Why Good Strategies Don't Translate to Execution[1]

Many execution failures begin long before execution starts. They begin when important ideas are never transformed into coordinated action.

Jeff Oltmann

I saw this firsthand while working with a leadership team that had spent months developing an innovative strategy to provide emergency communications capabilities in disaster zones.

When Alignment Is an Illusion

The vision was compelling. The leaders believed they were aligned and were eager to begin implementation. When I suggested that the first step was to define the pilot project's desired outcomes and key milestones in writing, they pushed back. Everyone already understood the goal. Why slow down when they could start moving?



But when we took the time to capture and refine ideas in writing, hidden assumptions emerged. Some leaders envisioned a packaged solution: equipment and capabilities that could be shipped directly to a disaster area and deployed immediately. Others envisioned an advisory service that would help responders build capabilities tailored to their own unique situations.

Both groups supported the same vision. Both thought they were aligned, yet they were describing fundamentally different solutions.

The ensuing discussions took weeks and were sometimes contentious. But they exposed critical differences before work began. Once we reached agreement on the deliverables, we could build an action plan that everyone understood and supported.

[1] How to cite this article: Oltmann, J. (2026). Why Good Strategies Don't Translate to Execution, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XV, Issue X, October.

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Five Questions Before You Execute

Experiences like this have convinced me that organizations often struggle because their good ideas have not yet been translated into five essential elements of coordinated action.

1. Desired Outcome

Do people agree on what will actually be delivered? Shared support for a vision is not the same as agreement on the outcome. Until the deliverables are clear, alignment is often an illusion.

2. Priorities

Have real trade-offs been made? Does the organization have the resources and capacity to support its priorities? If everything is important, teams are forced to make their own judgments about what matters most. Their different choices lead to diverging outcomes.

3. Roadmap

Is there agreement on what must happen first? Important work often depends on prerequisites. Without deliberate sequencing, organizations can look busy but don't build forward momentum.

4. Ownership

Who is accountable when decisions need to be made? Responsibility may appear clear at the leadership level but become vague in day-to-day work. Without deliberate attention from leaders, accountability naturally diffuses as work moves through the organization. This is especially true when a decision and its supporting rationale are not clearly documented. Teams may remember aspects of the decision but forget why it was made and the assumptions underlying it, creating confusion when conditions change later.

5. Capability

Does the organization have the time, resources, skills, and expertise to do the work? Even well-designed plans fail when commitments exceed available capacity or require capabilities the organization does not yet have. Sometimes those capabilities must be developed through training and experience or acquired by adding specialized expertise.

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Five elements that transform ideas into action

Where Execution Really Begins

You're not done when you have an innovative idea. You're done when it has been turned into work people can carry out consistently and together: step by step, with clear ownership, meaningful measures, and a way to adjust as reality changes.

A good idea creates the possibility of execution. It does not make execution happen on its own.

Organizations can struggle for many reasons. Yet even the best ideas fail when they are not translated into a shared outcome, clear priorities, deliberate sequencing, accountable ownership, and the capabilities required to succeed.

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Generating good ideas requires creativity and insight. Translating those ideas into work that people can understand, support, and carry out together is a challenge that organizations often underestimate.

I help organizations transform important ideas into coordinated action that delivers results. Contact me at jeff@spspro.com or see additional articles in my Article Library at spspro.com/article-library/.

Copilot helped me edit this article and draw the execution graphic.



About the Author

Jeff Oltmann

Oregon, USA

Jeff Oltmann helps organizations accelerate results through strategy deployment and project portfolio management. He consults, teaches, and leads forums for senior PMO leaders. He is principal at Synergy Professional Services (spspro.com) in Portland, Oregon and is on the faculty of the Division of Management at Oregon Health and Science University. He was previously on executive staff at IBM and is the founder of the Portfolio and Project Leaders Forum, a gathering of senior managers who lead project-based organizations (pplforum.org).

Jeff welcomes your questions and ideas. You can contact him at jeff@spspro.com or read previous articles at www.spspro.com/article-library.

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