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ARCHITECTS OF ADVANTAGE

EXELIS INSIGHTS

Execution Architecture-
Where Strategy Becomes Work

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ARTICLE IN BRIEF

Strategy becomes executable only when it changes the work.

A corporate agenda is not an execution system. The strategy must be translated through business units, functions and teams into the objectives, measures, initiatives, decisions and operating cadence each layer actually controls.

01 Cascading is translation, not communication.

Shared language creates the appearance of alignment. Real alignment requires each level to define what it must do differently for the strategy to become true.

02 Compression creates discipline.

A one-page OGSMI forces priorities, measures, owners and trade-offs into view. What does not earn a line must be deferred, delegated or dropped.

03 The cascade must work in both directions.

Top-down direction establishes priorities and guardrails. Bottom-up reality testing exposes capacity, system, talent, data and dependency constraints.

04 Cadence keeps the architecture alive.

The cascade becomes a management system only when recurring forums produce decisions, resource movement, escalation and course correction.

> "The best-run companies do not simply communicate strategy better. They translate it better."

EXECUTION ARCHITECTURE

Execution Architecture-Where Strategy Becomes Work

By Todd O. Glassman

Execution is not about effort. It is about architecture. That was the argument of the previous article in this series: most companies do not fail to execute because people are not working hard. They fail because the organization has not built the operating system required to translate strategic intent into measurable, owned, sequenced, and repeatable action.

But execution architecture cannot stop at the corporate level. That is the next layer of the problem. A strategy may be clear at the board level, logical at the executive level, and compelling at the corporate level — and still fail to change the work that actually happens inside the business. That is where strategy either becomes real or breaks down.

Companies do not execute in enterprise themes. They execute in functions, business units, teams, workflows, systems, decisions, metrics, and management routines. This is where OGSMI — Objectives, Goals, Strategies, Measures, and Initiatives, the strategy-to-execution framework introduced in the previous article — does its most important work. Not as a planning template. As a translation mechanism.

At every level, the framework forces the same questions: What are we trying to achieve? What does success look like? How will we get there? How will progress be measured? What is the highest-impact work that must get done?

At the corporate level, those questions define the enterprise agenda. But the real power of OGSMI shows up when it is translated through the organization. A corporate strategy does not become executable because it has been communicated. It becomes executable when each business unit, function, and team can translate it into the work it actually controls.

Cascading is not communication

Too many companies treat cascading strategy as a communication exercise. The senior team develops the strategy. The organization hears the message. Business units build supporting plans. Functional leaders identify initiatives. Everyone appears aligned.

But alignment on language is not the same as alignment in work. The harder question is not, “Has everyone heard the strategy?” The harder question is, “Can each part of the organization define what it must do differently for the enterprise strategy to become true?” That is where the cascade becomes real.

I have watched this failure mode up close — often while helping prepare the very board decks that embody it. The materials arrive — eighty pages, sometimes a hundred — and they are immaculate. Every workstream has a slide. Every initiative has a status. Every function is represented. Then a sponsor asks the only question that matters: which three things on this agenda actually move the multiple, and are they on track? The room that produced eighty pages cannot answer in one. That is not a reporting problem. It is a cascade problem. The organization has mapped everything to the strategy and prioritized nothing within it — and the deck, for all its polish, is the evidence.

> "The organization has mapped everything to the strategy and prioritized nothing within it."

A corporate strategy may become a functional objective. A functional objective may become a set of team-level strategies. Those strategies may become measures, initiatives, milestones, decision rights, resource commitments, and operating routines. In other words, strategy becomes a driver tree — where each layer explains how it will make the layer above it true.

EXHIBIT 1

Where strategy becomes work

Enterprise Strategy
Objectives | Goals | Strategies | Measures | Initiatives

↓

Business Unit Priorities
Markets | Customers | Products | Platforms | Geography

↓

Functional Objectives
Capabilities | Processes | Systems | Metrics | Governance | Resources

↓

Team-Level Work
Initiatives | Milestones | Decision Rights | Cadence | Accountability

↓

Operating Outcomes
Progress | Capability | Enterprise Value

Enterprise strategy becomes executable only when each layer of the organization translates the layer above into the objectives, measures, initiatives, decisions and cadence it actually controls.

Each level of the organization should become a driver of the level above it. The corporate agenda defines the value creation logic. Business units translate that logic into market, customer, product, platform, or geographic priorities. Functions translate it into capabilities, processes, systems, metrics, governance, and resource requirements. Teams translate it into the weekly and monthly work that actually moves the business. Done well, the cascade does not dilute the strategy. It makes it more precise.

A financial services example

At the corporate level, one objective might be to build a leading embedded insurance platform — a sponsor-backed insurtech that puts insurance at the point of transaction for lenders, retailers, and digital platforms. That may be exactly the right enterprise ambition. It defines the market, the customer, the platform opportunity, and the value creation target.

But no organization can practically execute that ambition as written. The business has to translate it into the operating drivers it actually controls. On one page, the translation looks like this:

EXHIBIT 2

The one-page OGSMI - an illustrative example

OBJECTIVE Build the leading embedded insurance platform for lenders, retailers, and digital platforms - creating durable enterprise value within the ownership window.

GOALS

- **Revenue $25M to $85M over the hold**
- **25% EBITDA margin**
- **3.0x+ MOIC over a five-year hold**

STRATEGY	MEASURES	INITIATIVES
STRATEGY 1 **Embedded distribution** Partner with lenders, retailers, and digital platforms to offer insurance at the point of transaction.	• Partner attach rate • Policies per partner • Net revenue per policy	• Partner vertical selection • Integration and onboarding • Referral economics and pricing
STRATEGY 2 **Technology licensing** License underwriting, rating, and policy administration technology to carriers and MGAs on a SaaS basis.	• Platform clients live • Annual recurring revenue • Net revenue retention	• Carrier and MGA development • Implementation playbook • Client success model
STRATEGY 3 **Organization and operating platform** Build the infrastructure, licensing footprint, leadership depth, and reporting discipline required to scale.	• Operating cost per policy • State licensing footprint • Reporting cycle time	• Regulatory foundation • Systems build-out • Organization and decision rights • Institutional reporting

DISCIPLINE RULES: Three to five goals per objective | three to four strategies | up to five measures per strategy | three to five initiatives per strategy

The one-page OGSMI compresses enterprise ambition into a manageable set of goals, strategies, measures and owned initiatives.

That is execution architecture: turning a platform ambition into the specific operating drivers, measures, initiatives, and management routines required to scale it.

The same logic applies across the enterprise. A commercial strategy to deepen customer relationships has to become segmentation, coverage model, product penetration, pricing, sales productivity, account management routines, customer retention, and revenue quality. An operating leverage strategy has to become process redesign, systems modernization, procurement discipline, organizational simplification, automation, capacity planning, and performance management. A platform professionalization strategy has to become leadership depth, decision rights, reporting quality, controls, governance, scalable systems, documented processes, and reduced key-person dependency.

The pattern is the same.

Enterprise strategy has to become functional work. Functional work has to become measurable operating drivers. Operating drivers have to become owned initiatives. Owned initiatives have to be governed through cadence. Cadence has to produce decisions, resource allocation, escalation, and course correction. Without that chain, strategy remains too high in the organization.

> Strategy has to become functional work. Functional work has to become measurable operating drivers.

It may be understood. It may be supported. It may even be repeated frequently. But it is not yet executable.

The false comfort of alignment

The danger is that every level of the organization appears aligned because everyone is using the same words: growth, margin expansion, operating leverage, customer experience, integration, scalability, cost advantage. These are useful strategic themes, but they are not yet work. Until they are translated into the operating language of each function, they remain abstractions. That is where many companies get stuck.

The executive team thinks it has cascaded the strategy because the organization can repeat the message. Functional leaders think they are aligned because they can map their initiatives to the corporate priorities. Teams think they are contributing because their work appears somewhere on the plan. But the real test is more demanding:

EXHIBIT 3

The real test of a cascade

	THE QUESTION	WHAT A YES REQUIRES
01	**Is the work causal?**	› A defensible link from the work to the enterprise outcome
02	**Does it actually drive the enterprise outcome?**	› Driver logic, not thematic mapping
03	**Is it measurable?**	› A metric that would reveal failure, not just report activity
04	**Is it owned?**	› One accountable name, not a supportive function
05	**Is it sequenced?**	› An explicit order - what must happen first
06	**Is it resourced?**	› Committed people, capital, and capacity, not assumed ones
07	**Is it governed?**	› A forum that reviews it and can act on it
08	**Does it force trade-offs?**	› Something else was deprioritized to make room
09	**Does it make clear what should stop?**	› Named work that was explicitly ended

A real cascade creates line of sight from enterprise ambition to the work, measures and decisions each level controls.

A good cascade does not just create alignment. It creates line of sight. Line of sight means every function understands how its work connects to enterprise value. It means every team can see which objectives it supports, which measures it moves, which initiatives it owns, and which decisions require escalation.

It also means leadership can see where the strategy is breaking down. That may be the most important benefit. A real cascade exposes the truth.

It shows where the strategy is under-resourced. It reveals where the organization has too many priorities. It surfaces conflicting goals across functions. It exposes system constraints, data gaps, talent gaps, capability gaps, decision bottlenecks, and cross-functional dependencies. That is uncomfortable. But it is necessary.

If the cascade only confirms that everyone is “aligned,” it is probably not doing its job. A good strategy cascade should create productive tension. It should force leaders to confront whether the company has the data, talent, systems, decision rights, capacity, and discipline to execute the ambition — and whether they are willing to make the trade-offs required.

This is why cascading OGSMI must work both top-down and bottom-up. Top-down, the corporate agenda provides direction, priorities, guardrails, and value creation logic. Bottom-up, the functions and business units provide reality testing. They reveal what it will actually take to execute: resources, sequencing, timing, dependencies, constraints, risks, and capability requirements.

That bottom-up feedback loop is critical. Without it, a corporate value creation plan can become detached from operating reality. It assumes capacity that does not exist. It assumes systems that are not ready. It assumes data that is not reliable. It assumes functional dependencies will resolve themselves. They usually do not.

That is how good strategies become overloaded execution agendas. Cascading OGSMI helps prevent that by making the work explicit. It forces each level of the organization to define its role in the strategy with enough specificity to be managed.

The discipline of subtraction

But it also forces something else: subtraction.

A cascade that only adds work is not an execution system. It is a burden. If every corporate priority creates more functional priorities, and every functional priority creates more team priorities, the organization eventually drowns. The plan becomes a multiplication machine for initiatives. Everything matters. Nothing is sequenced. Management bandwidth becomes the constraint. That is not architecture. That is accumulation.

A good cascade should narrow the agenda as it moves down the organization. It should clarify the critical few drivers that matter most. It should force leaders to decide what will be funded, what will be delayed, what will be simplified, and what will be stopped. The illustrative example above already made this point quietly: what makes the page credible is not the initiatives on it, but the dozens that did not survive it.

> What makes the page credible is not the initiatives on it, but the dozens that did not survive it.

This is where strategy becomes leadership. Not in the articulation of ambition, but in the discipline to make trade-offs. At the corporate level, trade-offs are often conceptual. At the functional level, they become real.

A company cannot simultaneously pursue every growth idea, every margin opportunity, every system upgrade, every integration priority, every customer initiative, and every reporting improvement with equal intensity. The organization has finite capacity. That means the cascade has to become a mechanism for resource allocation, not just alignment.

The practical test is simple: Does the cascade help leaders make better decisions about where time, capital, talent, and management attention should go?

If not, it is not yet an execution architecture. It is just another planning artifact.

Cadence keeps the cascade alive

Even a well-designed cascade will degrade without an operating rhythm to manage it. The plan has to be reviewed, tested, adjusted, and reinforced — through forums that produce decisions, resource movement, and course correction, not just updates. That operating cadence is a discipline of its own, and one I will take up later in this series. For now, the point is narrower: a cascade is not a document. It is a management system, and management systems live or die by the rhythm that runs them.

That is how a strategy cascade stays alive. It is also how an organization builds execution muscle over time. The goal is not to produce a better plan once a year. The goal is to build a management system that continually connects strategy, resources, work, measures, and decisions.

That is where durable enterprise value gets built. Not in the corporate statement of intent. Not in the annual planning deck. Not in the town hall. Not in the list of initiatives. Value is built when strategy becomes specific enough to change what functions do, what teams prioritize, what leaders measure, what resources get allocated, what meetings decide, and what capabilities become repeatable.

That is the real power of execution architecture. It translates strategy into work. It turns alignment into accountability. It turns enterprise ambition into functional ownership. It turns the value creation plan into a driver tree of measurable action.

The best-run companies do not simply communicate strategy better. They translate it better. And the surest sign the translation is working is not what the organization has added. It is what it has stopped. A shorter list of initiatives. A smaller set of measures that actually get managed. Fewer priorities, held with more force. When the cascade is real, the strategy gets narrower as it moves closer to the work — and the work, finally, gets done.

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.

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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