

THE SHADOW CHECKLIST

A practical way to examine what we may not be seeing in
ourselves, relationships, groups, institutions, and systems

EXECUTIVE FIELD CHECKLIST

Psychology · Sociology · Public Administration · Systems Thinking · Governance · Risk · Human Factors · Logistics · Ethics

Designed to be used, challenged, revisited, and corrected.

HRJS.ORG™

Core Principle

What the checklist means before any box gets checked.

Shadow is not automatically evil.

Shadow is what has become difficult to see, admit, integrate, question, or take responsibility for.

Sometimes what is hidden is fear.

Sometimes a legitimate need expressed badly.

Sometimes pride.

Sometimes a useful strength that was suppressed.

Sometimes grief.

Sometimes an institution doing harm without anyone waking up in the morning intending to harm anyone.

Sometimes cruelty.

And sometimes darkness is simply darkness and should be named plainly.

The purpose of this checklist is not to make excuses.

It is to look before concluding.

How to Use This Checklist

A field instrument, not a verdict machine.

You do not need to answer every question.

Use the section that matches the situation you are examining.

For each question, consider:

Yes

this may be
happening.

Maybe

I need more
information.

No

I do not currently see
evidence of it.

I don't know

which is a legitimate
answer.

That last category matters.

**Shadow literacy should increase curiosity.
It should not manufacture certainty.**

SCALE CHECK

- ☐ What exactly am I examining?
- ☐ At what level is the mechanism operating: self, relationship, group, institution, between institutions, or system?
- ☐ Am I accidentally using evidence from one level to make claims about another?

THE SELF

What might I not be seeing in myself?

Before diagnosing everyone else, humanity is unfortunately required to inspect its own wiring.

Ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ What emotion am I having that I do not want to admit? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What outcome do I secretly want? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What am I afraid will happen if I am wrong? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What am I afraid will happen if the other person is right? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I reacting to what is happening now, or to something older that this resembles? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I turning discomfort into certainty? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I interpreting my intentions as proof that my actions were harmless? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I minimizing something because acknowledging it would threaten my self-image? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

THE SELF

What might I not be seeing in myself?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ Am I exaggerating something because it supports the story I already believe? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What evidence would genuinely change my mind? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Have I allowed myself to become the hero of every version of this story? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Have I made someone else the villain because that is easier than holding complexity? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I confusing being hurt with being correct? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I confusing confidence with accuracy? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is there something valuable in me that I suppress because I associate it with a version of myself I reject? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is there something destructive in me that I romanticize as strength, honesty, power, or authenticity? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

CHECKPOINT

Can I describe my own contribution to the situation without immediately explaining why it does not count?

If not, keep looking.

BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE

What happens in the space between us?

Shadow often appears not inside one person but inside the relationship.

Ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ Are we responding to each other, or to our interpretations of each other? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Have either of us assigned motives without checking? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are old injuries determining how new behavior is interpreted? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Does one person always have to be the reasonable one? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Does one person's pain consistently outrank the other's? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is disagreement being treated as rejection? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is accountability being treated as attack? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is vulnerability being used as leverage? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE

What happens in the space between us?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ Are apologies expected from one person but rarely offered by the other? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is one person doing most of the emotional translation? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are boundaries respected even when inconvenient? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we rewarding escalation with attention? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we punishing calmness by ignoring it? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we confusing understanding someone with excusing them? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we confusing forgiveness with restored access? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we trying to repair the relationship, win the argument, or preserve our self-image? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

CHECKPOINT

Can both people's realities exist in the same room without one having to disappear?

WITHIN A GROUP

What does belonging make difficult to see?

Groups create identity.

Identity creates belonging.

Belonging is wonderful right up until the admission price becomes intellectual blindness.

Ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ What must members believe to remain accepted? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What are members discouraged from questioning? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What happens to someone who raises an uncomfortable fact? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Do we reward loyalty more than accuracy? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is criticism from inside the group treated differently from criticism outside it? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are certain members protected because of status, usefulness, popularity, money, charisma, or symbolic importance? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Does the group have a story in which it is almost always morally correct? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are failures blamed primarily on outsiders? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

WITHIN A GROUP

What does belonging make difficult to see?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ Are members expected to publicly perform agreement? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Does disagreement produce curiosity or suspicion? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we simplifying people outside the group? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we becoming more extreme because moderate voices receive less attention? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are certain emotions rewarded because they maintain cohesion? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Does the group need a recurring enemy to maintain unity? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are members allowed to leave without becoming traitors? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

CHECKPOINT

What truth would be hardest for this group to hear about itself?

That question is usually worth sitting with.

BETWEEN GROUPS

What happens when identity starts thinking for us?

This is where Projection Mirror becomes important.

Groups can become extremely skilled at seeing the other side's shadow.

Ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ What does our group accuse their group of doing? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Do we do anything structurally similar under a different name? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Do we describe our aggression as defense and theirs as aggression? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Do we explain our failures through context while explaining theirs through character? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are individual members being held responsible for the entire group? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we assuming disagreement means hatred? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we treating the most extreme members of another group as representative? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

BETWEEN GROUPS

What happens when identity starts thinking for us?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ Are we treating our own extremists as exceptions? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we consuming primarily information that confirms our group's interpretation? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Have we converted policy disagreement into moral contamination? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are we using language that makes ordinary people sound less human? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Does our group believe its fear is evidence while their fear is pathology? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Does our pain count as history while theirs counts as propaganda? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are legitimate grievances being turned into permanent enemy categories? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

CHECKPOINT

Can I describe the opposing group's strongest legitimate concern in language they would recognize?

If I cannot, I may not understand them well enough to confidently condemn them.

WITHIN AN INSTITUTION

What does the organization have difficulty seeing?

An institution can create shadow even when every individual employee considers themselves decent.

That is one of the more annoying discoveries of adulthood.

Ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ What outcomes does the institution officially value? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What outcomes does it actually reward? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What information travels upward? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What information dies before reaching leadership? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What problems are repeatedly documented but rarely corrected? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who can make a decision? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who can delay one? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who can override one? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who can appeal one? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who bears the consequences when the decision is wrong? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are responsibilities clearly owned, or scattered across departments? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

WITHIN AN INSTITUTION

What does the organization have difficulty seeing?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ Do policies make sense individually while producing harmful results together?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Are employees rewarded for resolving problems or merely closing tasks?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Does documentation protect people or mainly protect the institution?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Are metrics replacing judgment?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Does efficiency hide human cost?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Are frontline workers seeing realities leadership rarely encounters?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Are leaders receiving sanitized information?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Does the organization mistake compliance for health?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Are people punished for bringing bad news?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Are exceptions handled as evidence of system failure or dismissed as anomalies?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Is institutional reputation more protected than institutional learning?	☐	☐	☐	☐

CHECKPOINT

If everyone followed procedure perfectly, could the system still produce a bad outcome?

If yes, the shadow may be architectural rather than individual.

BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS

Where does responsibility disappear?

This is the Shadow Gap territory.

One organization says: "That belongs to them."

The second says: "We cannot act until they do something."

The third says: "That is outside our authority."

And somewhere in the middle is a human being slowly turning into administrative compost.

Ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ How many institutions touch this situation?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who owns the final outcome?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Does anyone own the final outcome?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Where are the handoffs?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What information is lost during each handoff?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Does one institution rely on documentation another institution cannot easily provide?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Are deadlines synchronized across institutions?	☐	☐	☐	☐

BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS

Where does responsibility disappear?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ Does one system assume another system has already acted? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Can a person comply with every instruction and still fall through the gap? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are people expected to coordinate systems that do not coordinate with each other? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who is responsible when multiple individually reasonable decisions create one unreasonable result? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Can institutions see the cumulative burden they place on one person? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is anyone measuring continuity rather than isolated transactions? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

CHECKPOINT

If something goes wrong between two organizations, who is actually required to notice?

If the answer is “the affected person,” you may be looking directly at a continuity gap.

ACROSS SYSTEMS

What emerges that nobody individually intended?

Systems can produce outcomes without a mastermind.

This matters because otherwise people bounce between two equally useless explanations:

“Everything is intentional.”

or

“Nothing is anyone’s responsibility.”

There is a rather inconvenient continent between those two.

Ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ What incentives are shaping behavior across the system?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What happens when those incentives interact?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who benefits from the current arrangement?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who repeatedly absorbs the costs?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Are the same populations experiencing similar failures across unrelated institutions?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Are small barriers accumulating into major exclusion?	☐	☐	☐	☐

ACROSS SYSTEMS

What emerges that nobody individually intended?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

- | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| ☐ Are systems optimized for throughput while ignoring continuity? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| ☐ Are people with the least time, money, transportation, health, information, or social support being required to perform the most coordination? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| ☐ Does the system create predictable losers without anyone explicitly choosing them? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| ☐ Are harmful patterns dismissed because no single actor intended the total result? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| ☐ Are feedback loops reinforcing the problem? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| ☐ Does the system learn from harm or merely process complaints? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

CHECKPOINT

Would the harmful pattern continue even if every individual actor were replaced tomorrow?

If yes, look at the structure.

POWER & VISIBILITY

Who can see whom?

Shadow changes when power changes.

A mistake by someone with little power and a mistake by someone controlling housing, employment, healthcare, policing, benefits, media, or law can have radically different consequences.

Ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ Who can observe whom?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who is being documented?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who controls the record?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who can correct the record?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who decides what counts as credible evidence?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Whose interpretation becomes official?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who can demand answers?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who can refuse to answer?	☐	☐	☐	☐

POWER & VISIBILITY

Who can see whom?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ Who can impose consequences?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who can appeal those consequences?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who can afford delay?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who suffers during delay?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who receives privacy?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who lives under scrutiny?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is visibility distributed equally?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Are powerful actors able to remain abstract while less powerful people become fully documented?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

CHECKPOINT

Who has the luxury of remaining unseen?

CONTINUITY & CONSEQUENCE

What happens as responsibility moves?

Sometimes the greatest harm is not one terrible decision.

It is twenty small decisions that never meet each other.

Ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ What happened first?

☐	☐	☐	☐
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

☐ What happened next?

☐	☐	☐	☐
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

☐ What depended on the previous step?

☐	☐	☐	☐
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

☐ Where did continuity break?

☐	☐	☐	☐
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

☐ Was the person required to repeat the same story multiple times?

☐	☐	☐	☐
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

☐ Did delays create new problems?

☐	☐	☐	☐
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CONTINUITY & CONSEQUENCE

What happens as responsibility moves?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ Did one missed response trigger another institution's penalty? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Did the consequences increase as responsibility moved? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Did anyone see the full timeline? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Did each actor evaluate only the portion they controlled? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Did later decision-makers mistake accumulated damage for personal failure? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Could one small intervention earlier have prevented several later failures? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

CHECKPOINT

Draw the timeline.

Shadow often becomes obvious when events are placed in sequence rather than examined separately.

THE SHADOW GAP TRAIN RIDE

Am I being carried through a pattern without realizing it?

This is the cross-scale question.

The Shadow Gap Train Ride describes how people, groups, and institutions can move through recurring shadow mechanisms while believing each stage is isolated.

Ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ What story am I entering?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who defined the problem before I arrived?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What role am I being invited to play?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who is the hero?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ Who is the enemy?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What emotion is moving me?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What information am I not seeing?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What uncertainty is being removed too quickly?	☐	☐	☐	☐

THE SHADOW GAP TRAIN RIDE

Am I being carried through a pattern without realizing it?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ What action feels morally obvious?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Who benefits if I act immediately?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What becomes harder to question after I belong?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is the system asking me to surrender ambiguity?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I becoming more curious or more certain?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I still able to see individual human beings?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Would I recognize the same mechanism if the ideology were reversed?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I noticing a recurring mechanism, or assuming that similar mechanisms make different systems morally equivalent?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

CHECKPOINT

Am I examining the shadow, or has the shadow recruited me into examining everyone else?

That one stays.

INTEGRATION

What do we do once we see it?

Shadow literacy without integration becomes sophisticated doomscrolling.

The point is not merely detection.

Ask:

	RESPONSE			
	Y	M	N	?
☐ What truth needs to be acknowledged?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What legitimate need exists underneath the behavior?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What harm still requires accountability?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What can be repaired?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What must be bounded?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What should not be restored?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What information would reduce uncertainty?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What conversation needs to happen?	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐ What policy needs clarification?	☐	☐	☐	☐

INTEGRATION

What do we do once we see it?

Continue the same examination. Change the question before changing the conclusion.

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ What responsibility needs a named owner? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What handoff needs redesign? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What incentive is driving the wrong behavior? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What can be changed immediately? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What requires structural reform? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What uncertainty must remain unresolved for now? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What would a proportionate response look like? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What is the smallest intervention that could interrupt the pattern before a larger intervention becomes necessary? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

CHECKPOINT

Can we increase truth without increasing unnecessary harm?

That is a useful definition of high-expression integration.

ANTI-PARANOIA / ANTI-SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

CHECK

This section is essential.

Before concluding that you have uncovered hidden shadow, ask:

RESPONSE

Y M N ?

☐ What evidence do I actually have? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What am I inferring? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ What remains unknown? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Is there a simpler explanation? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Have I confused a pattern with proof of intent? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Have I tested my interpretation against disconfirming evidence? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I using this framework to understand, or to validate what I already wanted to believe? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Could ordinary incompetence, incentives, overload, miscommunication, or fragmentation explain part of this? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Am I escalating my certainty faster than the evidence supports? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ Have I given myself an exemption from the same scrutiny I am applying to others? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

CHECKPOINT

This protects Shadow Literacy from becoming the very thing it is meant to examine.

Rapid Shadow Scan

If someone has only five minutes, they should be able to ask:

- 01 ☐ What am I not seeing in myself?
- 02 ☐ What are we projecting onto each other?
- 03 ☐ What does belonging make difficult to question?
- 04 ☐ What are we simplifying about the other group?
- 05 ☐ What does the institution reward versus what it says it values?
- 06 ☐ Where does responsibility disappear between institutions?
- 07 ☐ What outcome is the larger system producing regardless of intent?
- 08 ☐ Who has power, visibility, and the ability to correct the record?
- 09 ☐ Where did continuity break?
- 10 ☐ What uncertainty am I turning into certainty?
- 11 ☐ What harm requires accountability rather than explanation?
- 12 ☐ What can actually be repaired, bounded, redesigned, or stopped?

THREE PERMANENT RULES

- Shadow should neither be glorified nor denied.
- A pattern is not proof of intent.
- Understanding does not eliminate accountability.