CATALYST COLLECTIVE GROUP

Strategic Insight Series

From Vision to Execution

Turning Strategic Plans into Measurable Organizational Performance

A Case Study on Strategy Execution, Organizational Alignment, and the Discipline of Delivering Results

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Catalyzing Growth. Building Influence. Creating Legacy.

I. The Premise: Why Vision Is Not the Bottleneck

Every organization I have advised whether it be a nonprofit, government, healthcare, coalition, or mission-driven business has a vision. Very few have a system for making that vision measurable. That gap is not a communications problem or a leadership-charisma problem. It is a structural and operational problem, and it is the single most predictable reason well-intentioned organizations stall.

At Catalyst Collective Group, I have sat across the table from boards who could recite their mission statement flawlessly and could not tell me what changed operationally in the ninety days after their strategic plan was adopted. That disconnect is not a failure of intelligence or commitment. It is a failure of infrastructure, the absence of the mechanisms that translate intent into action, action into measurement, and measurement into accountability. This case study examines that disconnect through both my own field experience and the peer-reviewed management research that has spent four decades trying to explain it.

The central argument of this paper is simple, and the research bears it out: strategy formulation and strategy execution are two different disciplines that require two different sets of organizational muscle. An organization can be brilliant at the first and still fail completely at the second. Closing that gap, not writing a better plan is where measurable performance actually gets built.

II. What the Research Tells Us About the Execution Gap

The scale of the strategy-execution gap is well documented and, frankly, sobering. Early estimates from Kaplan and Norton (2001) and Mintzberg (1994) placed strategy implementation failure rates somewhere between fifty and ninety percent, a range so wide that later scholars have rightly questioned its precision. Cândido and Santos (2015), in a rigorous review published in the Journal of Management & Organization, concluded that while the oft-cited seventy-to-ninety-percent failure statistic is likely inflated by weak methodology in the underlying studies, the directional finding holds: a substantial majority of formulated strategies never fully materialize as intended, and the true rate remains difficult to pin down precisely because so few organizations measure implementation with any rigor at all.

Sull, Homkes, and Sull, writing in Harvard Business Review (2015), offer one of the more actionable diagnoses. Their research found that execution breakdowns are rarely caused by a flawed strategy itself. Instead, they trace back to a handful of recurring, correctable failures: employees who cannot articulate the organization's top priorities, middle managers who lack the authority or clarity to translate strategy into daily decisions, and cross-functional coordination that collapses the moment a plan crosses a departmental line. Their point, and mine, is that execution fails in the handoff, not in the boardroom where the plan was written.

> *"A sound strategy without execution discipline produces no results. Strong execution without strategic direction produces efficiency pointed in the wrong direction," the central tension every organization I advise is quietly navigating, whether they name it or not.*

A more recent systematic review by Anand, Holm, and Kringelum (2025), published in Review of Managerial Science, analyzed 160 peer-reviewed studies on strategy implementation and arrived at a conclusion that mirrors what I have observed directly with clients: successful execution is not the product of any single lever. It is the product of a well-structured, competent management team deploying multiple interdependent levers at once: managerial skill, organizational structure, communication discipline, and a culture capable of learning from its own mistakes. Strategy implementation, they note, remains a relative "black box" in management scholarship precisely because so much research energy has gone into strategy formulation and so little into what happens after the plan is approved (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021, as cited in Anand et al., 2025).

This matters because it reframes the client conversation I have most often. Leadership teams tend to ask me to help them write a better plan. What they actually need, in the overwhelming majority of cases, is help building the operating system that makes an already-reasonable plan executable, visible, and correctable in real time.

III. The Four Levers: What the Literature Says Actually Moves Execution

The Anand, Holm, and Kringelum (2025) review is useful because it does not treat execution as a single variable. It clusters the drivers of successful implementation into managerial levers and organizational levers, and in my own practice at Catalyst Collective Group I have found this framing maps almost exactly onto the failure patterns I see in client organizations. I have organized the research into four practical levers below.

1. Managerial Capability and Consensus

Hard management skills such as resource planning, risk assessment, and the disciplined use of frameworks such as strategy maps matter, but the research is emphatic that soft skills carry at least as much weight. Middle managers function as the organization's translators, converting executive intent into team-level action, and their effectiveness depends heavily on trust, social capital, and their ability to exert influence both upward and downward (Ahearne, Lam, & Kraus, 2014). Where commitment and consensus are low, even a technically sound plan implements slowly and unevenly, because decision consensus itself takes time to build (Dooley, Fryxell, & Judge, 2000, as cited in Anand et al., 2025). This is precisely why I never let a strategic plan leave the room without naming who owns each initiative by name, not by department.

2. Organizational Structure and Resource Orchestration

Strategy and structure are inseparable. When decision rights, accountability, and resource allocation are ambiguous, execution stalls regardless of how well-conceived the underlying strategy is (Neilson, Martin, & Powers, 2008). The research also warns against a common overcorrection: dispersing authority without clarity creates its own drag, and heavy-handed centralization can be just as damaging as none at all. The lesson for leadership teams is that structural change should follow strategic intent deliberately, not be treated as a side effect of it.

3. Communication and Operationalization

Lack of communication is one of the most frequently cited barriers to strategy implementation across the literature (Alexander, 1985; Heide, Grønhaug, & Johannessen, 2002). Critically, the research is clear that this is not primarily a volume problem, organizations do not fail because they communicated too little about strategy. They fail because they communicated without verifying comprehension, and because strategy was never broken down into the concrete, day-to-day activities that make it real for the people doing the work (Sull, Homkes, & Sull, 2015; Bhimani & Langfield-Smith, 2007). Operationalization, assigning clear responsibilities against clearly defined activities, is what separates a strategy document from a strategy that is actually being lived out.

4. Culture and Organizational Learning

Strategy implementation is never executed flawlessly on the first attempt, and the organizations that succeed are the ones that treat early missteps as data rather than failure. Organizational learning, the capacity to adapt procedures based on what implementation reveals, is a recurring predictor of long-term execution success (Argyris, 1989; Lee & Puranam, 2016). Dobni (2003) put it plainly in his research: meaningful changes to strategy are best supported by a corresponding change in culture, not by process documentation alone.

IV. Measurement as the Bridge Between Vision and Results

If the four levers above explain why execution breaks down, the balanced scorecard tradition pioneered by Robert Kaplan and David Norton explains what closes the gap. Their original 1992 Harvard Business Review article reframed performance measurement around four interdependent perspectives: financial, customer, internal process, and learning and growth, precisely because organizations that measured only lagging financial outcomes had no early warning system for strategic drift. Their later development of the strategy map (Kaplan & Norton, 2004) took this further, giving leadership teams a single-page visual of how strategic objectives are causally linked to one another, from workforce capability all the way through to mission or financial outcomes.

This is not measurement for its own sake. Empirical research by Hu, Leopold-Wildburger, and Strohhecker (2017), published in the European Journal of Operational Research, found that when strategy map concepts are embedded directly into a management “cockpit,” a live, visual decision-support tool, organizational performance measurably improves relative to organizations using static reporting alone. The mechanism is intuitive: leaders make better decisions faster when the cause-and-effect logic of their strategy is visible in the same tool they use to run the business, rather than buried in a planning document reviewed once a year.

Kaplan and Norton's later work (2008) on “mastering the management system” makes the same point I make with every client: a scorecard that is reviewed annually is a compliance artifact. A scorecard reviewed monthly, tied to resource allocation and initiative prioritization, is a management system. The difference between those two postures is, in my experience, the difference between organizations that talk about their strategic plan and organizations that are visibly being changed by it.

V. Applying the Framework: The Catalyst Growth Journey™ in Practice

At Catalyst Collective Group, we do not hand clients a strategic plan and walk away. We move them through The Catalyst Growth Journey™, a seven-phase methodology built specifically to close the gap the research above describes, between a vision that sounds right in a boardroom and a set of operating results that a board can actually verify a year later.

To illustrate how this plays out, consider a composite drawn from the pattern I see repeatedly across mission-driven organizations in our portfolio: a regional nonprofit coalition, call it the organization type common to our client base, rather than naming any single engagement, entering a period of leadership transition with an ambitious three-year vision, a supportive board, and no operational mechanism for tracking whether the vision was becoming reality. The following table maps how each phase of the Journey addresses a specific, research-documented execution failure point.

Phase	What the Research Warns Against	Catalyst Action Taken	Measurable Shift
Discover	Strategy formed without stakeholder involvement, which weakens later commitment (Elbanna et al., 2016)	Structured stakeholder assessment across board, staff, and funders before any goal-setting began	Baseline alignment score established as the first tracked metric
Design	Vision with no causal link to operational drivers (Kaplan & Norton, 2004)	Built a one-page strategy map connecting mission outcomes to internal processes and capacity investments	Three-year vision translated into 9 measurable strategic objectives
Develop	Capability gap between plan and staff skillset (Kerr & Jackofsky, 1989)	Named individual owners for each objective; closed two identified skill gaps via targeted development	100% of objectives assigned a named accountable owner

Phase	What the Research Warns Against	Catalyst Action Taken	Measurable Shift
Deploy	Communication without verified comprehension (Sull, Homkes & Sull, 2015)	Cascaded scorecard to department level with plain-language operationalized activities	Staff strategy-recall surveyed pre/post rollout
Demonstrate	Annual-only review cycles that miss strategic drift (Kaplan & Norton, 2008)	Installed a monthly scorecard cadence tied to budget and initiative reprioritization	Time-to-detect off-track initiatives cut from ~12 months to 30 days
Deliver	Treating early missteps as failure rather than learning input (Argyris, 1989)	Built a quarterly retrospective into governance rhythm to adjust tactics without abandoning strategy	Two initiatives redesigned mid-year based on scorecard data, both later met target
Distinguish	Results that are real but never externally evidenced or leveraged for growth	Packaged verified outcomes into funder- and board-ready impact reporting	Outcome data used to secure renewed and expanded funding commitments

What this composite pattern illustrates is not a single dramatic turnaround, it is the accumulation of small, research-backed corrections applied consistently. No single phase of the Catalyst Growth Journey™ is, by itself, revolutionary. What produces measurable performance is the discipline of running all seven in sequence, with a scorecard connecting each one to the next, so that vision is never more than one review cycle away from evidence.

VI. What Leaders Should Take Away From This

Three findings from this body of research and field experience should reshape how leadership teams think about their next strategic planning cycle.

- Execution is a distinct discipline. Do not staff, budget, or schedule for strategy formulation and assume execution will take care of itself. The research is unambiguous that these require different skills, different cadences, and often different people in the room (Anand, Holm, & Kringelum, 2025).
- Measurement has to be causal, not just comprehensive. A dashboard full of metrics that are not linked to one another in a strategy map does not tell leadership why performance is moving. It only tells them that it is (Kaplan & Norton, 2004; Hu, Leopold-Wildburger, & Strohhecker, 2017).
- The review cadence is itself a strategic choice. An annual review is a filing exercise. A monthly or quarterly review, tied to budget and initiative decisions, is a management system capable of catching drift while it is still cheap to correct (Kaplan & Norton, 2008).

- Culture determines whether the data gets used. All the measurement infrastructure in the world will not help an organization that punishes the bearer of bad news. Organizational learning capacity, more than any single tool, determines whether a scorecard becomes a genuine feedback loop or a quiet source of anxiety (Argyris, 1989; Lee & Puranam, 2016).

VII. Conclusion: From Vision to Velocity

The organizations I respect most are not the ones with the most polished vision statements. They are the ones that can tell me, without hesitation, what changed operationally last quarter because of their strategy, and show me the data to prove it. That is the standard the research points toward, and it is the standard Catalyst Collective Group holds every engagement to.

Vision sets direction. Execution, built on the right managerial capability, the right structure, disciplined communication, and a culture willing to learn from its own data, is what turns that direction into velocity. The gap between the two is not closed by inspiration. It is closed by infrastructure and building that infrastructure, phase by phase, metric by metric, is the work.

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About Catalyst Collective Group

Catalyst Collective Group (CCG) is a strategic growth and business development advisory firm that helps organizations build the partnerships, positioning, and operational capacity required to scale outcomes. We support nonprofits, government agencies, educational institutions, healthcare organizations, foundations, and mission-driven businesses with solutions that include executive strategy, partnership development, operational excellence, revenue diversification, and community impact planning—ensuring growth is aligned, measurable, and sustainable.

Our mission is to transform ideas into investment, partnerships into progress, and vision into measurable, sustainable impact.

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