

Before You Commit

What evidence supports your confidence in execution?

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You are about to approve a major AI or sustainability transformation, an acquisition or capital investment. The strategy has been challenged. The numbers have been tested. The technology has been reviewed. The risks have been mapped.

But what about the ability to execute it?

1. The Hidden Assumption

Teams spend countless hours determining the suitability of an initiative and testing its underlying assumptions. Yet one critical assumption deserves closer examination:

The organisation and its external partners will be able to work together to execute what is being proposed, even as conditions change.

Confidence in execution may be inferred from the experience of leaders, the capabilities of individual teams, previous successes and the apparent quality of the plan. All of these matter, but they do not necessarily establish how the execution system will perform as a whole.

When confidence in execution rests on assumptions that have not been adequately tested, weaknesses may become apparent only after capital has been committed and changing course is harder.

What if we're assessing the parts, but missing the whole?

2. The Sea Voyage Metaphor

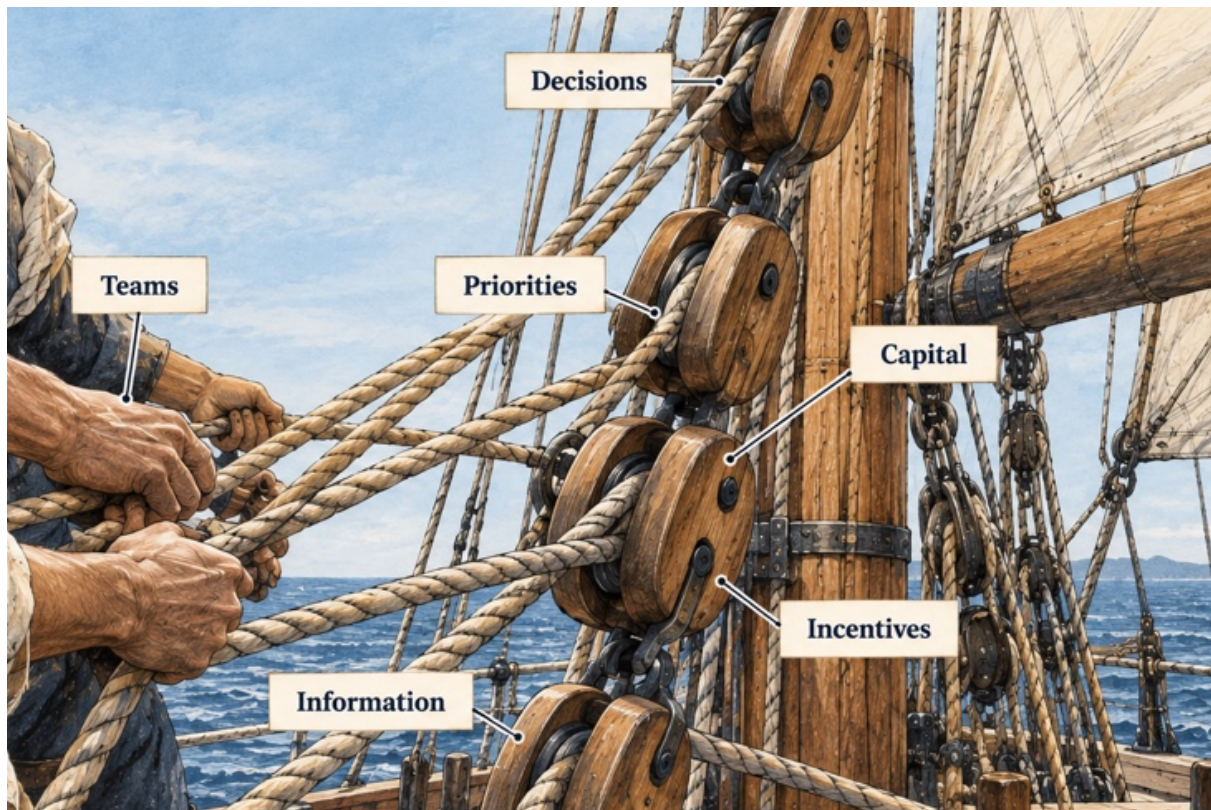
Imagine preparing for a sea voyage.

You decide whether the journey is worth making. You choose the vessel, recruit an experienced captain and crew, plan the route and load the necessary provisions.

All of these are necessary. But they do not tell you enough about how the vessel, crew and operating system will perform together when conditions change.

**A sailing vessel is not simply a collection of good components.
It is an interconnected system, operating under changing conditions.**

Lines, blocks, sails, people and decisions work together. When the wind changes, an adjustment in one part of the system changes the tension elsewhere. The crew must sense what is happening, coordinate, make decisions and continuously rebalance the system.



Execution works in much the same way.

Having the right people, resources and plan matters, as does their ability to work together effectively.

I will refer to this as the execution system: the people, teams, partners, decision-making and prioritization processes, incentives, information and resources that must work together to turn the commitment into results. Its boundaries depend on the initiative itself; sometimes it sits within one organisation, and sometimes it extends across several.

The critical test is whether that system can execute the commitment effectively under current conditions and as they change.

*The gap is not simply whether we have the right **people** for the job.*

*It is whether we have the right **system** for the job.*

The more execution depends on multiple teams, organisations and competing priorities, and the more uncertain or dynamic the operating environment, the less confidence we can place in the original plan alone. Rather than predict every disruption, we need to assess whether the system can **learn, reprioritise, coordinate and adapt as reality changes**. This scrutiny is especially important when commitments have major consequences and are difficult to reverse.

3. Execution Reliability

The key question becomes: what evidence supports confidence that this execution system can execute the commitment under current and changing conditions?

This paper proposes Execution Reliability as an **emerging decision-making discipline: one that examines the evidence supporting confidence in the execution system, both before making a major commitment and as execution progresses.**

Execution Reliability reflects how well an execution system can coordinate, learn and adapt as conditions change, improving its chances of fulfilling a commitment.

It does not, however, guarantee success.

The purpose is to make the evidence, assumptions and uncertainties surrounding execution explicit enough to inform the decision: whether to proceed, make approval conditional on specific actions, strengthen the system, test critical assumptions further, or reconsider the commitment.

Existing practices, including operational due diligence, delivery confidence reviews, and readiness assessments, already examine aspects of execution.

Execution Reliability does not seek to replace them. It offers an additional perspective by examining how the elements of an execution system work together, using observable evidence of how that system behaves, including its ability to adapt when conditions change.

4. Execution Reliability in Practice

Execution Reliability can be applied to different types of major commitments, including capital projects, AI and digital transformations, sustainability transitions, and acquisitions. While the execution systems and available evidence differ, the underlying challenge remains the same: establishing evidence-based confidence in execution.

Let's look at an example.

Private Equity: Can the investment thesis be executed?

A private equity firm is considering acquiring a company whose investment thesis depends on a major transformation: improving operational efficiency, replacing legacy systems, and reducing carbon emissions by introducing greener products.

During the limited due diligence window, access to detailed internal evidence of how the execution system operates may be restricted. Nevertheless, an initial Execution Reliability assessment can examine available evidence, such as previous transformation business cases, programme status reports and actual outcomes against original commitments.

Rather than simply identifying past successes or failures, the assessment seeks evidence of how the execution system behaved. Did initiatives produce usable outcomes incrementally? How quickly were problems recognised and addressed? Did the organisation learn from setbacks and adapt when circumstances changed?

These observations may reveal patterns that strengthen or challenge confidence in the existing execution system. However, the investment decision must also consider how that system will change under the new ownership, and whether the proposed combination of existing and new capabilities can execute the investment thesis.

The assessment may also examine evidence from the PE firm's previous transformations, the proposed governance and decision-making arrangements, and how the new leadership and existing teams are expected to work together.

Where evidence is insufficient, critical assumptions about the proposed execution system may remain untested.

The findings can inform the investment decision: whether to proceed as planned, investigate specific concerns, revise the proposed operating model or value creation plan, or reconsider the investment itself.

If the acquisition proceeds, access to more detailed evidence becomes possible: steering committee minutes, programme plans, change control records, benefits realisation reports and post-implementation reviews.

This enables a deeper assessment of how the execution system coordinates work, manages dependencies, resolves competing priorities and responds to changing conditions.

Execution Reliability can then provide an ongoing evidence-based perspective as the transformation progresses, helping investors determine whether their confidence in execution remains justified.

5. Conclusion

Major commitments will always involve uncertainty. The purpose of Execution Reliability is not to remove that uncertainty, but to make the confidence we place in execution more explicit, more evidence-based and more open to challenge.

Every major strategic decision depends on an assumption: that the commitment can be executed.

Execution Reliability is an emerging discipline that needs to be tested against real decisions. I welcome opportunities to examine actual commitments, challenge the assumptions and explore which evidence genuinely helps decision-makers assess execution reliability.

Before you commit, ask not only whether the strategy makes sense, but also what evidence supports your confidence that it can actually be executed.

Appendix

Conceptual Foundations and Open Questions

The main paper introduces Execution Reliability as a decision-making concept. This appendix provides a more formal definition, explores its scope and relationship with existing practices, and identifies questions requiring further research.

Definition

Execution Reliability is a forward-looking decision discipline that assesses the evidence supporting an execution system's ability to execute a consequential commitment under current and changing conditions.

Structure

The structure of Execution Reliability is not yet settled.

Different industries, sectors and types of initiative operate under different constraints and use different language. It is possible, however, that some underlying properties of reliable execution remain consistent across contexts.

One hypothesis is that Execution Reliability has two layers: a set of underlying principles that may apply broadly, and a second layer of evidence specific to the type of undertaking.

The signals that matter in a construction programme may differ from those in an AI transformation, while still pointing to the same underlying properties of the system.

Whether those properties are truly universal is an empirical question, not an assumption this paper attempts to settle.

What is the unit of analysis?

The unit of analysis is not the quality of the strategy, plan, leadership team or individual capabilities in isolation. It is the entire execution system, including its components and how they work together. The assessment examines evidence of that system's ability to execute the commitment effectively under current conditions and as they change.

For a given initiative, the boundary of the system is defined by the actors, dependencies, decision mechanisms and resource flows whose behaviour can affect execution.

How does this differ from existing practices?

Elements of Execution Reliability already appear in due diligence, project assurance, operational readiness reviews, governance assessments and other practices.

The proposed contribution is to examine the execution system as a whole, assessing observable evidence of how its elements work together, execute commitments, learn and respond to changing conditions.

Execution Reliability is intended to complement existing decision and assurance practices, providing an additional evidence-based perspective rather than replacing or consolidating their assessments.

What counts as evidence?

The purpose is not simply to ask leaders whether they believe the organisation can execute, but to examine evidence of how the execution system actually behaves. This may include historical execution patterns, operational records and structured assessments from people directly involved in the work. These sources can provide perspectives beyond management confidence, revealing how the system executes commitments, coordinates, learns and responds to changing conditions.

Where evidence is weak or absent, targeted probes, simulations, stress tests or small experiments may help expose how the system responds before a larger decision is made.

An assessment of Execution Reliability does not necessarily need to produce a numerical score or a binary judgement.

Further Research

This leaves several questions open:

- What evidence should support an assessment of Execution Reliability?
- Which signals are universal?
- Which are context-dependent?
- Which can be observed before execution begins?
- Which apparently reassuring indicators actually tell us very little?

And ultimately, the discipline itself must be tested:

- Does an explicit assessment of Execution Reliability improve decision quality beyond existing due-diligence and assurance practices?
- Which execution signals, if any, have meaningful predictive value for subsequent execution outcomes?
- Can independent assessors examining the same evidence reach sufficiently consistent conclusions?

Disclosure: AI was used to help improve the clarity and accessibility of the writing. The ideas, arguments and underlying thinking are my own.