

Execution Operating System Toolkit

ELP-007 | ELR-EXE-001 | Version 2.1 - print edition

One strategic priority. Five worksheets. Concrete operating decisions.

Use this toolkit with one live strategic priority. The aim is not to produce a prettier plan. It is to expose whether a strategy is failing because the choice is weak, the execution system is weak, or the organisation is failing to adapt - and then force the operating decisions required for delivery.

WHAT MAKES THIS TOOL DIFFERENT

This tool separates three different failure modes before prescribing more execution pressure:

- strategy gap;
- execution-system gap; and
- adaptation gap.

It also tests real commitment through protected capacity, explicit decision rights, dependency mechanisms, decision-capable review forums and learning/reset triggers.

HOW TO USE THE FIVE WORKSHEETS

Start here if diagnosis is unclear: Worksheet 2 - Three-Gap Diagnostic.

Core working page: Worksheet 1 - Execution Operating System Canvas.

Use if recurring decisions stall: Worksheet 3 - Decision Rights Mini-Map.

Use to redesign status meetings: Worksheet 4 - Strategic Review Agenda.

Use for oversight and challenge: Worksheet 5 - Board / Executive Challenge Questions.

Use one toolkit per strategic priority. Do not try to diagnose the whole enterprise at once.

KEY TERMS

Execution system: the management mechanisms that turn a strategic choice into coordinated action, evidence, decisions and adjustment.

Integrated outcome owner: the single executive accountable for the whole result across functions, not just one workstream.

Reset trigger: pre-agreed evidence that requires changing the execution approach, resources or strategy.

Adaptation gap: a failure to revise the plan or strategy when evidence changes.

Start with five questions

Use these on one priority that matters and is not moving fast enough.

1. WHO OWNS IT?

Who owns the integrated outcome end to end?

Avoid “shared ownership” unless one person still owns integration and escalation.

2. WHAT CAN THEY DECIDE?

Which material decisions can the owner make without fresh permission?

Within what boundaries?

Which decisions require consultation or escalation?

3. WHAT MOVED?

What money, people, specialist capability, senior attention, meeting time or existing work changed because this became a priority?

What are we willing to stop within 30 days?

4. WHAT MUST COORDINATE?

Which dependency is most likely to stall delivery?

What named mechanism resolves it - owner, forum, decision rule, commitment or escalation path?

5. WHAT WOULD MAKE US CHANGE COURSE?

What evidence would make us change the execution approach, reallocate resources or revisit the strategy itself?

FAST-DIAGNOSTIC RULE

Do not accept vague answers such as “shared ownership”, “stakeholders are aligned”, “we are working through it”, “the steering committee is monitoring it”, “it is a resourcing issue” or “we just need to execute”.

Ask instead:

Who decides?

What moved?

What is blocked?

What happens next?

Worksheet 1 | Execution canvas

Priority: _____ Owner: _____

MINIMUM OUTPUT

Do not leave this page with blanks in: accountable owner, decision rights, capacity move, dependency mechanism and reset trigger.

1. THE CHOICE

What consequential choice are we actually pursuing?

What are we explicitly NOT doing because of this choice?

2. THE OUTCOME

What observable outcome would tell us the priority is working?

What is the time horizon?

Worksheet 1 | Execution canvas

Priority: _____ Owner: _____

3. ACCOUNTABLE OWNER

Who owns integration of the outcome end to end?

What is this person accountable for?

What are they not accountable for?

4. DECISION RIGHTS

What can the owner decide without further approval?

Within what boundaries?

Which decisions must be escalated?

What decision is currently being delayed because no one has both authority and incentive to make it?

Worksheet 1 | Execution canvas

Priority: _____ Owner: _____

5. PROTECTED CAPACITY

What money, people, capability and management attention are protected for this priority?

What senior attention, calendar time or review capacity moved because this became a priority?

What are we stopping, reducing or deprioritising to create capacity?

What are we willing to stop within 30 days?

What critical capacity assumption is most fragile?

6. DEPENDENCIES

Which teams, functions or partners must act for the outcome to happen?

For each critical dependency record:

- what is required;
- named owner;
- coordination mechanism;
- escalation path.

Which dependency is most likely to stall delivery?

Worksheet 1 | Execution canvas

Priority: _____ Owner: _____

7. REVIEW / DECISION CADENCE

What forum reviews this priority?

What decisions can the forum make?

Can it reallocate, stop, escalate or reset?

8. EVIDENCE

Which few signals tell us whether the strategic logic is working?

Outcome measure:

Leading/progress signal:

Risk/constraint signal:

Which measure is most at risk of becoming a proxy for the real outcome?

Worksheet 1 | Execution canvas

Priority: _____ Owner: _____

9. ESCALATION

What event or threshold requires senior intervention, reallocation or a decision?

Who receives the escalation and by when?

10. LEARNING / ADAPTATION

What assumptions are we testing?

What evidence would cause us to:

- change the execution approach?
- change resource allocation?
- revisit the strategy itself?

REQUIRED ACTION SUMMARY

The operating-system change we are making now is:

Worksheet 2 | Diagnose the gap

MINIMUM OUTPUT

Choose one dominant gap. Do not select all three. A secondary contributing gap may be recorded only after a primary diagnosis is chosen.

A. STRATEGY GAP

Check for:

- ☐ The priority is not a real choice.
- ☐ Priorities conflict.
- ☐ The strategic logic is unclear or implausible.
- ☐ Success depends on assumptions we cannot defend.
- ☐ The organisation does not have, and cannot realistically obtain, the required capabilities/resources.

If this dominates: revisit the strategy before asking for more execution discipline.

B. EXECUTION-SYSTEM GAP

Check for:

- ☐ Ownership is unclear.
- ☐ The owner lacks authority to make material decisions.
- ☐ Decisions are repeatedly reopened or escalated unnecessarily.
- ☐ Capacity has not moved despite a new priority.
- ☐ Cross-functional dependencies have no explicit mechanism.
- ☐ Review meetings report activity but do not decide or reallocate.
- ☐ Escalation happens late.
- ☐ Measures reward local success while undermining the enterprise outcome.

If this dominates: redesign the operating system.

Worksheet 2 | Choose the response

C. ADAPTATION GAP

Check for:

- ☐ New evidence contradicts the original assumptions.
- ☐ The team is following the plan but missing the purpose.
- ☐ Variance is being explained away rather than investigated.
- ☐ No trigger exists for changing the plan or strategy.
- ☐ Teams are discouraged from surfacing evidence that challenges the plan.

If this dominates: create explicit learning and reset rules.

PRIMARY GAP

- ☐ Strategy
- ☐ Execution-System
- ☐ Adaptation

Secondary contributing gap, if any:

Why this diagnosis is primary:

REQUIRED ACTION SUMMARY

The operating-system change we are making now is:

Worksheet 3 | Decision 1

Complete the top three recurring material decisions. Copy a record for decisions 4 and 5 if useful.

Decision

Who has the best information?

Who decides?

Decision boundary

Who must be consulted?

Who executes?

Escalation trigger

Reversible? Yes / No Time-sensitive? Yes / No

Worksheet 3 | Decision 2

Complete the top three recurring material decisions. Copy a record for decisions 4 and 5 if useful.

Decision

Who has the best information?

Who decides?

Decision boundary

Who must be consulted?

Who executes?

Escalation trigger

Reversible? Yes / No Time-sensitive? Yes / No

Worksheet 3 | Decision 3

Complete the top three recurring material decisions. Copy a record for decisions 4 and 5 if useful.

Decision

Who has the best information?

Who decides?

Decision boundary

Who must be consulted?

Who executes?

Escalation trigger

Reversible? Yes / No Time-sensitive? Yes / No

Worksheet 4 | Review to decide

PURPOSE

Use this as a sample review cadence structure, not a universal meeting length. Fit the cadence to decision speed, risk, interdependence and operating context.

MINIMUM OUTPUT

This forum must have at least one explicit authority to reallocate, stop, escalate or reset.

1. OUTCOME

What changed in the actual outcome since the last review?

2. DECISION

What decision does this forum need to make today?

3. CONSTRAINT

What resource, capacity or dependency is currently limiting progress?

4. EVIDENCE

What did we learn about the assumptions behind the priority?

5. REALLOCATION

What should we stop, start, increase, reduce or reassign?

6. ESCALATION

What cannot be resolved at this level?

7. ADAPTATION

Is the right response to:

- [] recommit to the current approach;
- [] correct the execution system;
- [] change the plan;
- [] revisit the strategy?

REQUIRED ACTION SUMMARY

The operating-system change we are making now is:

Worksheet 5 | Challenge the system

BOARD OVERSIGHT QUESTIONS

- Which strategic priorities currently have no protected capacity?
- Where does accountability exist without authority?
- Which cross-functional dependency has no named owner or forum?
- Which KPI is at risk of becoming a proxy for the real outcome?
- What assumption behind the strategy has the weakest current evidence?
- What would have to happen for management to revisit the strategy rather than attribute every miss to execution?
- What is management learning now that was not known when the strategy was set?

EXECUTIVE-TEAM SELF-CHALLENGE

- Where are decisions repeatedly escalated because rights are unclear?
- Which review meeting reports the most but decides the least?
- What are we continuing to fund because stopping it is politically difficult rather than strategically justified?
- Which priority has not received corresponding movement in people, money or senior attention?
- What dependency is being described as “collaboration” instead of being given an explicit mechanism?
- Which unresolved decision currently has no person with both authority and incentive to make it?
- What evidence would make us change the plan before the result is obviously failing?

One question to take into the next meeting:

Facilitation & evidence

60-MINUTE FACILITATED USE

0-10 min - Diagnose the gap.

Choose the primary gap.

10-25 min - Define the operating core.

Complete choice, outcome, accountable owner and decision rights.

25-40 min - Make scarcity visible.

Complete protected capacity and dependencies. Force a decision on what stops or reduces.

40-50 min - Design the control loop.

Set the review forum, evidence and escalation triggers.

50-60 min - Design adaptation.

Agree the assumptions under test and what evidence would change the approach, resources or strategy.

SESSION OUTPUT

A usable execution system should leave the room with:

- one priority stated as a choice;
- one named accountable executive;
- explicit decision rights;
- a real capacity/resource decision;
- known dependencies with mechanisms;
- a decision-capable review forum;
- a small evidence set;
- escalation triggers;
- a strategy-reset condition.

SELECTED EVIDENCE / SOURCE NOTES

This resource is curated from the approved ELP-007 research and learning pack. The key evidence themes are:

- implementation research: strategy implementation is multi-mechanism, not a single execution lever;
- organisational attention: leadership attention is scarce and shapes what receives action;
- management control and adaptation: execution requires feedback and adjustment, not plan compliance alone;
- decision-rights material: practitioner evidence is used as illustration and is not treated as universal causal proof;
- board positioning: the board questions are oversight prompts, not an instruction for boards to operate management systems.

QUALITY NOTE

This toolkit is an evidence-informed executive synthesis, not a validated universal execution model. It deliberately avoids a fixed number of priorities, a universal cadence, a single decentralisation doctrine or generic KPI prescription.

Evidence anchors from the approved ELP-007 research: Friesl, Stensaker & Colman; Weiser, Jarzabkowski & Laamanen; Ocasio; Maritan & Lee; management-control research; Amazon shareholder letters (2015/2016); Berkshire Hathaway chairman's letter (1979).

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