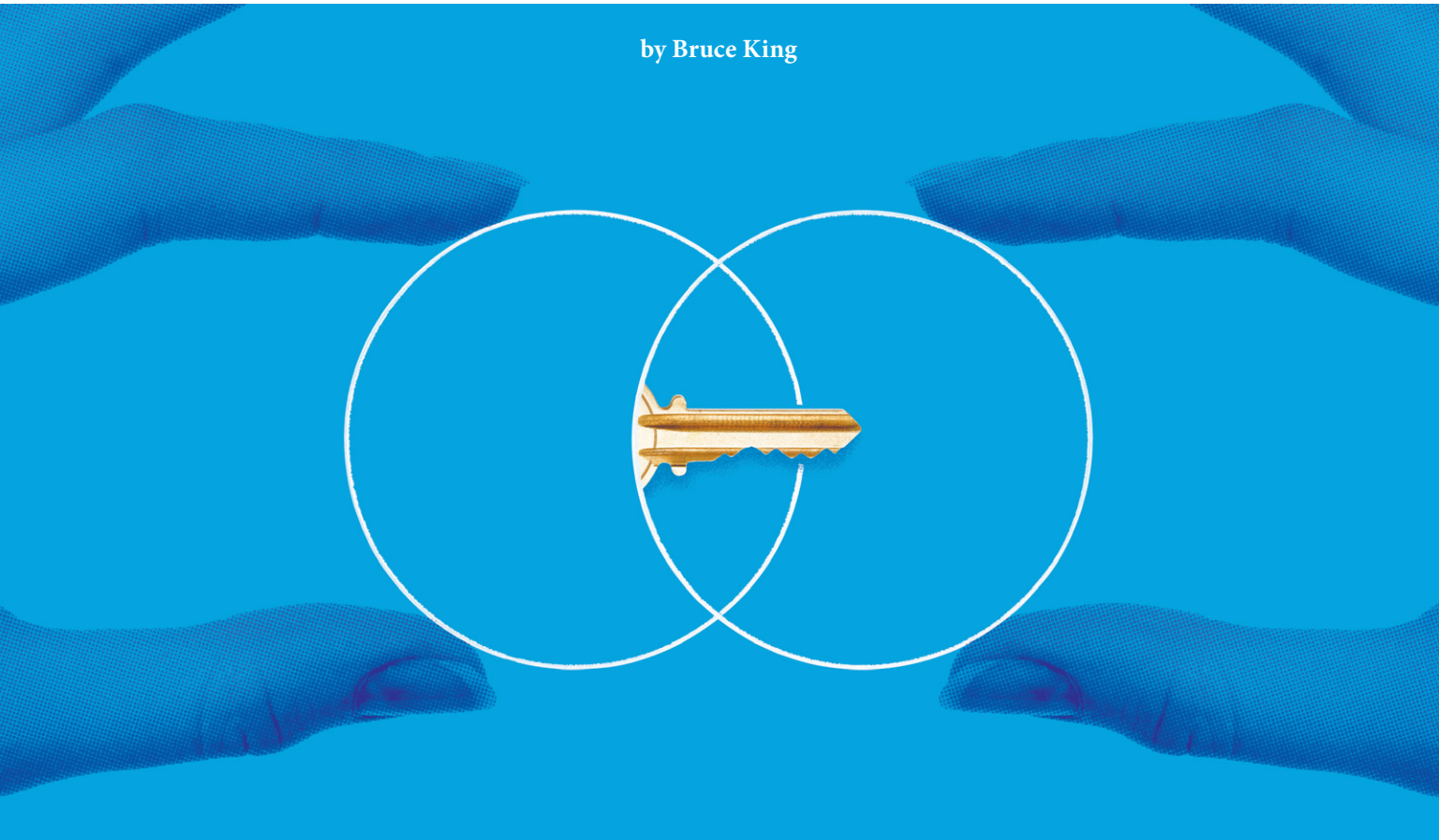


STRATEGIC DELIVERY:

A Blend of Art and Science

by Bruce King



The questions that lead to a strategic project's success are simple: Why, who, and how? As usual, the devil is in the details.

Have you ever worked on a strategic program for months, or even years, only to have it end without seeing any real benefits? What happened? Who was at fault? Were the goals too big or the resources too small?

Whatever the cause, there's likely an unpleasant feeling associated with the program that could lead to longer-term loss of morale or self-confidence. People who like to be part of a winning team do not like playing Monday morning quarterback. What should our teams and leaders do to avoid repeating these scenarios?

A company that can deliver strategic initiatives is one that can move well beyond survival to become an industry or market leader. Delivering strategic initiatives requires clear communication, a well-structured team, and effective leadership to define and manage the plan.

Strategic delivery requires a balance of art and science to achieve desired outcomes. The recipe to improve the success of a strategic initiative boils down to three simple questions:

1. Is everyone clear why we are doing this?
2. Does everyone understand who is doing what?
3. How well is our team achieving its outcome-based goals?

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

Communicate the goal and set the vision.

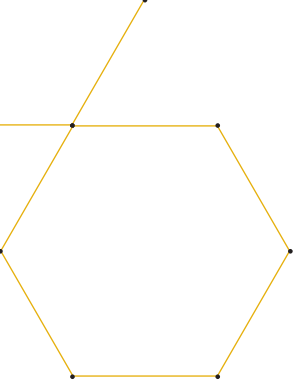
Teams operate more effectively when they understand the big picture, which includes who the key customers/stakeholders are and what value the program is striving to provide.

Never assume the broader working team understands what senior leadership has defined. People are motivated by how they feel about the work. Most want to understand why the program is important so they can feel like their involvement is important.

Spend time in the beginning simply communicating the value customers and stakeholders will gain from the program. Share how the investment of resources is a wise one for the growth of both the firm and the individuals involved. While communicating the vision, be sure to provide time for questions.

The key benefits for addressing questions and acknowledging concerns up front are:

- Eliminating ambiguity about why the firm is undertaking the initiative.
- Uncovering risks and issues the sponsor may not be aware of.
- Improving team engagement.



WHEN DEFINING THE OVERALL TEAM, CHEMISTRY IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE.

Lastly, establish tangible and measurable goals. Teams deliver results more effectively when they have a clear and simple set of qualitative and quantitative success measures. Well-defined interim and final milestones ensure team alignment. Celebrating progress throughout a project keeps the team engaged, boosts morale, and builds confidence throughout the journey.

WHO IS DOING WHAT?

Organize the team. What position am I playing, and whom do I trust?

Now that the group sees the big picture, how are we all expected to work together? Establishing a successful team requires the right balance of skills and personalities, accompanied by clear expectations at both the overall program and independent work stream levels. When defining the overall team, chemistry is just as important as skills and knowledge.

It would be challenging for a Major League Baseball team to win a World Series by having nine starting pitchers in all nine positions. The lack of diverse skills, or the positioning of personality types, can be a major risk for projects as well. Projects require a blend of people, process, and technology skills for managing and delivering results. Having the wrong mix of

people, or positioning them poorly, can derail a project because of the resulting conflicts or inaction.

At the start of the program, assess potential gaps, conflicts, and synergies that could affect team performance from both a skills and personality perspective. If significant skill gaps or personality conflicts exist, the leadership team needs to address them as early as possible. Telling people to “just start working” for the sake of meeting a project “kickoff” date may increase the risk of the project failing.

Instead, the project leadership team should collaborate to capitalize on the available knowledge and existing relationships to help with both personal growth and team success. Where gaps and conflicts are present with the “as-is” team, rework the staffing plan or add extra time for coaching and training to mitigate those risks. Another benefit will be increased engagement and goodwill among project team members.

Once the general team is mapped out, clarify expectations for individuals on the team so they understand their role in achieving the overall project goals. Providing clear expectations about each person’s activities, deliverables, and decision-making authority offers tremendous benefits. Communicating expectations

transparently increases team trust and individual autonomy to make decisions and deliver results.

Typically, leaders provide this information with a project organization chart—outlining role descriptions and engagement process documentation—or RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) charts. Although RACI charts and process documentation may come across as pedantic, their use reduces the need for team members to micromanage one another and enables everyone to focus their energy on what they need to do. A clearly defined organization and expectations structure will foster a happier, more empowered, and more efficient team that is prepared to achieve project goals.

HOW WELL ARE WE ACHIEVING THE GOAL?

Execute and manage the plan.

Remember the goal? The following are some important concepts to have in mind when executing the delivery plan:

- Outcomes are the value, not activities.
- You get what you measure.
- Unexpected events will happen.
- Proper communication and governance are important.

All programs, regardless of whether subteams use Agile, waterfall, or “other” delivery methods, will improve their success rate by using an integrated program plan that ties all the pieces together. The integrated plan is critical for establishing alignment and accountability among all the teams supporting the program. The integrated plan is the overarching basis for how the project is progressing.

The integrated program plan should focus on the critical path deliverables, decisions, and dependencies required from each work stream. This “outcome-oriented plan” provides a better method for communicating progress to executive stakeholders within the regular status updates.

For example, reporting that the team “conducted a joint planning session” (a planned activity) is less meaningful than “confirmed operating guidelines among product and sales teams” (the expected outcome from that activity). This is a subtle, but important, difference in style for effective measurement and communication of actual progress.

Define milestones and key deliverables with clear completion criteria. Write down the criteria. Ratify them during the program planning process to ensure team members agree on a common definition of “done.” If a team is

unable to accomplish this, there’s a lack of alignment on the program’s interim and final success criteria.

Use supporting progress measurements to evaluate the health and progress of a project’s specific deliverables. The basis used for determining progress should be easy to understand and align with the final acceptance criteria.

Unexpected events will happen during a program; how a team reacts to these situations is key to its success. Establish a simple process for acknowledging these items when they happen. Ignoring or verbally brushing over issues and risks will often lead to costlier problems down the road.

When risks and issues arise, understand the context of how they evolved and what, if any, material effect they will have. Some risks and issues should just be ignored or accepted if the potential impact is low, and the group has little control over the risk or issue.

When action is warranted, execute a mitigation plan with task owners and dates. If the issue or risk is big enough to materially affect the program scope, schedule, or budget, communicate to the program sponsor and stakeholders. Explain how and when it’s expected to be mitigated.

Lastly, ongoing communication and governance are critical for strategic program success. A

regular cadence of status updates, financial reviews, and other product and program review meetings will mitigate the risk of the team getting off track, and improve overall alignment and trust across the team and stakeholders.

These meetings also enable the team to discuss and confirm risks, issues, and potential scope or schedule changes that are common among large, complex programs. If done properly, the additional time and effort spent establishing “right-sized” program communications and governance will more than offset the costs associated with poor communication and management of scope, risks, and issues.

Effective delivery of strategic initiatives enables companies to emerge as market and industry leaders. At the beginning, it is critical to have the team aligned on who is doing what and why. Subsequent definition and management of an outcome-oriented plan with supporting metrics and communication will help ensure that delivery stays on course. Every program will encounter challenges; the difference between lackluster and excellent results is how the team defines and executes the plan. ■

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