The Strategy Is Usually Right

Execution Capability Is Where Value Is Won or Lost

A brief for boards on what has changed in execution - and why orchestration has become the most consequential, and least recognised, capability gap in modern growth programs.

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January 2026

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The Problem Boards Keep Meeting

Boards rarely reject growth strategies because they are wrong.

They approve them - and they then quietly lose value because execution capability has not kept pace with what delivery now demands.

Across major mergers, integrations, and synergy programs, the most persistent value-erosion pattern is not flawed ambition or weak intent. It is a systematic underestimation of how hard execution has become - and of the specific capabilities now required to turn strategy into results.

Execution today is less forgiving and harder to recover than many leaders expect. The penalty for getting it wrong has risen sharply.

This paper explains what has changed, why a critical execution competence remains largely absent, and how that blind spot erodes value even when strategy is sound.

What Has Changed Since the Late 1990s

Execution risk no longer behaves the way many strategy and governance frameworks implicitly assume.

Compared with the late 1990s, most organisations now operate with:

- Complex supplier ecosystems, rather than vertically integrated delivery
- Extensive outsourcing, with blurred accountability and limited leverage
- Tightly coupled systems, where local changes trigger non-local effects
- Dense regulation, constraining sequencing, design choices, and recovery options
- Minimal financial and operational slack

Each of these increases execution difficulty on its own. Taken together, they fundamentally alter the risk profile of large growth programs.

Errors now compound faster. Decisions harden earlier. Recovery options narrow sooner.

Large growth and transformation programs are expected to self-fund quickly and justify continued investment in real time. When things slip, there is less cash available to stabilise delivery, buy time, or absorb mistakes.

Traditional buffers have been removed - without a corresponding redesign of how execution is led.

In this environment, success depends less on heroic recovery and more on avoiding early moves that cannot later be undone.

Where Strategic Intent Fits - and Where It Stopped

Strategic Intent (Prahalad and Hamel, Harvard Business Review, 1989) was a necessary and correct challenge to incrementalism.

It encouraged leaders to start with ambition rather than constraint - to define a future position first, and then build the capabilities required to reach it.

At the time, execution environments were more forgiving. Dependencies were fewer.

Organisations were more vertically integrated. Financial and operational slack allowed learning in flight.

Strategic Intent therefore carried an implicit assumption: that once ambition was set, execution capability would emerge.

What it did not specify - and did not need to at the time - was how the execution gap it deliberately opened would be closed as delivery environments hardened.

That omission now matters.

The Missing Capability

As execution has become more complex and less forgiving, the assumption that execution capability will simply materialise can no longer be relied upon.

Growth ambition still runs ahead of current capability - as *Strategic Intent* encouraged it to do - but the means of closing that gap are now far less obvious.

What is missing in many organisations is a specific execution competence that has rarely been named explicitly.

That competence is **Orchestration.**

Why Orchestration Becomes Essential

Strategy statements are necessarily abstract by design. They set direction, not instruction.

Terms such as *integrate, simplify, leverage,* or *align* express growth intent, but carry little operational specificity on their own.

That abstraction shifts the burden of interpretation onto execution teams.

Teams must infer what is implied, reconcile contradictions, and make assumptions under time pressure - often with incomplete information and competing incentives.

Execution quietly becomes a mind-reading exercise.

Without orchestration, this interpretive burden does not remain abstract. It hardens into local decisions, sequencing choices, dependencies, and contractual commitments - embedding execution risk long before it becomes visible to governance.

This is where orchestration becomes essential.

Orchestration manages complexity by intercepting risk at the point where abstract intent turns into irreversible execution decisions.

What Orchestration Is

Orchestration is a distinct execution discipline.

It is the active, ongoing work of:

- Resolving ambiguity embedded in strategy and intent
- Managing cross-organisational and supplier dependencies
- Sequencing decisions under constraint
- Arbitrating system-wide trade-offs
- Doing so with authority, in real time, under pressure

Orchestration exists only if someone is explicitly accountable for the system as a whole - not for a function, platform, contract, or supplier.

What Orchestration Is Not

Orchestration is not coordination, program management, governance, alignment, or supplier integration.

These activities may support execution. None of them substitutes for orchestration.

The most damaging failure mode is conflation: collapsing orchestration into a collection of lower-level disciplines and assuming the gap is therefore covered.

This is why executives often say, in good faith, *“we already do that.”*

They do not.

> *A common example is SIAM (Service Integration and Management) - a legitimate discipline concerned with managing multi-supplier technology services, interfaces, and operational hand-offs once key architectural and commercial decisions are already locked in.*

SIAM addresses a narrow, technology-centric subset of execution control. It does not resolve strategic ambiguity, arbitrate system-wide trade-offs, manage cross-supplier dependencies under uncertainty, or sequence irreversible decisions.

Treating SIAM - or supplier capability more broadly - as a substitute for enterprise orchestration creates false confidence, not control.

The Supplier Myth

Paying major suppliers millions does not buy orchestration.

It buys delivery of defined scope, optimised locally and priced against each supplier’s own risk assumptions.

System-level orchestration requires decisions that may disadvantage individual suppliers, cut across contracts, or re-sequence work in ways no supplier is incentivised - or authorised - to own.

Why the Blind Spot Persists

In over 100 major programs across three decades, we have not encountered a single enterprise-level orchestration function deliberately designed, staffed, and empowered to do this job.

The absence is not accidental.

If a capability is not recognised, it is not built. If it is not built, responsibility is diffused. If responsibility is diffused, execution gaps are inevitable.

This blind spot emerged naturally - and now it must be dealt with deliberately.

The consequences are well known.

Large growth programs routinely under-deliver against their original ambition, incur material cost overruns, and take far longer than planned to complete.

Not all these outcomes are attributable to orchestration failure alone; complex programs fail for many reasons.

Orchestration failure is rarely the sole cause of poor outcomes. But it is what turns manageable risks into compounding failures.

A Question That Changes the Conversation

The most useful question is not:

“Is the strategy right?”

It is:

> *“Who, specifically, is accountable for orchestrating this program end-to-end - with the authority to manage dependencies and arbitrate trade-offs in real time - and what evidence do we have that they have done this successfully before, at comparable scale and complexity?”*

If this cannot be answered clearly and factually, the organisation is relying on confidence rather than capability.

Completing the Original Idea

Strategic Intent legitimised ambition running ahead of current capability - and it was right to do so.

What it did not - and could not - specify was how execution capability would need to be deliberately engineered as delivery environments hardened, dependencies multiplied, and buffers disappeared.

The resulting capability gap is understandable.

For decades, organisations relied on vertical integration, financial slack, and late heroics to compensate for weak orchestration.

As delivery has become more outsourced, more interdependent, and far less forgiving, that margin for error has gone.

Most leadership teams have never been taught to recognise orchestration as a distinct execution competence.

Fewer still have seen it deliberately designed, staffed, and empowered at enterprise level. In that context, it is hardly surprising that execution gaps persist even when strategy is sound and leadership intent is strong.

The consequence is rarely outright failure. It is quiet under-delivery: value left on the table, options closed too early, and complexity normalised rather than resolved.

The reassuring news is that this gap can be closed.

Orchestration is not a personality trait or a heroic intervention. It is a learnable, designable execution capability - but only if it is explicitly named, clearly owned, and given authority early, before commitments harden.

Organisations that do this do not dampen ambition. They protect it.

In execution, as in life, it is usually cheaper to invest early in seatbelts than to rely later on ambulances.

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