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ARCHITECTS OF ADVANTAGE

EXELIS INSIGHTS

Operating Cadence Is Not Meeting Cadence

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ARTICLE IN BRIEF

A calendar does not run the business.

A meeting cadence circulates information on a schedule. An operating cadence confronts reality against commitments, produces decisions, moves resources and escalates what the organization cannot resolve.

01 Reviews must produce action.

A real forum changes a decision, owner, resource, sequence or commitment.

02 Cadence keeps architecture alive.

Recurring forums connect strategy, decision rights, ownership and current operating reality.

03 The stack serves different clocks.

Annual, quarterly, monthly, weekly and daily forums should each have a distinct purpose.

04 The agenda is a strategy document.

What leadership reviews repeatedly tells the organization what truly matters.

> “A meeting cadence circulates information on a schedule. An operating cadence runs the business on one.”

EXECUTION ARCHITECTURE

Operating Cadence Is Not Meeting Cadence

By Todd O. Glassman

Most companies do not lack an operating rhythm. The calendar proves it: a weekly leadership meeting, a monthly business review, a quarterly board cycle, an annual plan. Meetings recur, dashboards refresh, updates circulate. By the standard of scheduled recurrence, the management system looks alive.

But meeting cadence is not operating cadence. A meeting cadence circulates information on a schedule. An operating cadence runs the business on one. It reviews reality against commitments, produces decisions, moves resources, escalates what deserves escalation, and closes what deserves closing - at a rhythm matched to how fast the business actually changes.

The distinction is easy to blur and expensive to conflate. A company can hold every meeting on its calendar and still have no mechanism that converts what it learns into what it does. The reviews happen. The variance gets explained. The next meeting gets scheduled. Nothing moves in between.

That is not an operating cadence. It is a reporting ritual with good attendance.

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EXHIBIT 1

Two cadences

MEETING CADENCE		OPERATING CADENCE
The deck is the deliverable	›	**Decisions are the deliverable**
Agenda built by habit — every function gets its ten minutes	›	**Agenda built by thresholds — time goes to what breached tolerance**
Status gets presented	›	**Choices get made, resources get moved**
Variance gets explained	›	**Variance gets acted on**
Output: minutes	›	**Output: commitments with names and dates**
Happens because it is on the calendar	›	**Happens because the business changes**

What operating cadence actually is

Operating cadence is the rhythm on which the management system confronts reality. It is the set of recurring forums - annual, quarterly, monthly, weekly, daily - through which the business reviews performance against commitments, makes the decisions the review demands, reallocates resources, and adjusts the plan while adjustment is still cheap.

This is not meeting hygiene. Better agendas and tighter facilitation improve meetings; cadence is value-creation infrastructure - the connection between the strategy and the decisions that deliver it, renewed on a schedule.

Execution is a matter of architecture: strategy cascades into owned work, decision rights determine who can act, and explicit trade-offs determine what the organization is actually built to do. Cadence is the mechanism that keeps all of it alive against time. And of these mechanisms, cadence is the one that decays fastest. A cascade drifts over quarters. Decision rights erode over months. A cadence degrades in weeks, because every busy organization is under constant pressure to let the review slip, shorten the preparation, defer the hard agenda item, and let the meeting become an update.

A real operating cadence resists that pressure by being built around a small set of questions that do not change.

EXHIBIT 2

What a real review answers

	The question	What it produces
01	**What did we say we would do?**	The commitment restated, not rediscovered
02	**What actually happened?**	Variance surfaced without spin
03	**What did we learn?**	Signal separated from noise
04	**Where are we off track?**	Problems named while they are still small
05	**What decisions are needed now?**	The agenda the meeting exists for
06	**What resources need to move?**	Reallocation as a standing item, not an annual event
07	**What work should stop?**	Capacity recovered on purpose
08	**What has changed that requires adjustment?**	The plan tested against reality, not defended from it

Eight questions. None of them are sophisticated. What is rare is a management system that asks them on schedule, answers them honestly, and acts on the answers before the next cycle.

The three-quarter yellow

I once watched the same integration issue appear in three consecutive quarterly reviews. Each time it was marked yellow. Each time it was discussed thoughtfully, for about ten minutes. Each time follow-ups were assigned, and each time the follow-ups produced motion without resolution, because no forum in the company had both the authority and the resources to actually close it. By the third quarter, the yellow had been absorbed into the baseline. Nobody was alarmed by it anymore, which was precisely the problem.

The issue was eventually resolved - not by the review process, but by an escalation that should have happened nine months earlier. The cadence had done everything except its job. It had surfaced the issue, tracked the issue, discussed the issue, and documented the issue. It had managed the problem instead of fixing it.

That is the signature failure of meeting cadence masquerading as operating cadence: issues get administered rather than resolved. A real cadence has aging rules. Nothing stays yellow for three quarters, because the rhythm itself forces the question - decide, escalate, or kill - before familiarity sets in.

Reviews are decision forums or they are theater

The monthly business review is where the difference between the two cadences becomes visible. In the theater version, the deck is the deliverable. Performance gets presented, variance gets explained, and explanation gets mistaken for management. The meeting ends when the pages end.

In the operating version, the deck is the entry ticket and the decisions are the deliverable. The pre-read arrives early enough to be read, so the meeting starts informed instead of becoming a live reading. Thresholds - not habit - determine what makes the agenda: anything off track beyond a defined tolerance shows up automatically, with a proposed decision attached. A habit-built agenda gives every function its ten minutes regardless of performance; a threshold-built agenda gives time to whatever breached its tolerance, and nothing else. Owners do not present status. They present the choice they need made, the resources they need moved, or the obstacle they need cleared. And the output is not minutes. It is commitments with names and dates on them.

The ratio is measurable. A working review runs roughly one quarter retrospective and three quarters prospective - a split I install explicitly. The retrospective quarter exists to surface variance and extract the lesson; everything after it belongs to decisions, resources, and the next ninety days. Most reviews run the inverse: ninety minutes explaining last quarter, ten minutes deciding what to do about it. A review that spends its time explaining the past is not managing the business. It is narrating it.

> “A review that cannot move resources, resolve constraints or make decisions is theater.”

The point of cadence is not to admire variance. The point is to act on it.

The cadence stack

Cadence works when each altitude of the rhythm has its own job, and the jobs do not blur.

EXHIBIT 3

The cadence stack

Altitude	The job it does
Annual	Strategy, targets, and resource envelopes are set — the plan gets made
Quarterly	Priorities are re-ranked; initiatives are funded, fixed, or killed — the plan gets corrected
Monthly	Performance is reviewed against commitments; decisions are made — the plan gets managed
Weekly	Execution is unblocked; escalations are resolved — the plan gets moved
Daily	Operations run; exceptions get caught early — the plan gets lived

The failure mode is compression: everything important migrates to one overloaded forum - usually the monthly review - which then tries to set strategy, manage performance, and unblock execution in the same two hours, and does none of them well. The discipline is the opposite: push each question to the altitude built for it, and protect the boundaries.

The agenda is a strategy document

The strongest cadence design choice available is also the simplest: the strategy document and the meeting agenda should be the same artifact. Not aligned. Not cross-referenced. The same. When the review walks the strategy page - goals against targets, then each strategy in turn, its measures, its initiatives, its owners - drift becomes structurally impossible. The company cannot review performance without reviewing it against the strategy, and cannot let the strategy go stale without the review exposing it within ninety days.

The most strategic cadence artifact I have installed is not a meeting design at all. It is an agenda. Inside one sponsor-backed platform, the quarterly business review was built directly on the company's one-page strategic framework, with time allocated by variance rather than by function. The review carried a standing kill discipline: every quarter, the initiative list was re-ranked, and something was explicitly stopped or consciously re-confirmed - no silent survivals. That single design choice did more for execution than any amount of meeting hygiene.

The test takes ten minutes. Put the review agenda next to the strategy document. If one maps onto the other, the cadence is running the strategy. If it does not - if the agenda is organized by department, by report, by whoever is presenting - the company has a meeting cadence, whatever the calendar says.

Cadence sets the tempo that decision rights make possible

Decision rights set organizational clockspeed - they determine whether the organization can make the right decisions at the right level. Cadence is the metronome that determines how often it must. Decision rights without cadence are capacity without a schedule: the organization is able to decide but confronts reality only when someone forces the issue. Cadence without decision rights is a schedule without capacity: the rhythm produces meetings that cannot resolve what they surface. Together they produce what neither produces alone - an organization that meets reality on a fixed rhythm and does something about it every time. Without both, the organization has meetings, but not clockspeed.

Cadence follows ownership

The right cadence is not universal. It follows the ownership context and the speed of the situation.

In a sponsor-backed company, the cadence has to run ahead of the governance calendar. The board and the sponsor will review the business quarterly regardless; the only question is whether management's own rhythm surfaces and resolves issues first. If the board is the first place where major execution issues become visible, the management cadence is already too slow.

In a founder-led business, the cadence typically lives in the founder's head - real, fast, and completely untransferable. The work is externalizing it: turning instinct into forums, thresholds, and reviews that operate without the founder in the room, which is the first honest test of whether the business can outgrow the person who built it.

In a turnaround or integration, the clock compresses. Monthly becomes weekly, weekly becomes daily, and the cadence itself becomes the primary management tool - not because meetings create value, but because in a fast-deteriorating or fast-changing situation, the interval between confrontations with reality is the risk.

Designing the cadence

Like decision rights, cadence fails at both extremes. Too little design, and the calendar fills with meetings that have attendees but no job. Too much, and the organization spends its operating capacity servicing its own review process.

Underneath the design questions sits one principle: the calendar is only the floor. It sets the minimum frequency at which the business confronts reality; thresholds and triggers set the actual tempo. A variance beyond tolerance, an initiative slipping a second time, a customer loss - these force items onto the agenda because something happened, not because it is Tuesday. A meeting held only because it is Tuesday has nothing forcing its agenda, which is why calendar-only cadences decay into theater.

The design questions are few:

EXHIBIT 4

Designing the operating cadence

	The question	What good looks like
01	**Which forums exist — and what is each one for?**	One job per forum; no forum without a job
02	**What altitude does each forum own?**	Enterprise, unit, function, team — nothing skipped, nothing duplicated
03	**What decisions can each forum actually make?**	Decision rights wired into the rhythm
04	**What puts an issue on the agenda?**	Thresholds and triggers, not habit
05	**What must arrive before the meeting?**	A pre-read discipline; the meeting starts informed
06	**Who owns each commitment coming out?**	Named owners and dates, not minutes
07	**When does an issue move up an altitude?**	Aging rules — nothing stays yellow for three quarters
08	**Which meetings should be killed?**	The calendar pays for the cadence

The last question is the one most designs skip. A cadence is a claim on the scarcest resource the company has - senior management attention - and every forum it adds must be funded by one it removes. A cadence that only adds meetings is not an operating system. It is overhead with an agenda.

The rhythm is the discipline

Somewhere this quarter, in a well-run company with capable leaders and a full calendar, an issue is turning yellow for the second time. The review will discuss it thoughtfully. Follow-ups will be assigned. And whether that issue gets resolved before it turns yellow a third time will have little to do with how hard anyone works and everything to do with whether the rhythm it lives inside is built to decide.

None of this is a silver bullet, and a redesigned calendar transforms nothing by itself. But cadence is where the compounding this series keeps returning to actually happens - or does not. Every cycle that converts review into decision makes the next cycle slightly faster, slightly more honest, slightly harder to perform theater in. Run that rhythm for eight quarters and the organization does not just meet more efficiently. It metabolizes reality faster than its competitors.

Operating cadence is not meeting cadence. It is not reporting theater with better slides. It is the management rhythm that keeps strategy, decisions, resources, and reality in the same room at the same time, on a schedule the business cannot drift away from. Everything else in this series describes what the operating system is. Cadence determines whether it runs. That is the operating discipline of enterprise value creation - not a framework adopted, but a rhythm kept.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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.

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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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