

# The Speed Imperative

Every enterprise has a default trajectory—and without intervention, it slows execution to a crawl. Learn how to break from drift and build the velocity your strategies demand.

By Jennifer Zimmer

**For those of us who have witnessed true, meaningful breakthroughs**—the kind that can reshape the trajectory of a company and even an entire industry—we understand their profound and lasting impact. As trailblazers in the art and science of catalyzing breakthrough results for more than three decades, Insigniam offers a refined definition: a breakthrough is a measurable outcome that is unprecedented or unlikely based on an organization’s history, resources, and the environment in which it operates.

Breakthroughs may concern processes, project deliverables, strategies, leadership, or corporate culture, but their effect is transformative. Most importantly, true breakthroughs are sustainable. They continue to deliver results without sacrificing quality, integrity, or well-being. They emerge when individuals adopt fresh perspectives and take novel actions that open pathways to possibilities previously unseen.

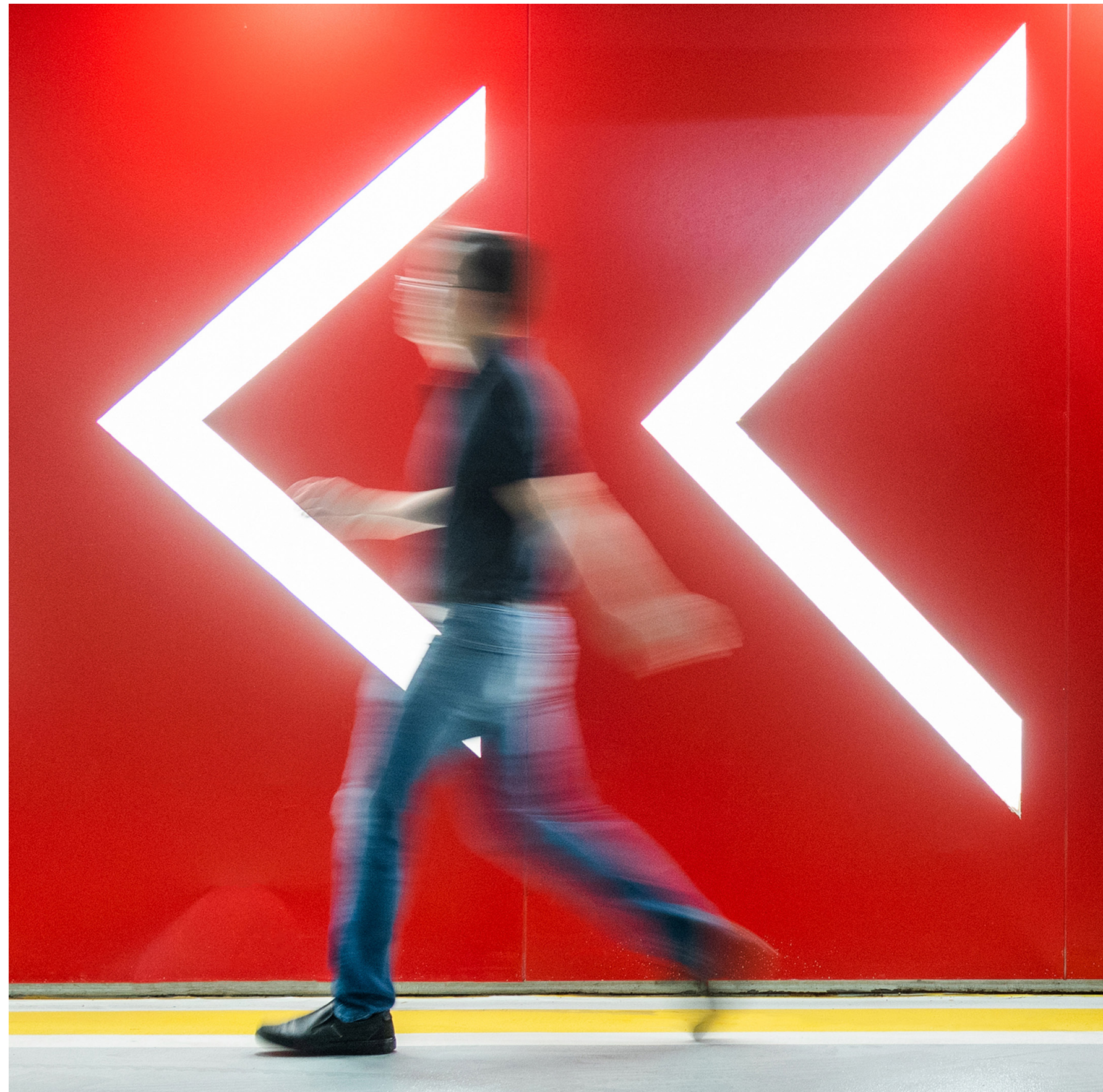
Yet even when leaders recognize the need for bold transformation, the pathway to execution can often feel opaque. The challenge is not in knowing that change is

required, but in understanding where to begin—and how to move swiftly enough to overcome stagnant growth, anticipate disruption, and avoid the perils of clinging to the status quo.

## Breakthroughs Begin by Revealing the Drift

In any organization, breakthroughs begin by acknowledging and confronting the “organizational drift”—the likely trajectory of performance created by the convergence of established practices, institutional dynamics, and deeply ingrained belief systems. Drift is the invisible undertow that shapes how people think, behave, interact, and ultimately perform. It pushes outcomes in a predictable direction, much like a river current quietly pulling everything along its path.

Imagine standing at the edge of a river, watching the current move with a steady, almost unnoticeable force. Drop a twig into the water and you can easily anticipate its downstream journey. Organizations behave much the same way; without intervention, the drift determines the future.



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To move beyond the drift and into a space where new futures become possible, Insigniam's methodology identifies four essential stages—Reveal, Unhook, Invent, and Implement.

These stages occur in sequence, and each introduces new conversations, structures, and actions that set the conditions for a true breakthrough.

In the era of AI, compressed decision cycles, and unprecedented operating tempo, these stages now serve an additional purpose: they help leaders accelerate execution and shorten the distance between decision and action.

#### **Reveal: Understanding the Current Reality and Its Impact on Speed**

The first action on the path to a breakthrough is to reveal the prevailing and controlling conversations that shape how people act, interact, solve problems, and interpret their environment. This requires confronting what is assumed to be real,

## **The challenge is knowing where to begin and how to move swiftly to avoid the perils of clinging to the status quo.**

as in the assumptions, interpretations, and unspoken norms that quietly limit pace and performance.

A recent example involved the CEO and CHRO of a Fortune 500 multinational food manufacturer who partnered with Insigniam to elevate their leadership culture in order to respond to rising consumer demand for nutritional products. Before they could move with the urgency the market required, they had to reveal how leaders experienced their work and themselves within it. Through a series of interviews and facilitated conversations, executive and extended leadership teams surfaced the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and habits that shaped their day-to-day behaviors.

Only after revealing these hidden constraints could they design a new leadership cultural framework—a shared purpose, new ways of working, and explicit commitments for how

leaders would show up. The executive team modeled new leadership behaviors, and extended teams followed by embodying clearly defined actions and ways of being that supported a renewed culture capable of operating with greater speed, cohesion, and accountability.

#### **Unhook: Detaching from Limiting Conversations to Restore Trust and Tempo**

The second stage requires the organization and its people to unhook from prevailing conversations, recognizing them as only one possible interpretation of reality. This stage is critical because much of what slows an enterprise down—missed deadlines, habitual risk aversion, or cross-functional friction—is not factual; it is rooted in shared interpretations and assumptions that have gone unchallenged.

One of the largest medical device companies in the world confronted this challenge while developing a groundbreaking surgical technology that could create an entirely new market category. After eight years—four years beyond the original target date—deadlines no longer felt real, and teams no longer believed in the timeline or in themselves. Trust had eroded among internal and external stakeholders, and the project had lost its tempo.

Insigniam worked with cross-functional teams to enable what seemed impossible: delivering the product to market within one year. To achieve this, individuals had to unhook from long-held norms about timelines, collaboration, and decision-making. Critical actions included establishing clear pathways for cross-functional communication, fast-tracking priority requests, and creating decision structures that supported rapid progress. Project managers and quality leaders designed mechanisms that motivated the organization to complete a multitude of tasks on schedule ahead of regulatory submissions.

By unhooking from limiting narratives and operating from facts rather than assumptions, teams rebuilt trust, rekindled accountability, and aligned around a shared commitment to move the project forward as one unified team.

#### **Invent: Designing New Conversations and Structures for a Faster Future**

The third stage—Invent—requires individuals to design new conversations rooted in an inspired future, shifting from circumstance-based dialogue to commitment-based dialogue. This is where organizations generate the energy, structures, and innovations that make a new trajectory possible.

A U.S.-based hospital healthcare system known globally for exceptional patient outcomes faced such a challenge. Despite its clinical excellence, the organization lacked a cohesive, intentional approach to developing

## **IS DECISIVENESS IN YOUR DNA?**

The CEO Genome Project—published in *Harvard Business Review*—analyzed 17,000 assessments and 2,000 CEOs to identify what truly drives top performance. The data shows leaders who make faster, clearer decisions are 12× more likely to excel. The takeaway is simple: execution velocity starts with leaders who design decision flows, remove bottlenecks, and set the tempo for the enterprise.

# 6.7x

#### **ADAPTABILITY**

CEOs with high adaptability are nearly seven times more likely to be high performers than their peers.<sup>1</sup>

# 94%

#### **RELIABILITY**

Among high-performing CEOs, reliability (i.e., following through) is a commonly shared trait.<sup>2</sup>

IQ

# 45%

#### **FAILURE**

Nearly half of CEOs had at least one major career “blowup”—yet many still rose to succeed.<sup>3</sup>

# 7%

#### **EDUCATION**

Elite credentials are not predictive; only 7% had an undergrad degree from an Ivy-League school.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1-4</sup>What Sets Successful CEOs Apart, *Harvard Business Review*, by Botelho, Rosenkoetter-Powell, Kincaid, and Wang.





### About the Author Jennifer Zimmer, Insigniam & Elixir Partner

A member of Insigniam's team since 1998, Jennifer Zimmer has expertise taking leaders to the next level of performance, empowering them to be accountable while delivering breakthrough results. She has substantial experience working in hospital systems, pharmaceuticals, and biotech, and consistently receives exceptional client satisfaction results. Her work includes consulting for major corporations on large-scale business and cultural transformations and initiatives, such as ERP implementations, regulatory compliance issues, and revenue cycle. In these engagements, Ms. Zimmer has helped teams produce significant measurable results, including increased employee engagement, patient satisfaction scores, and cash flow, and decreased rework and order-to-cash cycle time. Ms. Zimmer is a sought-after speaker at healthcare conferences and a member of the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association. She is a licensed critical care nurse and holds a B.S. in Nursing from Simmons College and a Mini MBA from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

physician leaders. Existing leadership development occurred sporadically, inconsistently, and often by chance. Yet their bold vision for the future demanded a structured platform for cultivating leadership throughout the system.

Insigniam convened cross-functional groups to surface the roadblocks to leadership development and reveal opportunities that had gone unseen. By confronting deeply embedded assumptions, leaders identified what worked, what no longer served the organization, and what needed to be invented to achieve their vision.

A collaborative design team used design thinking principles to prototype a formal leadership development structure. These prototypes were reviewed by the governing body and ultimately approved for implementation across the organization—laying the foundation for a scalable, long-term leadership pipeline capable of delivering breakthrough results.

#### Implement: Embedding New Structures, Accelerating Execution, and Sustaining Momentum

The final stage—Implementation—occurs when new conversations and structures become lived reality, enabling individuals and teams to convert breakthrough goals into breakthrough results. This step often requires organizations to operate under new conditions, as one of the world's largest automotive tire manufacturers learned during the global pandemic. For decades, the company built customer relationships and internal collaboration through in-person meetings. When the pandemic eliminated the possibility of face-to-face work, the structures that had supported success vanished overnight.

Insigniam worked with the client to increase engagement with internal and external customers, strengthen virtual collaboration, and accelerate the development of new operating rhythms. After aligning on an inspiring future, project teams designed pathways to achieve their goals. The president of the operations group was so impressed by the clarity and strength of these plans that he invited the teams to present at a quarterly executive meeting.

Two efforts created profound organizational lift: a program that spotlighted what inspired employees about their work, and a safe platform for international teams—previously hesitant to speak up due to cultural norms—to share openly and participate fully. These initiatives deepened connection, strengthened engagement, and created new pathways for serving customers in a virtual world. The resulting cohesion generated new strategies, accelerated execution, and helped the organization sustain performance during an unprecedented disruption.

#### A Playbook for Action and Speed

The actions required for a breakthrough must be supported by a fundamental shift in thinking—one that challenges the belief that the future is dictated by the past. In truth, the future acts as the backdrop against which people determine what is possible. It shapes their behavior, informs their decisions, and influences the tempo at which they operate.

Creating an enterprise capable of breakthrough results requires leadership that understands the organization's power extends beyond capital, technology, and operational efficiency. It calls for harnessing the human factor—investing in conversations, clarity, and new structures that accelerate execution. It demands the discipline to engage in the kinds of dialogue that create alignment, drive momentum, and turn intent into action quickly and decisively.

The essential question is this: If an observer were to examine your organization today, what actions—and at what tempo—would they see? In a world where speed is an advantage and execution is the great differentiator, breakthroughs are not a luxury. They are an imperative.

Do not surrender your future to drift or to your competitors. The actions required for a breakthrough—revealing, unhooking, inventing, and implementing—can propel your enterprise to results beyond what your past would predict. The capacity for breakthrough is already there. The question is whether you will command it. **IQ**

Portions of this article are based on materials created by Werner Erhard and on the book *The Three Laws of Performance: Rewriting the Future of Your Organization and Your Life* by Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan, 2009, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, and are used with permission.

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