

Three Illusions That Derail Projects Before They Start

A Strategic Project Design Perspective

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Most initiatives do not fail in the way people expect.

The strategy may be sound, the team capable, and the plan thorough. Months later, however, the results still fall short of what everyone thought they had agreed to achieve.

Execution usually takes the blame. Yet the real weakness often appears earlier, between deciding what to pursue and planning how to carry it out. This is where project design should clarify what the initiative is expected to accomplish and how it will produce the intended results. Too often, that step is rushed or skipped.

Three recurring patterns develop in this space. They can look like progress at first and become visible only after correction is costly. These illusions can undermine a well-run initiative before the first task is assigned.

1. The Alignment Illusion

“I Thought We All Agreed.”

The initiative launches with confidence. Everyone leaves the meeting believing expectations are shared. Soon, teams begin interpreting the same objective in different ways. Decisions reopen and conversations repeat.

The meeting produced agreement in principle, but not enough clarity to guide action.

A technology modernization effort began with unanimous support for its objectives. Six weeks later, tension surfaced between IT and operations. IT defined success as delivering the platform on schedule. Operations expected measurable workflow improvement. Each team acted on a reasonable interpretation of the agreement, but the group had never clearly defined what success required across both areas.

What Is Happening

The group had social agreement without a shared operating logic. No one had clearly mapped how the work would produce meaningful change or identified the conditions needed for that change to occur.

As a result, the initiative entered execution with important questions unresolved. More communication could not settle them because the underlying logic had never been clarified. The team had to renegotiate alignment while work was already underway, when changes were more disruptive and expensive.

How to Address It

Strategic Project Design makes the cause-and-effect logic visible before work begins. It clarifies what the initiative will deliver, what change those deliverables should produce, how success will be measured, and what conditions must exist for the logic to hold.

Teams can then move into planning and execution from a shared understanding of what success requires.

2. The Assumption Illusion

"We Would Have Mentioned That Earlier."

The strategy is approved and the team moves ahead with confidence. Later, a misunderstood dependency, unavailable resource, or missing condition comes into view.

The information was not deliberately withheld. No one brought it forward while there was still time to respond easily.

A process redesign initiative moved quickly through approval because the technical solution appeared clear. Midway through implementation, adoption stalled. The new process required behavior changes that local managers had never agreed to reinforce. The team had assumed adoption would follow delivery, but no one had tested that belief. Execution revealed a condition that had been present from the start.

What Is Happening

Every initiative relies on assumptions about behavior, timing, resources, authority, competing priorities, and other conditions. Many remain implicit because early momentum favors visible action. Plans move forward using beliefs that have never been examined closely enough.

Execution eventually exposes those assumptions. By then, the team may have committed money, time, and credibility to a path that is difficult to change.

How to Address It

Strategic Project Design brings important assumptions into the discussion before major commitments are made. The team asks what else must be true for the initiative to succeed, tests the most important conditions, and determines which risks require action.

Uncertainty does not disappear. But the team enters execution knowing more clearly what it depends on and what needs to be watched.

3. The Planning Illusion

"Everyone Is Working Hard. Why Aren't We Getting Results?"

Milestones are defined, schedules are built, and workstreams are assigned. Planning moves quickly, followed by energetic execution.

The team delivers activity and tracks progress, yet the expected improvement does not appear. Additional effort produces more output without solving the underlying problem.

A large system rollout finished on schedule and within budget. The plan was detailed and the team followed it closely. Six months later, performance gains were minimal. Planning had begun before leaders clearly defined the change the initiative was supposed to produce. The work was completed as planned, but the plan itself had never been tested against the result that mattered.

What Is Happening

Planning creates visible momentum. Once schedules, milestones, and work packages exist, they become the main reference points for progress. Teams naturally focus on completing them, even when new information raises questions about the original direction.

When project design is incomplete, the plan can become a substitute for clarity. A team can execute efficiently while remaining only loosely connected to the intended outcome.

How to Address It

Strategic Project Design clarifies outcomes and causal logic before detailed planning begins. Leaders first answer three design questions: What are we trying to accomplish and why? How will we measure success? What other conditions must exist?

Only then does the fourth question follow: How do we get there?

Tasks, schedules, resources, and accountabilities can then be built around a coherent view of how the initiative is expected to work. **Design before you execute.**

The Risk Between Strategy and Execution

All three patterns begin in the transition from strategic intent to execution planning. This is where leaders need to define how the initiative will produce results before commitments narrow the available choices.

Think of strategy as one shore and execution as the other. Organizations often invest heavily in each. They articulate direction, hire capable people, and build disciplined project management processes. The crossing between the two receives less attention because translating strategic intent into workable project logic is often assumed to happen naturally during planning.

It does not.

Unresolved issues collect in that crossing: unstated assumptions, different interpretations of success, and cause-and-effect connections that no one has tested. Teams then have to resolve them during execution, after deadlines, budgets, and expectations are already in place.

Strategic Project Design provides the bridge. It connects strategy to project planning by making the logic explicit, examining the assumptions that support it, and confirming that the proposed outcomes can reasonably produce the intended result.

At its core is the Logical Framework, or LogFrame, a one-page structure that makes this design logic visible and testable before detailed execution planning begins.

Strong execution depends on sound design. When the design work is done early, teams begin with clearer choices, fewer hidden disagreements, and a stronger basis for adapting as conditions change.

Project management matters. But before you manage the work, make sure you have designed the right work to manage.

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