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6 barriers to successful program execution – how to identify and remove them

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Don't let this be your program story!

"Already six months behind schedule with no end in sight. Your program is burning thousands of pounds as it struggles toward the finishing line – but no one really knows exactly why it's happened."

If you haven't had one of these frustrating setbacks, let me mention two well-publicised examples.

1. **The Smart Metering program** was a classic model for "strategic failure designed-in". Policy decisions made at the outset meant the delivery team were always pushing water uphill - at great cost and for years beyond the target. And this was compounded by the leadership's inability to adjust the strategy, based on delivery feedback

2. **HS2** is another great example of where an organisation-wide strategy got lost in translation - the vision and goals of the program were not aligned. Resulting in a program design that answered the wrong question

Different elements of these programs worked well – which is normal. But, taken as a whole, they both missed the mark.

If the magnitude of these delays and overspends were understood at the outset, the programs would never have been approved.

So why do companies continue to crash into serious execution barriers?

Warning signs your program or project is at risk of failure

We took a long hard look at all the programs we'd seen over the past 30 years, learning from our own experiences and other peoples' too.

And we made some intriguing discoveries.

We discovered 6 critical factors that were not properly nailed at the start of each program.

These barriers to success were overlooked time and time again - causing programs to go off track.

6 barriers to success

Misalignment

In my experience, Executive misalignment at the start of a program will always throw it off-track with devastating results.

Most senior executives would say they're aligned but the evidence often suggests otherwise.

Alignment must also extend beyond the executives - into the program team tasked with executing the program and into other parts of the business - including external suppliers that deliver into the program.

Naïve plans

We found most program plans were not actually plans at all. They were targets, based on someone else's view of what "ought to be possible."

Tracking the progress of a program against objectives is vital. Even more important, is that those leading the program must understand the facts presented to them by people who know the true state of play.

The key question senior executives should ask themselves at the start is "does my program have the right plan and the right metrics in place to succeed?"

Ineffective organisations

Many program organisation structures are misleading and unworkable.

Often, we see transformation programs handled like business as usual and shoehorned into a functional structure that always has its own priority work to do.

This mistake virtually guarantees the program won't hit its objectives, because business as usual always dominates new programs. Typically, resources are allocated part-time.

Poor supplier management

Almost every business-critical program these days is built around a set of major deliverables from one or more hardware or software vendors. Access equipment, billing systems, and so on. Reputable industry suppliers are just as prone to program misadventure as their clients, possibly more so.

Choosing the right suppliers and having a strong working partnership can make or break it.

We found that Suppliers don't usually provide full visibility of their development progress for commercial reasons. But this alibi can mask development delays and reveal annoying surprises late in the day.

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Weak dependencies

No business-critical program can be delivered in isolation. It relies on work packages completed by different projects from within the same program and from other functions within the business. Not forgetting external hardware and software vendors.

If these are not identified, understood, negotiated, and managed, big holes will appear in the program plan. Fragile dependency management can hobble any program.

6

Disruptive culture

Business-critical programs are hard enough without having to filter out the sort of "unfactual facts" that flow from fear-driven or over-optimistic cultures.

Culture is a set of living relationships, working toward a shared program strategy and objective. It's essential to have a tough and challenging program set up – but not at the expense of frank and open conversation.

How to avoid coming up against these barriers

- Are your functional teams working smoothly together?
- Is your program properly funded?
- Are you dedicating enough time and resources to the program?
- Are the key milestone dates realistic?
- Do you have full visibility of your suppliers' performance?
- Can you understand, escalate, and resolve dependency issues and mismatches?
- Does your team have the experience needed to succeed with the program?
- Is there an openness and willingness to share information across the program?

Critical to any program success is having the knowledge, insight and competence to stamp out potential program issues – before they happen.

Often, risks are hard to see and anticipate.

The first thing to do is to establish the brutal facts – to ask tons of questions. And there's a skill in asking these questions. But you have to be intent on getting the plain, unvarnished truth.

'What', 'when', 'how', 'where' and 'who' are very powerful questions. They force people to be specific – to reveal what they actually know for a fact.

It's then easy to separate real knowledge from wishful thinking.

The question 'why' encourages people to rationalise things in hindsight and to play down the seriousness of situations. It lacks precision and should be used sparingly.

You have to start by taking a deeper look into the 6 factors we've identified; they are all deeply interconnected.

So where do you start?

Using data to break down the execution barriers

Project management tools on the market today provide great visibility into the everyday status of program performance, helping project managers to understand the tasks and the schedule.

But they can be quite incomprehensible when it comes to understanding what exactly is going wrong if you miss your targets. Just look at the some of the major programs reported in the press.

This is where Mentor can help.

To assist busy and frustrated executives to improve their execution performance – and avoid these showstoppers, we created a framework to crack the most common execution barriers fast – before anything starts.

We call it the MentorBlueprint™

For each factor, we have a set of acid tests to gauge the extent to which a client program matches up with our success profile.

We've combined this framework with the latest AI technology and specifically designed algorithms and analytical techniques to create a new disruptive program assurance tool - **The Mentor Execution Index.**

It provides a level of insight and interventions that are simply not available with more traditional methods of program assurance.

You find out:

- Exactly what's causing gaps in your execution - quickly

- What the true end-to-end program picture looks like

- What remedial actions must be taken to get your program back on track

The Mentor Execution Index gives you deeper understanding of your program's health, reduces the risk of failure and maximises the probability of program success.
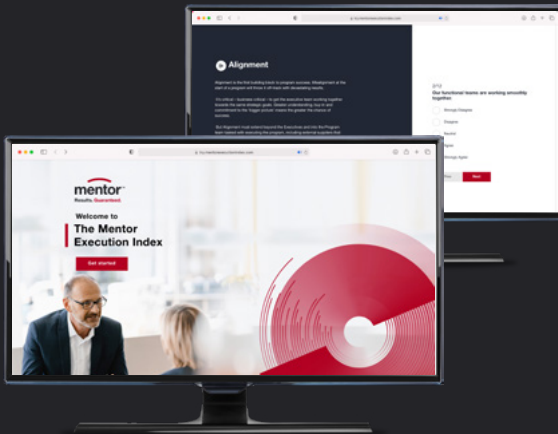
Tell the whole story

The Mentor Execution Index is a program assurance tool that quickly, accurately and cost effectively gives you an X-Ray of the health of your program. It is based on our proven execution framework - **The MentorBlueprint™.**

Whether you're starting something new – or resetting an existing program – The Mentor Execution Index delivers a comprehensive assessment of a program's health – based on the 6 factors that must be nailed to guarantee program success:

1. Executive Alignment

2. Planning

3. Organisation

4. Suppliers

5. Dependencies

6. Culture

It's time to do things differently

Curious?

Get a flavour of how well your program measures up. Take 5 minutes to assess your program using a short version of our new program health assessment tool – **The Mentor Execution Index** – and find out. At the end, you'll get a personalised program report.

Technology not only makes our lives more efficient and effective, but it also exists to help leaders get a complete picture of their business.

Many companies are comfortable using algorithms and AI technology in their everyday business - from screening candidates for jobs, employees surveys, and benchmarking their customer base - all aimed at gleaning valuable insights to make sure they remain competitive.

So why not do the same thing when executing a business-critical program?

Find out more

Further reading

Blog:
Program execution re-imagined

Blog:
Program failure is an expensive education

Blog:
Business transformation – when to get a second opinion

About:
The MentorBlueprint™

About David

David is Mentor Europe's Founder and Chief Executive. He is a trusted specialist with encyclopaedic skills on strategy execution and works behind the scenes with CEOs and senior executives, helping to crack problems blocking high performance.

He is a down-to-earth practitioner, with over 30 years' experience in the telecoms and service industries and has helped many client's setup new businesses.

Get in touch

If you're about to set up a program - or think your existing program might need a reset, email us at enquiries@mentoreurope.com.

Why Mentor

Mentor has three solid decades of experience in running difficult, business-critical programs in the UK and European telecoms markets. Breaking new ground by helping to create some of the first wave of Alt.net deployments, Mentor has worked behind the scenes with most of the UK's infrastructure players.

With our strong industry relationships and independence – combined with deep design, operational and commercial experience – we will work with you and your team to provide the people, resources and expertise to get your business-critical program over the line – with certainty.

We call it the Mentor Way. Results. Guaranteed.

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