

The Execution Gap

Why Organizations Fail Between Strategy and Outcomes



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CHAPTER 1

Activity Mistaken for Progress

The most dangerous moment in any transformation is the one that feels like success. A program with a full calendar, a busy steering committee, and a steady stream of status updates looks healthy. Activity is everywhere. Decks are produced. Workshops are facilitated. People are visibly, demonstrably working. The program has its own logo, its own war room, its own rhythm of meetings, and the comforting hum of an organization that is clearly doing something.

But activity is not progress, and motion is not movement toward an outcome. A transformation can generate enormous activity while changing nothing about how the organization actually performs. This is the first illusion, and it is the most seductive, because activity is the easiest thing in the world to mistake for results. It is visible, it is measurable, and it feels productive to everyone involved, which is exactly what makes it dangerous.

Why the confusion is so natural

Leaders are vulnerable to this confusion for a simple reason. Activity is visible and outcomes are not. A milestone met is concrete and reportable. A workshop held has an attendance list. A document delivered can be attached to an email. These things can be counted, and what can be counted gets reported, and what gets reported becomes the de facto definition of progress. The reporting system is built to track activity because activity is what reporting systems can see, and over time the organization comes to believe that the thing it is measuring is the thing that matters.

An outcome, by contrast, is diffuse and slow. A behavior changed across thousands of people does not announce itself on a Tuesday. The business performing differently is a trend that emerges over quarters, not

a milestone that closes on a date. So the reporting drifts, almost gravitationally, toward what is easy to measure. The program optimizes for the appearance of progress, and the appearance of progress is activity. No one decides to do this. It happens on its own, the way water finds the low ground, because the incentives all point the same direction.

There is also a human comfort in busyness. A team that is producing artifacts feels productive. A sponsor who sees a full program plan feels reassured. Everyone in the system is rewarded, emotionally and often formally, for motion. No one is rewarded for stopping to ask whether the motion is pointed at anything. The system conspires to keep itself busy, and the busier it gets, the more certain everyone becomes that something important must be happening, because surely this much effort could not produce nothing.

The artifact trap

Watch where a struggling transformation puts its energy and you will usually find it pouring into artifacts. The current-state assessment becomes a hundred-page document. The future-state vision becomes a beautifully designed deck. The communications plan becomes a calendar of messages. Each of these is genuine work, produced by competent people, and each of them is a way of being busy that postpones the moment of contact with reality. An organization can spend a year producing artifacts about a change and never once make the change, and the whole time it will feel as though the change is well underway.

The tell is that the artifacts reference each other rather than the world. The roadmap cites the assessment. The communications plan cites the roadmap. The steering deck summarizes all three. Nowhere in the chain is there a measurement of whether anything in the actual operation is different. The program has become a closed loop, producing documents about itself, and the loop can run indefinitely because it never has to touch the one thing that would reveal it as empty, which is the behavior of the people the transformation was supposed to change.

The tell

There is a reliable test for whether a transformation has fallen into this trap. Ask not whether the program is busy, but whether the business is different. Ask what an outside observer, with no access to the program plan, would be able to see changing in how the organization actually operates. If the honest answer is that they would see meetings and documents but no change in behavior, decisions, or results, the program has confused its own activity with the outcome it was meant to produce.

I sometimes put the test more bluntly to the leaders I work with. Imagine the program office burned down tonight, every deck and plan and tracker gone. Would the organization keep working the new way tomorrow, or would the change disappear with the documents. If the change lives only in the artifacts, it does not yet live in the organization, and no amount of further artifacts will move it there. The change has to be built into how people actually decide and act, and that is a different kind of work than the kind that fills a program plan.

The remedy is to define success in terms of the business, not the program, from the very beginning, and to hold that definition stubbornly through the inevitable pull toward activity metrics. The question is never how much the program has done. The question is whether the organization is different, and whether that difference is the one the investment was supposed to buy. The gap between those two questions is where most transformations quietly fail, and the leaders who refuse to let the questions collapse into one are the ones who keep their programs honest.

The metrics that lie by telling the truth

The cruelest version of this illusion is built entirely from accurate numbers. Every metric on the report is true. The workshops were held. The documents were delivered. The milestones closed on schedule. Nothing is fabricated, and yet the picture the true numbers assemble is false, because they measure the program's exertion rather than the organization's transformation. A report can be scrupulously honest about activity and profoundly misleading about progress, and the

honesty of its individual numbers is exactly what makes the misleading whole so persuasive. No one can object to any single figure, so no one objects to the conclusion they imply, which is that the transformation is going well.

This is why the remedy is not better data quality but a different question. Improving the accuracy of activity metrics does nothing, because the metrics were never inaccurate. The problem is that they are the wrong metrics, faithfully reported. The only fix is to put alongside them a small number of outcome measures that activity cannot fake, and to give those measures primacy in the conversation, so that the question in the room shifts from how much the program has done to whether the organization is actually different. Until that shift happens, the truest report in the world will keep telling the organization that it is succeeding right up until the moment it can no longer deny that it failed.

What it looks like from inside

Consider how this feels to the people living it, because the feeling is part of the trap. Inside a transformation that has confused activity for progress, the days are full and the work is real. There are deadlines that get met, deliverables that get praised, meetings that produce decisions about the next meetings. The people involved are not idle or cynical. They are working hard at things that feel important, and the hard work is precisely what makes the absence of progress so difficult to see. You cannot easily believe that this much effort is producing nothing, and so you do not look for the possibility, and the program runs on its own momentum long after it has stopped moving the organization.

The moment of recognition, when it comes, is usually jarring. Someone asks a simple question, what has actually changed in how the business operates, and the room goes quiet, because the honest answer is that the program has been busy and the business has been the same. The decks describe a transformation. The operation describes business as usual. The gap between the two has been there all along, hidden by the volume of activity, and it becomes visible only when someone insists on looking past the activity to the outcome. The leaders who keep their

programs honest are the ones who ask that question early and often, before the gap has had a year to widen unobserved.

But surely the work has to get done

A reasonable objection arises here. The artifacts are not worthless. The assessment, the roadmap, the communications plan, these are genuine work products that a transformation does in fact need, and it would be foolish to dismiss them as mere busyness. This is true, and it is not the point. The artifacts are necessary and they are not sufficient, and the failure is not in producing them but in mistaking their production for the outcome. A roadmap is a tool for producing a result, not the result itself, and a transformation that produces a beautiful roadmap and no change has not done part of the job well. It has done the easy part and skipped the hard part, while telling itself, on the strength of the roadmap, that the job is underway.

The rule

The operative rule is simple to state and hard to hold. Define success in terms of the business, not the program, and refuse to let the two definitions collapse into one. The program's measures of its own activity are necessary for running the program and worthless as measures of whether the transformation is succeeding, and the moment the organization begins reporting progress in terms of activity, it has begun to lose sight of the outcome. Hold the outcome definition stubbornly, against the constant gravitational pull toward the activity metrics that are so much easier to produce and so much more reliably reassuring.

For the reader facing a transformation, this rule converts into a single recurring question to ask in every status conversation. Not how much has the program done, but how is the business actually different, and how do we know. Ask it early, ask it often, and require an answer in terms of the operation rather than the program. The question is uncomfortable because the honest answer, early on, is frequently that the business is not yet different at all, and the discomfort of that answer is precisely its value,

because it surfaces the gap while there is still time to close it rather than after it has widened beyond recovery.

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