It's 'Déjà Vu' all over again

...reflections on a life in strategy execution

mentor tm

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For more than 20 years, a staggering 80% of Mentor's work has been in program "rescue". When it comes to managing complex, business-critical programs, the same howlers are repeated again and again – blunders that would simply not be tolerated in any other business discipline.

Why do smart top executives drag their feet so much before taking radical action? Reconstituting business-critical programs is hugely time-consuming and expensive – and never achieves the original objectives. Why does it take some dramatic force to realise that the emperor has no clothes?

Most companies handle programs without enough thought for their differences or value to the business – with catastrophic consequences. How do these management blindspots come about - and how can companies sidestep the most glaring gaffes?

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Seeds of a crisis

Program "rescue" has been a way of life for Mentor for the past 20 years. Typically, a client program was off the rails for many months, despite management attempts to retrieve the situation.

Why do smart, no-nonsense CEO's - who seem passionate about building high-performance organisations – put off dealing with serious problems when it's clear that the program team is pushing water uphill with a rake?

At first, signs of trouble trickle out slowly. Perhaps, a critical milestone has been missed – or a key supplier has complained about extra demands. Some team members may have voiced concerns – or maybe the CEO has seen the warning signs before and has a "feeling" that the story just doesn't hang together; triggers like these prompt a CEO to dig deeper.

But why does it take so long to act?

A "healthcheck" reveals that the true state of the program was not anywhere close to meeting the client's original objectives. Signs of crisis are everywhere – frantic activity; extensive overtime; eye-catching PowerPoint presentations; crisis-driven emergency meetings and

teleconferences – people working as individuals, focused on getting "their bit" right.

The reasons business-critical programs crash remain constant across the years; they're depressingly consistent. At one end of the scale, explanations range from vague objectives; fantasy plans; dreadful supplier performance and hopeless control systems. At the other extreme - truant sponsorship; karaoke program management and under-resourced teams.

And if all this isn't bad enough – unworkable organisation structures with all the staying power of a pudding in a microwave.

> **"The reasons business-critical programs crash remain constant across the years; they're depressingly consistent.**

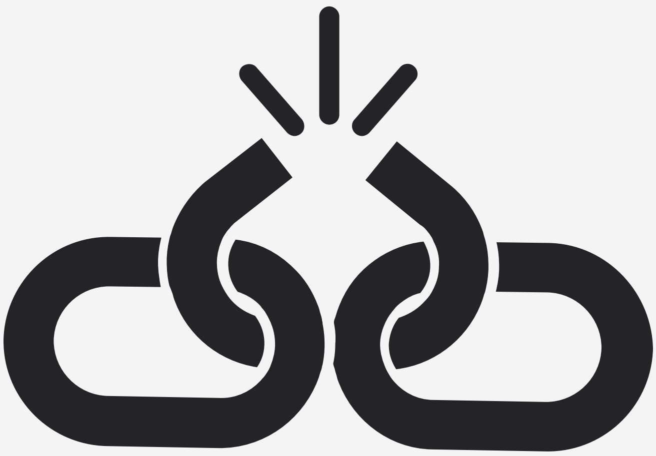
The missing link

More often than not, the critical link between strategy and execution is missing. Tons of prominence is given to strategy - but not nearly enough to execution. Execution is usually an afterthought; boring, back-room, dirty work.

Months before, the strategy team crafted a new game plan for the business; spending months analysing the market, positioning the company in the landscape – and deciding what's needed to remain competitive and profitable.

A ground-breaking strategy presentation is then usually topped-off with a few anorexic charts on execution. Timescales are little more than targets describing what "ought to be possible" - defended with crude and scarcely relevant achievements elsewhere. Bar charts may be attention-grabbers – but they are absolutely not execution plans. Strategy planning is normally carried out by a handful of people over a short period – sometimes just a few weeks.

By contrast, execution of the strategy is played out over a much longer period, usually involving hundreds of people. But countless strategies are designed without taking into account the organisation's ability to execute them.



Specifically, struggling to focus on more than three or four critical issues at one time is a widespread disease.

Classically, strategy is too abstract and not deep enough to be understood by the people who have to implement it; it's never widely shared in concrete terms. People must understand the specifics of how to act on a strategy; they shouldn't have to read between the lines. This means getting the message across in plain english – and not using simple words at the expense of the most accurate; it means being precise.

Conceptual, clichéd and sterile business language doesn't appeal to the emotions of the people who have to execute strategy; plain talk does – and is the result of hard work and hard thinking. The execution challenge is always way beyond strategy. There's a long, rough road between strategy and results.

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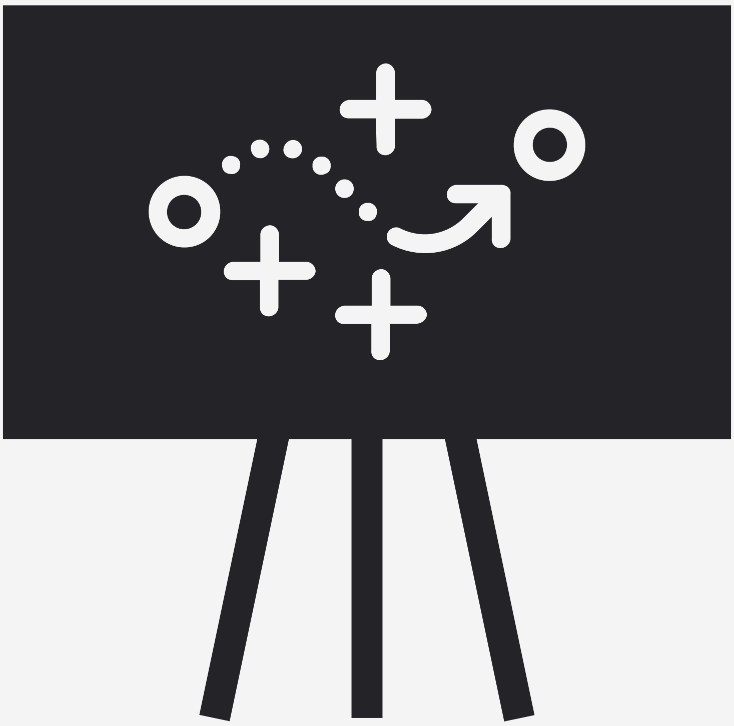


Strategic v business-critical programs

Programs fall into two classes - regular and complex; there's little in between. Many functions have got to grips with the regular, incremental program types, but still manage to make a complete mess of complex, business-critical ones.

Regular does not mean they aren't demanding and difficult; they're just more common. But to dignify "do your job" programs with the word strategic seems a little generous. The term "strategic program" is so massively abused that when an authentic, business-critical program does come along, companies find it hard to create any true distinction.

Programs are "business-critical" because they're cutting-edge; typically, the future of the business depends on them. They're awkward and expensive, demanding complex, high-speed interactions between internal functions and major suppliers - with heaps of opportunities to drop the baton. Execution velocity and precision is fundamental to winning.

It's about organisation, stupid!

Companies don't admit - or perhaps even realise - that many business-critical programs are not treated as if they're strategic at all; they're managed in the same way as any other initiative.

Too often, companies naïvely believe that a functional organisation structure is capable of executing a business-critical program.

It's hard to find an executive who would not say that his function is a "can do" outfit - or that his team couldn't do almost anything. Instinctive, but flawed judgement. What should be remembered is that programs must be done along with delivering excellence in ongoing operations. Functional organisations are always creaking at the seams.

How can it possibly make sense to dump one or more, game-changing programs on top of their normal workload - and not expect serious repercussions?

Organisation choices for strategic programs do have a dramatic impact on results. This "default" tactic also neatly sidesteps a decisive question - "how should

we organise to give this critical program the oxygen it needs to succeed?". Functional structures were never designed for tackling business-critical programs; they were designed for repeatability and predictability - which many do very well.

Basic irreconcilable clashes between normal business and business-critical programs inevitably mean they're always in conflict. This vital distinction goes to the very heart of how managers are trained, how organisations are designed – and how performance is measured.

But the fact is, management practice in normal business functions has little in common with the basic management principles for running business-critical programs; functions quickly run into a brick wall.

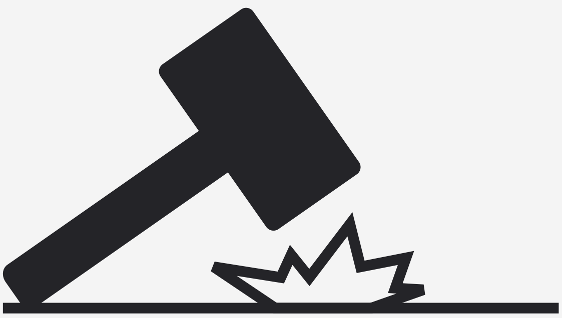
"Too often, companies naïvely believe that a functional organisation structure is capable of executing a business-critical program

When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail

The greatest strength of the functional structure – repeatability and predictability – is also its achilles heel.

Business-critical programs are the opposite; they're unique, unconventional, precarious - and critical to the future success of the business. Failure is inconceivable. They demand rapid, polished baton-passing between functions at a time when organisational complexity is colossal - when real facts are thin on the ground and when guesswork is at its peak; a feat which is simply beyond the reach of normal functions.

This is a painful discovery for many companies who are hopelessly in love with doctrines that scorn any disturbance to functional structures.



Making use of functional structures for business-critical programs promotes anti-change behaviours, has almost zero chance of success – and is a troublesome distraction for top management who are constantly snared in battles to reconcile collaboration disputes between silos.

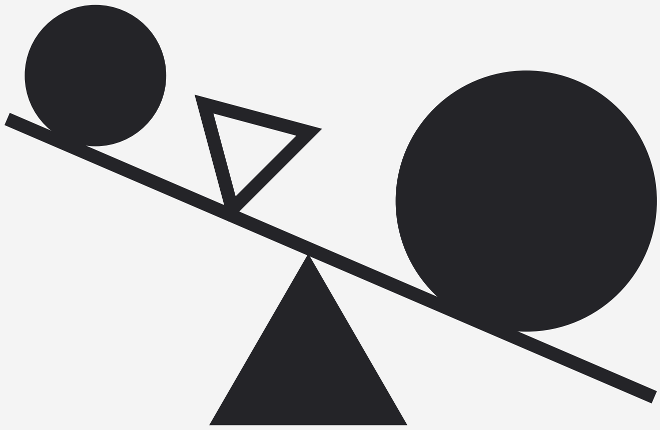
To succeed, business-critical programs must be separate and distinct from the functional structure, deliberately so. Each program requires a tailor-made team, a custom organisational model – and a dedicated, standalone plan.

Top teams make horrendously bad decisions about organising to execute major programs. The decisive organisation design question is routinely overlooked - or botched in some way.

Managers regularly "fake" meaningful discussions on program business-critical organisations - all they're doing is rearranging their prejudices and dubbing it "critical thinking".

CEO's must ask hard questions on exactly how new programs will get done. It's absurd for management teams to skate over crucial organisation questions because one or two "robber barons" may gripe and behave badly; they're deeply uncomfortable with other models, thinking their power and status is threatened. But it happens over and over again.

> **"To succeed, programs must be separate and distinct from the functional structure.**



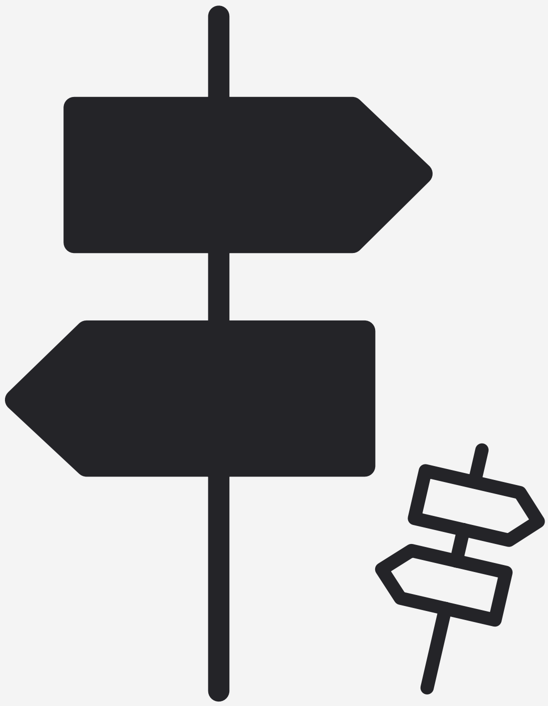
Even a turkey flies in a hurricane!

Business-critical programs are seldom headed by a full-time executive, with a proven track record - and matching authority.

And even if he claims otherwise, the program sponsor is usually an "absentee" Director who sets objectives, allocates funds, selects the Program Director and holds sign-off authority. For the most part, it's utterly criminal; top management gone AWOL, dressed up as delegation.

The nuts and bolts of program management don't appeal to most CEO's – at least initially. It's rare to find a Program Director reporting to the CEO or a board level sponsor, even when it's clear the journey from boardroom to marketplace must pass through a "bet the company" program. It happens, but it's exceptional.

But the CEO is in an awkward position. He has a full diary, with tons of competing distractions for his time. So, the sponsor role is usually given to the "Most Affected" Director – the person responsible for the function most concerned with the change. This is a bizarre organisational mystery – because these people hardly ever have the time, inclination or competence, to manage



a complex program. regular calamities in the business prevent them from spending even one day a week on it. Instead, they delegate responsibility to two, three – or worse still, more managers. As a result, business-critical programs don't get the visibility and experienced management they need.

Initially, CEO's are usually very enthusiastic, visible and immersed, but then appeal tends to fade and they shift attention back to normal operations. Even if it's not deliberate, it's a huge problem.

CEO's must continually nourish programs - and robustly deal with the clichéd whinges of the status quo brigade; it's not enough to kick a program off and then take your foot off the pedal. Successful programs demand impartial priority calls between functions again and again – not just once.

The "most affected" function always has its own self-interested views about how the company's activities should be managed – parochial opinions that invariably conflict with other functions. Relationships become tribal; critical dependencies are missed or handled shoddily - and a "finger pointing" atmosphere develops. Classically, the "most affected" function spends far too much time policing what everyone else is doing and focusing too little on its own contribution. Over time, the program loses priority and focus in other functions, with damaging results.

The "Most Affected" Director model is commonplace; the notion is convenient and attractive but borders on negligence - a cop out – an ineffective top management manoeuvre for dealing with a thorny problem known as ..."who do we have that is senior enough to run this program?" It always leads to an execution debacle – not overnight – but over time, it does. At best, it's a limp-along approach; the worst way to fill a leadership position on a business-critical program.

No skilled Program Director worth a candle would consider a harebrained "mission impossible" setup like this; not for a second. Who wants to get involved in a quixotic challenge with a bureaucratic octopus?

"It's utterly criminal; top management gone AWOL, dressed up as delegation

What you don't know can kill you!

Most businesses have not actually run a true business-critical program in the previous 5 years; regular programs, yes – but business-critical programs, no.

Complicating matters, the management team is usually unwilling to accept that they don't have the skills in-house. Instead, they talk about having an experienced crew of project managers "somewhere" in the business, using world-class, Prince2 compliant processes - but, while they have the manuals, they don't follow their own processes and can rarely lay hands on these phantom skills.

The main argument tends to run along the lines: all that's needed to deliver a strategic program is a PMO (Program Management Office). This term is now a universal management catchphrase - a miracle cure for program success, like penicillin's triumph over once-fatal bacterial infections. Few top managers can explain what a PMO is - or what it does.

When pushed, many will say that it's about "keeping score" and "telling us where we are". What's usually behind these ramblings is that a PMO is a dreary

administrative process with templates and bar charts – and you don't need to be very bright to do it.

The idea that "process" and well-intentioned managers with Prince2-itis can outdo experience, good judgement and leadership is a management delusion – the doctrine of misplaced " conviction.

Just as a management accountant could never be accountable for delivering a budget, a PMO could never be accountable for delivering a business-critical program. The thought of a management accountant being accountable for delivering revenue and profit would never enter a CEO's head; it's ridiculous.

How can it make any sense for a PMO to manage a complex business–critical program?

Top management think that all that's needed to deliver a business–critical program is a PMO.

Qualifications in accounting or in program management don't mean you are qualified to run a function or a program. It may mean that you are qualified to coordinate and keep score – but that's a long way from making things happen at the coal face. Top management easily grasps the accounting example, but time after time fails to distinguish between the roles of a PMO Manager and a Program Director.

The reverse is also true; this distinction is also lost on misguided, self-important PMO Managers. Many try, in vain, to deliver mission-programs without having any of the organisational clout or skills to do it. But they'll "try" anyway.

No doctor, lawyer, accountant, tax advisor – any profession with a duty of care - could responsibly afford to take this position. Cavalier attitudes like these trigger appalling failures; they're hugely damaging to the program management profession.

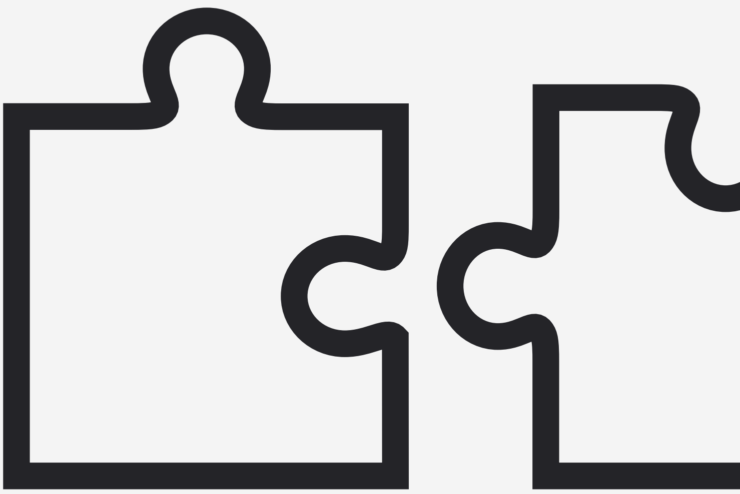
"Top management think all that's needed to deliver a strategic program is a PMO.

Experience is a good school – but the fees are high

Initially, CEO's tend to think the problem is a temporary glitch that will be dealt with swiftly. But this instinct is hardly ever based on know-how from running complex programs.

"Experience" shortfalls have huge consequences; what people don't know can really hurt them. Experience matters. By contrast, a CEO with a sales, marketing or financial background will "know" that something is wrong. A metaphorical "red flag" tells him the story he's hearing doesn't make sense – and he knows he can remedy the problem before it gets out of hand. But, he doesn't normally have the bareknuckle experience to make comparable judgements about business-critical programs. It's mind-blowing how many senior people feel competent to make big calls about running programs – often on the back of irrelevant, sepia-tinted, memories.

Unlike a sales and marketing situation, where the CEO and one of his directors, would have a set of complementary experiences – this is rarely the position



on a business-critical program. The CEO is utterly reliant on the "Most Affected" Director, who can never be close enough to the detail to "know" when a program is in deep trouble.

In truth, when the various sponsors and directors are peeled away, the person actually running the program is probably "two or three levels down the management chain. Focused on the "mechanics" of the program, he has zero organisational power, has never run a business-critical program before – and wouldn't be seen as a "superstar". Almost certainly, he plays ping-pong in a wind tunnel all day long - with grudging "helpers" from other functions. His job is impossible; he's been set up to fail.

The cocktail of CEO, "Most Affected" Director and under-equipped Program Manager is, in a word, ruinous. Together, they add up to one of top management's biggest organisational blunders.

> **"Experience" shortfalls have huge consequences; what people don't know can really hurt them.**

The mythical man-month

Resource allocation is a chronic issue. Business-critical programs always require more resource.

But, on a failing program, one deep-rooted feature magnifies this jam; a plan based on a small core execution team, supported by "parts of lots of people" from different functions. Manicured, but misleading, PowerPoint versions of this structure look impressive, but it's a mirage that ultimately causes programs to wither and die.

A part-timer's work is always controlled by a line manager somewhere else; it's bound to be harmful to the program. It's unmanageable - a huge drag on the program - causing friction, time-wasting and fruitless complexity.

Extensive "time-slicing" is a sure sign that the business hasn't done enough to convert strategy-speak into action. Anyone spending less than 40% of their time on a program will not make a meaningful contribution, due to pressures of their "day" job. What 40% do you get anyway - the slice available after their normal work - or the first few hours each day?

How can you plan and manage any program with useless fragments of people's time? It's nonsense – and completely undermines the position of the Program Director who, at best, becomes a coordinator. Another strong signal that businesses prefer to shrug off disturbances to functional structures.

Naturally, some resources can never be directly controlled by the Program Director; these include some supplier and specialist internal resource. But this must be kept to an absolute minimum and, even then, tightly controlled by a tough Dependency Management system.

> **"Extensive "time-slicing" is a sure sign that the business hasn't done enough to convert strategy-speak into action.**

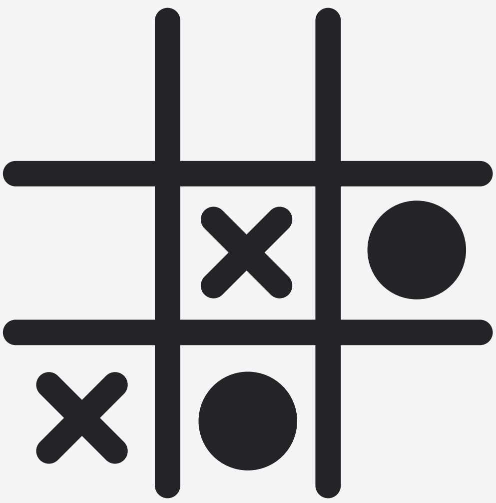
If it wasn't for denial my life would be dreadful

What normally happens next is the CEO asks for a drill-down on the plan to flush out "all" of the problems and to set recovery actions in motion.

This exercise is taken seriously. No one wants to look bad - but even if people know there are problems, there is a natural tendency to tell the CEO what he wants to hear. Only a few brave-hearted managers enjoy facing up to the carcass of their mistakes. The rules are: be optimistic, bend the truth – and view problems through terribly dark parochial glasses.

Before the next CEO review, a "collusion of optimists" comes up with the bones of a plausible story.

Management duckspeak – a phrase invented by George Orwell - describes attempts to massage perceptions with barely plausible stories, using bloated but empty language. The collusion of optimists' tale exposes a few new problems but teams pretty much always conclude that - "the situation is tight, but achievable"



- weasel-words for "we've already blown it". Top management never hears the "tight but" half of the sentence; everyone focuses on what's "achievable" – that's all they want to hear. So, with huge relief, the revised plans are embraced.

There is a less than 20% chance of this "first" rework succeeding, because it's based on lots of "stretch" metrics. History shows "stretch" metrics are typically poles apart from anything achieved up till then. But the chances of the top team accepting a lower risk - more realistic plan - are unthinkable, at that point.

Depending on the scale of the problems, this pattern repeats itself several times - until harsh reality strikes. Eventually, a deep sense of crisis and pain provides the impetus for taking the exceptional measures needed to rescue the program; although the bar is considerably lower next time around.

"'The situation is tight, but achievable' - weasel-words for 'we've already blown it.'

The best-looking horse in the glue factory

Rescue work starts when a CEO becomes anxious - typically around half-way through the program's life. This fear is never unfounded.

The position is always far worse than he imagined and exposes the bitter facts. The original program goals are unachievable; fundamental change is inevitable.

Disgruntled senior managers can be a bit of a handful now; seizing the opportunity to vent frustrations, they attempt to land a few metaphorical punches on the "Most Affected" Director and some of his key people. But transparent "politicking" is always well telegraphed, even when the wily culprits feel no one suspects.

Otherwise, most people are supportive; if you're sick, there isn't much point in playing poker with the doctor. There's nothing to be gained by holding back.

What's significant is how many people in the execution team knew the program had deep problems and had been "silenced" in one way or another, long ago. They had recognised the hopelessness of their position - had given up and were now sitting on their hands – leaving the program leadership team and top management to talk each other to death.

If all you can do is crawl, start crawling

A healthcheck flushes out problems in the program – and, typically, pinpoints a sizeable mismatch between what the CEO was expecting and the actual position.

A healthcheck flushes out problems in the program – and, typically, pinpoints a sizeable mismatch between what the CEO was expecting and the actual position. Facts are compelling; they destroy groundless - and prejudiced - "opinion".

Brutally, they show the program team has been juggling soot for anywhere between six and twelve months – and the program is long past the point where full recovery is possible.

But a healthcheck is not a cure; it's crucial to understand this. It scales the problem, highlights areas for change and proposes answers. Making the actual changes is tough, time-consuming and expensive - and there is no genie in the bottle - no matter how magically companies might want to patch up the destruction.

"Facts are compelling; they destroy groundless - and prejudiced - "opinion."

Healthchecks usually make it plain that the program will take longer to complete; the budget and the business case are effectively out of the window - and there will be substantial lost or delayed benefits too.

The program plan must be reworked – yet again. this exercise is largely centred on "re-phasing" the program - and preparing fallback options to salvage as much as possible of the original program objectives. And to start mending the reputational damage that always comes with bad news.

What really works? Nothing really works – at least not all of the time. There is no single driver of failure; problems are always multi-layered. There is no execution recipe that guarantees the cake will rise.

Execution is far too rich in flexibility and complexity to be reduced to a formula; only a fool would try. Answers are different each time from company to company.

The key questions are always – for this company, at this time, what is truly important? What must we get done – and how can we do it?

Occasionally, there is severe reluctance to make tough decisions about the composition of a new program leadership team; various fudges are put forward to spare the blushes of the "Most Affected" Director and the Program Manager.

But if we were talking about a doctor who killed more patients than he cured - or a teacher whose pupils got more stupid as the year progressed – and then discovered that this was the rule rather than the exception, people would be outraged and demand that something be done. Isn't it puzzling why sensible executives remain so hesitant when confronted with undeniable facts?

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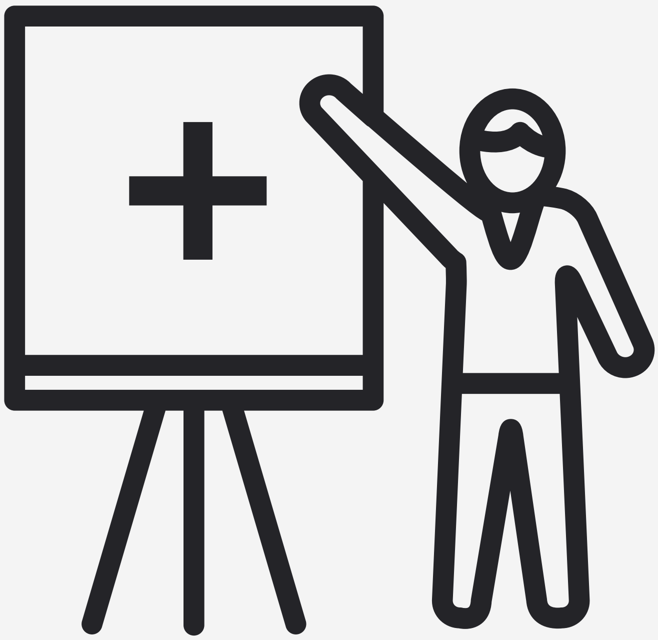


Healing is a matter of time

The replan is essentially about getting everyone back to basics – and developing a realistic route forward that minimises damage.

Real program control centres on a single baselined plan that everyone works towards; knowing the position and being able to resolve issues quickly - up, down and across the business.

Getting this remedial work done is chunky, expensive and time consuming - reconnecting strategy and execution; restructuring the program organisation to give it the visibility it needs; strengthening the program leadership team; filling critical skill gaps; reconstructing plans; revising budgets and revenue forecasts – and revitalising control systems with some bite.

This is an essential part of the recovery task but it's not possible to complete - and inject pace and momentum into the reworked plan, without substantially boosting program management "capability" in the business.

Companies should expect to invest up to 5% of the total program budget on "capable" direction and control.

Specifically, business-critical programs should have a business sponsor and a program director with complementary skills and experience; they're part of a single team. A sponsor should always be one of the organisation's business leaders; the Program Director should be a "true" director level appointment – with in-depth execution experience and a proven track record.

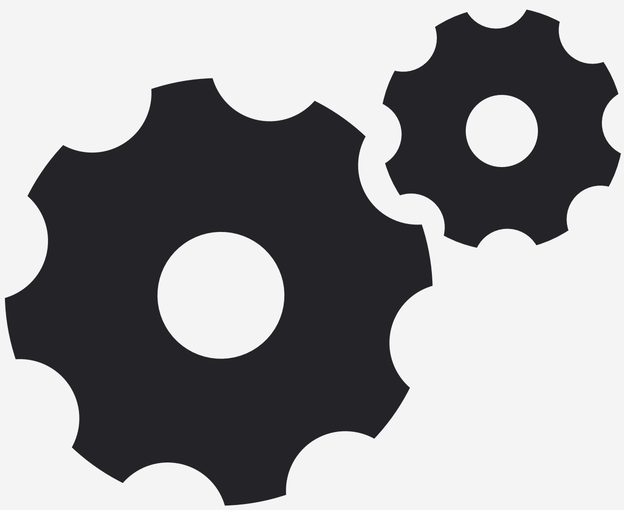
The time for fudges is well and truly over.

There are two mistakes – not going all the way, and not starting

When all this has been done, what happens next is usually remarkable. Finally, the CEO makes it crystal clear to the executive team the program's priority.

He agrees that the new Program Director will report to him - or another board level sponsor. To give the program the visibility and clout it needs, he agrees to chair the Program Review Board personally. He guarantees to remove speed bumps - and commits substantial additional full-time resource to the program to underpin the revised schedule.

Naturally, these dramatic signals show that, in the end, companies do what's necessary to shrink problems. But it does prompt people to ask "why didn't we do all this in the first place – why did we have to endure so much pain?" Why indeed?



The positive consequences of these actions are far reaching. The de-motivated program team often develops a new sense of purpose, performs way beyond expectations and converts what initially appeared to be impossible into a rational proposition.

Amazingly, over 98% of these people were the same people who worked on the previous "failed" effort and subsequently celebrated a fabulous success.

Newsflash!

Well organised teams can break the sound barrier.

"Amazingly, over 98% of these people were the same people who worked on the previous "failed" effort and subsequently celebrated a fabulous success.

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An American comedian used to sing a song about a man who went to the railway each day to sit on the tracks; tragically, he got killed.

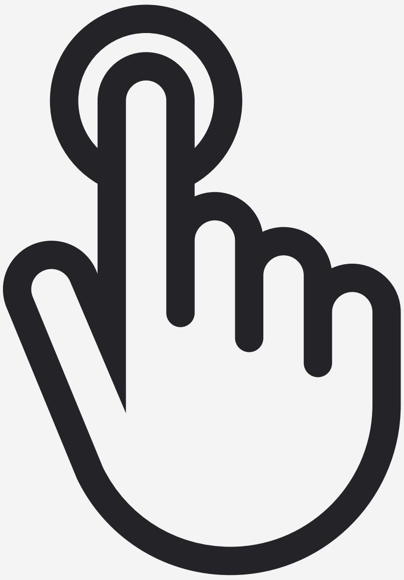
Even though he knew what time the trains were coming, somehow he couldn’t use that precise knowledge to get out of the way.

The business landscape is littered with expensive strategies that failed in the execution phase. The same problems are repeated year after year.

Many of the same muppets do it again and again; they’re always “well-known” but mostly remain free, resurfacing later to cause more chaos.

But, it may be wrong to criticise these individuals too much – selection clangers are always connected to how top management sets out its stall to run complex programs. An over-simplistic company execution model is usually to blame. It doesn’t make sense to point the finger for program failure at one or two individuals. However talented, one or two characters against a weak “system” is a really bad bet.

Impossible challenges, nonsensical organisation structures, naïve target dates and not enough skills and resources would quickly sweep most managers aside. It’s hard for any internal executive to express misgivings about a program’s chances in a “can do” culture - where harassment, intimidation and blind compliance is treasured.



“Putting executives in this unwinnable position has destroyed many careers.

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Businesses put enormous investments into crafting the "perfect" " strategy and then screw it up with slapdash execution. The Board would have crawled all over the strategy before signing it off. But somehow execution plans – how the strategy will actually be delivered – are almost casually waved through without the same level of review intensity – too much syrup and not enough citrus.

Many companies think they "know" what it takes to run a business-critical program. But knowing what to do is not enough. People think they know about music; after all, it's only twelve notes. What could be simpler? And then they try and compose it - and quickly realise that it takes a lot of flair and craft to transform horrible noises into something that's delightful to the ear. Executing business-critical programs is a craft without stunts. There is no formula that guarantees success – there are no shortcuts.

Wouldn't it be more sensible to also invest in making sure businesses have the right organisation, convincing plans, capable program leadership and enough of the right skills and resources to get the job done? Good ideas, by themselves, change nothing. While embarking on a business-critical program, the Board and the CEO should ask some hard questions about "capability" - to give the business a fighting chance of winning through.

How much sooner would problems be recognised and knocked on the head, if the initial program setup, organisation design and plans were independently reviewed by experienced professionals – and if the ongoing control system had regular independent reviews built in? The answer is obvious – but it's exceptional to see these simple measures in place. It doesn't sit well with blame cultures that thrive on turf battles.

Why is there so much reluctance to bring in specialists to help? All businesses do this routinely in many functional areas. But, even on business-critical programs, most businesses have a clear-cut preference for insiders. Relying on too many insiders always leads to skill shortfalls.

Outside help isn't a cure-all, but it does provide an independent view to the "collusion of optimists" – and either helps to nip pointless trouble in the bud – or gets remedial action moving faster. There's little point in waiting for an expensive rescue situation to develop.

Here's a thought-provoking question. How many people from your business would you truthfully hire, if you were building a new business venture for yourself? Revealing, isn't it?

"How much sooner would problems be recognised and knocked on the head... if the ongoing control system had regular independent reviews built in?

And, finally...

If you like to skim articles . . . and not carefully and truly take in what's here . . . you should stop doing that.

You speed-read to get overviews, but you may also miss something crucial. You deep-read because you want to soak up something important - and you want what you read to stick in your mind.

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