The Strategy-to-Execution Gap

Why good plans stall, and how growth-minded leaders close the distance

POSITION Consultants
Perspective Paper

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ABSTRACT

Many organizations that struggle to grow do not lack a strategy. They have a carry-through problem: plans are approved, priorities are listed, and then daily operations absorb the people who were supposed to deliver them.

This paper makes three arguments. The gap between decision and delivery is widely reported by senior executives. It tends to open at structural points rather than through lack of motivation. And it can be narrowed deliberately, by treating choice, commercial infrastructure and implementation as one continuous effort.

Keywords: Strategic planning; Execution; Growth; Operating rhythm; Capacity

KEY POINTS

1. Executives in large-company surveys consistently report that implementation, not planning alone, is where strategic value is lost — though these figures are self-reported estimates, not measured losses.
2. The gap tends to open at five structural points: priorities that are never narrowed, a commercial engine that is assumed rather than built, vague ownership, no operating rhythm, and no protected capacity.
3. Closing it means choosing fewer priorities as explicit trade-offs, building growth into repeatable systems, and protecting the plan from the calendar with owners, cadence and capacity.

1 What the evidence says

In 2017 the Economist Intelligence Unit, sponsored by the Brightline Initiative, surveyed 500 senior executives at companies with annual revenue of $1 billion or more. On average, respondents said their companies fail to meet 20% of their strategic objectives because of poor implementation [2], and nearly 90% said they fail to achieve all of their strategic goals because they don't implement well.

ABOUT THIS EVIDENCE

These are executives' own estimates of what poor implementation costs them — not independently measured losses. "Fail to achieve all goals" means missing at least some objectives, not failing at 90% of them. The sample is large companies; smaller and mission-driven organizations may differ.

Earlier research points in the same direction. In a widely cited 2005 Harvard Business Review article, Michael Mankins and Richard Steele reported that companies typically realize only about 60% of their strategies' potential value because of defects and breakdowns in planning and execution [3].

ABOUT THIS EVIDENCE

This is a twenty-year-old survey-based estimate, and it attributes the shortfall to planning *and* execution together. We use it to show a long-standing pattern, not as a current benchmark.

POSITION'S VIEW

Studies differ in sample, year and method, and several are repeated in secondhand form. We treat them as directional. The consistent signal is that leaders believe the shortfall sits largely in carrying the plan through, not only in the quality of the plan.

2 Where the gap opens

In our consulting work with leadership teams — from mission-driven nonprofits to consumer brands — five breakpoints recur.

1. **Priorities are not narrowed.** A plan with fifteen "top" priorities has none. Leaders avoid trade-offs in the room and teams make them silently afterward.
2. **The commercial engine is assumed, not built.** Growth targets are set without a defined offer, a visible pipeline, repeatable proposals or a partnership approach.
3. **Ownership is vague.** Initiatives are assigned to committees or to "the leadership team." Nobody's calendar changes.
4. **There is no operating rhythm.** Without monthly monitoring and quarterly adjustment, a plan is a document, not a management system.
5. **Capacity is ignored.** The same people running day-to-day operations are asked to deliver transformation on top. Something gives, and it is often the plan.

FROM CONSULTING PRACTICE

These breakpoints come from our own engagements and are not a statistical finding. In our experience the fifth — capacity — is the one leaders most often underestimate: a sound plan can stall simply because the people expected to carry it have no time left to do so.

3 A practical lens: Choose, Build, Carry

Choose, Build, Carry is a practical way to organize growth and execution work around three questions.

Table 1. Choose, Build, Carry — what each part asks and produces

Part	Core question	What leaders walk away with	Related service
Choose	Where will we focus, and what will we stop doing?	A short list of priorities, growth targets, risks and a phased plan	Strategic Planning & Growth Advisory
Build	What offer, pipeline and partnerships will make growth repeatable?	Defined services, proposal templates, a prospect pipeline, partnership criteria	Business Development, Partnerships & Service Design
Carry	Who does what by when, and how will we know?	Named owners, project plans, a monitoring cadence and course-correction points	Strategy Implementation & Project Support

3.1 Choose: fewer priorities, stated as trade-offs

Effective strategic planning forces choices. We ask leadership teams to name what they will *not* pursue in the planning window, and to state each priority as an outcome with a measure, not an activity. A three-horizon structure helps: stabilize what is at risk now, position for the next 6–18 months, then expand once the foundation is secure.

3.2 Build: make growth a system

Growth that depends on one leader's relationships is fragile. Build means turning informal habits into infrastructure: a clearly described offer, a pipeline with stages, a standard proposal, and criteria for choosing partners. For organizations dependent on a single funding source, this is also a risk-management step, because diversification starts with a repeatable way to find and win new work.

3.3 Carry: protect the plan from the calendar

Implementation support does three things. It assigns one accountable owner per initiative. It sets a rhythm — monthly progress review, quarterly evaluation, adjustment when conditions change. And it adds capacity, whether through project support, a dedicated implementation lead or a fractional operating role, so that execution is not competing with daily operations for the same hours.

4 A leadership discussion tool

REFLECTION TOOL

Use these ten statements to start a leadership conversation, not to score yourselves. There is no pass mark and no total that "proves" a gap — the useful part is where your answers differ and what evidence each person points to.

1. Our leadership team can state our top three priorities without notes.
2. We have explicitly decided what we are *not* doing this year.
3. Every priority has a single named owner.
4. Each priority has a measure and a target date.
5. We can describe our offer in two sentences and our buyers or funders in one.
6. We know how many qualified opportunities are in our pipeline today.
7. Our leaders review progress against the plan at least monthly.
8. We have freed up capacity, not just assigned work, for the people carrying initiatives.
9. We have changed the plan at least once in the past year because of what we learned.
10. Our board or senior sponsors see the same progress data that managers do.

5 Implications for leaders

- **Treat the plan as the beginning of the work.** Budget for implementation at the same time as planning.
- **Match ambition to capacity.** If your people are at capacity, adding priorities will not add progress.
- **Build the commercial engine in parallel.** Do not wait for the plan to be "finished" before defining the offer and the pipeline.
- **Make progress visible.** Share results simply and regularly, so owners and sponsors see the same picture.

6 Limitations

- The survey figures are executives' own estimates from large companies (revenue of $1 billion or more), not measured losses; smaller and mission-driven organizations may differ.
- The Harvard Business Review estimate dates from 2005 and attributes the shortfall to planning and execution together.
- The five breakpoints come from our consulting practice rather than a representative study.
- The ten discussion statements are a conversation aid, not a validated diagnostic, and have no scoring threshold.

7 Questions for discussion

For a leadership team conversation. There are no right answers or scores.

1. Which of our current priorities would we drop if we had to choose only three?
2. Where does our growth still depend on one person's relationships?

3. Who owns each priority by name — and has anything been taken off their plate to make room?
4. When did we last change the plan because of what we learned, and what triggered it?
5. Which of the ten statements above would our team disagree about most, and why?

References

[1] The Economist Intelligence Unit (sponsored by the Brightline Initiative) (2017). Closing the Gap: Designing and Delivering a Strategy that Works. *Brightline Initiative*.
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ABOUT THIS PAPER

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