



EXECUTION

Why Results Fail to Launch

Uncovering the system failures that ground your results and prevent them from soaring to new heights.

By **Jennifer Zimmer**, Insigniam & Elixirr Partner

Watch a magician closely and you'll learn something unsettling. The trick isn't in what you're looking at. It's in what you're not. Misdirection is the entire art form. The magician doesn't hide the coin — she points your eyes at her left hand while her right hand does the work. The audience leaves convinced they saw everything. They didn't. They saw exactly what the magician wanted them to see, and the rest of the stage was invisible to them by design. This is also, more or less, the relationship most executives have with their own organizations.

The strategy is articulated. The OKRs cascade. The dashboards illuminate. Quarterly reviews are calendared, attended, and minuted. By every visible measure, the leadership team is doing the work. And yet, quarter after quarter, the results don't move the way the plan said they would. Initiatives that were green a month ago are yellow now. Yellow becomes red. The board asks pointed questions. Someone proposes a transformation office. A consultant arrives. Another dashboard appears. None of it works, because none of it is looking at the right hand.

The hard truth that most executives have not yet been told—and that some, when told, refuse to believe—is that what looks like an execution problem almost never is one. The plan isn't broken. The people aren't lazy. The strategy doesn't need refinement.

What's broken is the operating system underneath all of it: the unwritten rules of who actually decides, who can quietly veto, what gets rewarded versus what gets said in the slide deck, and which decisions are even visible as decisions in the first place.

That operating system is invisible to the people who designed it. By definition. You can't redesign what you can't see. And here is the part that should keep CXOs up at night: the dashboards aren't going to show it to you. The dashboards are the magician's left hand.

What the Data Tells Us

In March 2026, Hypothesis Group—an Elixirr company—surveyed 100 senior executives at U.S. enterprises with \$1 billion (USD) or more in annual revenue. The questions were about consulting. The answers



THE HARD TRUTH ABOUT EXECUTION

What looks like an execution problem almost never is one. What's broken is the invisible operating system underneath the strategy (the unwritten rules of who actually decides, who can quietly veto, what gets rewarded versus what gets said in the slide deck), and the dashboards executives trust were never designed to surface it.

AI & EXECUTION



Why the Work Doesn't Happen, and What AI Changes

Most large companies don't fail because they had the wrong strategy. They fail because the strategy never actually got done. The decision was made. The plan was approved. Six months later, nothing has moved, and nobody can quite point to whose fault that is.

The reason this keeps happening is that most operating models don't actually require execution. There's no single person whose calendar, bonus, or career is on the line for any given decision landing. The decision was the leadership team's. The execution was the program team's. The outcome was the business's. When reality intrudes — a re-org, a competing priority, a function head pushing back — the work just stops. Nobody is the person who failed. That's what executives don't want to say out loud. The system lets people off the hook. When ownership is spread across enough names, no individual actually feels it.

For years, the standard response has been more dashboards, more reporting cadences, more visibility. AI plugs neatly into that instinct, which is part of the problem. In a lot of companies it just means there's now a more accurate chart of the thing not happening.

What's different about agentic AI, used well, is that you cannot build an agent without making choices the organization has been avoiding for years. Who decides? What triggers escalation? What counts as done? Writing that down forces the conversation. Then the agent doesn't tolerate the ambiguity that kept execution optional — it moves the work, or tells you exactly why it hasn't moved and who's sitting on it.

The trap is trying to use AI to force execution without first being honest about ownership. Fix what's underneath. Then let the agent enforce something real. **IQ**

—Adam Hofmann, Elixirr Partner

WHAT GROUNDS EXECUTION

• • •



36%

TIME CRUNCH

A lack of capacity to sustain effort is a primary reason execution sputters¹



35%

NAVIGATION ISSUES

Decisions made with incomplete context lead to strategies that go off-course.²



60%

THE PIECES DON'T FIT

Strategic misalignment wastes 60% of a company's resources and stymies execution.³



MOMENT OF TRUTH

Ask yourself:
Can you name the three unwritten rules that are actually governing how decisions get made?

were about execution. One finding was so stark it warrants reading twice.

When asked what most often undermines the success of major initiatives, 52% of senior vice presidents and vice presidents cited “execution drifted from original intent.” Among C-Suite executives at the same companies, the figure was 17%. Same enterprises. Same initiatives. Same dashboards. A 35-point gap on what’s going wrong.

This is not noise. This is two different organizations describing the same reality from different vantage points, and the C-Suite is the vantage point that doesn’t have visibility. The people closest to the work see execution drift as the dominant failure mode. The people defining the work barely see it at all.

You are reading this on a screen, probably from one of those two vantage points. If you are in the C-Suite, the natural reaction to a 17% number is that doesn’t sound like the dominant problem. If you are an SVP or a VP, the natural reaction is of course that’s the problem; everyone knows that. The fact that your reaction reveals where you sit on the org chart is itself the diagnosis. The same study found that 23% of

senior executives identified “ability to translate strategy into actionable plans” as the area where their organization most overestimates its readiness. These are not capability gaps. What showed up is a structural blind spot; the conviction that the organization can convert intent into prioritized, accountable execution, and the operational evidence that it cannot.

The figure most often cited in the trade press is the *Harvard Business Review* finding that 67% of well-formulated strategies fail in execution. It has been quoted for so long it has begun to feel decorative. The new finding is sharper. Strategies aren’t failing in execution. They’re failing in visibility. The execution system is doing exactly what it was designed to do—and what it was designed to do is not what the executive thought.

Manufacturing Results

The pattern is most acute in industries where the cost of execution drift compounds fastest. Manufacturing is one of them. Hypothesis found that 55% of manufacturing and industrial companies cite a major strategic shift or growth initiative as the trigger for engaging external help — the highest of any industry surveyed.



Heavy Lifting Required

Half of all transformation projects fail to deliver—and the engine is rarely to blame. According to a 2025 Project Management Institute study of more than 5,800 professionals, only half of projects today meet a modern definition of success.⁴

Stakes are visibly high. Margins are visibly thin. The gap between “we said we’d ship 18” and “we shipped 6” cannot be smoothed over by a deck.

Talk to senior leaders in manufacturing right now and a familiar dynamic surfaces. Many describe what they call a “GDP-minus” environment: growth that lags the broader economy, where assumptions about market-driven performance no longer hold. In this environment, the commercial function becomes a primary lever. And the commercial function is where execution drift becomes most visible, because every drift translates immediately into a number.

Tim Romberger, founder and principal of TRC Advisory—an Elixirr company—works closely with manufacturing executives on the commercial side of their business and describes the issue directly:

“Many manufacturers continue to operate with models that were designed for a different era,” Mr. Romberger says.

“Sales organizations are often structured to maintain existing revenue rather than generate new growth. Effort is spread across a wide range of opportunities, without clear prioritization.”

“Too often we look for simple answers to complex problems. We need to look more holistically and be willing to understand why some initiatives succeed and others fail.”

—Mike Stow

Global Marketing, Surgical Robotics
Medtronic

The result, he observes, is a familiar pattern. Activity is high. Pipeline conversion varies. Pricing discipline is uneven. Resources are not always aligned with the highest-value opportunities. The strategy is clear; the execution does not deliver on it. Notice what is and isn’t being said. The strategy is fine. The people are working. The activity is real. The execution doesn’t follow.

Why? Because (and here is the misdirection) the people running the commercial function are operating inside an unwritten set of rules about what’s actually rewarded. Rules that were established years ago, by leaders who are no longer in the room, in conditions that no longer exist. Those rules govern who gets credit for what. Which deals are “worth fighting for.” How pricing exceptions are quietly granted. Which accounts are protected even when they shouldn’t be. None of that appears on the dashboard.

The operational side of the house has its own version of the same problem. Rory Farquharson, an Elixirr partner who frequently counsels manufacturing executives, observes that production environments have become structurally harder to read.

“Manufacturing environments have become more complex,” Mr. Farquharson says. “Supply chains are less predictable. Production systems rely on a mix of legacy infrastructure and newer digital tools.”

Many organizations have invested heavily in tracking and reporting — and yet, real-time visibility remains limited. Data is not always integrated across systems. Decision-making lags behind events on the ground.

“When execution gaps occur,” Mr. Farquharson notes, “they tend to surface first in operational metrics. Throughput becomes inconsistent. Delivery performance slips. Safety incidents increase. Financial impact almost always follows later.”

CLIENTS SOUND OFF



When execution initiatives and strategies fail to materialize, here’s where clients point to first.



Our teams aren’t accountable.



We can’t seem to get things done.



We’re aligned at the top, but not on the ground.



Our execution is wildly inconsistent.



This is the second tell. By the time the financial impact shows up—which is the layer the C-Suite tends to be looking at—the execution failure has already been visible for weeks or months in the operational telemetry. The dashboard at the top of the house catches the symptom; the dashboard near the work catches the disease. Both dashboards are real. Only one of them is being watched by the people who can actually act.

A senior executive at a leading medical technology and device company captured the diagnostic problem directly when asked how he assesses where performance is breaking down.

“The root cause likely isn’t as simple as structure, execution, or the underlying ways teams work together,” they said. “It likely lies deeper and across all three. Too often we look for simple answers to complex problems.” They continue: “We need to look more holistically and be willing to understand why some initiatives succeed and others fail.”

Most organizations don’t. Most organizations diagnose execution failure as a behavioral problem and respond with behavioral interventions. Tighter governance. Sharper KPIs. Clearer expectations. More town halls. Each move is logical inside the existing context — and each one fails to surface the context, which is the only thing that would actually change the outcome.

What the Executive Cannot See, and Why

There is a methodology that begins, before anything else, by making the operating system visible. At Insigniam, the first step is to *reveal*. What surfaces is not what most executives expect. It is rarely a single dramatic dysfunction. It is, more often, a quiet inventory of normalcy. The way decisions actually get made. Who is genuinely consulted

versus who is informed for the sake of appearance. Which meetings are real and which are theater.

The phrase that’s used in the hallway after the meeting that contradicts the phrase used in the meeting itself. The senior leader everyone has learned to route around. The function that has, without anyone deciding, accumulated a quiet veto.

None of this is hidden, exactly. Most of it is known to most of the people doing the work. What’s hidden is its aggregation — the way these unspoken rules combine into a coherent operating system that produces the outcomes the dashboards are measuring. The dashboard sees the output. The methodology surfaces the system that produced the output.

The next move—unhook—is the part most leaders find genuinely difficult. It is the deliberate act of disengaging from the prevailing mindset. The unwritten rules don’t leave on their own; they reassert themselves the moment a new initiative is introduced, retranslating it into the old way of thinking. Without unhooking, the new strategy gets quietly absorbed into the old operating system and emerges, six months later, looking suspiciously like everything that came before. Senior leaders who have lived inside the system for years are themselves the principal carriers of the rules. Asking them to redesign the system without unhooking is asking the magician to spot her own misdirection.

Only then does the real work begin: inventing a different operating context, then implementing through it. This practice for enabling successful change describes the move as installing clear decision rights, accountabilities, leadership actions, and processes; but only after the existing ones are revealed. The sequence matters. Most failed transformations install new decision rights on top of unrevealed old ones.

CASE STUDY

When the Floor Knows What the Dashboard Can’t Understand

At a premier aircraft manufacturer, the strategy was sound, the engineering was sophisticated, and the market position was strong. What wasn’t working was harder to see. A pervasive morale breakdown had quietly taken hold across the manufacturing floor — not as a cultural abstraction, but as an operational drag with real financial consequences.

The unwritten rules had accumulated over years. Frontline supervisors and team leaders were expected to follow directives and report status. Identifying problems was someone else’s job. Originating solutions was above their pay grade. The result was a culture of passive compliance that had become an execution ceiling: the people closest to the work had effectively been removed from the work of improving it.

Leadership recognized the diagnosis and engaged outside help — not to install new governance mechanisms, but to rewrite the unwritten rules. A rigorous development program was built specifically for frontline supervisors, team leaders, and senior managers. Participants weren’t trained in the abstract. They were handed real operational problems within their own scope and made accountable for solving them. The results were quantifiable. Business projects originating from the frontline produced millions in incremental profit each. Total bottom-line impact exceeded \$24 million. Manufacturing throughput improved. The program worked so well that leadership commissioned a second round.

The Hard Truth

The execution failure was never on the floor. It was in the system that told the floor not to think. When the unwritten rules changed, so did the numbers—and no new dashboard was required to make it happen.

The new rights live in the policy document; the old rights continue to govern actual behavior. This is not jargon. It is a description of why execution failure cannot be solved by adding mechanisms—more dashboards, more reviews, more governance—to a system whose problem is that the existing mechanisms are already invisible to the people running them.

The Agentic Complication

There is a contemporary wrinkle that makes this more urgent in 2026 than at any prior point in modern executive memory.

Agentic AI is forcing decision rights into the open whether organizations want to look at them or not. When an AI agent inherits permissions from an overprovisioned human and acts in seconds, the unwritten rules of “who can really do what” become operationally consequential at machine speed. You can no longer rely on the human pause — the moment when an employee thinks, I’m not sure I should do this, and walks down the hall to ask.

In its 2026 *Secure Access in the Age of AI* research, Hypothesis Group, working with Microsoft Security, surveyed 305 enterprise access management decision-makers. Six in ten leaders anticipate more access incidents from AI agents and employee GenAI use, while 80% report that AI agent use has increased in the past year. Sixty percent say agents operate autonomously with limited oversight. More than half say agents require broad or elevated permissions to systems and data.

The unwritten rules of human decision rights, in other words, are being copied directly into AI systems—and those systems then act on the unwritten rules at scale, in real time, without the human pause that used to provide a margin of safety. The execution failures that used to take a quarter to surface are now arriving in days.



About the Author
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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.

A CISO in financial services, interviewed during the qualitative phase of the study, put it directly: “Even with many different tools, we still don’t end up getting the entire risk picture.” Tool sprawl is not protection. It is exposure. The organizations with six or more access management tools are reporting more AI-related incidents than those with fewer—67% versus 47% on GenAI; 64% versus 51% on agentic AI. Adding more visible mechanisms to a system whose actual problem is invisible governance produces, predictably, more failure.

The pattern is the same one that broke the jet program in 2009 and slowed the biopharma in 2026. The technology is new; the diagnosis is not.

What this Means for You

If you are sitting with a strategy you believe in and execution that isn’t delivering, the honest first question is not how do we fix execution. It is what am I being misdirected away from. The dashboards you trust were built inside the assumptions of the system that’s failing. They are doing their job. Their job is not to surface what they were never asked to see.

The work begins with making the operating system visible. That is uncomfortable, because the operating system is built on choices senior leaders made, often without naming them as choices. It is built on what those leaders, over years, allowed and rewarded. It is built on what got tolerated when no one was officially watching. Surfacing it is not a comfortable exercise. It is also the only one that produces a durable answer.

CXOs willing to do this work—to ask not “who is failing to execute” but “what about how we operate is making execution structurally unlikely”—are the ones who will outperform the market and overcome the hard truths. Their strategies, over time, are the ones that show up in the numbers. Meanwhile, their competition will be all too busy watching the left hand. **IQ**

EXECUTIVE Q&A



Technology does not sell itself. Execution does.

PETER ALKEMA

Head of IS Technology & Platforms

ABB

Peter Alkema is Head of IS Technology & Platforms at ABB, where he leads enterprise technology strategy and platform development across global operations. With experience in manufacturing and financial services, he focuses on how IT enables execution at scale, from modernizing legacy systems to embedding agility. His work connects technology, operations, and leadership, showing how system design, data architecture, and organizational behavior shape performance.



01 WHERE DO DATA AND SYSTEMS BREAK DOWN IN SUPPORTING PERFORMANCE, AND HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS IMPROVE RESPONSIVENESS?

Mr. Alkema: The first issue is simply that there are too many systems and too many sources of data. You end up with productivity leakage as people spend time trying to join the dots across multiple platforms. Every new tool promises to solve a problem, but over time organizations accumulate layers of systems, processes, and dependencies that make execution harder rather than easier.

We’re very good at adding new tools, but not very good at taking things away. That is where legacy starts to become a real bottleneck on performance.

It creates technical debt, forces trade-offs during implementation, and once the immediate pressure of delivery is gone, organizations move on to the next initiative and the problem compounds.

So, the opportunity is not just modernization for its own sake. It is to be much more deliberate about cleanup. If you introduce two or three new tools, you should be asking which five or six you are now going to remove. That means dealing with difficult questions around people, cost, training, incentives, and how capability gets reallocated into the new environment. I also think the issue is not only fragmentation. In many organizations, even when data exists, it is still too far removed from execution. You have visibility, but not enough line of sight to action. ABB's own technology work reflects the importance of moving from simply collecting data to processing it and translating it into decisions, with the control layer sitting much closer to where value is created. That is where responsiveness improves.

The technology will continue to evolve and vendors will keep bringing better tools. The question is how you adopt those tools without carrying forward the inefficiencies of what they were meant to replace.



Before joining ABB in 2023, Mr. Alkema served as Business Banking CIO at FNB South Africa, and in roles with Absa Bank and Accenture.



PETER ALKEMA
Head of IS Technology & Platforms, ABB

“
The shift from visibility to action happens when intelligence is embedded much closer to operations.”

02 AS MANUFACTURERS INVEST IN TRACKING SYSTEMS, HOW CAN THEY MOVE FROM VISIBILITY TO REAL-TIME DECISIONS?

Mr. Alkema: There is a massive opportunity, particularly around inventory and working capital. But to support better decisions in real time, or even day by day and week by week, processes need to be digitized. The difficulty is that external forces can overwhelm even very good reporting systems. Geopolitical shifts, supply chain volatility, tariffs, and sovereignty pressures all work against efficiency. Where I've seen real progress is when solutions originate on the factory floor. When process engineers understand the lines and prototype against real problems, those systems endure. The shift from visibility to action happens when intelligence is embedded much closer to operations.

03 HOW DO YOU THINK ABOUT ENTERPRISE AGILITY, AND WHEN SHOULD STRATEGY ADAPT AMID DISRUPTION?

Mr. Alkema: You cannot run an entire enterprise purely on agile principles, but you can embed agility into the building blocks of the organization. That matters because when conditions shift, you do not want the business constrained by its own IT function. At the same time, you cannot get too far ahead of the business and build something they do not want or are not ready to sponsor.

What works is creating an environment where IT can act as a catalyst. IT brings ideas, enables the business to test and adapt quickly, and designs processes that support continuous learning. That does not mean everything is endlessly fluid. Major investments still require stability, time, and discipline. You cannot turn an organization on a dime. But within that direction, an agile delivery model lets you keep configuring in ways that stay relevant as the environment changes.

I would always err on the side of being as agile as possible within those constraints. The mistake is either being so rigid that the business cannot adapt, or so disconnected that IT runs off in its own direction.

ABB's innovation framework speaks to that tension well. There is a disciplined path from ideation to validation to piloting to scalable deployment, with iterative feedback loops and fast validation cycles. That is the balance: enough agility to learn, enough structure to scale.

Leadership alignment is where the under-leveraged opportunity really sits.”

04 WHERE CAN AI MOST IMPROVE MANUFACTURING, AND WHAT MUST CHANGE TO REALIZE ITS VALUE?

Mr. Alkema: We are going to go through the hype cycle. Every conference has a new buzzword or a new way of dressing up the same conversation. The valuable use cases will emerge once the hype settles. One of the biggest challenges is that advanced AI, especially agentic AI, requires very high-quality, granular context. If you want systems to diagnose and resolve issues with meaningful autonomy, they need a high-fidelity representation of the environment they are operating in. Most companies simply do not have that. Without it, what you are doing is automation rather than true autonomy. Data is the fundamental issue. The second issue is scaling. Many organizations can demonstrate something interesting once. Far fewer can make it stable, reproducible, integrated, and scalable inside a real industrial setting.

05 WHAT IS ONE UNDER-LEVERAGED OPPORTUNITY IN MANUFACTURING TODAY?

Mr. Alkema: There is significant opportunity in autonomous operations and what some would call the “dark factory.” The direction of travel is clear. We are moving toward environments where systems can see more, interpret more, and increasingly act with less human intervention. But the constraint is not really the technology. It is how it gets implemented. The barriers are often specific to individual factories, regions, leadership teams, and local ways of working. I have seen factories with two different lines running under two different cultures. Very often, the blocker is leadership.

The tools are increasingly available. The determining factor is the priority leaders give them, how close they stay to the operating reality, and whether they create the conditions for those tools to take hold. The best outcomes usually come when you combine local insight with broader organizational capability. That is where you can move productivity materially, improve service, improve quality, and free people up from low-value, repetitive work.

That leadership alignment, for me, is where the under-leveraged opportunity really sits. **IQ**