Matthias Kolbusa

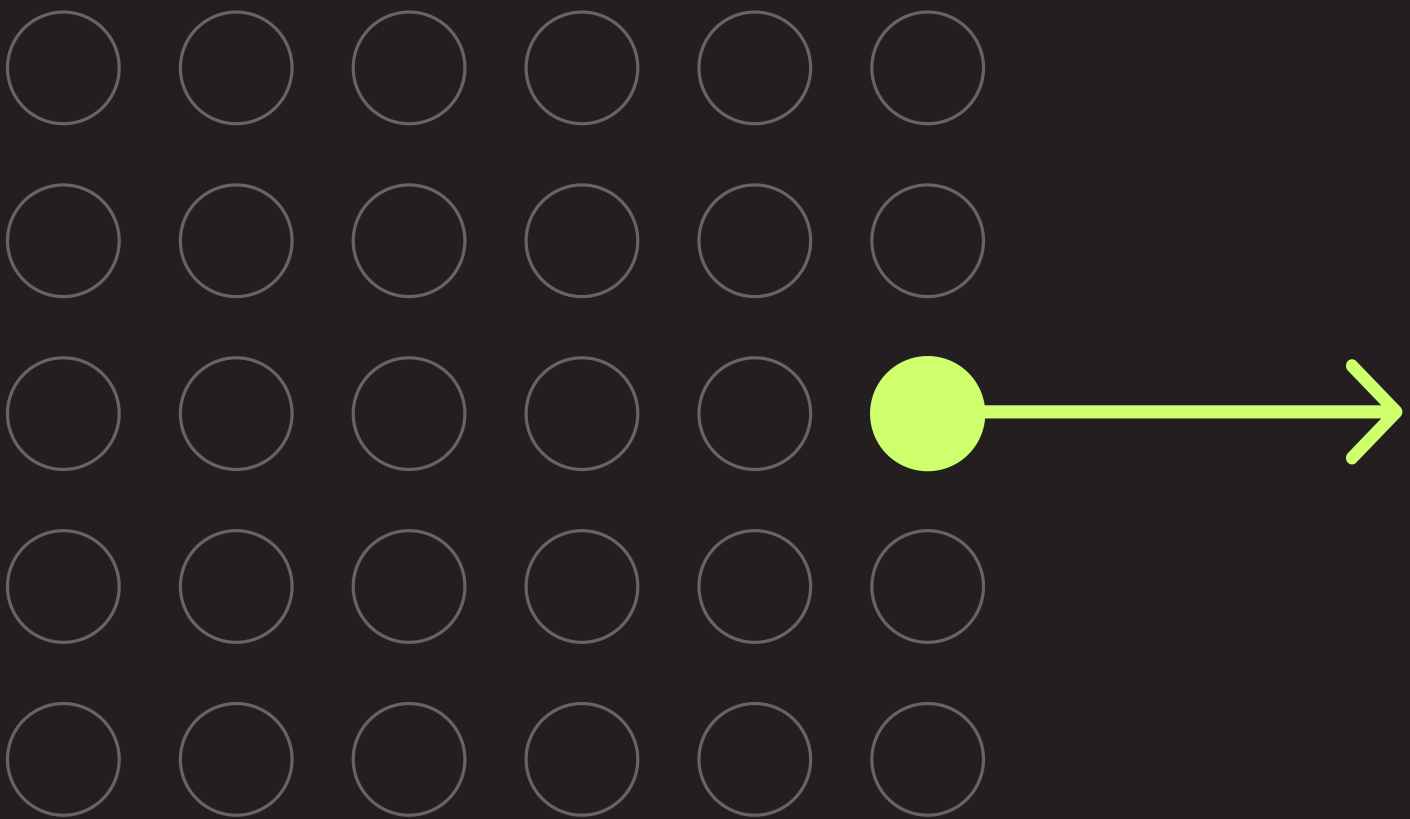
SECRETS OF EXECUTION®

BEST OF

Drawn from 20 Years

Execution Excellence.

From Good to Outstanding: 30 Models for Stronger Execution in High-Performance Organisations



The strategy is set. Now comes the part that matters.

The goals are set, the strategy is defined, even the budgets are approved. Now it all comes down to what shows up day to day.

For 20 years, I've been capturing what I learn about strategy execution in SECRETS OF EXECUTION®. I learned most of it from executive board members and CEOs. They carry a weight that is rarely visible from the outside.

From fifteen editions and my books, I've selected the 30 models that have proven themselves most often. Your company already does much of this well. The models show where good becomes outstanding.

This book is a companion, not a manual. Keep it close, open it again and again, and put it in front of someone who needs to read that exact page.

On the next page you'll find twelve sentences you hear in the C-suite. If you've heard one of them lately, you know where to start. And if a page rubs you the wrong way, stay there. It's usually the right one.

Yours,



Matthias Kolbusa

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

1. THESIS
   A sentence or two you're free to disagree with.
2. VISUAL
   The model at a glance.
3. EXPLANATION
   Two paragraphs. No more.
4. TOUGH QUESTIONS
   For you and your leadership team.

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Where do you start?

↘ Twelve sentences you hear in the C-suite. Behind each one is a model.

“But that’s what we agreed on.”	01	The Root of Weak Follow-Through	p. 5
“My direct reports are just mediocre.”	02	Excellence Is a Casting Decision	p. 6
“Why exactly are we falling behind here?”	03	The Myth of Leading Through Questions	p. 7
“Change just takes time.”	05	The Change Illusion	p. 9
“Don’t take this as criticism.”	06	Withholding Criticism Is Disloyal	p. 10
“That’s just wrong!”	08	Stop Needing to Be Right	p. 12
“We need to communicate the strategy better.”	13	Clarity Doesn’t Create Commitment	p. 17
“Our strategy: 20 per cent revenue growth.”	18	Draw Clear Distinctions: Goals, Strategy, Tactics, Planning, Execution	p. 23
“Are we on track?”	23	Progress Management, Not Status Meetings	p. 29
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“We have too many priorities.”	25	Four Fallacies in Prioritising	p. 31
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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK WITH YOUR TEAM

1. One model. Ten minutes. One page, not the whole book.
2. Answer the questions. Honestly, not aspirationally. Each person on their own, then together.
3. Make an agreement. Who, what, by when, under what conditions. No directives, no expectations.
4. Pass it on. Put the page in front of someone who should read it.

↘ For your leadership summit: Keynote, p. 20.

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01 The Root of Weak Follow-Through

Everyone complains about a lack of follow-through. But follow-through isn't what's missing. What's missing is its foundation: the three Cs.

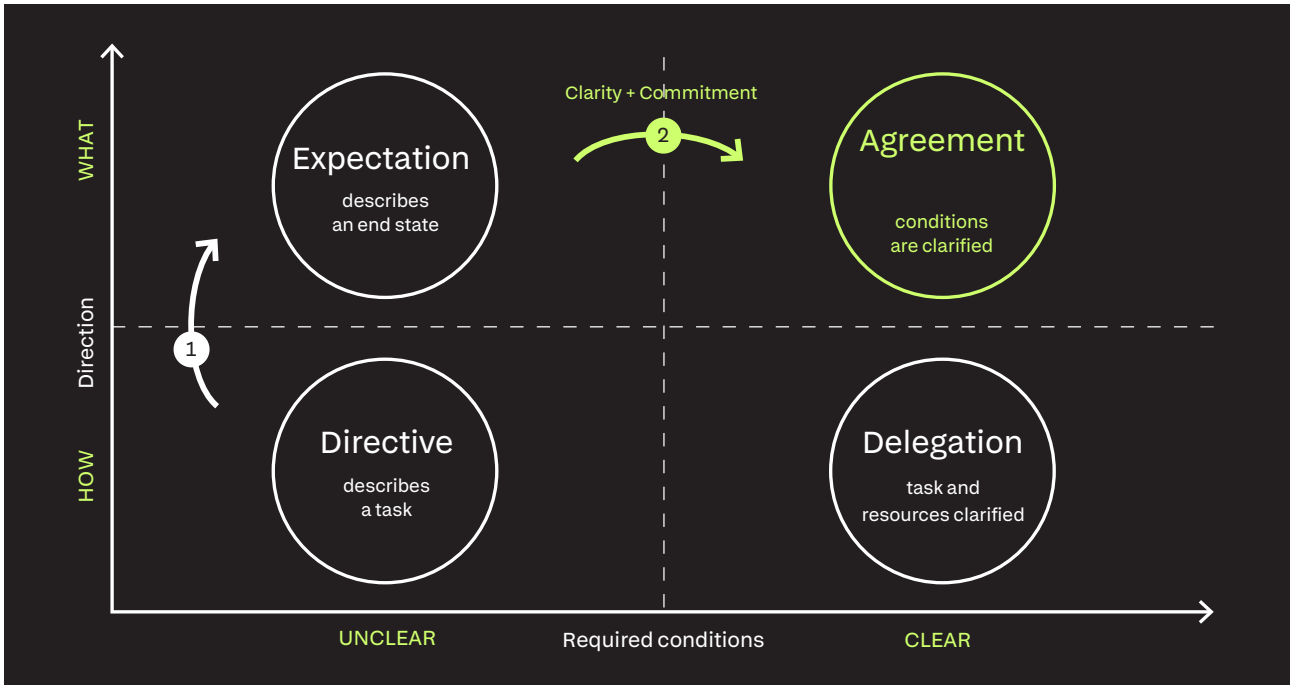


Fig. 1: The hallmarks of an agreement: clarity and commitment

Many organisations complain about a lack of follow-through. But that isn't the problem. The problem is the foundation of reliability, the three Cs: Commitment at the moment you agree, the Contract itself, and Consistency in keeping it. Meetings are a hailstorm of directives ("Walk Sales through the proposal") and expectations. Four weeks later, everyone is frustrated that nothing got done. But there never was an agreement: Nobody checked whether the other person had the time, resources, and capability, or what they would drop to make room for it.

From now on, make sure you only make agreements. Make the question "So do we have an agreement?" part of your culture: That's the first path to a high-performance organisation. The second takes courage: When a firm agreement is broken, call out the unreliability (06 Withholding Criticism Is Disloyal, p. 10). Train yourself and others to say plainly that this behaviour is unreliable. That triggers shame or guilt (11 Harness the Power of Emotions, p. 15). You have to be able to handle that. High performance happens in the discomfort zone (07 Breakthrough, Not Back-Patting, p. 11).

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. How many of your "agreements" are really directives or expectations?
2. Are you clear on how commitment, contract, and consistency work together?
3. When did you last say: "That's unreliable. Is this how we want to work together?"

02 Excellence Is a Casting Decision

↘ Drive and the capacity for abstract thinking can barely be developed. You can only cast for them.

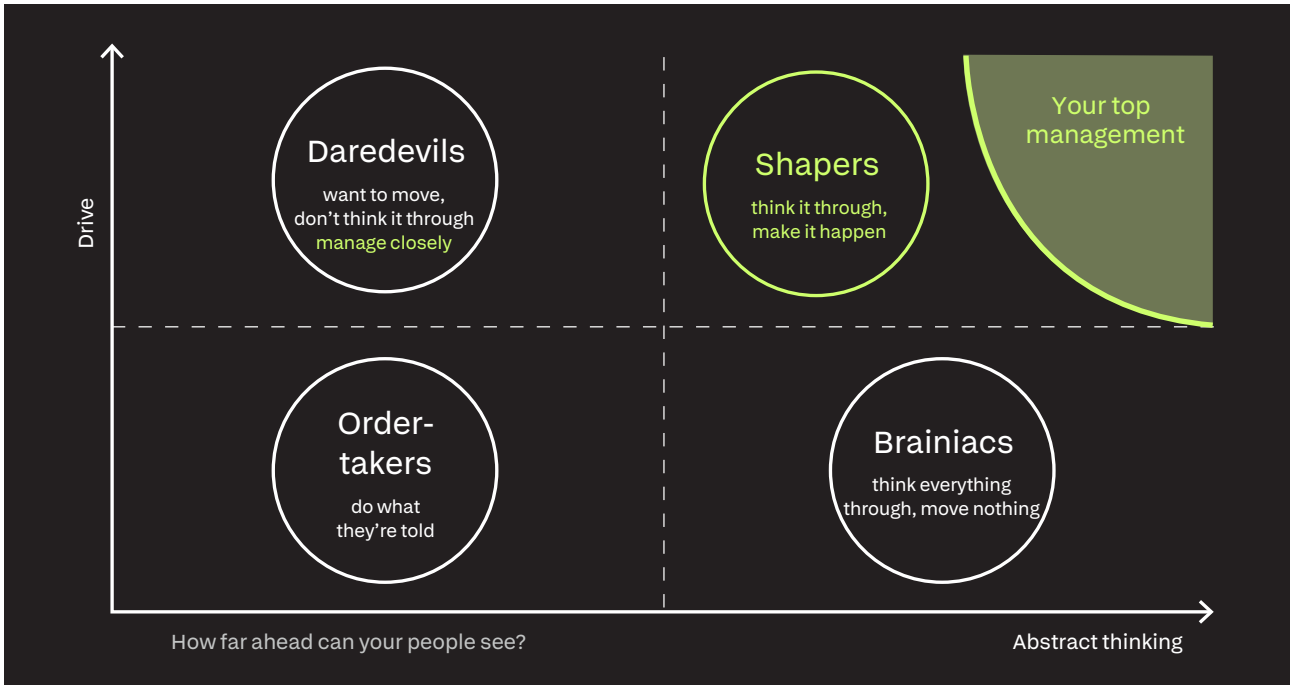


Fig. 2: Drive and abstract thinking: where your top executive team needs to be

Two questions sort out any leadership team. First, abstract thinking: How far ahead can your people see? Can they think systematically beyond their own area and work out conceptually what needs to be done? Second, drive: Do they really want to make things happen? Everybody wants to; few actually do. Real drive means breaking through resistance, and not everyone has that in them. Bottom left are the order-takers, who do what they're told. Bottom right, the brainiacs, who think everything through and never get anything on the road. Top left, the daredevils: lots of drive, little insight, so they need to be managed closely.

Only the shaded area in the top right belongs on a top executive team. In my experience, both qualities are hardwired; there's little to develop here. Every seat, however, can be recast. Compromise is expensive, because nothing determines a company's success as much as the makeup of its top management team. Settle for mediocre here, and you end up leading to compensate. And doing two jobs.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Where do the members of your executive team stand: honestly, not aspirationally?
2. Who have you tried to develop for years where development barely works?
3. What casting compromise are you paying for right now, and how?
4. Whose job are you doing on the side?

03 The Myth of Leading Through Questions

↘ "Why are you falling behind?" isn't a question. It's an attack with a question mark.

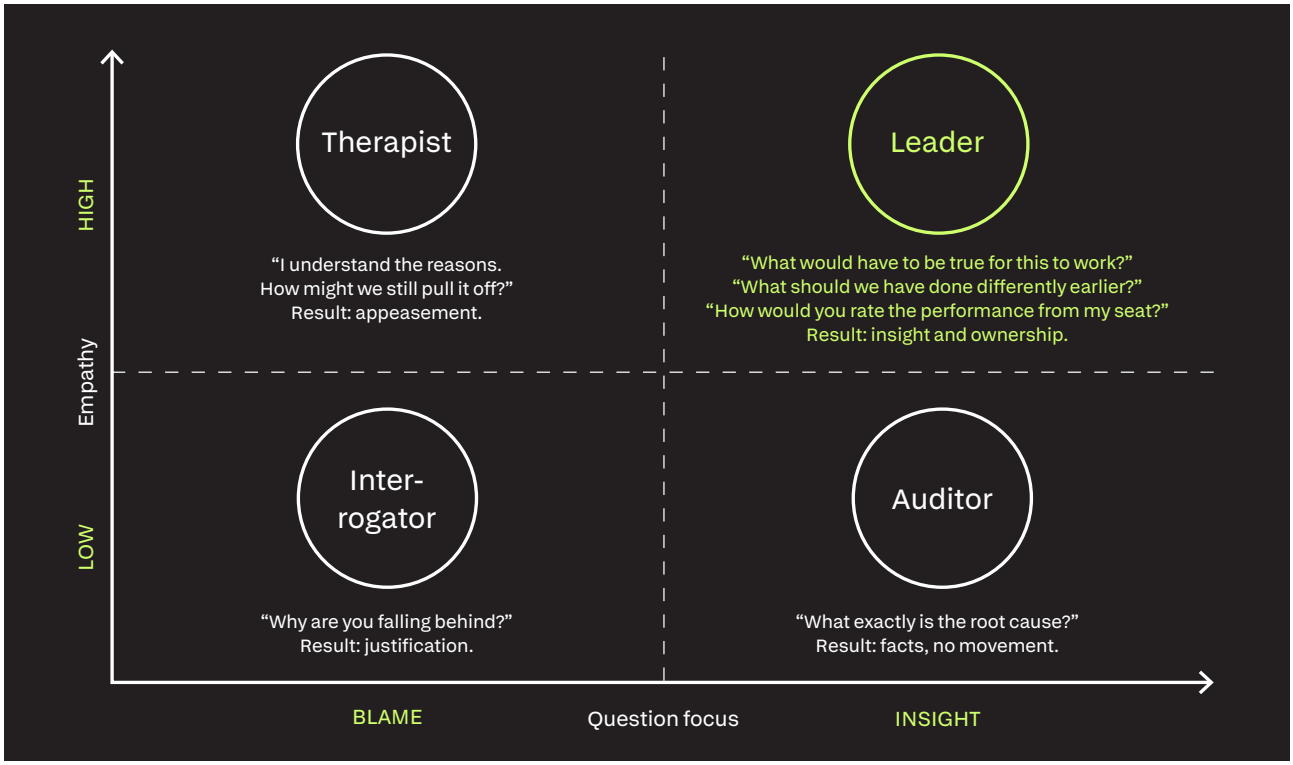


Fig. 3: Empathy and question focus: only the leader leads

Every manager learns in their first leadership seminar that you lead by asking questions. Few actually do it. Most questions in leadership meetings are accusations dressed up as questions: "Why are we behind?" The interrogator invites exactly one response: justification. Wrap it in empathy and you get the therapist: "I understand the reasons. How might we still pull it off?" The result is appeasement. One executive nailed it: "What we're really good at here is going around in circles by asking questions."

Two axes decide: the focus of the question and the empathy of the person asking. Insight without warmth gives you the auditor: correct facts, no movement. Only in the top right do questions turn into leadership. The leader asks: "Under what conditions could this have worked? What can we do to get there? If you took over this area, what would you do differently?" Check your motive before you ask: Do you want to understand, or do you want to be right (08 Stop Needing to Be Right, p. 12)? And say what you see instead of packaging it as a question (06 Withholding Criticism Is Disloyal, p. 10).

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Which of your last five questions in status meetings were closer to interrogation or therapy?
2. When did one of your questions last produce insight, not justification?
3. What questions do you need to ask so that real insight emerges?

04 The Use of Power

Power means getting others to do or think something they otherwise wouldn't. The question isn't whether you have it, but how you use it, and to what end.

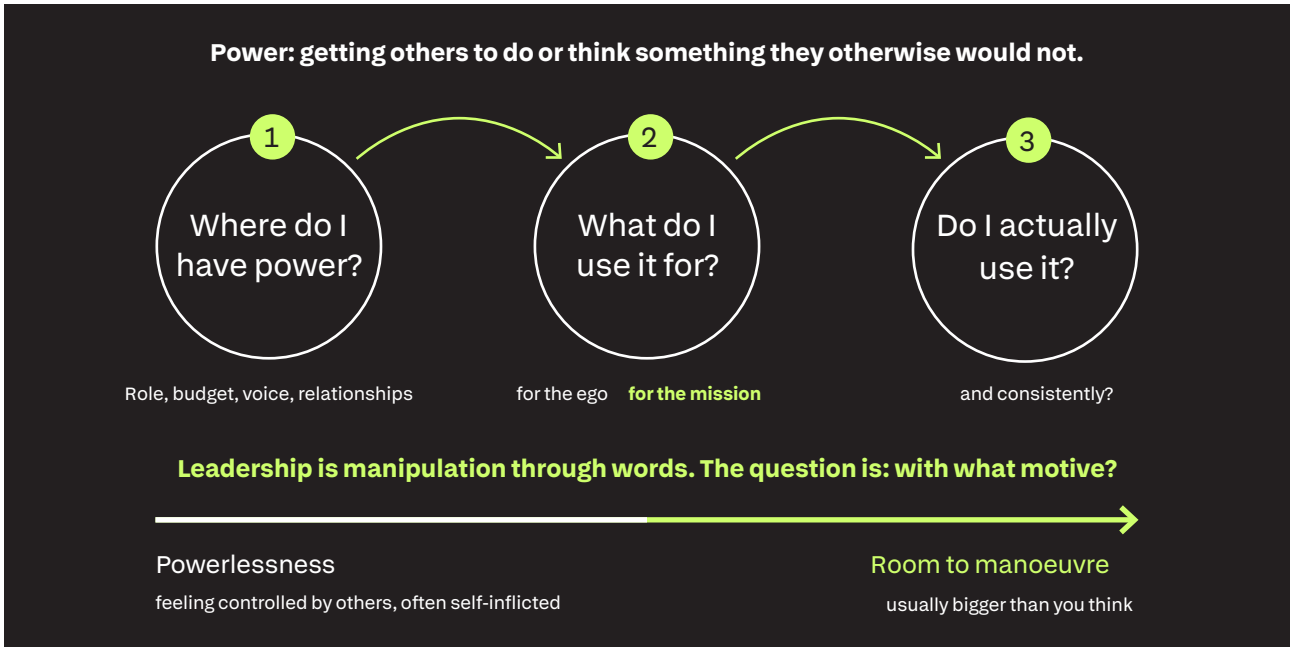


Fig. 4: Three questions about power

Power has a bad reputation. That's why most managers don't use it deliberately. Yet power isn't a bad thing: Everyone needs it to lead a responsible life. Defining accountabilities in an organisation is nothing more than defining power. And a tough goal-setting conversation is an exercise of power, because without you, the other person wouldn't question their role. To put it provocatively: Leadership is manipulation through words. We want others to do or think things they otherwise wouldn't.

What matters is the motive. Do you manipulate so your people get faster and better because you're fighting for a cause together? Or to look good? Power for the ego or power for the mission. And then the most uncomfortable question: Do you actually use your power, and consistently? People who feel powerless hand off responsibility for their actions to others, often to circumstances. People massively underestimate their room to manoeuvre. You can almost always achieve more than you think.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Where should you exercise more power, in the interest of speed and performance?
2. Where should you hold back so people can learn from experience, and where should you step in?
3. Which decision in recent weeks was about your ego rather than the cause?
4. Which of your direct reports underestimates their room to manoeuvre, and what are you doing about it?

05 The Change Illusion

The idea that change takes a long time is an illusion. How fast something changes depends on two things: clarity and follow-through.

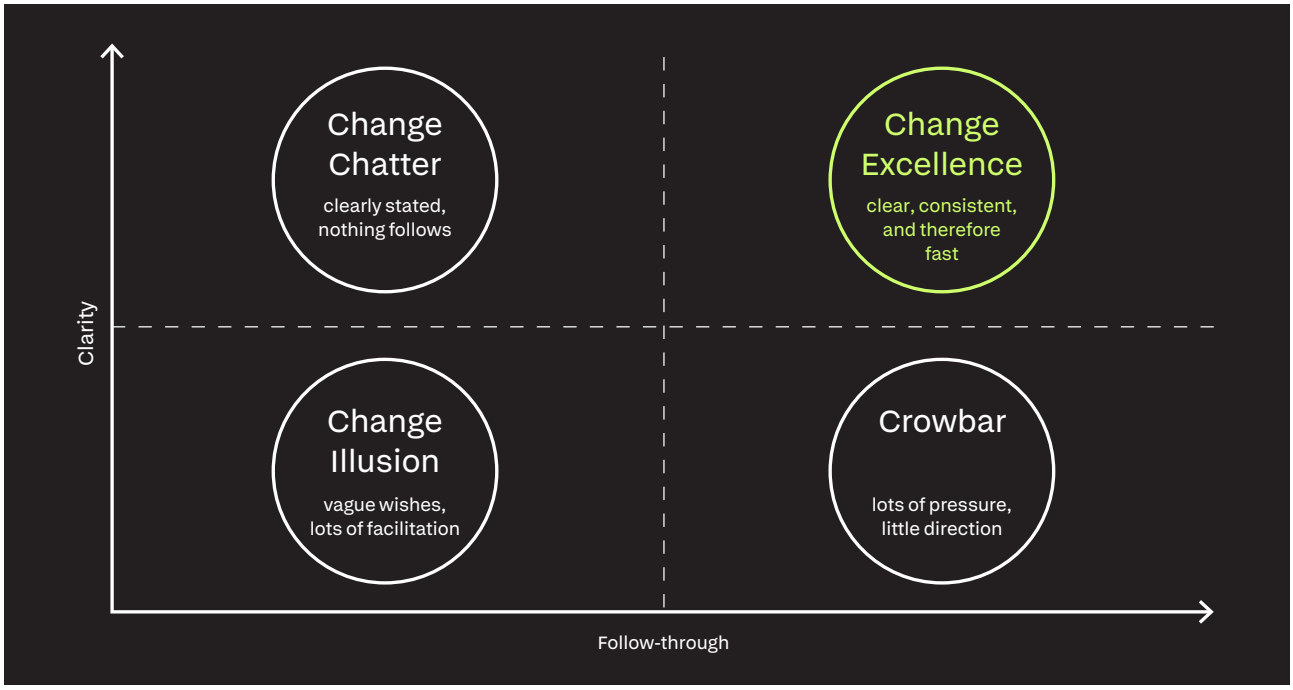


Fig. 5: Clarity and follow-through in change

Change demands everything from us, our teams, and our organisation. That doesn't mean it has to take long. How fast behaviour changes depends on two factors: clarity about exactly what needs to happen, and the follow-through used to make sure it does. Without either, all you get is the change illusion: People wish for "better collaboration," facilitate workshop after workshop, and change nothing. The target state floats like a vague cloud in a sky full of wishes.

The vast majority of change initiatives I've seen are change chatter: lots of communication, another town hall, workshops, posters, appeals. What needs to change is clear, but nothing follows from it. Follow-through without clarity is the crowbar: It moves things, and breaks a lot along the way. Change excellence takes both. Describe in concrete terms which behaviour you expect in which everyday situations. And clarify up front what happens if it doesn't show up. People don't care what they hear. They care what they experience (13 Clarity Doesn't Create Commitment, p. 17).

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Which of the four quadrants is your current change initiative in?
2. Can you name two or three specific behaviours that need to change, and by when?
3. What is the actual reward and punishment system in your organisation? Which behaviour does it encourage, and which does it prevent?
4. Where are you talking about change instead of modelling it?

06 Withholding Criticism Is Disloyal

↘ "Don't take this as criticism." Oh, but it is. And that's exactly your duty.

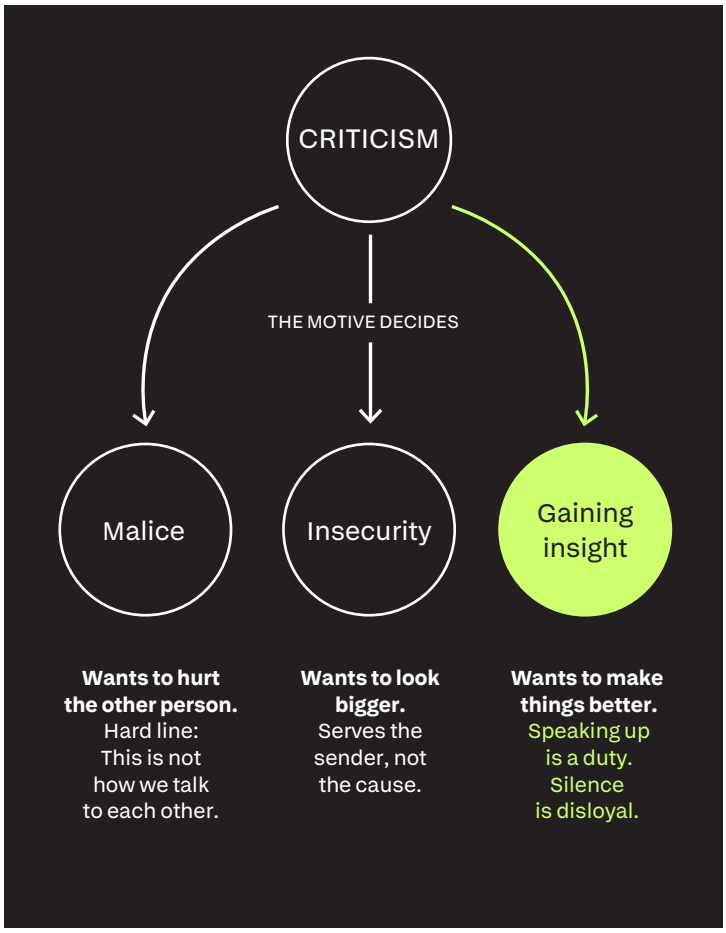


Fig. 6: Three motives behind criticism

Criticism is seen as something negative. Some people even open it with an apology. It's the other way around: Anyone in the room who sees that something isn't working, or isn't good enough, and stays silent is being disloyal to the team and the company. Out of misplaced respect, leadership teams stay stuck in mediocrity. Nobody wants to hurt anyone. The price is an average organisation.

What matters is the motive. Criticism that seeks insight targets actions and statements, never the person. It still triggers shame or guilt. You have to tolerate that: seek to understand instead of justifying yourself (08 Stop Needing to Be Right, p. 12). Criticism driven by insecurity or malice, on the other hand, serves only the sender. Meet it with a hard line. In high-performance teams, the rule is: If you don't have the courage to criticise (15 No Fear, No Courage, p. 19), you open yourself up to everyone else's criticism.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. When did a teammate last seriously criticise you?
2. What did you think in your last meeting and not say?
3. How do you respond to criticism: with a question or with a justification?
4. Whose criticism clearly serves only themselves, and who's telling them?

07 Breakthrough, Not Back-Patting

↘ High-performance teams are tough on the issue and warm towards the person. Average teams are nice and harmonious.

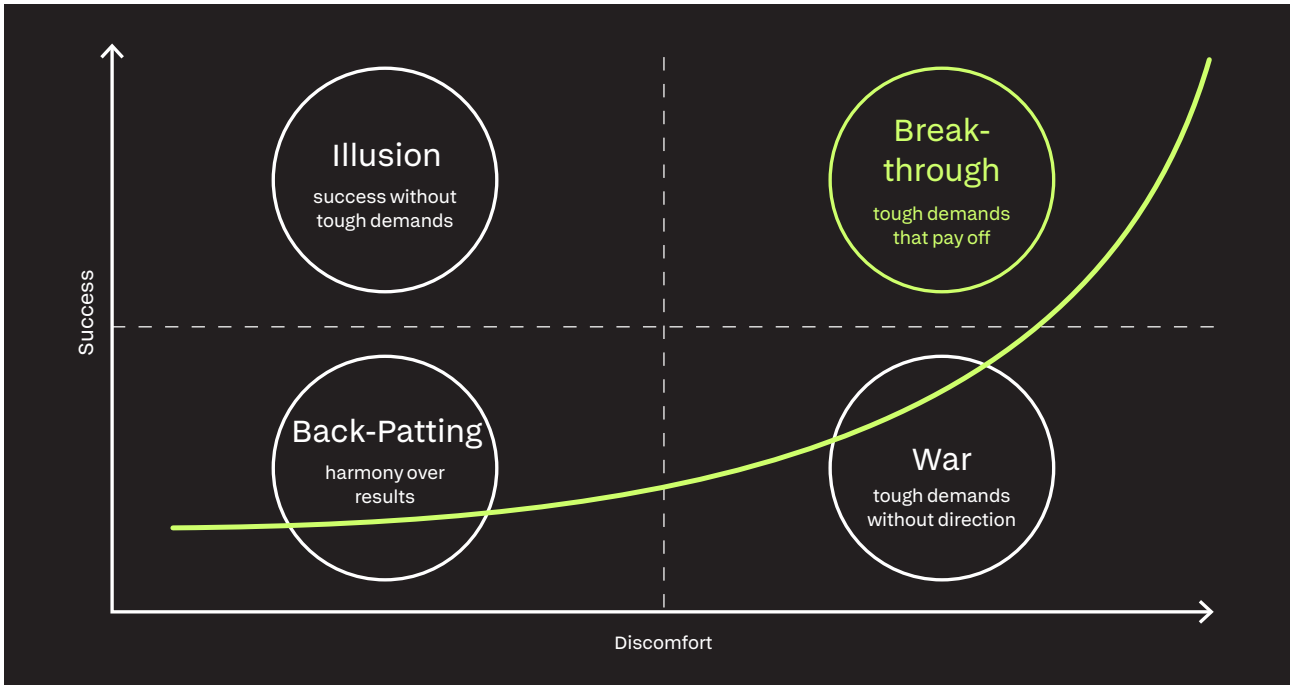


Fig. 7: The four performance quadrants: success and discomfort

There's a direct link between the discomfort a team is willing to accept for the sake of the work and its success. In back-patting, getting along matters more than results: People set "realistic" goals, go easy on each other, like each other, and call it trust. In war, it hurts and gets you nowhere: being right at all costs (08 Stop Needing to Be Right, p. 12), silos, finger-pointing. The top left holds the most dangerous corner: very successful, very relaxed. The illusion holds until things get hot (09 Success Is the Most Dangerous Moment, p. 13).

Breakthrough means deliberate, tough demands that pay off. Not harshness towards people, but discomfort in the service of the goal: high ambitions, deliberately thinking through different paths to the goal, open criticism (06 Withholding Criticism Is Disloyal, p. 10), speed (22 Speed: Just as Important as Substance, p. 28). An excessive need for harmony isn't a strength; it's an ego weakness: the inability to handle conflict. Team-building retreats and the like won't get you there; they fizzle out. A waste of time and money. Real discomfort can only be experienced in the work itself. Create those experiences!

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Which quadrant is your leadership team in today: honestly, not aspirationally?
2. When did someone on your team last say something that hurt and moved things forward?
3. Where do you confuse harmony with respect?
4. Which tough demand have you been putting off, even though it's long overdue?

08 Stop Needing to Be Right

↘ Every debate about right and wrong is a fight. It produces winners, losers, and rarely the best solution.

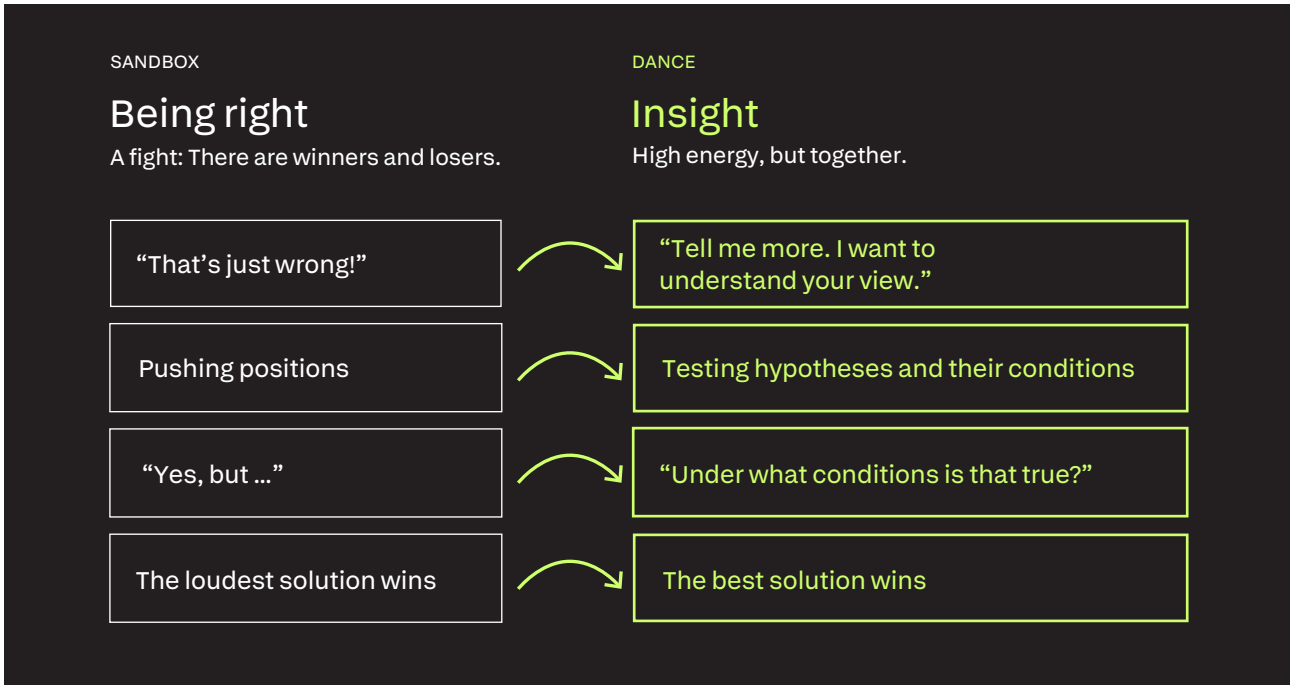


Fig. 8: Being right or gaining insight

If I could wave a magic wand and change just one thing in every organisation, it would be this: Stop needing to be right. The more important the decision, the more heavily armed everyone walks into the room. Then it's a battle of positions. "Here's how I see it" is met with "That's just wrong." That's kindergarten: kids throwing sand in the sandbox. In the end, the loudest solution wins, not the smartest.

The alternative isn't a group hug. Wrestle hard, but for insight: Either I learn something, or the other person does, or the whole room does. The only legitimate response to a different view is: "Tell me more. I want to understand your view." Deliberately play devil's advocate, and have others do it too. There are no positions, only hypotheses and the conditions under which they hold up. That way there are only winners, because everyone walks away with new insight. The real fight is outside, against the competition.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. How often did you hear "That's just wrong" or "Yes, but" in your last meeting?
2. When did you last deliberately argue against your own conviction?
3. When did you last change your mind in a meeting, and did you say so?
4. Who walks out of your meetings a loser?

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09 Success Is the Most Dangerous Moment

↘ Every success becomes a success plateau, and with it, a comfort zone.

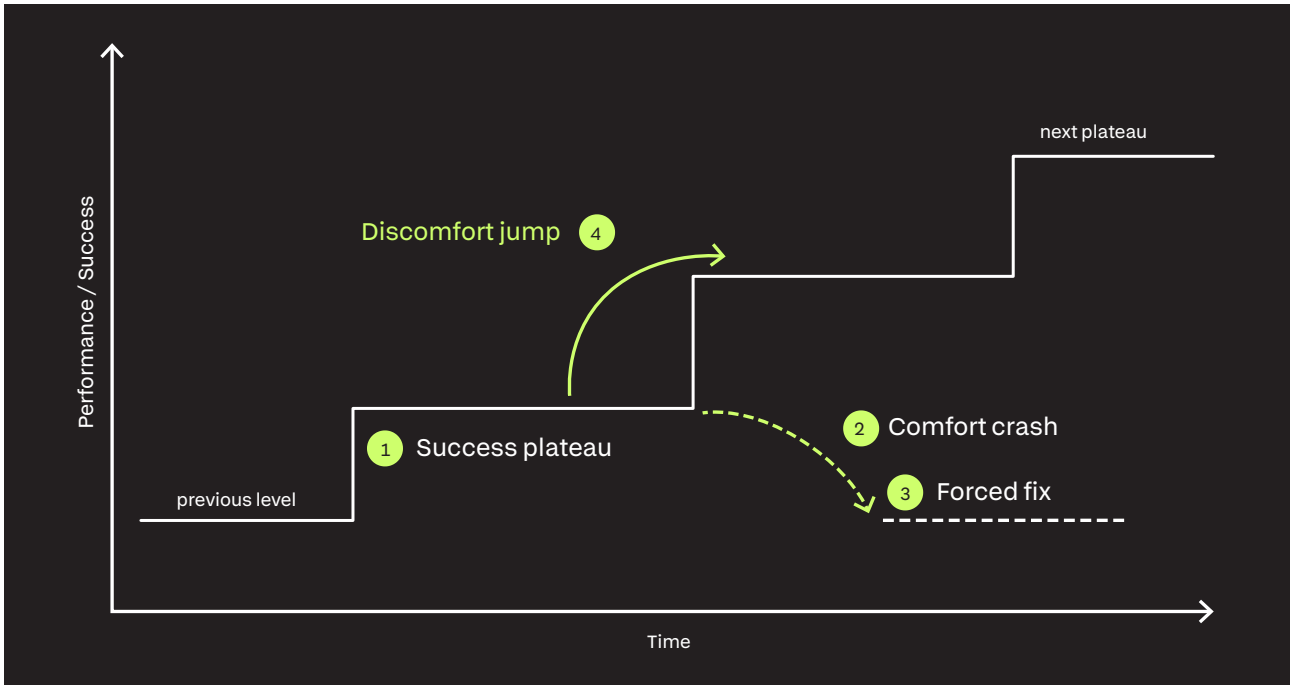


Fig. 9: The success plateau

On the plateau, the status quo works. That's exactly why there's no urgency to stretch further. People optimise: cut costs, fine-tune structures, tinker with the management system. But if you wait for fear before you act, you'll only ever do what removes the threat. That's not how real competitive strength is built. When the pressure comes from outside, it's often too late: The slide back to an earlier level can no longer be stopped.

Most organisations believe change only happens with a "sense of urgency," and that without one, change is impossible. That's nonsense. Change driven by fear certainly works, but there are other emotions (11 Harness the Power of Emotions, p. 15). Mature organisations celebrate success and jump anyway. Voluntarily, under their own power, before they have to. This discomfort jump hurts. If it didn't, you'd have made it long ago. The good news: Every successful jump makes the next one easier. What got you here won't get you there.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Which plateau have you settled on, and since when?
2. What would you change today if your biggest customer left tomorrow?
3. Which jump could you make now from strength, rather than later out of necessity?

10 Five Values for High Performance

What matters isn't what unites an organisation. What matters are five core values that make it a high-performance organisation.

1. **Courage**
   Saying or doing what's right in the situation: what helps more people than it harms.

2. **Openness**
   The sincere desire to understand others. Something entirely different from listening.

3. **Reliability**
   Keeping agreements, or renegotiating them in time.

4. **Speed**
   The will to move at the fastest possible pace: the fine line between prudence and recklessness.

5. **Trust**
   Deliberately taking the risk of being hurt or disappointed.

Fig. 10: The five core values and their definitions

Every company has values. Some even share an understanding of them, at least on posters and in town halls. Values are the expression of how people actually behave with each other every day, nothing more, nothing less. Communication doesn't change that. When I ask managers whether someone who shows up without a firmly agreed plan is unreliable, I often hear: "It depends." That's exactly the problem. For high-performance organisations, five key values have crystallised for me: courage, openness, reliability, speed, and trust.

Every value needs a definition that allows a clear judgement in everyday situations. The definitions are uncomfortable. Openness isn't listening; it's wanting to understand. Trust can't be earned: It's a risk someone takes deliberately. Someone who renegotiates in time is reliable, too (01 The Root of Weak Follow-Through, p. 5). Learned by heart and anchored in two everyday situations per value, the values become habits. The first effects show up after four to six months. Provided the top team starts with itself.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Can your team members define the five values in the same words?
2. Which of the five values is your team weakest on?
3. When did you last trust deliberately, meaning take a real risk?
4. Which agreement do you need to renegotiate today instead of letting it slip?

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11 Harness the Power of Emotions

Execution power isn't a rational challenge. It's an emotional one.

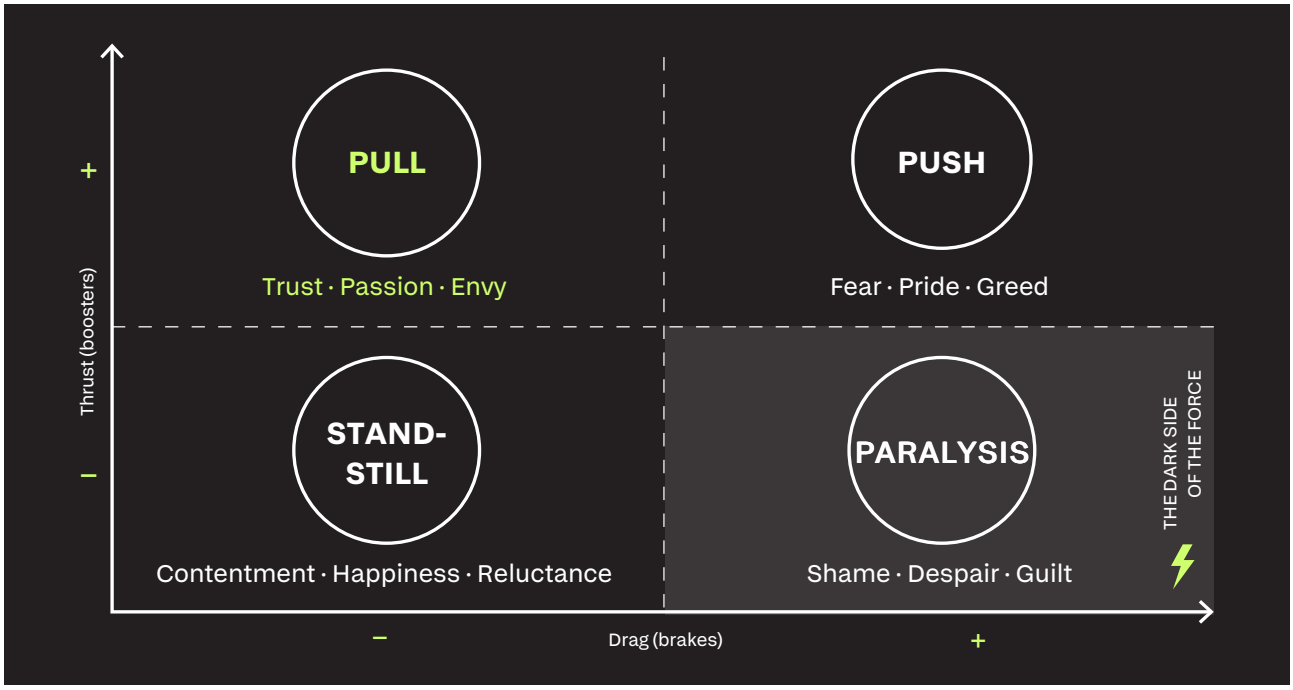


Fig. 11: Twelve emotions in management: thrust and drag

People are interested in logic. Only emotion makes them act. Most managers don't realise they need to steer this deliberately: Emotions tend to happen by accident. Because of how the usual management mechanics are designed, with status meetings that easily turn into courtroom trials (23 Progress Management, Not Status Meetings, p. 29), many teams get caught in a vicious cycle of fear, shame, guilt, and despair: the dark side of the Force. Leading with fear is normal and fine. It just shouldn't be the only mode, or the main one.

Beyond deadlines, you need a vision that ignites passion (17 A→B vs. B→A Thinking, p. 22), and progress that creates pride (26 Input, Output, Outcome, Impact, p. 33): progress dialogues instead of justifications (30 The Management Triple Jump, p. 37). Break out of this spiral and build an organisation whose emotional climate is defined by passion, trust, and pride. That's the magic. Bonus and incentive systems deliver less than people think: They create happiness and contentment, and those do move people, but nowhere near as much as passion and pride.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. What emotion does your steering committee trigger in the people who report to it?
2. Where do you lead with fear, and is that your default mode or the exception?
3. Which vision ignites real passion in you?
4. What was your organisation last truly proud of?

12 Between Stimulus and Response

↘ Maturity means putting your own values between stimulus and response. That's how you spot a high-performance leader.

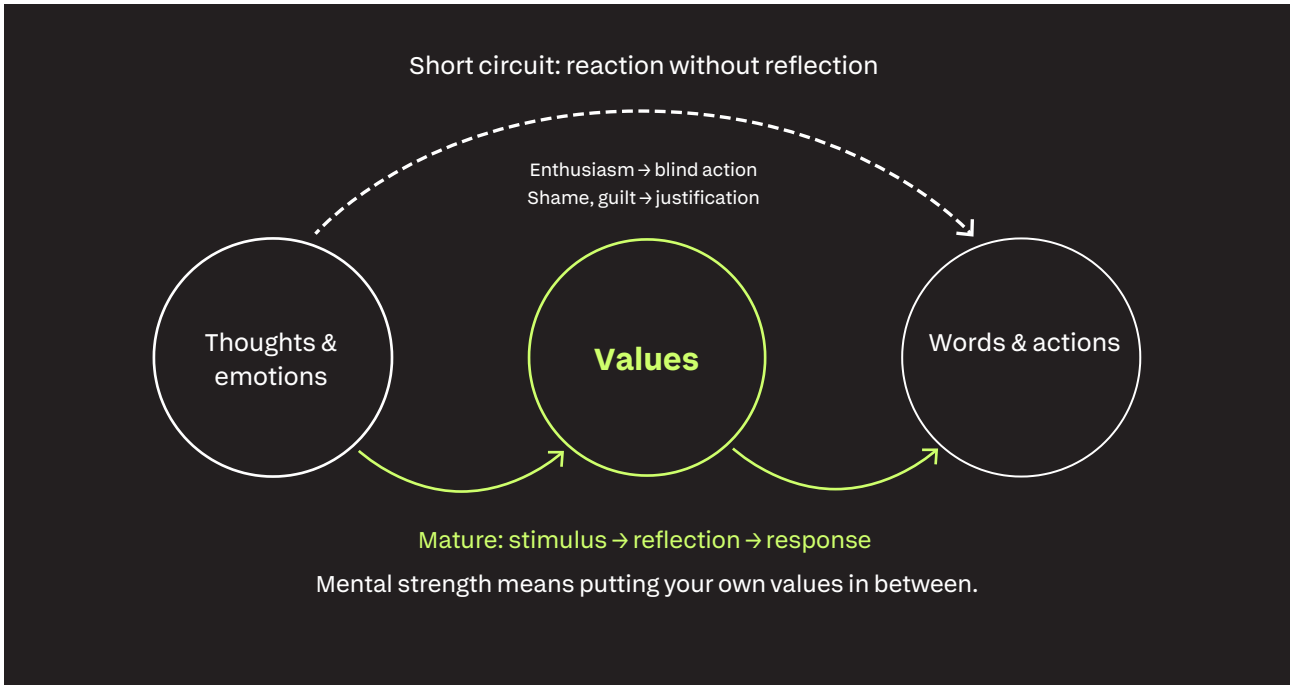


Fig. 12: Thoughts and emotions, values, words and actions

Our actions are always triggered by thoughts and emotions. What matters is what sits in between. In a short circuit, the reaction follows the stimulus instantly. That works both ways: enthusiasm, and someone jumps straight into action. Or criticism that triggers shame or guilt, and someone justifies themselves, counters, hits back. Either way, reflex rules, not the cause.

Mature leaders put their value system in between (10 Five Values for High Performance, p. 14): The feeling is normal, but it doesn't serve the cause. So ask instead of firing back, think it through instead of charging ahead. The acid test is stress. That's exactly what I learned training with Navy SEALs: The high art is still finding the space between stimulus and response under incredible stress. Staying open to criticism under pressure instead of lashing out. And in moments of huge success, not closing the next pointless deal or opening the next plant out of sheer euphoria, but keeping a cool head. This mental strength can be trained like a muscle.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. When did you last react before you reflected?
2. When did you last decide or say something out of euphoria that you later regretted?
3. Where does your team jump into blind action?
4. Mission first, team second, me third: Does that order hold on your leadership team?

13 Clarity Doesn’t Create Commitment

↘ And more presentations certainly won’t.

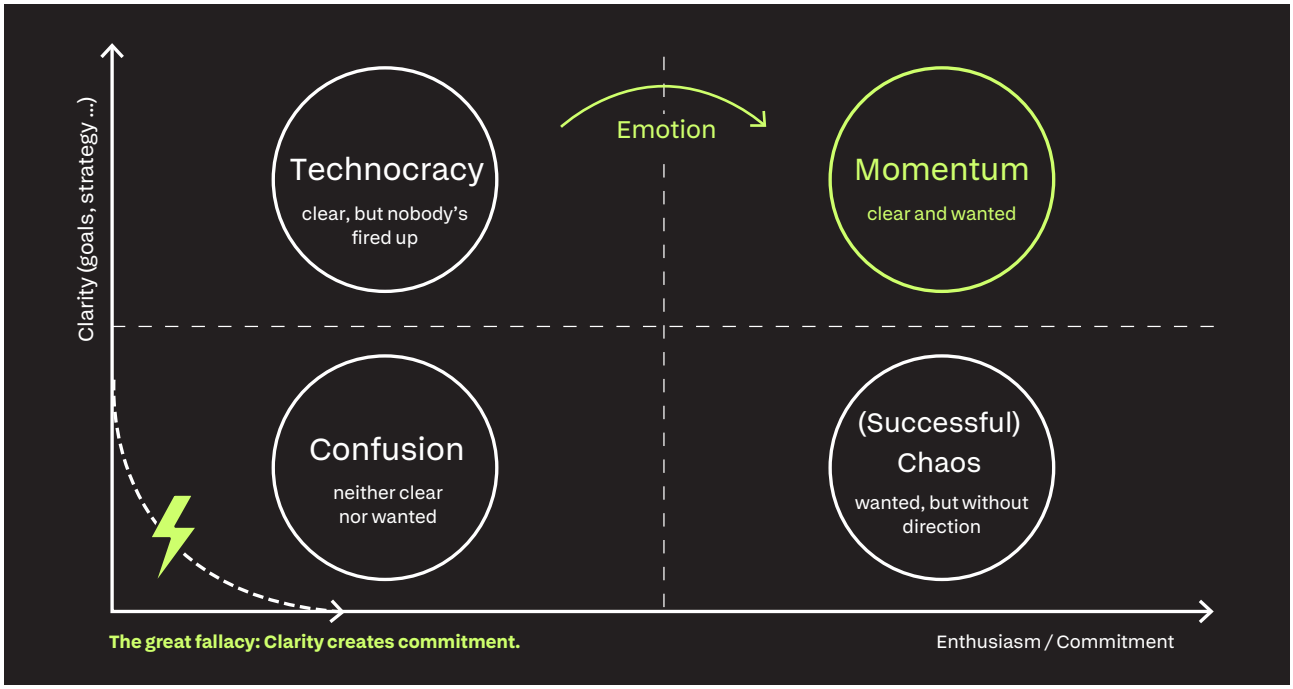


Fig. 13: Clarity and commitment: the great fallacy

For a long time, I believed it myself: Explain goals and strategy clearly enough and enthusiasm will follow. That’s a fallacy. Of course goals and strategy have to be explained well and often enough. But there are organisations that perform with tremendous momentum and enthusiasm without a cleanly defined strategy, usually shaped by highly charismatic leaders. Of course, there are also those that are simply running in chaos. And there are organisations with crystal-clear plans where nothing moves. Clarity helps. But the trigger for action is always an emotion (11 Harness the Power of Emotions, p. 15).

When commitment is missing, we reach for the wrong tools out of desperation: more slides, more discussion, another town hall. That digs us deeper into the technocracy corner and only adds complexity. “Getting buy-in by involving everyone affected” is often a waste of time. Meaning comes from doing, not talking. Momentum takes both: clarity and people who are fired up about the vision (14 Six Months. Beyond That, No One Feels It., p. 18).

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Which quadrant is your most important initiative in?
2. How much communication could you replace with real experiences?
3. Who is fired up about your vision and can describe it in concrete terms?
4. In your organisation, do people talk about things, or do you let results do the talking?

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14 Six Months. Beyond That, No One Feels It.

Logic gets people thinking. Only emotions get them acting, and emotions only arise within a certain time horizon.

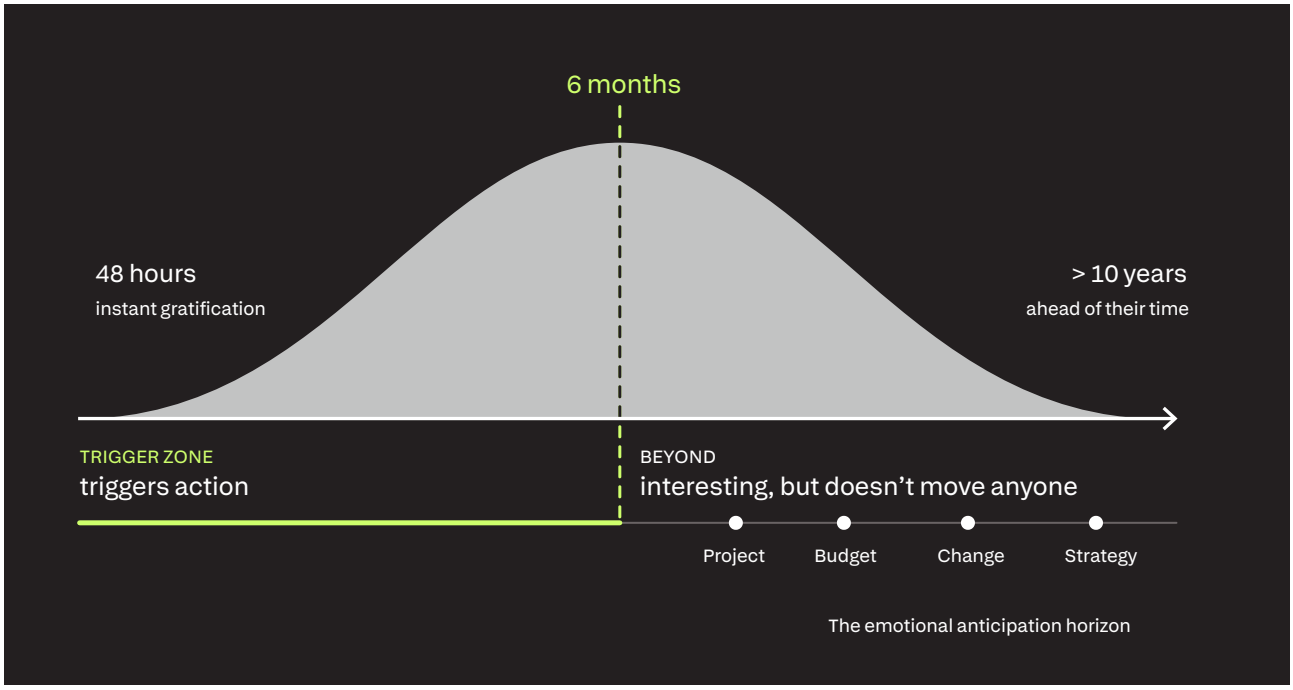


Fig. 14: The emotional anticipation horizon

How close does a deadline have to get before it triggers anything? I call this the emotional anticipation horizon. On average, it's about six months. Everything beyond it may interest leaders, but as a rule it doesn't drive them to act. That's the average; there are extremes in both directions. That's why the overdue IT overhaul and the new strategy get pushed back until the house is on fire. And that's why firefighting is considered a strength in so many places.

Most of the important issues lie beyond this horizon: strategy, change, major projects. The lever: Slice them into six-month increments and describe for each one what will be concretely different by then. So precisely that a picture forms, and with it the desire to get there. Ask questions like: "What exactly will you be proud of six months from now?" That provokes outcome thinking (26 Input, Output, Outcome, Impact, p. 33). "What will the competition envy?" People execute what they carry around in their heads and hearts. Not what they'll have to present on slides at some point.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. For your three key issues: What exactly will be different in six months? Observable, not theoretical.
2. Who on your team can make a target state tangible? Litmus test: Ask every project lead, "Tell me exactly what will be different in six months."
3. In how many status meetings are slides used instead of substance? Ban PowerPoint.

15 No Fear, No Courage

Courage isn't the absence of fear. Where there's no fear, there can be no courage.

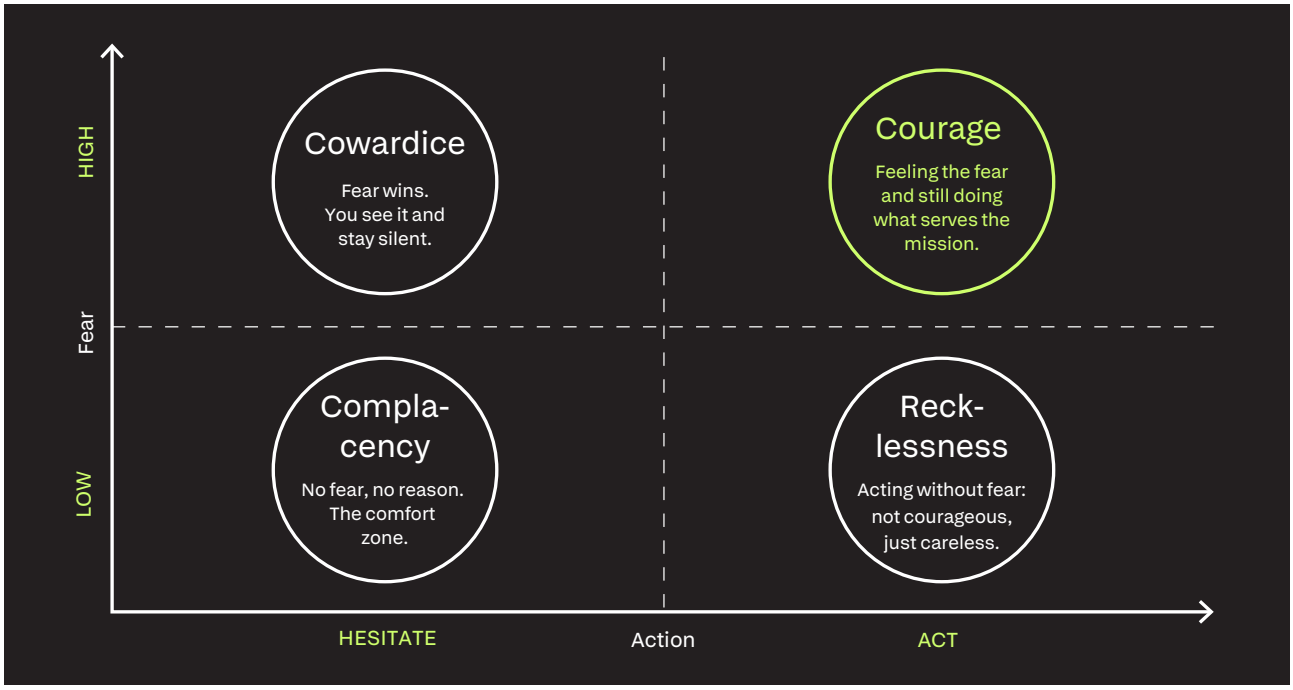


Fig. 15: Fear and action: courage is the only quadrant where both are high

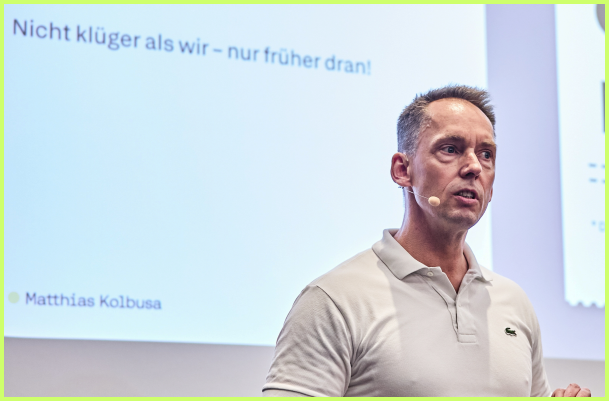
We admire people who seem fearless, and confuse two things. Acting without fear isn't courageous, just careless: recklessness. Someone who hesitates without fear simply has no reason to act: complacency, the comfort zone. Push yourself deliberately into discomfort (07 Breakthrough, Not Back-Patting, p. 11). Someone who is afraid and therefore stays silent, even though they see something going wrong, is a coward. Courage is the fourth quadrant: feeling the fear and still doing or saying what serves the mission.

That makes courage a routine: stepping into discomfort despite the fear and saying or doing the right thing. The right thing is whatever does more good than harm. Mission first, team second, me third. In the boardroom, that means raising the objection that will ruin your afternoon (06 Withholding Criticism Is Disloyal, p. 10). Fear is a good indicator: Where it shows up, something is at stake. High-performance teams use it as a signal, not a stop sign. And they know the three weak quadrants are everyday faces of mediocrity: too comfortable, too careless, too afraid.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. When were you last afraid to say something in a meeting, and said it anyway?
2. Which of your team's decisions wasn't courageous, just reckless?
3. Where in your organisation does complacency rule because nothing hurts?
4. Who on your team shows courage, and who has their back?

Keynotes that outlast the applause.



These pages are full of models. Your event is about your company.

In a prep call, we tailor the topic and the talk to your event together. Afterwards, your leadership team sees its own organisation differently.

Which one are you hearing right now? It points you to the right topic.

01	"The strategy is set. Now it has to show up in day-to-day work, for everyone."	**Execution Power** Executing strategies and transformations successfully
02	"We want a leadership team that fights for the whole company first, and a culture where people love to perform."	**Leadership beyond Ego** Mission First. Me Third.
03	"We're good. We want to be outstanding."	**From Good to Outstanding** The path to a high-performance organisation

↘ Matthias Kolbusa showed us how to get people emotionally charged through tangible wins.

Emese Weissenbacher
EVP & COO, MANN+HUMMEL

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Keep the momentum going after the event?
Board Dialogue, p. 32 ·
Critical Dialogue, p. 38

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16 The Central Strategy Question

↘ Strategy answers exactly one question: Which position do you want to hold, in which business, and by when? No more. No less.

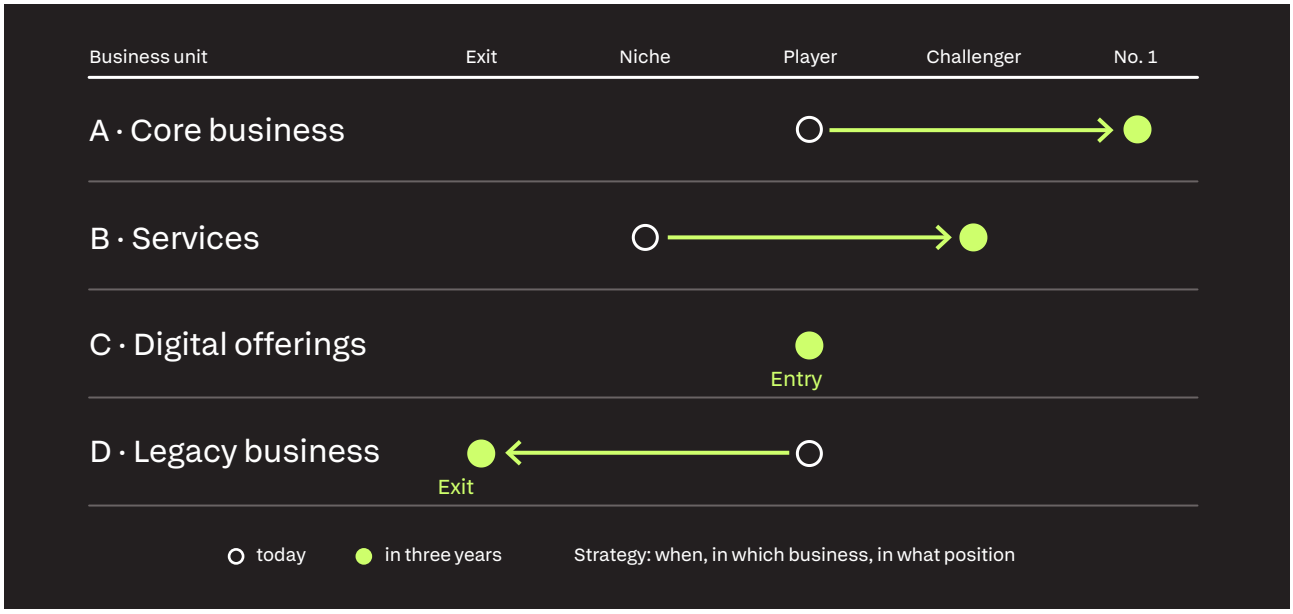


Fig. 16: The central strategy question, illustrated with four business units

Strategy papers often run a hundred pages and still don't answer the one question. Strategy is the answer to which position you want to hold in which business units, and by when: number one, challenger, player, profitable niche, or out. Everything else, from market analyses to initiatives to action plans, is either groundwork or execution. If you can answer this question in one sentence per business unit, you have a strategy. If you need a document to do it, you don't.

The target position defines the strategic target state (17 A→B vs. B→A Thinking, p. 22): What has to be true in three years for us to be there? But that's no longer strategy; it's execution design. Excellent strategy decks have four slides: market understanding (usually a market structure matrix), today's competitive position, scenarios for how the future might unfold, and the target position as a strategic option, tested against those scenarios (19 Every Strategy Is a Bet. Do You Know Your Options?, p. 24). The matrix forces decisions: Which business do we give up? Strategy is also always about what you will stop doing.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. How many slides does your strategy need? More than four?
2. For each of your business units, can you say in one sentence where it should be in three years?
3. Does your language clearly separate goals, strategy, tactics, planning, and execution?

17 A→B vs. B→A Thinking

↘ It's not the plan that gets you to the goal. It's a precise, clear picture of the target state you need to reach.

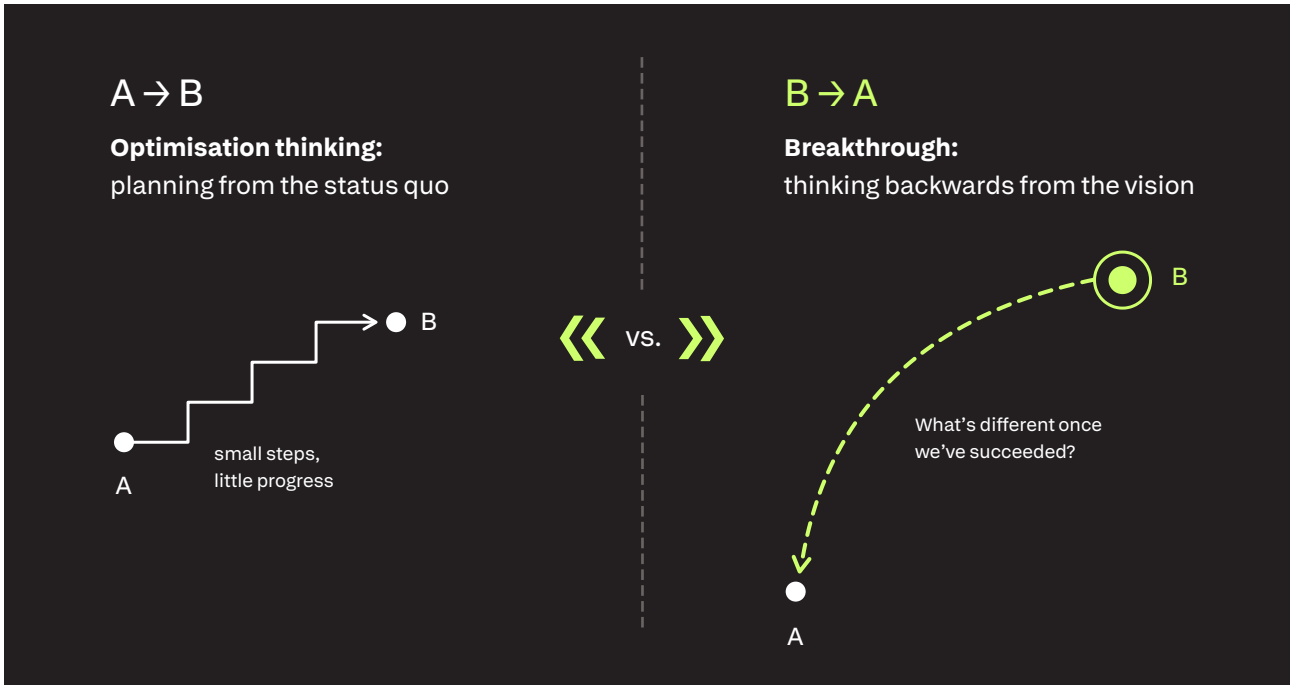


Fig. 17: Optimisation thinking and breakthrough behaviour

Most people work from A to B: The situation isn't right, so they think about what to do, plan it, and do it: optimisation in small steps. According to my research, fewer than two per cent of all executives are B→A thinkers. Activity orientation is a cognitive bias: Asked what exactly will be different if the initiative turns out to be a huge success, the vast majority operate on the left side of the chart (A→B): They think through activities first and only then arrive at the result. High-performance organisations think and operate on the right (B→A), starting from B.

If you buy a rusted-out classic car and can already see the restored gem in your mind's eye, you don't need a project plan. You'll find the next sensible step every day. Are you optimising, or are you creating target states? Break yourself and others out of the prison of experience with provocative target states and absurd goals. Not because those goals will be reached, but because the thinking changes. Have your leadership team write the vision as a time-travel essay: concrete, with scenes from the future (14 Six Months. Beyond That, No One Feels It., p. 18).

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Can you say in three sentences what will be different in twelve months?
2. Would your colleagues describe the same movie?
3. Which absurd goal would force your team to think differently, rather than just optimise better?
4. What does your steering committee talk about: plans or target states?

18 Draw Clear Distinctions: Goals, Strategy, Tactics, Planning, Execution

Precise language isn't just helpful. It's decisive for real competitive strength and performance.

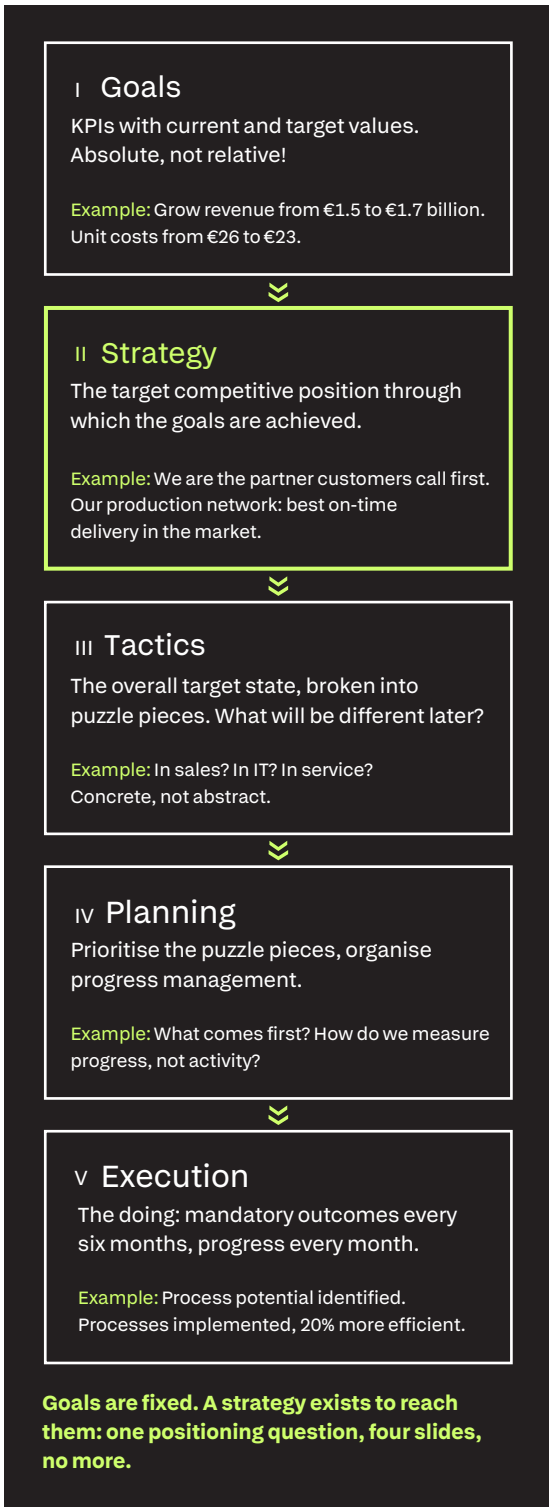


Fig. 18: Five terms, one sequence: goals, strategy, tactics, planning, execution

"Our strategy: 20 per cent revenue growth and a stronger international presence." That isn't a strategy. One is a goal, the other is an action. Goals are KPIs with current and target values, absolute, not relative: revenue from €1.5 billion to €1.7 billion, unit costs from €26 to €23. A strategy is a positioning question (16 The Central Strategy Question, p. 21) and exists to achieve the goals. "Winning internationally through customer excellence" is a possible target state, but it isn't a strategy either.

Tactics describe the target state (17 A→B vs. B→A Thinking, p. 22) and break that picture down into puzzle pieces: What exactly is different in sales, in IT, in service? Concrete, not abstract. Planning prioritises the puzzle pieces and organises progress management: focused on progress, not activity (23 Progress Management, Not Status Meetings, p. 29). Execution runs in six-month cycles with mandatory outcomes: After six months, a go-to-market plan isn't enough; the first LOIs have to be on the table. And progress is assessed monthly.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. What do your colleagues mean when they say "our strategy": a number, a programme or a state?
2. Are your goals absolute as-is/to-be values or relative statements of intent?
3. Are your target states outcome-oriented, clear and tangible, or just measures?
4. Do you force your organisation into the discomfort of delivering an outcome from every project within six months at the latest?

19 Every Strategy Is a Bet. Do You Know Your Options?

The goals are set. There are always several strategic options for reaching them. If you only consider one, you're betting blind.

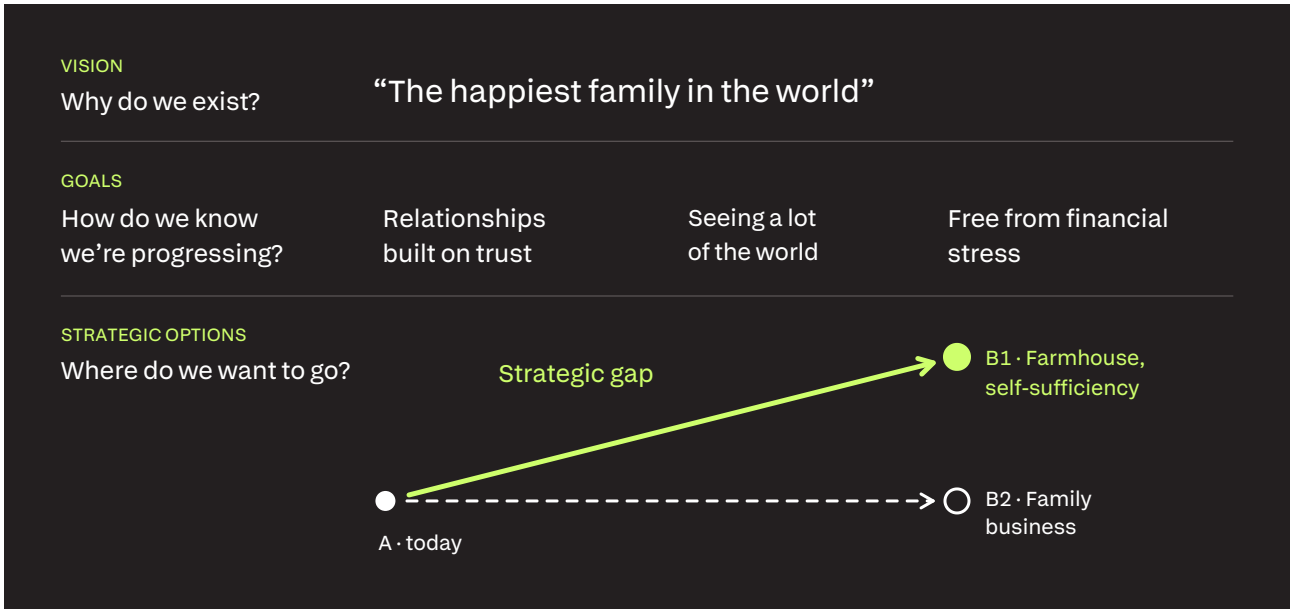


Fig. 19: Vision, goals, and the strategic gap, illustrated with a family

A family wants to be the happiest in the world. Its goals: relationships built on trust, seeing a lot of the world, freedom from financial stress. One option is an old farmhouse with a high degree of self-sufficiency. The other is a family business. Two completely different futures for exactly the same goals. It's no different in a company: The goals are set (18 Draw Clear Distinctions: Goals, Strategy, Tactics, Planning, Execution, p. 23), and the strategy exists to reach them. There are always several strategic options for doing that (16 The Central Strategy Question, p. 21).

If you only consider one option, you're stuck in the prison of experience. There's always a shorter, smarter route. Only by comparing real options do you see what you're betting on: which assumptions about the market, your customers, and your own capabilities. Only once the target state is chosen does the strategic gap become visible: the distance between today and the target state (17 A→B vs. B→A Thinking, p. 22). It's the only thing change needs to address. Without this picture, projects soon have nothing to do with each other.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Which strategic options did you seriously think through before you decided?
2. Which three assumptions is your strategy betting on, and when did you last test them?
3. What goes away, what gets added, and how does that feel?

20 Feasibility vs. Disruption

What a strategy execution or transformation gets out of your organisation comes down to balancing consistency, feasibility, and disruption.

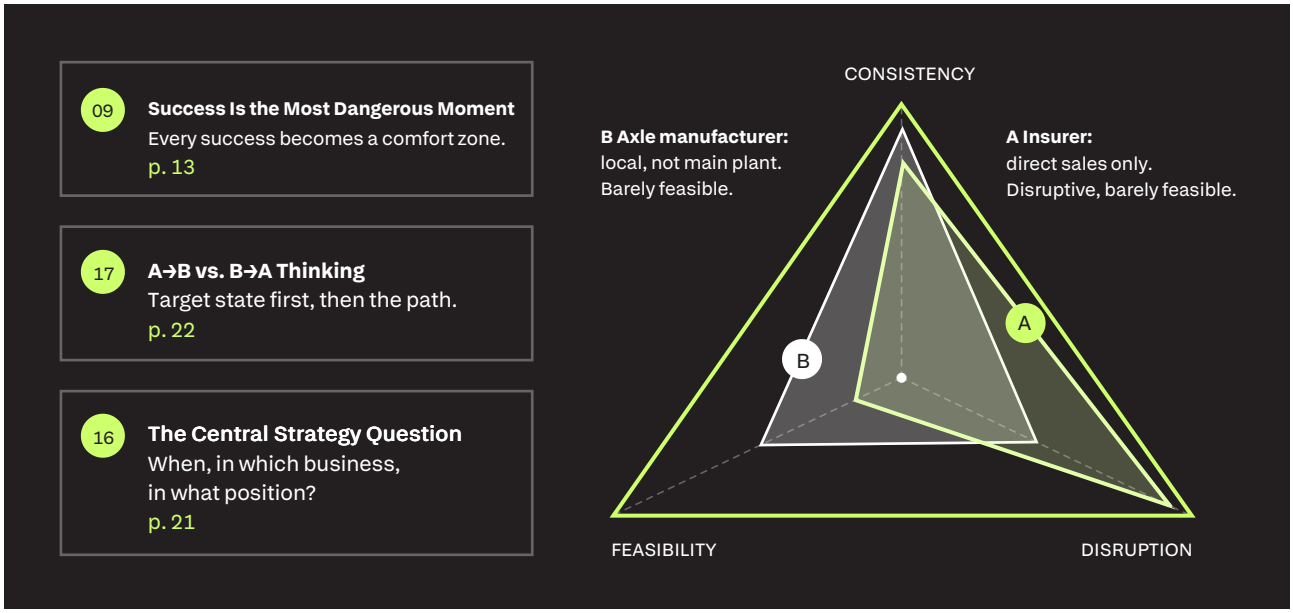


Fig. 20: The tension triangle with two examples: an insurer (A) and an axle manufacturer (B)

Three forces. Consistency: Everything has to fit the goals and the business as a whole. Disruption: The status quo has to be seriously challenged, or you just extrapolate the past. Feasibility: The organisation must be willing and able to think through and shape the vision. A strategy can be consistent and disruptive and still fail, because too few people in the company can clearly think through and shape the vision (02 Excellence Is a Casting Decision, p. 6). A strategy that meets no resistance isn't worth talking about: status quo, 100 per cent feasibility, zero disruption.

An insurer (A) exits motor insurance, scraps its broker channel, and goes all in on direct sales: disruptive, maybe consistent, barely feasible. An axle manufacturer (B) stays in its markets but produces locally instead of at its main plant: highly consistent, with an element of disruption, just barely feasible. That's why target states (17 A→B vs. B→A Thinking, p. 22) should never come from top management alone. A better approach: A think tank of five to seven people, including the company's constructive mavericks, describes them on two to three pages.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Where in the triangle is your transformation: honestly, not ideally?
2. What resistance does your strategy create? None? Then it's just extrapolating the status quo.
3. Who wrote your vision: top management alone, or a think tank with mavericks?

The truth behind leadership.

↘ These pages are my view.
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21 Seven Symptoms of Mediocrity

↘ Mediocre execution is no accident. It has seven faces.



Fig. 21: Seven symptoms of mediocrity

Wherever strategies and transformations fall short of their potential, I keep running into the same seven symptoms. Activities get reported and managed, not progress (26 Input, Output, Outcome, Impact, p. 33). The urge for certainty drives demands for ever more detailed plans. Status meetings feel like courtroom trials: point-scoring (08 Stop Needing to Be Right, p. 12) instead of criticism and commitment (01 The Root of Weak Follow-Through, p. 5). Then there's the priority circus: Everything is important, so nothing is (25 Four Fallacies in Prioritising, p. 31). And meetings that metastasize in number, length, and frequency.

The decision decelerator: Decisions aren't made where they belong. The horsepower never reaches the road (29 Three Governance Tracks, Not One, p. 36). Units that wall themselves off. And goal drift: Supposedly clear goals get watered down over time. The customer-centricity initiative turns into a CRM project, and the tail wags the dog: What gets tracked is the milestone plan through rollout, no longer churn rate, cross-sell rate, and cost per service case. None of these symptoms comes from bad intentions. They come from the way the organisation is managed.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Which three of the seven symptoms do you recognise in your most important initiative?
2. Which decisions keep landing on your desk even though they don't belong there?
3. Which of your goals has become fuzzy over time, and who noticed?
4. Which of the seven symptoms are you feeding yourself?

22 Speed: Just as Important as Substance!

↘ Work takes exactly as long as you give it! A lack of pace leads to lost focus and needless complexity. Run at high RPMs, just not in the red!

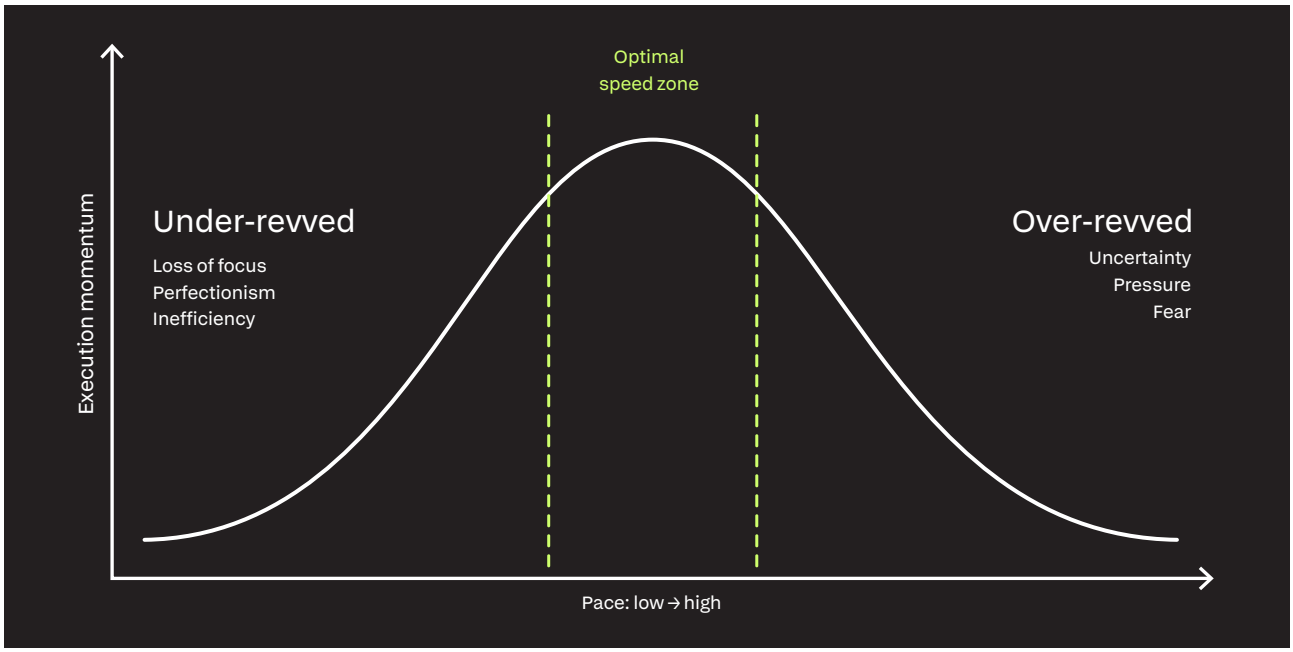


Fig. 22: The optimal speed zone

Speed is a competitive advantage today. It's no longer the big beating the small, but the fast beating the slow: You can see it right now in the defence industry, where young companies are running circles around established players. AI will do its part. The longer something gets pondered and discussed, the more reasons turn up for why it won't work. The more people involved, the slower it gets. Set the pace, and you force focus.

Most organisations never reach their optimal speed zone. They start out relaxed, get frantic, overheat, and then let the pace drop again after the milestone. High-performance execution means sprint, recover, train, sprint. Work in intervals of two to six weeks, call them sprints or waves, each of which has to deliver real progress: output or outcome, not just completed activities (26 Input, Output, Outcome, Impact, p. 33). The faster you want to go, the fewer people you can take along.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Where is your organisation under-revving, and where is it over-revving?
2. Which of your initiatives would a fast competitor finish in half the time?
3. What would be possible in six weeks if you demanded it and insisted on real progress?

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23 Progress Management, Not Status Meetings

↘ Status meetings are back-patting sessions. Manage deviations from plan, and you manage justifications. Focus on progress, and you drive towards results.

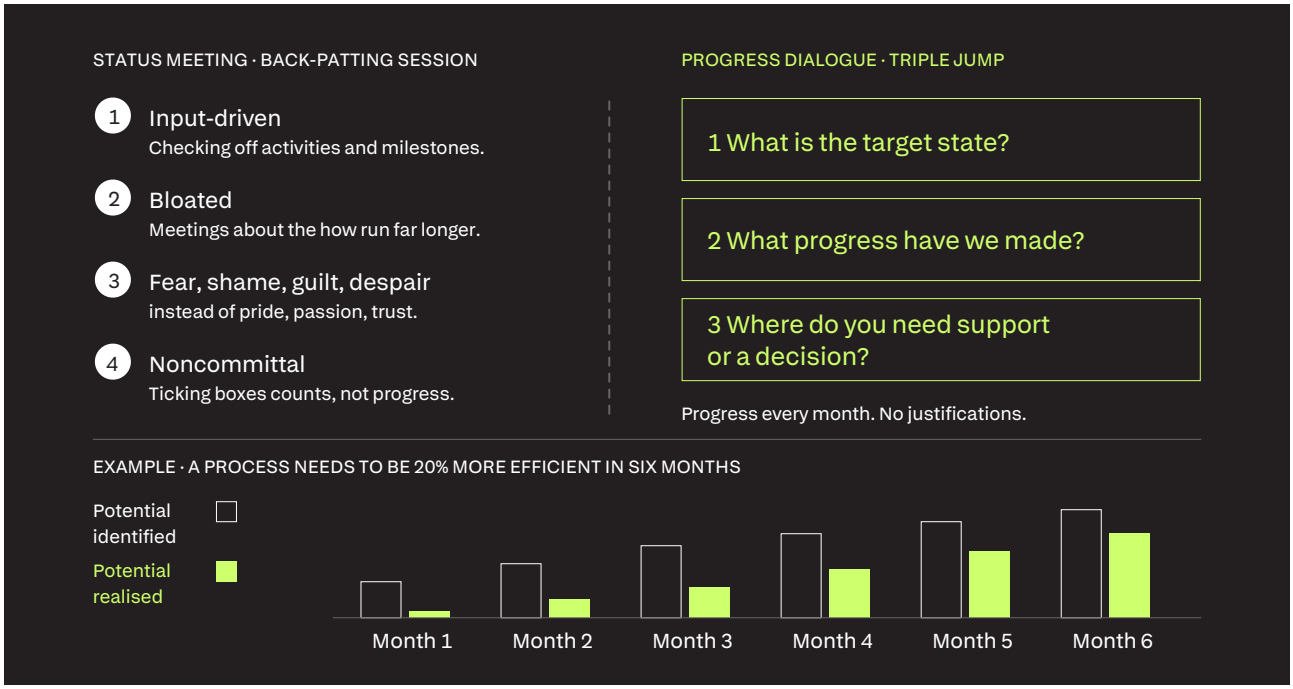


Fig. 23: Back-patting session or progress dialogue: four deficits, three questions, one example

Most status meetings are back-patting sessions: Everyone takes a turn reporting what they've done and what they plan to do. Everyone else is discreetly answering texts and emails. Four deficits: input-driven, checking off activities and milestones. Bloated: The how takes many times longer than the what and the why. Fear, shame, guilt, and despair (11 Harness the Power of Emotions, p. 15). And noncommittal, because the focus is on ticking boxes, not on progress.

The progress dialogue follows the management triple jump (30 The Management Triple Jump, p. 37): target state, progress, support needed. First the target state in three or five years, then the next slice: What part of it will be different in six months, with mandatory outcomes (26 Input, Output, Outcome, Impact, p. 33)? Plus two or three progress metrics. If a process needs to be 20 per cent more efficient in six months, all I want to know each month is: potential identified, potential realised? Both have to grow every month, without targets.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Was your last status meeting more back-patting session or progress dialogue?
2. Which two or three progress metrics grow every month in your most important initiative?
3. How much meeting time goes to the how, and how much to the what and why?

24 Kill Your Zombies

We take on too much, and things move too slowly or not at all. That's human nature. Act fast and decisively: Kill the zombies.

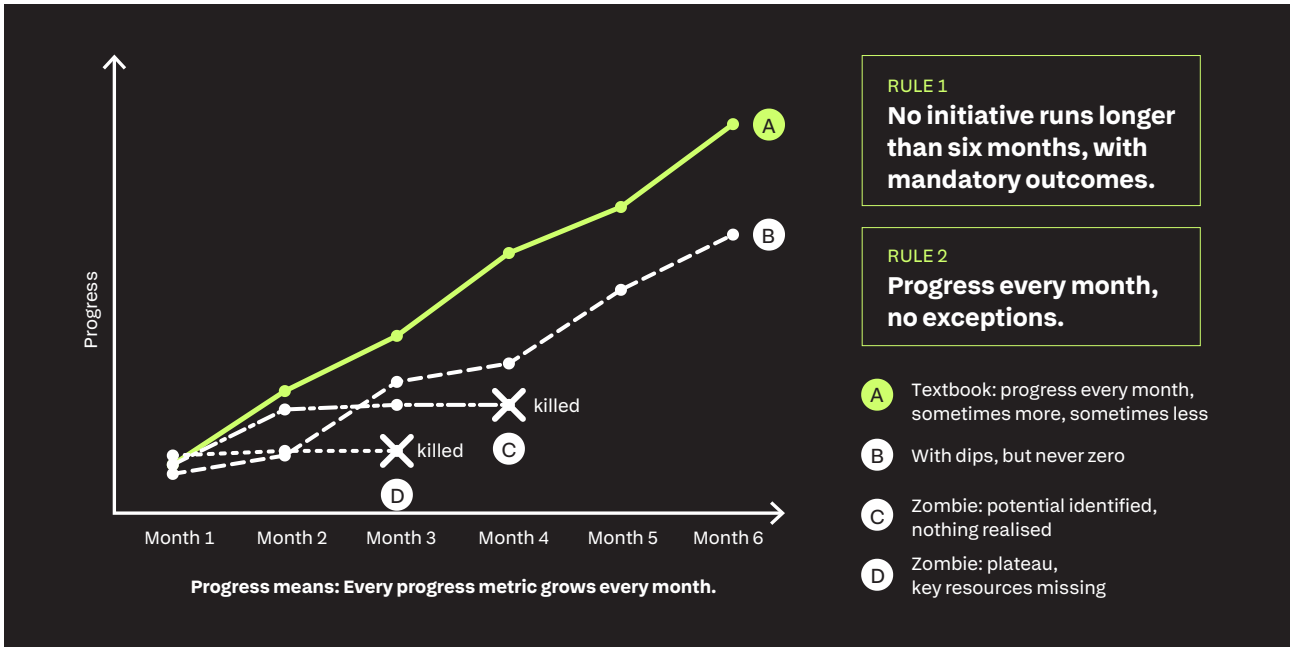


Fig. 24: Four initiatives, six months: two make progress, two are zombies

Every company has initiatives that haven't made progress in months but keep running. Nobody ends them, because no one wants the effort to have been wasted, and ending looks like failing. These zombies eat up the time of the few key people. Exactly the time the important initiatives are missing. Progress means: Each of the two or three progress metrics grows every month (23 Progress Management, Not Status Meetings, p. 29). Identifying potential isn't enough; at least some of it has to be realised in month one. Two or three months without growth: zombie.

The second kind makes progress in months one and two and then stalls because key resources are missing. Which means: Something else is more important (25 Four Fallacies in Prioritising, p. 31). This zombie gets killed, too. Two rules keep a portfolio lean: no initiative longer than six months, with mandatory outcomes (26 Input, Output, Outcome, Impact, p. 33), and progress every month, no exceptions. Stick to that, and you build momentum instead of nursing zombies. Don't pause, don't replan: end it. Stop starting, start finishing.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. How many initiatives run without mandatory outcomes within six months?
2. Do you focus on making progress every month, or on discussing activities?
3. When did you last kill a zombie?
4. How many zombies come to mind right away, and how are you dealing with them?

25 Four Fallacies in Prioritising

↘ Ask “Is this important?” and you’ve already lost. Say “This is a priority” and you still haven’t decided anything. Priority is where capacity flows.

WHAT DETERMINES PRIORITY

1. **Resources**
   People and money. Time can be bought.
2. **Time**
   Negotiable or not: The trade fair date is fixed.
3. **Bottlenecks**
   Not interchangeable. The magic number 3.
4. **Capability**
   Can we even do this?
5. **Impact**
   How much impact on the top KPIs, and how fast?

FOUR FALLACIES

1. **Absolutism**
   “Is this a priority?” Priority only exists in comparison, ranked by impact.
2. **The time excuse**
   “I don’t have time for that.” Time is a resource. No time means: Something else is more important. Say so.
3. **On the side**
   “Not a priority, we’ll keep it going on the side.” Priority is where capacity flows. On the side means: We’re not doing it.
4. **Heroics**
   “We’ve got an incredible amount going on.” Doing a lot is human. And average.

Fig. 25: Five factors determine priority. Four fallacies prevent it.

Every portfolio review, the same discussion. People look at the list and ask: “So what’s actually important?” When in doubt, out comes the dot voting. Five factors determine what can be a priority: resources, meaning people and money, which can buy time. Time, negotiable or not, when the trade fair date is fixed. Bottlenecks: the handful of key people you’d need in 27 places at once. Capability: Can we do it? And impact: How much impact on the top KPIs, and how fast (28 KPIs, Reduced to the Max, p. 35)?

In your private life as in business: Family, nutrition, exercise, books, career, network, and balance are like squaring the circle. Prioritising starts with the core target metrics, followed by strategy as a positioning question (19 Every Strategy Is a Bet. Do You Know Your Options?, p. 24), then initiatives ranked by impact. For bottlenecks, the magic number is 3: Anyone substantially involved in more than three topics becomes unproductive. “Not a priority, but we’ll keep it going on the side” means: We’re not doing it (24 Kill Your Zombies, p. 30). And if the same specialists have been missing for years: Where’s the plan to fix that?

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. When did you last hear “That’s not a priority, but we’ll keep it going on the side,” and what did you say?
2. Which of your key people are deep in more than three topics?
3. Do you prioritise by impact on your top KPIs, or by dot voting?
4. Which bottleneck has been slowing you down for years, and what will remove it?

For what matters most, but gets no room in day-to-day business.

What's on these pages applies to many companies. How it applies to yours is best discussed with people facing the same questions.

A day off the treadmill: fresh ideas and connections beyond your industry, in a circle of up to 15 executive board members and managing directors.

HOW THE DAY RUNS

Beforehand
Five theses are set in advance and sent to you. You tell me which one rubs you the wrong way most.

Morning
The group decides where to go deeper. First dialogue block, no presentations.

Afternoon
After lunch, the second block: What will each of you do differently on your own executive team?

Open Hour
Optional, for concrete follow-ups. The Chatham House Rule applies.

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT · THE ROLE ITSELF AND THREE FIELDS

The role itself	"What does the responsibility do to you, and how do you grow with it instead of being crushed by it?"
Strategy and structure	"Can your organisation carry the ambition, or is it just administering the status quo?"
Execution	"How does your company get faster, not just busier?"
Performance culture	"How does a functioning executive team become a winning team?"

VOICES FROM THE CIRCLE

"The most valuable takeaway I brought back to my day-to-day as CEO is the courage to be clear. I've made it second nature to address things plainly, without a thousand excuses, and free of buzzwords or artificial management-speak."

Rüdiger Böhle
CEO, Blanco Group

"It's an excellent small-group format where C-level decision-makers meet as peers. Because everyone brings their own specific strategic challenges, the exchange is far more intense and practical than at typical networking events."

Hubertus Volmert
CEO, Trilux

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26 Input, Output, Outcome, Impact

The core thinking skill for high performance: consistently distinguishing between input, output, outcome, and impact.

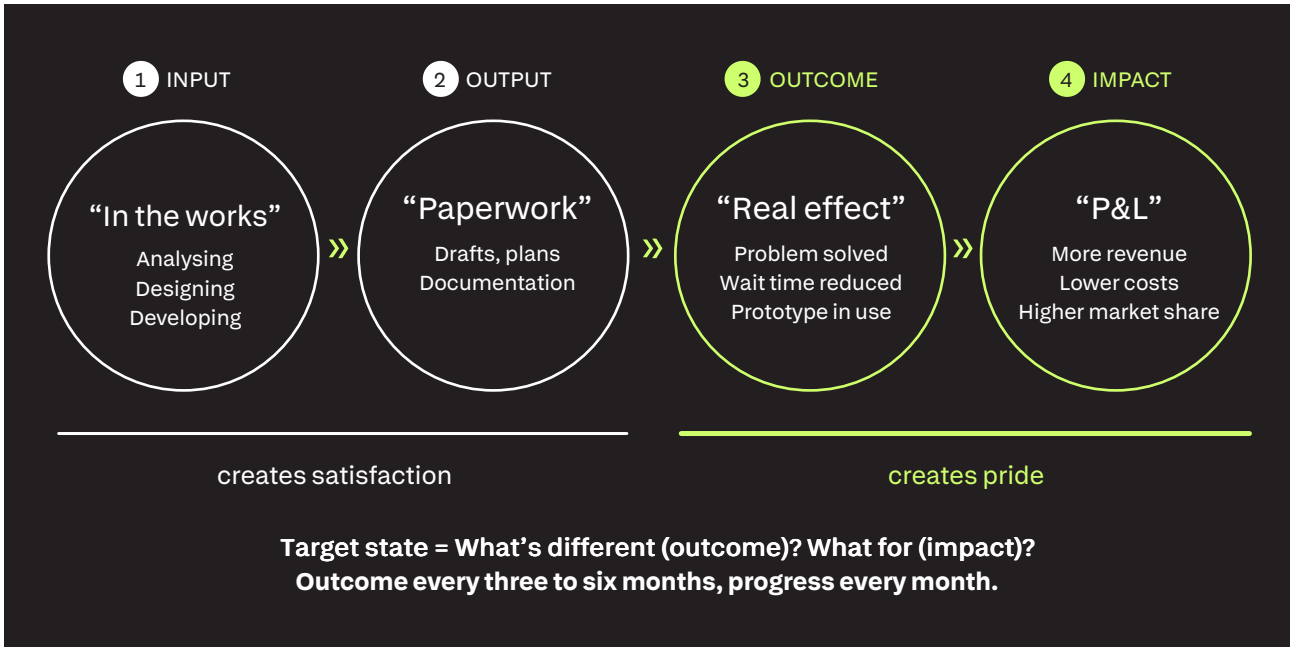


Fig. 26: Input, output, outcome, impact

Four terms sort out any status meeting. Input: everything that's in the works. Output: the paper it produces, such as drafts, plans, and documentation. Outcome: the first real effect, like a problem solved, a wait time reduced, a prototype in use. Impact: the reason for the whole thing, meaning more revenue, lower costs, higher market share. A target state (17 A→B vs. B→A Thinking, p. 22) describes exactly two things: What's different? And with what benefit? The what-for is the impact.

Most organisations manage through input and output. That keeps everyone busy and, at best, satisfied. Pride only comes from outcome. The same goes for KPIs: Impact KPIs have a P&L link at every step of the value chain; the decisive levers are outcome metrics (28 KPIs, Reduced to the Max, p. 35). In football, the 2–0 win is the impact; pass completion rate and crossing accuracy are the levers. The discipline: outcome every three to six months and measurable progress every month (23 Progress Management, Not Status Meetings, p. 29). Ask of every plan, provocatively: So what?

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. What got reported in your last status meeting: input, output, or outcome?
2. Which of your initiatives hasn't produced an outcome in six months?
3. Can your leaders say, for every initiative, what will be different and what it's for?
4. What was your leadership team last proud of, not just satisfied with?

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27 Most “Strategic” Work Is Just Operations

Strategic isn’t what’s important. It’s what changes how you create value. Keep the two apart: in your head and in your governance.

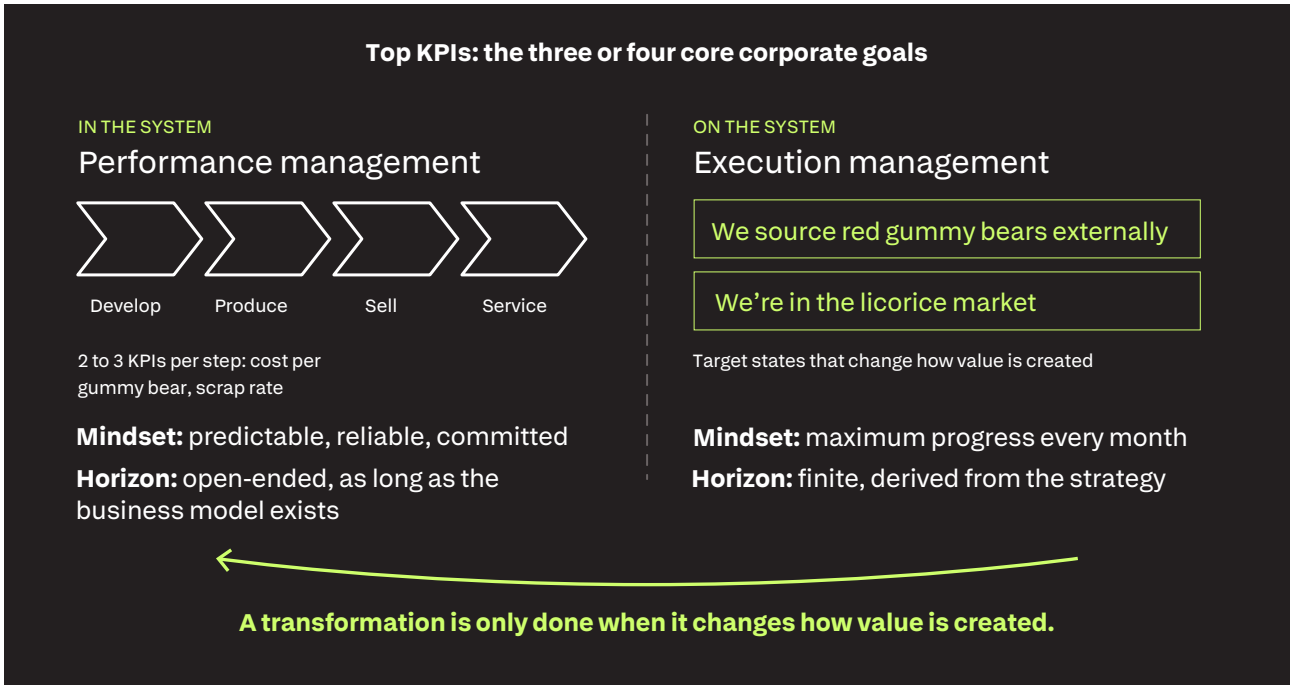


Fig. 27: Working in the system and on the system, illustrated with a gummy bear factory

Working in the system, you manage everyday value creation; that’s where 70 to 100 per cent of capacity goes. The key question: Which two or three outcome and impact KPIs do you use to assess your core value creation (28 KPIs, Reduced to the Max, p. 35)? And the job is to keep getting better: less scrap, lower cost per gummy bear. That’s operational excellence: committed and predictable.

You work on the system when you change value creation itself, derived from the strategy (16 The Central Strategy Question, p. 21): sourcing red gummy bears externally, entering the licorice market. The test: Do you reach the goal by doing more of the same, better? Then it’s operations. Each needs its own governance (29 Three Governance Tracks, Not One, p. 36); mix them, and you’ll do neither performance management nor execution management really well. It gets dangerous when everything is labelled “strategic,” because that’s the only way topics get attention. Nonsense. The money is made in day-to-day business. The people grinding away there don’t feel valued when strategy is all anyone talks about anymore.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Which of your “strategic” initiatives are really day-to-day business?
2. Do you have separate governance for operations, collaboration, and execution?
3. Which two or three KPIs do you use to assess your core value creation, and does everyone know them?
4. How often does an optimisation project get labelled “strategic” just to get attention?

28 KPIs, Reduced to the Max!

↘ Finding the right result metrics and the decisive control levers is an art.

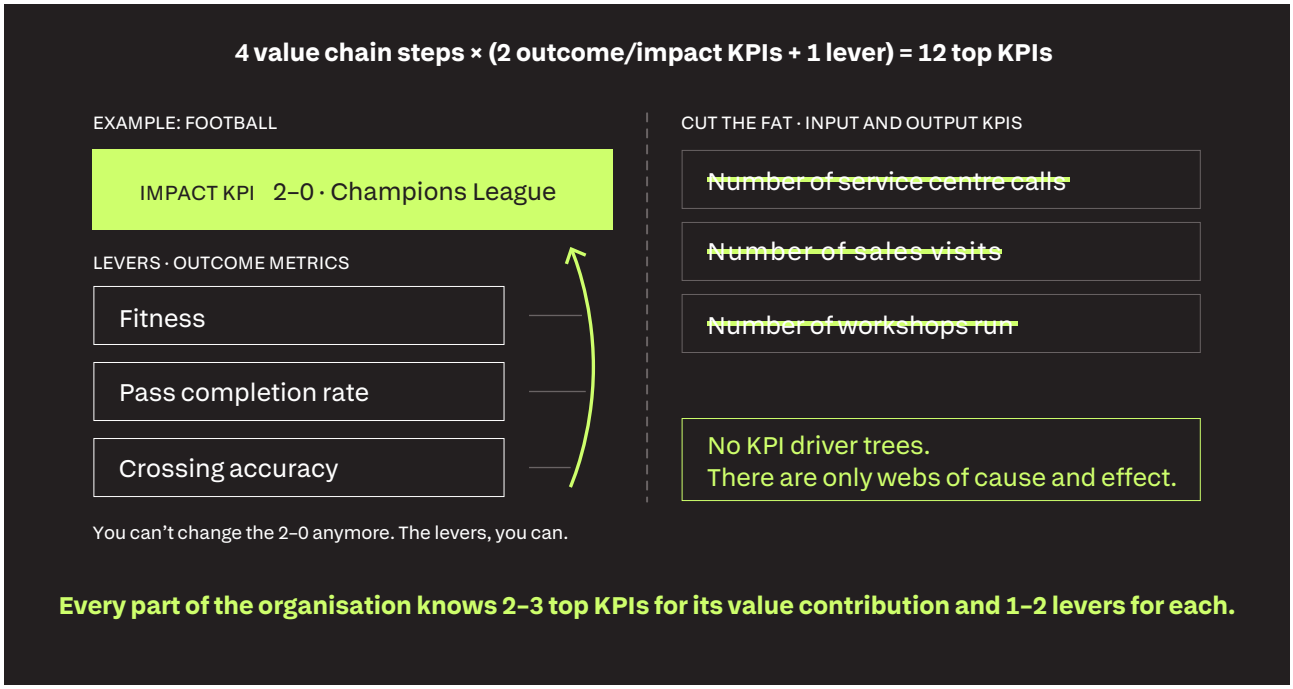


Fig. 28: Twelve top KPIs for value creation: levers instead of input metrics

Ask every business unit head: "Which two or three metrics tell you you're performing, and how do you measure your value contribution?" Line and support functions alike. The system (27 Most "Strategic" Work Is Just Operations, p. 34): three to four top goals, no more. For each step in the value chain, two to three outcome and impact KPIs (26 Input, Output, Outcome, Impact, p. 33), plus one or two levers with the greatest influence on them. Four steps times three: twelve top KPIs to manage your value creation, cascaded further for each unit.

Most organisations, by contrast, are bursting with input and output KPIs, thanks to the activity bias (17 A→B vs. B→A Thinking, p. 22). Who cares about the number of service centre calls or sales visits? Cut them ruthlessly. And forget KPI driver trees: They suggest a cascading logic that doesn't exist in practice. There are only webs of cause and effect. Flat structure or matrix: Every part of the organisation knows two to three top KPIs for its value contribution and one or two levers. Force your organisation to know its control levers.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Which two or three metrics tell each of your units that it's performing? Ask tomorrow.
2. How many of your KPIs are input or output metrics nobody cares about?
3. Does every unit know the one or two levers with the greatest influence on its value contribution?
4. Does your management system fit on a single page?

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29 Three Governance Tracks, Not One

↘ Turn one into three: one governance track for operations, one for collaboration, one for strategy execution. Mix them, or skip them altogether, and mediocrity is the best you'll get.

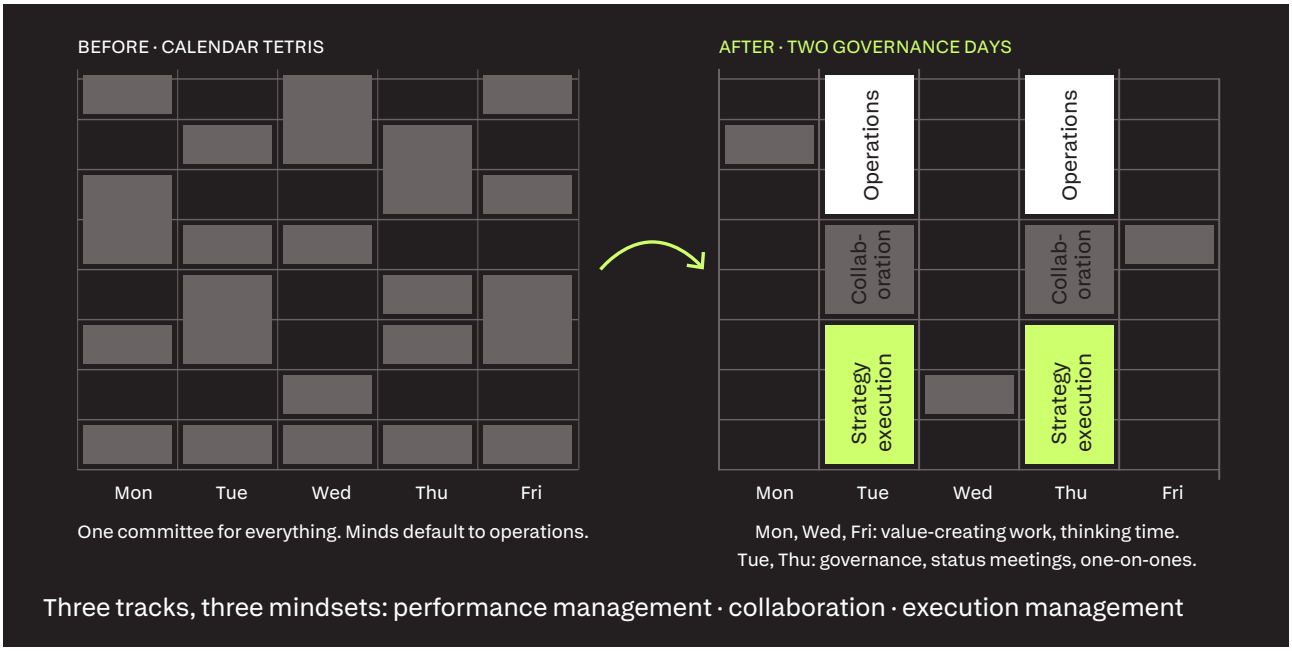


Fig. 29: From calendar Tetris to two governance days with three tracks

Most managers' calendars are one big game of Tetris: the same committee for everything. High-performance organisations separate three governance tracks. Performance management runs operations (27 Most "Strategic" Work Is Just Operations, p. 34): KPI-driven, committed, short and to the point, no meeting longer than 20 minutes. Collaboration governance creates room for exchange: meetings without an agenda. It gets steamrolled almost everywhere, yet it's what kicks in the turbo. Execution management drives the strategic target states towards maximum progress every month (23 Progress Management, Not Status Meetings, p. 29).

Do this well, and all your recurring meetings fit into two days a week, not five. Don't believe it? I'll prove it to you. Executive board meetings shrink from five hours to two. Use your governance to answer the five key questions: Who discusses what, when, with whom and how? That leaves time for critical dialogues where the elephants in the room get addressed. That only works without an agenda.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Do you steer operations, collaboration, and strategy in three different committees?
2. How long is your longest status meeting, and what happens after minute 20?
3. When did you last talk with your colleagues without an agenda?
4. How many weekdays do your recurring meetings spread across?

↘ With your leaders, no agenda: Critical Dialogue, p. 38.

30 The Management Triple Jump

↘ Three questions instead of a status report: Target state? Progress? Support needed? Nothing to show for question two, and you're out.

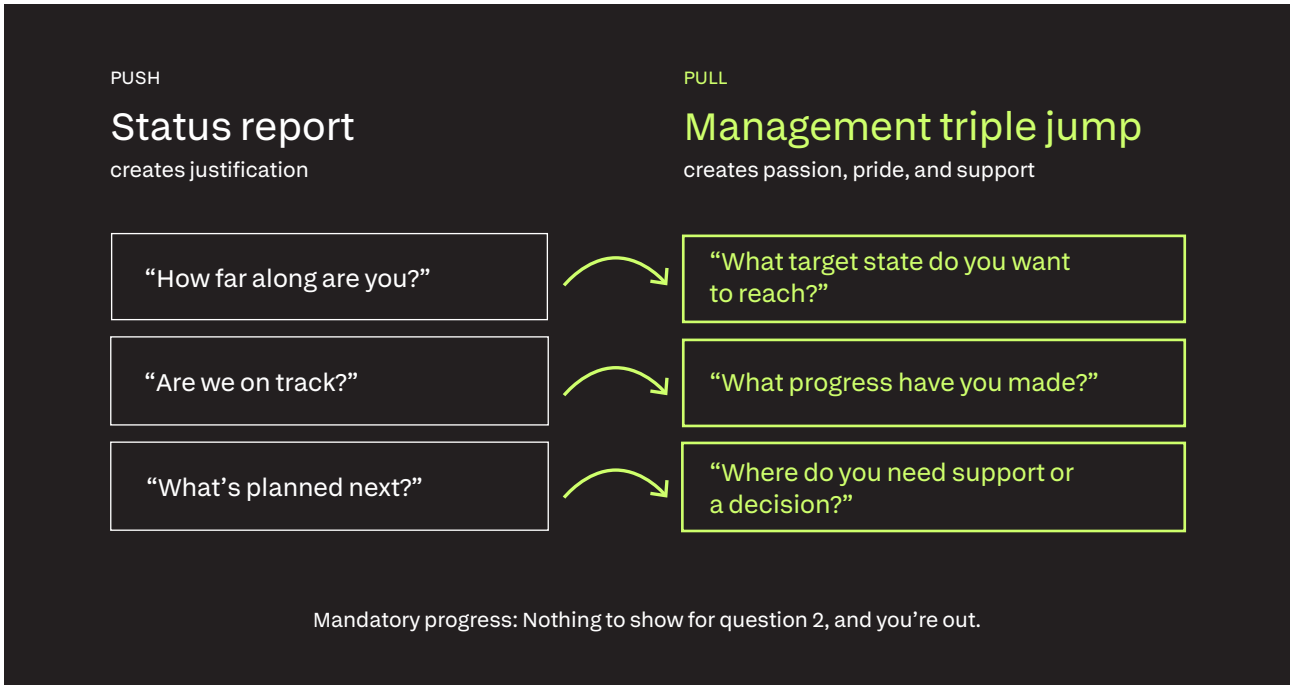


Fig. 30: From push to pull management: the management triple jump

"How far along are you? Are we on track? What's planned next?" Every steering committee knows these three questions. They produce justification, not progress. Ask that way, and you're managing activities and smothering even the best vision with pressure. The management triple jump replaces them with three different questions. What target state do you want to reach, and please, no PowerPoint (14 Six Months. Beyond That, No One Feels It., p. 18)? What progress have you made (26 Input, Output, Outcome, Impact, p. 33)? Where do you need support or a decision?

The first question tests clarity and passion, the second creates pride, the third turns control into support. The consequence: Progress becomes mandatory. Anyone with nothing to show for question two for two or three months is a zombie (24 Kill Your Zombies, p. 30). Uncomfortable for both sides: As a leader, you have to resist setting monthly targets and asking about them. And you have to commit to helping. For the team, it means: criticise, accept criticism, ask for help. In high-performance organisations, nobody justifies themselves.

TOUGH QUESTIONS ON YOUR EXECUTION EXCELLENCE

1. Which three questions do you ask most often in your status meetings?
2. When did someone from your direct reports last ask you for help?
3. Can you go a whole month without asking about the plan?
4. What happens when someone has nothing to show for question two for the third time?

Get done in two and a half hours what often doesn't happen in weeks.

"That only works without an agenda," says model 29. In the Critical Dialogue, I take that literally.

A dialogue with your leadership team or a programme team, with no agenda and no hierarchy. In a keynote, I talk. Here, your team talks, and I conduct.

What comes up is what gets left on the table in status meetings: what's holding your team back, and the ideas it has had all along.



WHEN IT FITS

Out of the dead end

A team or a major project is stuck, and nobody says why.

Consensus, no consequence

Everyone nods in the meeting; afterwards, nothing changes.

Taking off

The energy is there; it just isn't hitting the road.

About two and a half hours · at your company · 5 to 30 people · German or English
Recommended: three sessions, two to three months apart

REQUEST A PREP CALL

kolbusa.com/en/critical-dialogue

We'll clarify the occasion, participants, and setup. You don't need a date yet.

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Matthias Kolbusa

The Reality Check for High Performance.

For two decades, Matthias Kolbusa has worked with executive teams and their organisations on precise strategies and rigorous execution. His goal is high-performance organisations: places where people love to perform.

He is the author of several management books and the host of the Board Dialogues and the video podcast DEBUGGED. His newsletter, Kolbusa's Wisdom (German), comes out every two weeks. The fifteen German-language volumes of SECRETS OF EXECUTION® from which this Best of is drawn are available on request at matthias@kolbusa.com.

BOOKS (IN GERMAN)

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kolbusa.com

matthias@kolbusa.com
+49 160 975 23394

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+49 160 975 23394

matthias@kolbusa.com

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Matthias Kolbusa

Schäferkampsallee 43 · 20357 Hamburg, Germany
kolbusa.com