documented reasons, consistency, and review before classifying it as bounded discretion.
Organizational learning	The study is not a test of learning moderation.	Trace whether operational experience is collectively interpreted, retained, and used to evaluate alternatives.

Framework element	Evidence boundary	Framework-derived analytical question
Strategic flexibility	No flexibility-responsiveness coefficient is supplied by the illustration.	Identify feasible resource or process options within the mandate and distinguish their availability from actual use.
Strategic responsiveness	The complete model is not validated by the source study.	Document an identified need, the timing and relevance of coordinated action, and adherence to obligations.
Adaptive compliance	Only part of the proposed configuration is illustrated directly.	Assess whether authority, learning, options, and compliance are aligned; do not equate discretion alone with the configuration.

Source: Authors' conceptual mapping anchored in Rahman et al. (2024). Additional questions are proposed analyses, not findings reported by that study.

This application reveals why discretion alone is insufficient for the framework's claims. An analysis would also need to establish the applicable obligations, distinguish lawful adaptation from informal accommodation, trace the use of feedback, and document feasible and enacted responses. Selective bridging makes the interpretive problem visible; it does not by itself demonstrate accountable responsiveness. The illustration consequently supports the framework's analytical relevance while retaining its unvalidated status.

The following hypothetical situations illustrate how the complete framework may operate under contrasting constraints. In a licensing office facing a temporary application backlog, managers may retain statutory eligibility and verification requirements while authorizing changes to appointment scheduling, staff allocation, or task sequencing. Complaint patterns and processing records can inform the diagnosis, while subsequent review can assess whether the adjustment addresses delays without weakening required checks. Discretion authorizes the adjustment, learning informs its selection and evaluation, and flexibility makes implementation feasible.

In a public healthcare service, mandatory safety requirements may prevent comparable changes to verification or clinical procedures. Adaptation may instead involve authorized changes to patient information, appointment coordination, or non-clinical workflows. Where shortages leave no feasible option, managers may need to document unmet needs and seek resources or decisions from a higher authority. These situations illustrate that responsiveness depends on lawful and operationally feasible alternatives; it does not require relaxing mandatory safeguards or assuming that local managers can resolve every service problem.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1 Compliance Is Not the Opposite of Responsiveness

The framework changes the comparison from rule-following versus flexibility to differences in how comparable obligations are implemented. Two organizations may fulfill the same requirements while differing in whether procedures remain revisable, feedback enters decisions, and authorized alternatives are used. The explanatory focus is therefore implementation architecture rather than compliance level alone.

Rules can also enable response. Clear authority can reduce uncertainty about who may act, standardized records can facilitate coordination, and review procedures can make justified adjustment credible. The distinction between useful rules and burdensome implementation is consistent with the literature on red tape (Campbell et al., 2023). P1 should therefore not be

interpreted as a universal indictment of formal control. Its contribution is identifying a condition under which otherwise legitimate compliance can become restrictive.

Evidence of citizen burden can alert an organization to service problems without specifying their organizational source. Distinguishing those levels allows complaints and access difficulties to become diagnostic inputs rather than presumed proof of rigidity. The practical analytical question is whether the organization can examine the problem and revise lawful implementation arrangements when warranted.

4.2.2 Adaptive Compliance as an Organizational Configuration

The configurational interpretation concerns coordination among functions, not a sum of favorable scores. High flexibility coupled with weak evaluation may produce poorly directed change; extensive knowledge with no lawful authority or reconfiguration capacity may leave problems unresolved. These contrasts explain what the integrative concept adds beyond its components considered separately.

P6 makes alignment the object of explanation. A decision must be authorized, informed by relevant evidence, feasible within available arrangements, and consistent with continuing obligations. The specific institutional forms performing these functions can differ across organizations. Research on routines, digital-government barriers, and integrative innovation supports attention to contextual combinations rather than uniform solutions (Pedersen & Scheller, 2024; Wilson & Mergel, 2022; Purnomo & Khabibi, 2025).

This interpretation remains distinguishable from formal claims of causal necessity and sufficiency. A relational study could evaluate P1-P5 without establishing P6. A configurational study would need to assess combinations and coordination directly, specify outcome and membership criteria, and consider alternative arrangements. A high average across component measures would not by itself demonstrate adaptive compliance.

4.2.3 The Accountability Adaptability Tension

Adaptive compliance manages a continuing tension rather than eliminating it. Discretion can create inconsistent treatment or obscure responsibility; flexibility can fragment coordination or redirect resources from mandated functions; and learning can institutionalize misleading interpretations when organizations ignore contrary evidence. The availability of adaptive mechanisms consequently requires safeguards as well as authority.

Discretion should be bounded through explicit delegation, recorded reasons, review of comparable cases, and channels for challenge. Resource and process adjustments should remain traceable, with clear responsibilities and protected mandatory tasks (Sihotang, Suhud, Handaru, & Lestari, 2027). Learning should include evaluation of unsuccessful changes, participation by relevant service users and employees, and revision of assumptions when evidence conflicts with accepted practice. Transparency research provides support for feedback and organizational design as elements of accountable implementation (Matheus et al., 2021).

These safeguards are framework-derived practical requirements, not effects empirically demonstrated in this study. They distinguish accountable adaptation from arbitrary accommodation. An organization may legitimately decide against a proposed adjustment when rights, safety, or legal authority would be compromised. Responsiveness in such cases can consist of explaining the constraint, pursuing authorized alternatives, or escalating the issue to the competent authority.

Competing public values can also limit the preferred response. Prioritizing urgent cases may improve timeliness for some users while delaying others, and individualized accommodation may conflict with consistent treatment unless decision criteria are explicit and reviewable.

Managers should therefore document which values are being balanced, the legal basis for prioritization, and the consequences for affected groups. Where the conflict exceeds delegated authority, escalation forms part of accountable responsiveness.

4.2.4 Theoretical Contributions

The first contribution is a conditional intervening explanation. By distinguishing compliance from procedural dominance, the framework positions rigidity as a mechanism through which a particular implementation orientation can constrain responsiveness. It connects research on rules with organizational adaptation without assuming that regulatory intensity and dysfunction are equivalent.

The second contribution is the separation of interpretive and evaluative conditions. Bounded managerial discretion moderates the translation of compliance into rigidity, whereas organizational learning moderates the conversion of flexibility into responsiveness. This division specifies where each mechanism operates and avoids treating all adaptive capabilities as interchangeable positive antecedents.

The third contribution is adaptive compliance as an integrative configuration. Its novelty is the coordination of functions within an explicit regulatory boundary, rather than the introduction of a generic capability to change. Strategic flexibility, agility, adaptive capacity, and managerial change capabilities already address organizational adjustment (Herhausen et al., 2021; Looks et al., 2024; Zhang, 2021; Widianto et al., 2021). The framework complements those perspectives by specifying their relationship with compliant implementation. It does not claim that responsiveness was previously confined to citizen satisfaction or that existing organizational adaptation theories lack public-sector relevance.

The contribution remains propositional. Studies of employee innovation, public-sector performance, and citizen experiences supply related mechanisms but cannot establish the proposed organization's causal relationships. Construct discrimination and level-appropriate evidence are therefore central to evaluating whether the framework offers additional explanatory value.

4.2.5 Practical Implications

Public managers can begin by separating non-negotiable requirements from internal arrangements that may be revised under existing authority. Reviews should assess the substantive purpose of a procedure, its implementation costs, and whether the same obligation can be fulfilled through a more accessible and coordinated process. A cumbersome requirement should not be removed solely because it is unpopular; its legal status and contribution to public purposes must first be assessed.

Managers should then specify who may authorize adjustments, the evidence required, and the route for reviewing exceptional decisions. Complaint patterns, frontline observations, performance information, and collaborative knowledge can be interpreted together rather than treated as isolated signals (Hansen & Nielsen, 2022; Knox & Marin-Cadavid, 2023; Kurtmollaiev et al., 2024). This creates a practical connection between discretion, learning, and feasible response.

Reconfiguration should be documented and evaluated against both service needs and continuing obligations. Table 3 translates the framework into managerial actions and indicative monitoring questions. These are recommendations for implementation and future evaluation, not validated measurement instruments or evidence that the proposed actions have already improved performance.

Table 3. Managerial actions and monitoring questions

Focus	Recommended action	Indicative monitoring question
Review procedures	Separate mandatory requirements from revisable implementation arrangements; assess purpose and costs.	What is legally required, and which internal steps can be revised without impairing the mandate?
Bound discretion	Define delegation, decision criteria, reasons, review, and escalation.	Are comparable decisions consistent, authorized, and open to challenge?
Institutionalize learning	Combine performance information, complaints, staff observations, and evaluations.	What evidence changed the diagnosis, and how was that interpretation retained?
Enable reconfiguration	Maintain lawful options for staffing, sequencing, coordination, and service channels.	Were alternatives feasible before the response, and who authorized their use?
Evaluate integration	Trace the need, decision, implementation, review, and continuing compliance.	Did action address the documented need while preserving rights, safety, and obligations?

Source: Authors' practical implications derived from the framework. Questions are not validated measures.

5. Conclusion

Public service organizations can maintain compliance while developing responsiveness when they preserve mandatory obligations and coordinate authorized interpretation, evidence-based learning, and feasible reconfiguration. The framework explains why similar compliance levels can yield different outcomes: procedural dominance can generate rigidity, bounded discretion can limit that translation, and learning can improve the use of available strategic options. Adaptive compliance names the alignment of these functions, rather than an additional causal outcome.

The paper's contribution is a conditional mechanism-based account, with five relational propositions and one integrative proposition. Several limitations remain. The framework has not been empirically validated, and its non-systematic synthesis does not establish exhaustive literature coverage. Flexibility, responsiveness, agility, and adaptive capacity require discriminant testing. Organizational interpretations drawn from citizen- or employee-level studies require level-appropriate evidence. Political influence, organizational culture, unequal resources, and competing public values may also alter the mechanisms. Applicability depends on the type of service, regulatory authority, and lawful scope for adjustment.

Research on P1-P5 should measure compliance separately from procedural dominance and assess the restrictive pathway within the stated implementation condition. Longitudinal, comparative, or mixed-method designs could trace revisions, information use, and changes in action; suitable relational analyses could test the conditional indirect pathway and the two interactions. Such work should distinguish options available before a response from actions subsequently enacted, and should not infer organization-level learning from one manager's perceptions without appropriate justification.

Research on P6 should examine coordinated combinations of functions rather than construct a single reflective adaptive compliance scale. Comparative case analysis and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) could investigate whether different combinations support responsiveness alongside independently assessed accountability. Calibration,

necessity, sufficiency, and possible equifinality would need empirical justification. Neither the conceptual inclusion of four functions nor the relational propositions establish those properties in advance. This separate agenda allows the framework's integrative claim to be refined or challenged without confusing it with individual coefficient tests.

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