

Designing for Execution

A Strategic Project Design Perspective

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Most Projects Don't Fail in Execution. They Fail in Design.

Senior leaders know the pattern. A major initiative launches with energy and commitment. Teams are assembled, timelines built, and resources allocated. Six months later, the work begins to stall. Often, the problem is not an incapable team. The initiative was never fully designed before execution began.

The weakness starts earlier, when teams move into planning before answering the questions that determine whether the project can succeed in the first place.

Forbes found that 54% of technology project failures are attributable to poor management, while only 3% stem from technical problems. Whatever the specific cause, many failures that become visible during execution have roots in decisions made much earlier.

Organizations often respond by strengthening project management: better Gantt charts, tighter budgets, clearer accountability, and stronger PMO oversight. All of these can help. But they improve the planning and execution layer. They do not correct a weak project design.

You cannot plan your way out of a flawed design.

> *"A much stronger focus on implementation is urgently needed in this change-driven world… this is the perfect guide to help you and your organization navigate through this new reality successfully."* —Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, former Global Chairman, Project Management Institute (PMI)

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Planning Is Not Design. The Difference Is Everything.

Planning is about tasks, schedules, resources, responsibilities, and timing. It answers the question: **How do we get there?** Design comes first. It determines what the project is intended to accomplish, why it matters, how success will be measured, and what conditions must hold for the proposed approach to work.

An architect creates the blueprint before contractors break ground. Strategic Project Design serves a similar purpose. It creates the logic that project planning and execution will follow. Without that logic, teams can become very good at managing activities without knowing whether those activities will produce the results that matter.

The Logical Framework: Strategy and Execution on One Page.

> *"Terry's process and framework helps organizations better select and justify projects that are 'strategy relevant.'"* —Howard Rohm, Cofounder and President, Balanced Scorecard Institute

The Logical Framework—known as the LogFrame—is the tool that makes Strategic Project Design rigorous, repeatable, and fast. Originally developed for USAID and used worldwide, it has since been adopted by national laboratories, technology firms, defense programs, R&D organizations, and executive teams who need to move from strategic intent to execution-ready design without losing the thread between the two.

Four levels of Objectives structure the thinking:

- **Goal —** The strategic intent: why this initiative matters to the organization.
- **Purpose —** The specific change or benefit this project is meant to deliver.
- **Outcomes —** The concrete deliverables the team controls.
- **Inputs —** The activities and resources that produce those deliverables.

These four levels are linked by a simple logic

"If Inputs, ***Then*** Outcomes***,***
If Outcomes***, Then*** Purpose***,***
If Purpose***, Then*** Goal***"***

Objectives	Success Measures	Verification	Assumptions
Goal WHY?			
Purpose Why?			
Outcomes What?			
Inputs How?	When? Who?		

The Logical Framework Matrix

The Four Critical Strategic Project Questions

The Logical Framework helps us to systematically answer and agree on these critical design questions:

1. What are we trying to accomplish and why?
2. How will we measure success?
3. What other conditions must exist?
4. How do we get there?

At its core, the LogFrame treats the project as a testable hypothesis. If we invest these resources and carry out these activities, we expect to produce these Outcomes. If those Outcomes are produced, we expect to achieve the Purpose. If the Purpose is achieved, it should contribute to the larger Goal.

But each connection depends on assumptions: conditions that must exist for one level to lead to the next. The LogFrame makes both the logic and the assumptions visible so they can be challenged before execution begins.

This causal logic turns a project from a collection of activities into a hypothesis that leaders and teams can examine and improve.

The sequence matters. **Questions 1 through 3 are design questions. Question 4 is the planning question.** The first three establish what we are trying to accomplish and why, how success will be measured, and what other conditions must exist. Only then should the team ask: How do we get there?

Many organizations jump quickly to Question 4 because planning feels like progress. Schedules appear, responsibilities are assigned, and work begins. But when the first three questions remain unresolved, the plan may simply make a weak design more efficient.

Strategic Project Design is not added bureaucracy. It is an upfront discipline for creating clarity before major commitments are made. When leaders genuinely agree on the objective levels, measures, and assumptions, they have a shared model of success that can withstand personnel changes, budget pressures, and scope debates better than a project schedule alone.

When Leaders Reach for the LogFrame

The LogFrame adds the most value when the cost of misunderstanding or misalignment is high. Senior leaders, program managers, and project teams use it when:

- The strategic mission has shifted, but the portfolio of active initiatives has not caught up.
- A critical initiative is being launched with significant resource commitments and cross-functional dependencies.
- Multiple stakeholders or organizations must align quickly around a shared definition of success.
- A troubled project needs a structured diagnosis: **Is this a design problem or an execution problem?**
- Risk is high and the tolerance for costly mid-course correction is low.
- Resource or budget requests require a clear link between investment and strategic impact.

> *"My teams love this methodology and are actively applying these concepts to projects and programs that improve national security. This approach makes strategy simple, practical, and actionable."* —Tammy P. Taylor, Ph.D., former Chief Operating Officer, National Security Directorate, Pacific Northwest National Laboratory

Proof in practice: At one national laboratory, teams applied the LogFrame before beginning an advanced materials R&D cycle. By designing Outcomes and surfacing assumptions before test plans were built, they cut months from the program timeline and reduced rework. Leadership could also see how key milestones connected to mission goals because the design made those relationships explicit.

Where the Logical Framework Applies

The LogFrame adapts to virtually any strategic challenge. Here is where practitioners apply it most.

STRATEGY & ORGANIZATIONAL DIRECTION

• Design strategic plans and roadmaps tied to long-term goals	• Evaluate project and program feasibility before committing resources
• Reframe corporate vision, mission, and long-term aspirations	• Support critical decisions by clarifying trade-offs and assumptions
• Redesign organizational structures to support evolving strategy	• Justify resource and budget requests with a demonstrable logic chain

PROGRAM & PROJECT EXECUTION

• Launch critical initiatives with cross-functional alignment from day one	• Implement change management with structured adoption milestones
• Diagnose troubled projects: identify whether the failure is design or execution	• Plan facility expansions with clear timelines, budgets, and dependencies
• Improve product development coordination across functions and timelines	• Manage R&D initiatives with objectives tied directly to strategic goals

TECHNOLOGY & DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

• Drive digital transformation with strategy preceding system selection	• Implement data governance with defined accuracy, security, and access standards
• Plan and prioritize IT system upgrades against mission requirements	• Evaluate and manage vendor relationships as strategic partnerships
• Optimize software development by aligning features with user outcomes	• Scale business operations with resource and staffing plans tied to growth targets

PEOPLE, TALENT & ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

• Develop employee skills programs with clear learning objectives and success criteria	• Enhance cross-functional team collaboration around shared success models
• Revamp onboarding processes to accelerate time-to-productivity	• Improve customer experience through initiatives with defined, measurable outcomes

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About Terry Schmidt

Terry Schmidt is a recognized global expert in the Logical Framework Approach. He was part of the original LogFrame development team and has taught the methodology in 24 countries through USAID before adapting it for business, technology, and national security applications. He holds an engineering degree from the University of Washington and an MBA from Harvard, and is an award-winning instructor at UCLA Extension's Technical Management Program. He is the author of ***Strategic Project Management Made Simple*** and others, including Designing for Execution.



Ready to explore what this looks like for your organization? Email Terry at Info@ManagementPro.com or book a no-pressure strategy conversation at https://bit.ly/TerryStrategySession.