



## Executive Briefing Series

# 5 Barriers

## *To Executing Your Plan*

*...And Proven Methods to Overcome Them*

1. The underlying strategy is not clear.
2. The plan is overly optimistic.
3. No one is accountable for results.
4. The plan has not been actively deployed.
5. The plan is static.

Executive Briefing Series

# Five Barriers to Executing Your Plan...and Proven Methods to Overcome Them

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*Lead with Strategy. Leverage Technology. Deliver Results.*

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## INTRODUCTION

You may be familiar with Dwight D. Eisenhower's quote, "Plans are useless; planning is everything."

The reason this quote resonates with so many of us in business is because we have all learned (some of us the hard way) that execution — more so than planning — is the battleground that determines success and failure.

The function of planning should be thought of as much more than simply a means to generate plans and budgets. It should be thought of as a process that builds clarity and alignment, and positions the organization for efficient and effective execution.



**CASE EXAMPLE: FORTUNE 50 MANUFACTURING COMPANY**

We recently experienced an example of an unclear underlying strategy at a division of a Fortune 50 manufacturing company. The CEO reported flat performance and a feeling of “being stuck in second gear.” Everyone was working more hours than ever, but experiencing little progress and no success. While the CEO attributed the situation to an overall lack of accountability, we helped uncover a fundamental disagreement regarding how the company was positioned to compete and win. Roughly half of the executive team, including a very outspoken individual running the international operations, believed that the core competitive anchor for the company was rooted in its ability to provide great customer service. The CEO and the rest of the team thought the game would be decided based on their ability to innovate new products and services. This basic disagreement had some executives pushing in one direction while the others pulled against them. In this example, agreement on the company’s core competitive anchor enabled the executive team to break through several decision “logjams”, give rise to a clear strategy, and pave the way for efficient execution.

Consider this everyday example:

A group of people is planning a road trip from Chicago to Los Angeles. To be effective and build assurance that they will achieve their goal, they could decide on their “strategy” for the trip upfront. Do they want to focus on efficiency and arrive as quickly as possible? Perhaps beautiful scenery is the priority? What about access to comfortable lodging or frequency of historical landmarks? The possibilities are endless.

Without an upfront discussion and set of agreements, there will be many, many conversations (and quite possibly arguments) about route, schedule, and approach. The vacuum that is left without clear agreement and common perspective is inevitably filled by politics and emotion: one day Bill’s point of view (or obsession or habit or ax to grind) prevails, the next day Sally gets her way. The route becomes circuitous, particularly confusing to anyone who may be trying to follow. In this situation, achievement of the goal (get to L.A.) may also be compromised.

The same situation happens in many businesses. A lack of clarity and agreement regarding the direction of the organization creates a void where personalities, politics, and one-upsmanship prevail. In addition fundamental disagreements are seldom understood well enough to be tackled directly. They are instead played out in hundreds of fragments of daily conversations and emails about whether to attend this tradeshow or that one, or what the brochure should say, or what initiative is the priority at that moment. Although the direct effect is diluted progress, there are many other costly repercussions such as manager and employee frustration, missed opportunities, and loss of competitive edge.





**CASE EXAMPLE: \$500 MILLION TECHNOLOGY CONSULTING FIRM**

In a recent project with a \$500 million technology consulting firm, we ran into serious execution barriers. In interviews, several members of the executive team complained of a “flavor-of-the-month” culture and an inability to follow-through on projects and initiatives. To prove our hunch about the team’s tendency to take on too much, we facilitated a session where each member of the executive team listed all of the initiatives they were currently managing (and considered “strategic”) on flipcharts. The result was shocking to the CEO and the team. Collectively, these 10 executives were attempting to manage and execute over 200 strategic initiatives. After working with the group to sort through and prioritize, we realized that the root cause of this situation was centered on avoidance of tough decisions. Making the calls on which initiatives were true priorities represented a level of decision making they were not comfortable with. In continually avoiding these challenging decisions, the team hindered any substantial progress. We worked with the team to deploy some specific decision making tools and forums that facilitated regular prioritization and pruning of initiatives. The firm went on to achieve record growth for the year.

**BARRIER #2: THE PLAN IS OVERLY OPTIMISTIC**

Most executive teams tend to take on too much. The very real and pronounced opportunities and issues they face make it exceedingly difficult to prioritize initiatives and activities. At the same time, as organizations evolve, they collect initiatives, management processes and pet projects from bygone eras that dilute focus and soak up resources. In addition, when executives plan, they often assume a perfect world — one free of distractions, changes in the internal and/or external environment, and unexpected problems.

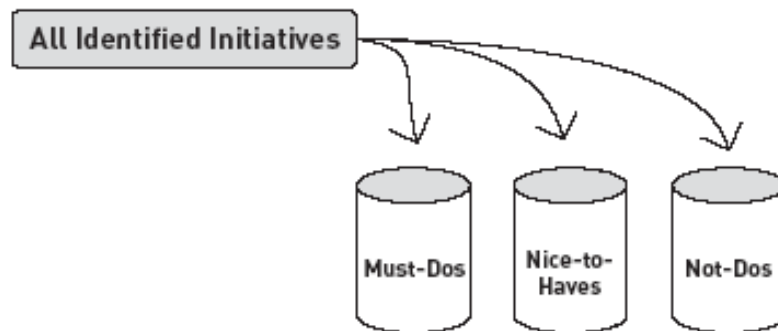
Unfortunately, this kind of environment doesn’t exist. The effect of overly optimistic planning can be devastating for execution. Runaway optimism builds failure into the plan, corrupting the entire notion of execution in the minds of the people required to follow-through and in the processes required to maintain the plan.

**WHAT TO DO: DEFINE PRIORITIES**

Creating an executable plan requires putting as much discipline and focus on those things that are **not considered a priority** for execution as those that are. In other words, the “Not-Do’s” must be identified, captured and communicated along with the “Must-Do’s.”

Again, simplicity pays off. From a comprehensive list of all initiatives, projects, and activities currently underway or planned, create a rough-cut prioritization by assigning each item to one of three “buckets”:

- Must-Do this year,
- Nice-To-Have this year, and
- Not-Do this year.







In terms of a business example, consider the last IT project that was implemented in your company. Chances are it was sold on the basis of a specific ROI. Management of the effort, however, was focused on the **activities** of implementation, instead of the results associated with the Return on Investment. Did the system deliver the return? Many times the answer is a clear “no.”

### WHAT TO DO: RAISE THE STAKES

As initiatives are prioritized (see the Must-Do’s mentioned above), tie the initiative to a specific time horizon. Then, take the time to define a specific business result associated with effective execution of that initiative. What do we expect to get out of this initiative?

By when should we expect to realize this result? And of course, who is on the hook to make this happen?

Defining initiatives in this manner raises the stakes for execution and enables the organization to fully commit. These “souped-up” initiatives become our **business commitments**.

From Initiatives...	....to Business Commitments
1. Develop New Products	1.0 Develop 3 new products by 5/31 to generate \$6MM in incremental revenue by Q4. (Smith)
2. Train Sales Reps	2.0 Train 36 sales reps in new product specifications by end of Q2; drive \$2MM in incremental sales by Q4. (Lee)
3. Improve Access to Product Information	3.0 Develop online product info access by 5/31; increase average number of products sold/customer by 15% by Q4. (Jones)

**CASE EXAMPLE: FORTUNE  
100 PRINTING COMPANY**

In working with a Fortune 100 printing company, we recommended an active deployment approach. After completing a Strategic Framework, the President of a key division and his key lieutenants spent two days in each of their facilities actively deploying the strategy and execution plans. While there were communications sessions for each of the plant shifts, the focus of the deployment was workshops with the executive team of each site. In these workshops, the CEO took the opportunity to clearly articulate the content of, and basis for, the strategy. He also got to work side-by-side with the team, helping them adjust their priorities and create plans to support execution. It was a profound experience for the site managers. They had never had the opportunity to think through and question the direction of the company — and get answers straight from the horse's mouth. The deployment effort was also a clear signal to the organization that planning was indeed over and focus was now on execution.

**BARRIER #4: THE PLAN HAS NOT BEEN ACTIVELY DEPLOYED**

Many executives complain about the difficulty in aligning their organizations around a specific vision or strategy. When asked what they actually do to deploy the vision or strategy to the organization, responses range from puzzled looks to explanations of employee communications programs. In either case, there is opportunity to more actively set a strategy in motion. Issues of strategic complexity and importance require more than a 60-minute group presentation in order for people to internalize and act on them. At first hearing, most employees will not understand a strategy or plan enough to apply it to their activities and responsibilities. Although trying to bring clarity, the executive team treating complex issues in this manner usually reaps confusion at best. At worst, the result is mismatched expectations regarding what management has actually committed to. To do their jobs, managers need an opportunity to actively apply the strategy or plan to their part of the business in a safe, no-nonsense business environment. Ideally, this is accomplished working shoulder-to-shoulder with the executives who are the primary authors of the strategic plan.

**WHAT TO DO: MOBILIZE THE TROOPS**

A first step in execution (or a last step in planning) should be a series of **Deployment Workshops** during which leaders will articulate the new strategy or plan to a group of managers. Both leaders and managers participate in planning exercises in which the managers, who are experts in their part of the business, make decisions regarding what they must do differently as a result of the new strategic plan. This is a very powerful approach that truly aligns the organization while motivating and mobilizing the troops to execute.

In most medium to large organizations, Deployment Workshops can be done at the business unit level and cascaded down into the organization as the need arises. While planning and conducting Deployment Workshops in several parts of the business represents an investment in time and money, many executive teams often cite this step as the most crucial. To some, it is considered more important than the development of the strategy itself, as it builds momentum “where the rubber hits the road.”





### CASE EXAMPLE: LARGE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRM

A large professional services firm received a 50-100 page strategic plan from each of its 22 global offices. As a result, the corporate executive team found it nearly impossible to understand the relative direction of each office, hold anyone accountable for progress, or implement company-wide changes in direction. Making coordinated progress and replicating successes was difficult. We worked with each office to understand its plan and boiled each down to a one-page integrated dashboard. We also worked with the corporate executive team to design a process that allowed them to understand progress in the field, make decisions based on that progress, and turn those decisions into coordinated, company-wide actions. The resulting Progress Management Process required each office to submit a monthly updated dashboard which, in turn, could be reviewed by the corporate executive team prior to their monthly meetings. Decisions made in the monthly meetings were fed back to the offices via email in real time. The revised dashboards were posted to an employee database so each employee could understand ongoing progress and priorities. This process enabled the organization to clarify strategy, coordinate activities and optimize resource allocations, while remaining extremely nimble and efficient from a decision-making standpoint.

### WHAT TO DO: CREATE AN EXECUTION PROCESS

Companies that are accomplished in execution use strategy as a weapon to drive progress, manage accountabilities, evaluate performance and support decision-making. In order to do this, they make the plan visible, accessible and changeable. These companies use annual planning not to develop static plans, but to create dynamic processes for execution. Thick binders become single page Executive Dashboards. One thousand task project plans become single page Management Action Plans. Weekly staff meetings become Strategy Progress Meetings. A dynamic planning and execution process helps an executive team **understand progress, make decisions** based on that progress, and **take action** to effect the decisions in the organization.



### CONCLUSION

Successful strategy execution is a living, dynamic process. Strategy itself begins life as a set of agreements about markets, products, revenues, growth and the like. The rest is execution. Unless there is an ongoing process for evaluating execution, making decisions about it, and closing the loop with the original strategy, the effort dies. That's why it is important to distinguish between strategic planning (those high-level agreements) and execution — an ongoing process for reviewing and maintaining strategic progress.

Now, before the end of this annual planning cycle, take the time to refocus your planning activities on execution of plans, not on the plans themselves. Assess your own organization's performance against the five barriers and make changes to manage or overcome them. Use your planning process to create a dynamic set of levers for steering your organization around these barriers and on to success.