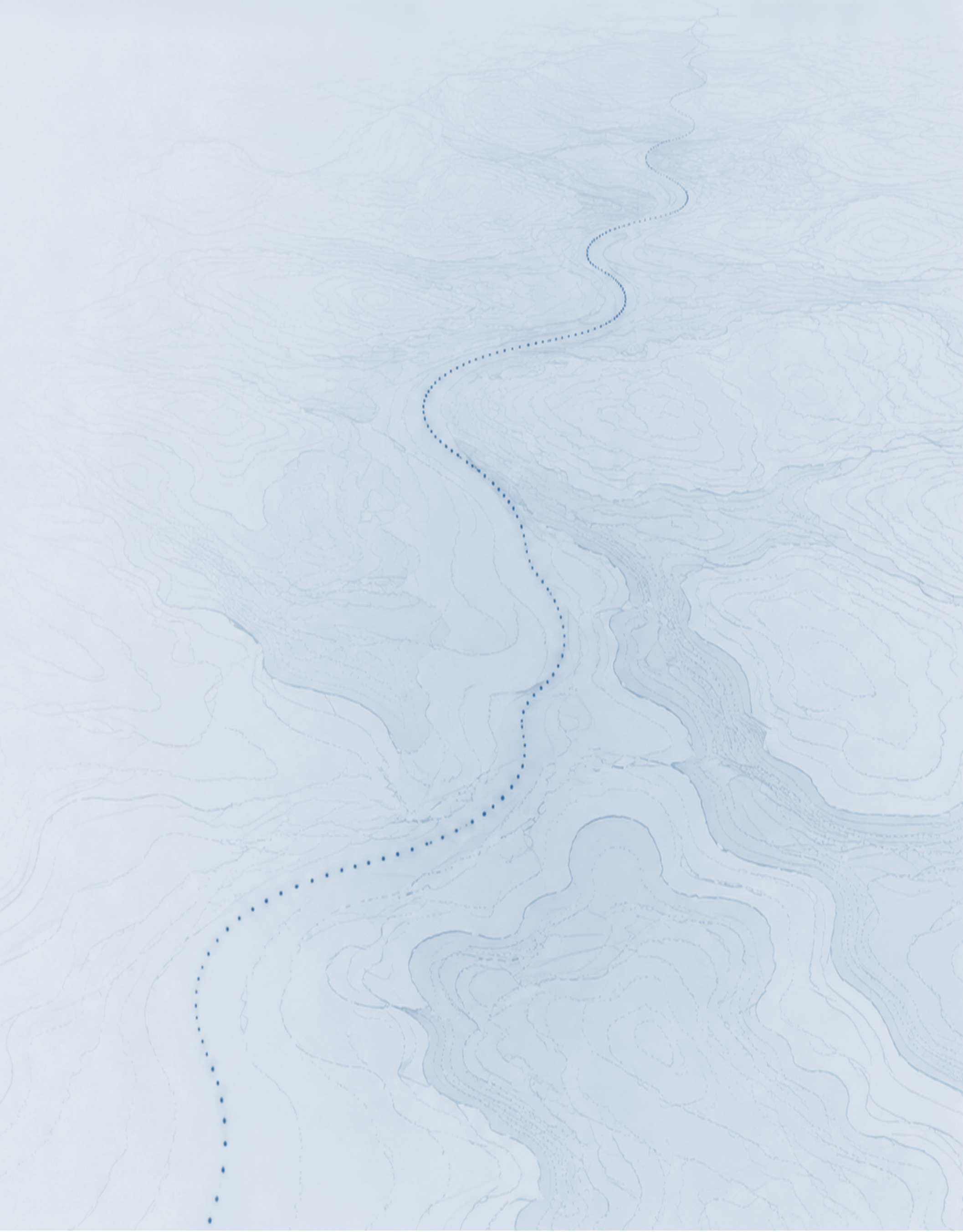
EXELIS

ARCHITECTS OF ADVANTAGE



EXELIS INSIGHTS

# Execution Is Not About Effort. It's About Architecture.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ARTICLE IN BRIEF

# Execution improves when the system does.

When strategic initiatives stall, the reflex is to demand more urgency. But durable progress depends less on pressure than on an operating architecture that makes the right work visible, owned, sequenced, resourced and repeatable.

### 01 Effort is not the core constraint.

Capable teams can work intensely and still fail to advance the few outcomes that matter most.

### 02 Architecture converts intent into work.

Strategy needs owners, measures, decision rights, resources and a cadence that exposes reality.

### 03 Activity is not execution.

Motion becomes progress only when work is explicitly linked to enterprise outcomes.

### 04 Discipline compounds.

Small gains in decision speed, ownership and follow-through accumulate into durable enterprise value.

> “Execution is not about asking people to try harder inside a system that was not built to perform.”

EXECUTION ARCHITECTURE

# Execution Is Not About Effort. It's About Architecture.

By Todd O. Glassman

Most execution problems are misdiagnosed. When strategic initiatives stall, the default response is almost always to demand more effort - more urgency, more meetings, more dashboards, more follow-up, more pressure from the top. That may create motion. But motion is not execution. If real progress still depends on the CEO, CFO, sponsor, or board personally driving the key decisions week after week, the organization doesn't have an effort problem. It has an architecture problem.

The leadership team may be capable. The strategy may be directionally right. The value creation plan may identify the right levers. The organization may even be working hard. But hard work is not the same as organized progress against the few things that matter most.

Execution breaks down when a company lacks the architecture required to translate strategic intent into operating reality. The distinction matters because the diagnosis determines the fix. Mistake the problem for effort, and you push people harder. See it as architecture, and you rebuild the system that turns strategy into coordinated action. Most companies choose pressure when what they need is design.

## The execution gap

Many companies are busy but not focused. Meetings happen, yet decisions still move slowly. Initiatives get launched, but ownership stays vague. Dashboards get produced, yet behavior rarely changes. The board gets updates, but not always a clear picture of progress. The management team works harder, but the underlying system doesn't get stronger.

I once sat in a company's annual strategy offsite eleven months after the sponsor closed the investment. By any measure, the business was in motion. The leadership team was deep in integration work, systems projects, commercial initiatives, and reporting upgrades. Then came a simple exercise: each executive independently listed the company's most important priorities. Nine executives produced a combined list of more than forty distinct initiatives, with very limited overlap among them. Nearly a year of the ownership window was gone, and the company had not yet agreed on what mattered most.

This is the difference between activity and execution. Activity is motion. Execution is organized progress.

> “Activity is motion. Execution is organized progress.”

The issue is rarely that the team is sitting around waiting for direction. More often, the company is drowning in activity. People are busy. Problems are getting solved. Reports are getting produced. Meetings are happening. But the important work is not protected, resourced, or managed with enough discipline to survive the daily operating noise. Priorities are too numerous, ownership is too vague, measures are too disconnected, decisions are too slow, sequencing is unclear, and accountability is implied rather than designed into the operating rhythm of the business.

EXHIBIT 1

## From activity to execution discipline

| Activity | Execution Discipline |
|---|---|
| **More urgency** | Explicit prioritization, sequencing, and capacity trade-offs |
| **More meetings** | Decision cadence that converts discussion into commitments and action |
| **More dashboards** | Performance visibility linked to owners, thresholds, and intervention |
| **More follow-up** | Accountability mechanisms with named owners, milestones, and consequences |
| **More pressure from the top** | Leadership attention allocated to decisions only leadership can make |
| **More initiatives** | Fewer enterprise priorities with real resource commitment |
| **More escalation** | Defined decision rights and escalation paths that resolve issues at the right level |
| **More reporting** | Management routines that expose issues, drive decisions, and reinforce accountability |

When these conditions are not designed deliberately, execution becomes dependent on personalities instead of process. The CEO pushes. The CFO tracks. The board asks. The sponsor follows up. The team reacts. Progress gets made in bursts. Then the organization drifts back to the urgent work of running the business.

But urgent does not always mean important.

Stephen Covey, the author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, helped popularize the distinction between urgent and important work. The concept is highly relevant to execution. Many organizations are consumed by urgent work: customer issues, deadlines, internal requests, reporting cycles, fire drills, and day-to-day operating demands. Some of that work is necessary. But when urgent work consistently crowds out important work, the business struggles to build the capabilities required for its next stage of value creation.

That is one of the quiet execution traps in the middle market. The company is not standing still. It is busy, responsive, and getting things done. But the important work - building scalable systems, improving management cadence, strengthening reporting, developing leadership depth, clarifying accountability, improving pricing discipline, integrating acquisitions, and institutionalizing better practices - keeps getting deferred.

That is how companies confuse motion with progress.

# What execution architecture means

Execution architecture is the operating system that turns strategic intent into measurable, owned, sequenced, and repeatable action inside the business. It connects the strategy deck to management routines, board-level priorities to operating cadence, financial targets to actual work, and value creation levers to ownership, measures, sequencing, and accountability.

In a value creation context, this is the critical bridge: execution architecture converts strategy, investment thesis, and board-level priorities into operating discipline - the system that makes the right work visible, owned, resourced, governed, and repeatable.

EXHIBIT 2

### From strategy to enterprise value

| Strategic Agenda | Execution Architecture | Operating Effect |
|---|---|---|
| **Where we are going** | Objectives | Focus |
| **What success looks like** | Goals | Measurable outcomes |
| **How we will compete and win** | Strategies | Strategic choices and trade-offs |
| **How performance will be measured** | Measures | Visibility and accountability |
| **What work matters most** | Initiatives | Prioritized, owned work |
| **How progress will be managed** | Cadence | Operating rhythm and momentum |
| **What must become repeatable** | Embedded capability | Progress that survives leadership change |

Objectives, Goals, Strategies, Measures, Initiatives: the OGSMI framework

The point is not that strategy automatically flows into value. It does not. The middle column is the work. Without objectives, goals, strategies, measures, initiatives, cadence, and embedded capability, the strategic agenda remains largely conceptual. Execution architecture is what converts direction into operating effect - and operating effect is where value creation actually begins.

# Why this matters in value creation

This is especially visible in the middle market, where companies are often ambitious enough to grow but not yet built to scale. It shows up in sponsor-backed businesses, founder-led companies, and companies moving through a major transformation. In those settings, ambition is rarely the problem. The ambition is usually clear: accelerate growth, improve margins, professionalize the platform, integrate acquisitions, reduce working capital drag, or prepare the company for its next stage of value creation.

But ambition does not create enterprise value by itself. Neither does a board discussion. Neither does a strategy deck. Neither does a value creation plan. Value is created when those ideas are translated into the operating system of the business.

That translation runs through a set of questions most strategy processes never force:

EXHIBIT 3

## The questions that turn ambition into architecture

| | The question | What it forces |
|---|---|---|
| 01 | What are the few objectives that matter most? | An agenda the organization can actually absorb |
| 02 | What does success look like in measurable terms? | Ambition becomes a number and a date |
| 03 | Which strategies will actually create the value? | Real choices instead of strategic themes |
| 04 | What measures will tell us whether progress is real? | Leading indicators, not backward-looking recaps |
| 05 | Which initiatives must be owned, sequenced, resourced, and governed? | Work with named owners instead of supported themes |
| 06 | Who has decision rights? | Decisions made at the right level, at speed |
| 07 | Where are the cross-functional dependencies? | Constraints surfaced before they become stalls |
| 08 | What management cadence will keep the work visible? | A rhythm of intervention, not reporting |
| 09 | What must be escalated — and what should never reach the CEO or sponsor? | Senior attention reserved for enterprise trade-offs |
| 10 | What must be explicitly stopped to create real bandwidth? | Capacity that is real, not assumed |
| 11 | What capabilities must be institutionalized so progress survives ownership and leadership change? | Progress that outlives the individuals |

These are not academic questions. They determine whether strategy becomes action or remains aspiration. They determine whether a value creation plan becomes operating reality or stays trapped in a board deck.

> “The architecture underneath execution determines whether strategy survives contact with the organization.”

# The discipline underneath execution

This is where a framework like OGSMI becomes powerful (see the Execution Architecture column in Exhibit 2). OGSMI - Objectives, Goals, Strategies, Measures, and Initiatives - is a simple strategy-to-execution framework. I have not found a simpler or more effective way to connect strategy with execution. During my years inside Fidelity's private equity group, we deployed it across the portfolio to translate strategic priorities into clear accountabilities, measurable outcomes, and coordinated initiatives - and it has traveled with me ever since.

Its value is not in the acronym. Its value is the discipline it forces - and the fact that it works at every altitude of the organization. The same one-page logic that gives a board or sponsor line of sight into how strategy will become work gives a functional team line of sight into why its work matters. Direction cascades down without losing precision, and operating reality flows back up without losing honesty. Used well, OGSMI pushes leadership to clarify direction, quantify success, make real strategic choices, define how progress will be measured, and translate the work into owned initiatives. It is powerful because it is simple and unforgiving.

A company may say it wants to grow faster. But what is the objective? What are the measurable goals? Which growth strategies matter most? What leading indicators actually show whether the work is gaining traction? Which initiatives are required, who owns them, and what must happen first? What resources are truly committed? And what operating cadence will keep the organization focused instead of drifting back to the urgent?

Until those questions are answered, the company does not really have an execution plan. It has intent. Intent matters. But intent does not become enterprise value unless it becomes operating discipline.

# Why many value creation plans are weaker than they appear

Many value creation plans identify the right levers but not the architecture required to execute them. They define the opportunity but not the management system required to capture it. They assume the organization can absorb the agenda but do not test whether the company has the bandwidth, data, systems, talent, governance, and cadence to deliver it.

That gap matters. A company can have a sound strategy and still fail in execution. A sponsor can have a strong investment thesis and still miss the value creation case. A board can set the right priorities and still watch them drift inside the business.

The issue is not always the quality of the idea. The issue is whether the organization has been architected to make the idea executable. A good-enough strategy executed with discipline will outperform a brilliant strategy that lacks ownership, cadence, and operating follow-through.

The best-run companies do this deliberately. They narrow the agenda. They define what success looks like. They translate strategy into owned initiatives. They establish leading and lagging measures. They sequence the work around real organizational capacity. They create decision forums that actually make decisions. They use cadence to create focus, visibility, and accountability. Most importantly, they institutionalize what works so progress does not depend on a few heroic individuals.

That is the operating discipline of enterprise value creation.

It is not glamorous. It is not always visible from the outside. It does not always look like a breakthrough. But it is often the difference between companies that talk about transformation and companies that actually transform.

None of this is a silver bullet, and no framework transforms a company because leadership adopted it at an offsite. Execution architecture works the way compounding works. A decision gets made this week instead of next month; an initiative gets a named owner instead of a supportive committee; a metric gets a threshold instead of a color; a workstream gets formally stopped instead of quietly starved. Each improvement is small on its own. Repeated across a management system, quarter after quarter, the arithmetic becomes the strategy.

Execution is not about asking people to try harder inside a system that wasn't built to perform. It is about building the architecture that makes the right work visible, owned, sequenced, resourced, and repeatable.

That is how strategy becomes action. That is how action becomes progress. And that is how progress becomes durable enterprise value.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## Todd O. Glassman

Todd is the Founder and Principal of Exelis Group. Over the past 25+ years, he has worked across executive leadership, investing and advisory roles, helping owners, investors, boards and management teams build, scale, transform and institutionalize businesses, capabilities and strategic initiatives. His work sits at the intersection of strategy, finance, operations, investing and execution.

### ABOUT EXELIS GROUP

## Architects of Advantage

Exelis Group is a principal-led C-suite advisory and interim leadership firm helping owners, investors, boards and management teams improve performance, navigate critical inflection points and build more durable enterprise value. We combine investor perspective with operator accountability, translating strategic intent into the mechanisms, capabilities and management systems required for durable execution.

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