

Eliminate The Design Flaws That Show Up During Execution.

A Strategic Project Design Perspective

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I once watched a $40 million government modernization initiative unravel in slow motion.

Eighteen months into the effort, sprints were running, status reports were circulating, and steering committees were meeting regularly. Yet no one could answer one basic question:

What does success actually look like?

When the Deputy Secretary asked the team to demonstrate the intended Purpose, the room went silent. The initiative had a schedule, a budget, and a long list of deliverables, but its leaders had never reached a shared definition of what success meant.

The team had worked hard and followed the plan. The deeper problem was that the design behind the plan had never been fully examined. That kind of weakness is costly because it often stays hidden until substantial time, money, and credibility have already been committed.

Activity Can Hide a Weak Design

Busy teams often feel productive, even when their effort is not producing the intended result.

Gantt charts document movement. They do not prove that the work is moving in the right direction. Without a clear connection between effort and outcomes, a project can remain busy while steadily drifting away from the result it was meant to achieve.

The Challenger disaster revealed a similar pattern. The Rogers Commission examined the decision process that allowed known concerns to be discounted. The visible failure occurred during execution, but weaknesses in the reasoning behind the decision were already present before launch.

That pattern appears in many project failures. The breakdown becomes visible during execution, but the design flaw often begins much earlier.

Planning and Design Serve Different Purposes

Planning organizes the work: sequence, resources, responsibilities, timing, and coordination.

Design establishes the logic that makes the work worth doing. Before detailed project planning begins, leaders should be able to answer three basic questions:

What are we trying to accomplish? Why does it matter? What must be true for the proposed approach to work?

The first question requires a concrete definition of success. Broad aspirations are not enough. The intended result should be clear enough that an objective observer could determine whether it was achieved.

The second question connects the initiative to its larger purpose. What problem will it solve? Who will benefit? What change should occur? What happens if the problem remains unresolved?

The third question tests the causal logic. If the team completes the proposed work, is there a sound reason to expect the desired outcome? What assumptions support that expectation, and how confident are we that they will hold?

Teams often move quickly into planning because plans create visible progress. Whiteboards fill, schedules take shape, responsibilities are assigned, and documents multiply. But none of that proves the underlying project design is sound.

A detailed plan cannot rescue an initiative built on weak logic.

Five Practices for Designing Stronger Initiatives

1. Define success before listing activities.

“Improve customer satisfaction” points in a general direction. “Increase Net Promoter Score from 34 to 55 within 12 months” establishes a measurable result.

A clear target gives the team something specific to design toward. It also creates a basis for judging whether the initiative is actually producing the intended result.

2. Map and test the logic chain.

Every initiative contains a theory about cause and effect. Certain actions will produce outputs. Those outputs should create outcomes. Those outcomes should contribute to a larger purpose. Write that logic down and examine each connection. Look for leaps in reasoning, unsupported expectations, and dependencies that have not been tested.

A logic chain that looks convincing at first may reveal important weaknesses once the connections are made explicit.

3. Identify the critical assumptions.

Every project depends on conditions the team does not fully control. The market may respond. The technology may integrate. Leaders may remain aligned. Users may adopt the new system.

Naming these assumptions makes them easier to examine. Teams can gather evidence, monitor important conditions, and decide in advance what to do if an assumption proves false.

Assumptions are also a practical starting point for project risk analysis because they reveal where the design depends on conditions that may not hold.

4. Separate deliverables from the change they are meant to create.

Reports, systems, training programs, and product features are deliverables produced by the team. Their value depends on the change they enable. A training program matters because people apply new skills. A system matters because it improves decisions, service, speed, safety, cost, or some other meaningful result.

This distinction is essential. A team can deliver everything it promised and still fail to produce the intended change. Begin with the result you need, then work backward to determine which deliverables are actually necessary.

5. Conduct a design review before kickoff.

A project design review examines the logic of the initiative before detailed execution begins.

Do the proposed deliverables support the intended outcomes? Are the measures of success concrete? Have the major assumptions been identified? Does the cause-and-effect logic hold together?

A rigorous discussion at this stage may be uncomfortable. But it is far less costly than discovering a weak design after the project is underway.

The Question Worth Asking Before Approval

For more than three decades, I have asked leaders in boardrooms, government agencies, and technology organizations a simple question:

“If your team executes this initiative perfectly, on time, on budget, and according to plan, will it produce the outcome you need?”

The question often produces a long pause.

Many leaders can describe the work in detail. They know the milestones, the deliverables, and the people responsible. They are less certain about the change the work is expected to produce or the evidence supporting that expectation.

That uncertainty is where value is most likely to be lost.

Strategic Project Design addresses that uncertainty before execution begins. It makes outcomes, measures, assumptions, and causal logic explicit so leaders can test whether the proposed work has a reasonable chance of producing the intended result.

Design the logic first. Then build the plan around it.