

# 10 Strategies for Successful Project Execution

by [Naomi Caietti](#) | Feb 20, 2018

Is your organization failing to close the gaps between strategy and execution? Fortunately, there are strategies (and tools!) you can use to help you close those gaps, yet it isn't easy.

And you're not alone in this challenge.

PMI's [Pulse of the Profession Report 2107](#) shared that many senior leaders acknowledge that their organizations often struggle to bridge the gap between strategy formulation and its day-to-day implementation. The struggle is real; executive leaders that were surveyed reported that over the last year, only 60 percent of their strategic initiatives met goals.

Let's review strategies and tools you can use, and learn how they can help you close that gap to promote successful project execution. We'll hear from experts and review key takeaways that project leaders can immediately put into practice in their programs and projects.

What is Project Execution?

During the five process groups of the project life cycle, there are multiple objectives and outcomes for each phase. After the project initiation and the planning processes, the execution of the project begins.

Successful CEOs Ram Charan and Larry Bossidy define execution in their book [Executive: The Discipline of Getting Things Done](#): "Execution is a specific set of behaviors and techniques that companies need to master in order to have competitive advantage. It's a discipline of its own."

Project execution is the third phase of the project life cycle and one of the most vital of the project phases. It is the phase where you will construct your deliverables and present them to your customer and key stakeholders. This is usually the longest phase of the project life cycle and predictably the most demanding.

Project execution's key purpose is to complete the work defined in the project management plan and to meet key project objectives. During this phase a project leader will focus on these key processes:

- Managing people
- Following processes
- Communicating information to all key stakeholders, sponsors and team members

Now that we've covered that, what can program and project managers do to help their organizations close those gaps and add value along the way?

Closing the Execution Gap

There are two pieces to closing the gap:

- Aligning the strategic plan goals and objectives
- Executing in the program and project delivery of outcomes that meet those objectives

Closing that execution gap, also known as the strategy gap, is one of the most frustrating challenges facing business leaders today. The execution gap is a perceived gap between a company's strategies and expectations and its ability to meet those goals and put ideas into action.

## 6 Execution Gaps to Watch Out For

Over the last several years, there have been numerous books focused on how to solve the gaps regarding strategy and execution. These books suggest that sponsors are critical to filling these gaps, as well as implementing a well-defined framework.

Organizations that implement an executive strategy to turn strategic goals into business value will discover the “larger system” for success – the C-suite executives, middle management, project manager and project team.

Earlier this year, another book was released called Filling Execution Gaps by Todd Williams. Williams' book takes it one step further to clearly identify “six execution gaps” to close for realizing repeatable project success.

Per the latest PMI Pulse of the Profession 2017, “C-suite continues to be largely focused on bridging strategy formulation and execution and tackling technology and business disruption.” Williams' research reveals the gaps we've been missing.

Williams' research identifies six primary gaps that prevent successful project execution:

- Absence of common understanding
- Disengaged executive sponsors
- Misalignment with strategic goals
- Poor change management
- Ineffective governance
- Lackluster leadership

Shouldn't it be more complicated than this? The reality is that fixing each gap individually is not the solution. The real challenge is finding solutions, developing actions plans and implementing strategy to fix *all* six gaps. According to Williams, it's not rocket science, but understanding how each gap affects your program initiatives is key to the most critical phase of your project – execution.

PROJECT <b>MANAGER</b>			
10 Strategies for Project Execution			
	<b>Begin with the End in Mind</b> By keeping the end in sight, you're more likely to stay aligned with strategy.		<b>Get Buy-In</b> If your team doesn't understand the strategy, they're not going to know what to do.
	<b>Leaders Have the Skills</b> It's crucial to have the correct combination of skills, from business to technical, in order to get the job done.		<b>Build High-Performing Teams</b> The right team, with the right skills, who are informed on strategy, will lead to success.
	<b>Monitor with Accountability</b> Keep the lines of communication open, and follow the progress of performance of your team.		<b>Listen to Lead</b> A leader doesn't bark orders, but seeks feedback and fosters a dialogue with the team to better communication.
	<b>Be Flexible</b> Every project is different. You must be open to change and nimble in your response to it.		<b>Celebrate</b> Note small wins and milestones, boosting morale by acknowledging teamwork.
	<b>Team Effort</b> There's no "I" in team. Everyone works together towards a common goal.		<b>Fail Better</b> Don't let failure creep up on you when it's too late to do anything about it.

## Strategic Tips to Improve Project Execution

Let's review some strategies to promote successful project execution.

### 1. Begin with the End in Mind

It's a good idea to consider the alignment of strategy with your program or projects and the projected final outcomes. A big problem with going from concept to implementation is simply a lack of clearly defined goals and objectives.

Executives who cannot define what they want accomplished can hardly expect project leaders to understand their strategy and lead their projects with any level of meaningful contribution.

### 2. Gain Buy-in from Your Core Team

Executives require the efforts of others. Executives must be able to effectively communicate to sponsors, program and project managers what they want done and, more importantly, why they want to do it.

Clear and concise communication is vitally important. A well-defined project up front will help earn the buy-in from your team and stakeholders, and it sets the stage for your team.

Furthermore, explaining the vision behind strategic decisions gives this core team a deeper understanding of how their knowledge and work will contribute to the larger whole. Without this understanding it is easy for them to feel isolated instead of feeling like engaged

participants in a meaningful enterprise. Using collaborative project management software is an ideal way to keep everyone working as a team while keeping sight of primary objectives.

### 3. Project Leaders Get Their Projects Across the Finish Line

To make sure strategies get put into motion, you must make sure you have the talent with the right project leadership skill sets to manage the project. Today, PMI recognizes the need to have a trio of skill sets in the areas of leadership, strategic and business management, and technical project management.

Emotional intelligence and self-awareness continue to be essential skillsets for project leaders. You also need to better understand yourself to lead others. Plan to acquire any just-in-time training so you have the necessary working knowledge for your role on the project. Every project leader should have a personal career roadmap in place to fill behavior or competency gaps.

### 4. Build a High Performing Team

You should aim to build a highly qualified team that can help define the right strategies and alignments for your programs and projects. Project leaders that can align their vision and work with their teams will successfully deliver key programs and projects. The alignment of vision and strategy to implementation will help you close those gaps.

### 5. Monitor Progress and Performance through Accountability

Implementing any strategy involves meetings to discuss the various projects and programs that will be required. Meetings are critical to help bring together the focus in this phase to do the following:

- Manage people
- Follow processes
- Communicate information to all key stakeholders, sponsors and team members

Meetings are a great way to firm up agreements, document actionable items, identify risks/issues and hold your team members accountable to follow through to produce results.

Keep the line of communication open throughout the project. Make sure to follow up before, during and after meetings regarding outstanding action items, issues and risks. Make sure not to micromanage, and adjust your leadership style based on the situation and the team member.

### 6. Listen to Lead

Project leaders don't have crystal balls to see the future to avoid unknown risks and issues. What they can do is tap into the collective knowledge of their team. Listening is an underutilized skillset of many leaders, and if you want to close gaps, you need to learn to listen.

Rely on input and feedback from your team, stakeholder and customers as required. Be prepared to filter out any information that doesn't add value.

## 7. Be Open and Flexible

Every project is unique. Project leaders must be nimble, adaptable and flexible to adjust and course correct their projects. The project execution phase will reveal unanticipated problems or issues, so project leaders must be prepared to pivot and make tactical changes.

## 8. Celebrate Incremental Achievements Along the Way

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. Break down the project execution phases into smaller parts. Celebrate at each phase. Celebrate milestones, quick wins and refinements to improve processes and performance.

The execution phase will be one of your longest phases and will take the most time and energy from your team. It's a great time to boost morale and acknowledge team efforts.

## 9. There Is No "I" in Team

There are no projects that are completed successfully without the efforts of your team. Acknowledge and give credit to your team for being instrumental to the success of the program or project. Project leadership is all about growing other leaders in your organization. Also, any great leader knows that the success of their programs and projects is because it's a team effort.

## 10. Champion a New Reality

Failure is hard to recognize without hindsight, so should we champion a new reality? I've seen many projects and programs complete their implementation only to be considered a failure in a few years. Fail fast, fail forward.

Organizations that focus on alignment of their vision and strategy in programs and projects will yield a higher rate of project success. It's clear that the closing of these gaps improves an organizations' ability to produce repeatable best practices and reap a return on investment.

Remember the words of business and management guru, Michael LeBeouf, "A satisfied customer is the best business strategy of all."