

Strategic Commitment: The Missing Link in Transformation

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Abstract

Organizations frequently misdiagnose execution problems as strategy failures, leading to costly pivots that don't address underlying operational breakdowns. Through multi-contextual research, this study identifies "execution drift" as the gradual loss of coherence between strategy, operations, and innovation. This drift causes performance declines that leaders mistakenly attribute to flawed strategy rather than execution fragility. This article develops Strategic Commitment Loop (SCL), enabling organizations to absorb external changes, align internal capabilities, and renew execution rhythms before drift undermines performance. Four practices are recommended: embedding execution feedback into strategic decisions, auditing legacy assumptions, reconnecting innovation with operations, and institutionalizing renewal cadences.

Organizations look for transformation to stay competitive in changing environments. Yet top management teams monitor strategic plans without knowing whether their organization can still execute them under evolving conditions. When alignment weakens, or systems stop adapting, performance declines without warning. Based on five years of multi-contextual research, this study finds that such transformation efforts stall due to **execution drift**: a gradual loss of internal coherence, responsiveness, and renewal capacity. This drift is rarely visible in real-time and is misdiagnosed as strategy failure. The issue is execution fragility, where the organization's ability to respond, adapt, and coordinate weakens beneath the surface.

This multi-contextual research draws upon:

1. My published journal article: A systematic literature review of 76 high-impact peer-reviewed and practitioner publications, which included

dataset of 7,500+ respondents across 23 countries comprising – senior executives, middle managers, and strategy professionals from information technology (IT), finance, manufacturing, and infrastructure sectors – demonstrating that absorptive capacity, innovation sequencing, and execution alignment collectively transform into sustained performance.¹

2. My grounded theory analysis of 8028 pages data of large-scale transformation strategies managing long-term transitions, to identify institutional commitment mechanisms.² It involved systematic coding of 104 documents which comprised: long-term strategies, synthesis reports, meeting records, decisions, and transcripts of recorded interviews and speeches. The analysis followed four stages: (i) initial sampling and open coding of 2 randomly selected documents to develop initial concepts; (ii) concept development and axial coding expanded across all documents, generating 297 concepts grouped into 10 categories; (iii) selective coding identified 182 activities across six categories until data saturation; and (iv) validation through formalization of inductive and predictive statements.
3. My two field-based case studies: Rieco Industries, a mid-sized firm that achieved a turnaround through internal execution realignment; BYJU'S (my published case study³) which illustrates early success and later failure due to strategic misalignment.

The key question is: *How can leaders detect whether their organization remains execution-ready as conditions evolve?* In response, this study finds that sustained performance stems from maintaining strategic commitment through execution renewal. Organizations that consistently absorb change, realign internal systems, and refresh delivery mechanisms outperform those that repeatedly shift direction. To build transformation that lasts, leaders are advised to conduct regular audits using the Strategic Commitment Loop (SCL), which enables their organizations to:

- Absorb change coherently (external change),
- Align functions across time and purpose (strategy with day-to-day action),
- Renew execution rhythms before stagnation sets in.

The SCL reframes transformation as an ongoing capability that helps top management navigate complex transitions such as post-crisis restructuring.

Execution Fragility vs Strategy Failure

Leaders misdiagnose execution issues as strategy flaws because early warning signals of drift are subtle, cumulative, and masked by lagging

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performance indicators. When outcomes dip, the reflex is to redesign strategy rather than examine how internal systems function. Organizations typically capture only a limited portion of their strategies' potential value due to execution breakdowns rather than strategic flaws, yet leaders routinely misattribute performance gaps to strategy failures.⁴ This study observed patterns where leadership revised goals or restructured departments, expecting turnaround, without addressing the deeper issue: that coordination had frayed, feedback loops had stalled, or cross-functional ownership had weakened. In high-pressure environments, such as post-crisis phases, there is a tendency to blame external volatility or outdated strategy assumptions rather than interrogate internal breakdowns in alignment, coordination, or innovation flow.

What reinforces the misdiagnosis is that execution fragility rarely has visible breakdowns. Instead, it shows subtle slippage: delays, declining responsiveness, or poor integration. Leaders who embed real-time operational sensing and internal coherence checks are better positioned to distinguish between a failing strategy and a fading execution rhythm.

Evidence from multiple contexts supports this misdiagnosis. BYJU'S, an education technology organization, delivered premium digital learning content to millions of students through apps and online platforms, though it faced declining user engagement over time. The organization expanded through acquisitions and launched new learning verticals to capture broader market segments. Its growth strategy included celebrity endorsements and aggressive sales teams to drive user enrollment across diverse student populations. Rieco Industries, a mid-sized firm, provides solutions to clients across multiple sectors while experiencing coordination challenges across its operations. The firm specialized in engineering-led problem-solving for industrial applications, serving clients through customized equipment and system integration. Its business model included external vendors for fabrication while maintaining in-house design and project management capabilities. Both organizations confronted performance issues stemming from internal execution misalignment, but their responses diverged.

In BYJU's case, despite mounting user dissatisfaction, reduced parental trust, and falling engagement, leadership attributed the performance dip to competitive intensity and a need for more aggressive growth. As a result, they accelerated acquisitions, high discounts, and influencer-led outreach. The fragility lay in execution: bloated sales teams chasing misaligned Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), unresolved onboarding complaints, and stale app experiences that had not evolved with learner expectations. These execution breakdowns were internal and fixable but were misread as a market rejection of the core strategy. In contrast, Rieco Industries, instead of

changing its strategic positioning, diagnosed lags in execution, enhancing cross-functional collaboration, and improving alignment between sales and engineering workflows. Investing in turnkey coordination, capability benchmarking, and focused after-sales renewal restored momentum. Crucially, Rieco did not change strategy, it fixed execution.

This research also found that when outcomes of **large-scale transformation strategies** (e.g., net zero by 2050) faltered, leaders assumed the problem lay in flawed strategy. Innovation was stuck in pilot mode and not integrated into operational routines. Knowledge systems were fragmented or siloed, preventing learning and adaptation. Coordination between the central leadership and delivery units lacked alignment, leading to fractured implementation. Instead of repairing these gaps, leaders responded with revised targets, new frameworks, or external signaling, mistaking execution fragility for strategic failure.

When progress stalls, executives frequently change direction: pivoting strategy, restructuring teams, or launching new initiatives, without diagnosing whether the issue lies deeper in how capabilities, learning, and operations are connected. Without integrated renewal mechanisms, even sound strategies become symbolic, as in these cases, where leaders lacked mechanisms to detect the invisible unraveling of execution.

Large-scale Transformation Strategies

Large-scale transformation strategies means building systems that preserve coherence and adaptability (strategic direction) amid volatility, while enabling adaptive execution. The goal is not prediction, it's continuity through coherence and recalibration. The long-term goals from large-scale transformation strategies weren't those with fixed roadmaps, but instead involved structuring long-horizon commitments (e.g., 2050 targets), breaking them into flexible and revisitable sectoral plans, and establishing coordination and update mechanisms such as periodic revision windows, innovation pipelines, and stakeholder feedback loops. Analysis of transformation strategies reveals that success depends not on rigid timelines but on governance structures that enable periodic reassessment while maintaining directional commitment.

Firms with sustained performance demonstrate following execution rhythms. First, they institute quarterly renewal loops to continuously reassess whether execution remains aligned with strategic intent as conditions evolve. Second, they employ purpose-anchored KPIs that maintain strategic coherence while accommodating necessary contextual shifts in response to market or operational changes. Third, they establish structured forums for team-level realignment, creating regular touchpoints

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where cross-functional teams can identify and address emerging misalignments before they calcify into drift. Organizations that embed these renewal mechanisms can detect and address execution gaps before they compound into performance crises, whereas those lacking systematic reassessment processes allow small misalignments to accumulate undetected until significant correction becomes necessary.

Renew phase of the SCL institutionalizes long-term orientation as an execution rhythm, a leadership capability to reset and realign through reviews, innovation check-ins, and adaptation triggers. It gives leaders a structured way to detect when systems are misaligned, decide what to retain, adjust, or phase out, and realign without breaking strategy momentum.

Organizational Translation

In organizations, this requires reframing "long-term" not as timeline-based, but as governance-based.⁵ Leaders must set purpose-anchored strategic direction, such as commitments to decarbonization, digital inclusion, or stakeholder trust, that provides enduring orientation regardless of quarterly fluctuations. These commitments are then backed by rolling renewal mechanisms including quarterly execution reviews, cross-unit realignment processes, and adaptive budgeting that allows resource reallocation as priorities shift. The governance approach protects long-term goals by decoupling them from short-term volatility, while ensuring they remain responsive to fundamental changes in the competitive or operational environment, distinguishing organizations that sustain transformation momentum from those whose long-term commitments erode under near-term pressures.

Such governance-based long-term orientation protects transformation from the most common failure point: internal drift under external volatility.⁶ Long-term orientation is no longer about planning cycles, it's about adaptive discipline.⁷ The most resilient organizations do not try to forecast years (e.g., 5-years), they build the ability to refresh execution continuously without losing strategic clarity.

Execution Drift

Organizations with sustained performance institutionalize execution renewal. They periodically reassess how strategy is translated across functions, ensure clarity of ownership, and adapt internal processes to external change. When this rhythm weakens, execution no longer keeps pace with ambition, resulting in drift.

Execution drift occurs when organizations lose coherence between their strategic direction, operational routines, and innovation rhythm (i.e. strategy

and day-to-day operations over time). This misalignment is subtle, emerging through outdated routines, siloed functions, or inertia in decision-making. As environments evolve, organizations that fail to refresh execution mechanisms, feedback loops, alignment rituals, and operating rhythms, gradually underperform despite having the right strategic intent.

This drift is caused by a breakdown in the SCL, the process by which organizations absorb external changes, align internal capabilities, and renew execution models. When one of these elements weakens, such as absorptive capacity (missing market signals), misaligned functions (e.g., innovation isolated from operations), or absence of renewal cycles (static KPIs), execution becomes fragile, even when the overarching strategy remains sound.

In the case of BYJU'S, leadership expanded aggressively through acquisitions (e.g., WhiteHat Jr., Aakash) and new verticals (e.g., Future School), assuming the core strategy remained valid, despite early signs of drift: declining user engagement, rising parent dissatisfaction, and overstretched sales teams. Execution issues, such as fragmented onboarding, uncalibrated incentive structures, and fatigue from overused influencer channels, were misdiagnosed as strategic or market-level problems, leading to a push for further scale rather than internal reconfiguration. Innovation efforts across acquired units remained siloed and disconnected from central delivery systems. While marketing emphasized brand visibility, parental dissatisfaction and weak learner support persisted. These execution issues were misread as strategic setbacks, leading to more scaling rather than structural recalibration.

In contrast, Rieco retained its core strategy of engineering-led problem-solving for industrial clients but identified early signs of drift, disconnected units, weak client feedback loops, and inconsistent delivery. It responded by restructuring cross-functional teams, strengthening after-sales processes, and ensuring innovation efforts (e.g., Pulvionex for energy-efficient dust suppression, Kompacto for compact grinding) were directly linked to plant-level problems. This alignment enabled sustained execution and avoided drift without deviating from strategic focus.

In essence, execution drift is silent and cumulative. It arises not from a single failure but from a series of unnoticed ruptures in the organizational rhythm. Leaders miss these signals because they treat poor performance as a need to change strategy, when the real problem is fragility in execution, where learning, alignment, and renewal have quietly fallen out of sync.

Post-crisis

In a post-crisis restructuring, organizations prioritize financial recovery and visible pilots, redefining roles, reducing costs, or reorganizing departments. But these actions fail to restore the invisible threads that bind strategy, innovation and operations, and rarely ensure transformation unless leaders also rebuild the organization's execution capacity. During crises, the organization's innovation rhythm is frequently paused or fragmented, Research and Development (R&D) is slowed, pilot projects are shelved, or innovation is isolated from mainstream operations. Once restructuring begins, strategy is rewritten to signal transformation, but execution teams still operate on pre-crisis workflows, priorities, and metrics. This gap between strategy and execution creates a time-lagged disconnect: innovation outputs do not match operational capacity, and strategy assumes agility that does not exist. Leaders are recommended to apply the SCL.

Strategic Commitment Loop (SCL)

The SCL enables organizations to absorb change, align internal systems, and renew execution rhythms as conditions evolve (environments shift). It is essential in post-crisis restructuring, where execution fragility becomes visible, and it is necessary even during stable or growth phases to detect misalignments before they impact performance. By institutionalizing this loop, leaders convert transformation from a one-time effort into an ongoing execution capability, which is critical for navigating complex transitions and sustaining strategic momentum (Figure 1).

Absorb. Organizations must actively sense and internalize external shifts post-crisis. Absorbing change means building mechanisms to continuously monitor: customer needs, regulatory changes, market volatility.

Transformation succeeds when institutionalized learning systems are set up, such as feedback loops between all the stakeholders (e.g., firms, sub-national units). Companies must develop equivalent capabilities for such continuous sensing platforms.

Align. Leaders must resolve the **disconnect** between strategy, innovation, and operations quickly after disruption (crisis) to restore execution coherence. The disconnect arises from two sources: (1) *differing temporal logics*: strategy unfolds over multi-year horizons, while operations function in short cycles, and (2) *lack of shared ownership*: innovation is frequently developed independently of operational integration. This creates a misalignment where innovation initiatives, though well-intentioned, fail to match the readiness or rhythm of frontline execution. Without deliberate

structures to bridge these cycles, organizations risk building strategies that outpace their capacity to deliver.

Strategy is updated, but execution units still operate on **outdated assumptions**. Leaders must realign:

- Goals across functions,
- Resource allocation,
- Timelines and priorities.

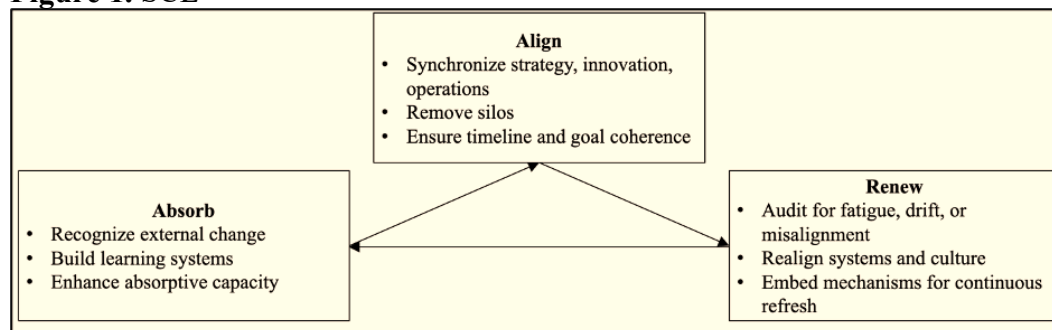
Performance improvements occur only when innovation and execution cycles are explicitly resynchronized. This is especially critical in fragmented post-crisis environments. Post-crisis, organizations act quickly to stabilize. In doing so, functions prioritize their mandates, strategy teams plan new goals, innovation teams design pilots, operations restore continuity. But unless these units are realigned early, execution gaps widen.

Renew. Organizations should not treat post-crisis change as a single fix. Instead, they must create a cadence of execution renewal: Quarterly review loops, Cross-functional operating rhythm audits, Leadership recalibration meetings.

Renewal differentiates high-commitment systems. Firms that embed revisitation mechanisms (e.g., timeline-adjustable targets, sector-specific course corrections) progress faster than those with rigid policy blocks.

The leaders must treat post-crisis change as a strategic opportunity to rebuild transformation capability by ensuring their organization can absorb volatility, realign execution, and institutionalize renewal before the next wave of disruption arrives.

Figure 1. SCL



The Disconnect

In BYJU's, the post-crisis pivot was marked by the launch of new verticals (e.g., Future School targeting global coding learners; partnerships for upskilling), shift of brand messaging from aspirational learning to full-stack transformation (emphasizing personalized education, live classes and global

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expansion), and acquisitions made to signal technological depth and market consolidation. However, the underlying delivery model remained unchanged: onboarding remained transactional (high-pressure sales calls without contextual customization, families were pushed into one-size-fits-all packages without clarity on learner profiles), content unrefreshed (failing to reflect curriculum changes or pedagogical diversity), and support lagged (backend support operations, including query redressal and mentor availability, suffered from overburdened teams with poor escalation protocols). The firm was running a post-crisis narrative with pre-crisis processes, causing friction between what was promised and what was delivered. Innovation initiatives (such as AI-driven diagnostics or personalized progression models) were not operationalized at scale. Field teams, academic mentors, and technology units remained disconnected, resulting in promising tools being piloted but never adopted system-wide. Thus, the company narrated a transformation but functioned in continuity. Executional misalignments between strategic ambition, innovation claims, and operational delivery weakened trust internally and externally.

In contrast, Rieco Industries navigated its post-crisis phase through focused execution realignment rather than strategic pivots. Leadership prioritized strengthening internal coherence as demand rose in turnkey pollution control and material handling projects across core sectors. A detailed review revealed that growth had outpaced integration, and teams needed tighter collaboration to ensure delivery consistency and client responsiveness. Rieco introduced cross-functional client teams, formalized workflows between sales, design, execution, and support, and launched alignment reviews. Its innovation (such as Kompacto and Pulvionex), emerged from direct engagement with operational contexts, addressing needs like compact installations and rugged performance. These solutions, co-developed by engineering and site teams, enhanced fit, durability, and efficiency. The after-sales function was transformed from a support role into a renewal platform, with defined KPIs for service continuity, diagnostics, and upgrade readiness. By reinforcing its execution system, without altering its strategic focus on engineered turnkey solutions, Rieco turned alignment and responsiveness into safeguards against execution drift.

During transformation, such as in post-crisis phases, disconnects between strategy, innovation, and operations emerge because execution systems are not recalibrated alongside strategic pivots. Innovation often remains disconnected from delivery because it lacks shared execution ownership. Strategic shifts generate momentum, but pilots fail to transition into scaled routines without aligned planning, operations, and review mechanisms. The gap widens when leadership signals change, yet resource

allocation, team structures, and frontline workflows remain unchanged. Instead of realigning these execution elements, organizations focus on external signaling, revised targets, or superficial rebranding, deepening the disconnect.

Outdated Assumptions

Outdated assumptions are legacy beliefs about customer behavior, market dynamics, or internal capabilities that persist even after the environment has shifted. These assumptions are dangerous not because they are obviously wrong, but because they were once right, and thus escape scrutiny. This research identifies such assumptions as hidden culprits behind strategic failure, especially when firms scale or restructure without revalidating their mental models.

BYJU'S operated under the assumption that endorsed content, aggressive sales, and "more modules per product" would continue to drive conversion and learning outcomes, as they had in earlier growth phases. But this belief failed to account for shifting parent expectations, growing discomfort with high-pressure sales, and user fatigue from overloaded app interfaces. Leadership continued to invest in influencer marketing, bundling, and scripted sales even as parental trust declined and engagement metrics weakened. The underlying assumption that pre-crisis success formulas would remain valid in a post-crisis, cost-conscious, and more discerning consumer landscape, remained unchallenged despite shifting user preferences.

This research finds that long-term transformation efforts (such as net-zero declarations), relied on the assumption that only goal articulation would trigger systemic change. This overlooked the need for capability-building, decentralized innovation, and operational renewal. While strategies were revised, the assumption that leadership signaling could drive transformation without retooling execution systems remained unchallenged, leading to stagnation.

Outdated assumptions also emerge internally. In organizations like Rieco, there was once a belief that market expansion depended only on product diversity. That assumption was revisited when leadership realized that alignment of engineering innovation with execution and after-sales value was more critical than breadth of offerings. This led to sharper productization and modular solutions tailored to industry-specific pain points.

In all these cases, outdated assumptions are invisible defaults that persist until performance declines force a reckoning. Organizations with sustained performance build routines for questioning these defaults through execution

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feedback, real-time learning, and scenario-based strategic foresight. Without this, even the most innovative strategies are built on foundations that no longer exist.

The SCL helps resolve this by creating coherence mechanisms, ensuring strategy refreshes include operational input, pilots are assessed for integration feasibility, and renewal cycles realign functions before slippage occurs. Without this, even sound strategies fail to translate.

This study recommends institutionalizing assumption audits before making strategic decisions, explicitly reviewing which beliefs have remained untested or unchanged. Organizations that regularly revalidate their assumptions avoid misalignment between strategic intent and real-world execution.

Managerial Implications and Actions

To prevent execution drift and ensure strategy translates into sustained performance, leaders must focus on *what* they plan and *how* their organizations absorb, align, and renew internally. Four practices are recommended:

Embed Execution Feedback into Strategic Decision-Making

Organizations with sustained performance treat execution as a learning source. At Rieco, post-crisis growth came not from a new strategy but from diagnosing missed client feedback loops and misaligned business units. By integrating frontline insights into leadership reviews and product design, Rieco realigned execution without overhauling its core.

Action: Establish structured feedback loops where frontline teams, such as product, sales engineering, and customer support, report real-time operational signals (e.g., delivery delays, user complaints, recurring feature gaps) to senior leadership. These insights should supplement traditional lagging metrics like revenue and market share, enabling timely adjustments to execution.

Audit and Challenge Strategic Assumptions Regularly

Outdated assumptions are the silent killers of execution. BYJU'S continued investing in influencer marketing and large content bundles based on prior success, despite declining trust and attention spans. These assumptions remained unexamined because they once worked, and leadership mistook performance drops for strategy failure rather than a mismatch with evolving user expectations.

Action: Run a "legacy assumption audit" before each strategic planning cycle. *Ask:* Which beliefs about customers, markets, or internal strengths

have not been revalidated in the past year? Which ones no longer align with the current environment?

Reconnect Innovation with Operational Rhythms

In post-crisis phases, innovation becomes isolated, as pilots run in silos disconnected from delivery systems or scale readiness. In firms, this leads to promising innovations remain confined to test environments, never reaching mainstream execution. Innovation loses momentum when it is decoupled from daily operations, frontline teams, and execution targets.

Action: Ensure every pilot or R&D initiative has shared accountability across strategy and operations. Evaluate technical soundness and readiness for integration into current workflows and delivery systems.

Institutionalize Renewal

Execution excellence requires rhythm. Organizations that revisit their operating models, review capabilities across levels, and realign systems on a regular cadence navigate uncertainty (market shocks) better. At Rieco, structured renewal practices such as capability reviews, leadership rotation, and periodic process audits helped translate intent into sustained action.

Action: Audit organization's renewal cadence. Is there a system to revisit execution models (e.g., every 12–18 months)? Are capabilities assessed at the leadership and operational levels being reassessed and realigned regularly?

Together, these practices constitute the SCL, a system that enables organizations to absorb change, align internal processes, and renew execution rhythmically over time.

Conclusion

Strategy fails when execution becomes misaligned and leaders miss early signs of drift. Organizations that treat execution as a strategic system, continuously absorbing change, aligning units, and renewing capabilities, are better equipped to adapt, deliver, and sustain performance through uncertainty. The SCL provides a diagnostic framework for leaders to detect execution fragility before it becomes performance failure, transforming organizational change from episodic strategic overhauls into sustained execution capability.

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Endnotes

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