

Filling Execution Gaps
How Executives and Project Managers turn Corporate Strategy into Successful Projects
By Todd C. Williams

(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPMI)

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Introduction

Author Todd C. Williams has accumulated years of exposure to the inner workings of corporate management and experience of its link to project management. In particular, his studies have uncovered six areas of typical shortcomings, or downright failure, in communications. From these, he has developed an understanding of the differences between the purpose of corporate management and the delivery intent of project management. He has chosen to call these shortcomings "Execution Gaps". These execution gaps are from the top down and are, therefore, the responsibilities of top management.

These gaps are identified as Goal-Project Alignment, Executive Sponsorship, Change Management, Effective Governance, and Leadership, all five of which fall under the over-arching Gap (failure of) Common Understanding.¹

As we shall see, Todd has organized his book accordingly and while it is intensely detailed, complete with what needs to be done in each case, the advice is clearly focused for top and middle management consumption. That is not to say that project managers will not be interested on account of the subject matter being generally out of their purview. On the contrary, the project management community should be delighted to see well-known areas of conflict being identified and explained, and remedial action ardently recommended for resolution.

This book is recommended as a highly valuable reference manual for all those seriously involved in all organizational levels of major project management undertakings.

About the author²

Todd C. Williams is an executive consultant with three decades of experience helping organizations connect strategy to successful projects. He has worked with startups and multi-billion dollar companies. He is a prolific writer sharing his wisdom and experience so that others can succeed. His first book was the highly acclaimed *Rescue the Problem Project: A Complete Guide to Identifying, Preventing, and Recovering from Project Failure* (AMACON 2011).

Further, he was a contributor to *Gower Handbook of people in Project Management* (2013) and *Toyota: Saga of Success* (2008) as well as being a technical editor for other books on project management.

Book Structure

The contents of this book are set out in a dual structure of six Parts, labeled "GAPS", plus a concluding Part 7, all of which contain 12 chapters plus an Appendix. The chapters and GAPS are:

GAP 1: Common Understanding

1. Understanding the Problem

GAP 2: Alignment between Corporate Goals and Projects

2. Creating and Maintaining Corporate Alignment

GAP 3: Engages Executive Sponsors

3. Challenges in Executive Sponsorship
4. A Model for Engaged Executive Sponsors

GAP 4: Adoption and Change Management

5. Adoption and Change Management
6. Organization Change Management and Projects

GAP 5: Effective Governance

7. Lean Project Governance
8. Value Driven PMOs

GAP 6: Project Leadership

9. Leadership's Relationship to Projects
10. The Project's Leadership Structure
11. Leadership Traits and Actions

PART 7: Pulling it all Together

12. Filling the Six Gaps
- 13.

Appendix A: Endnotes

Interestingly, a detailed list of "learning points" is included under the heading of each chapter in the table of Contents. That results in a Table of Contents of nine pages.

Every chapter concludes with two brief summaries titled *Project and Middle Manager Takeaway* and *Executive Takeaway*. These are followed by three sets of questions under the general title of *Applying These Concepts*. These sets are *Organization Wide Questions*, *Project and Middle Manager Centric Questions*, and *Executive Centric Questions*.

The book has a total of 356 tightly packed pages with frequent illustrations throughout. Responses to the three sets of questions mentioned above are not answered in the book because they depend heavily on the relevant experiences of each respondent. The intent is for extensive discussion and exchange of ideas, views and experiences. Therefore the book is best suited for presentation in a classroom setting to mature learners with relevant backgrounds.

Appendix: A: Endnotes lists the copious references quoted in each chapter. The book does not have a Glossary of Terms.

What we liked – in general

What we liked about this book is that it records the collective wisdom of a large number of people who

have given thought to why so many projects don't seem to work the way they should. In his acknowledgements, author Todd Williams observes:³

"There are hundreds of people who I want to thank for making this book possible. They were the people who took surveys or participated in interviews with a guy they did not know. . . They trusted me and I am eternally indebted. I would name them, there are over 300, but I promised anonymity. Their stories are here, their ideas are here, they changed my out look, confirmed my beliefs, shot a few ideas out of the water, uncovered many surprising relationships, and sent me back to the drawing board."

As a consequence, this book is so full of ideas and organizational concepts, that it is not possible in this brief review to fairly represent its message. *Filling Executive Gaps* is focused on executing strategy — taking strategic goals and turning them into business value.⁴ Everyone should know that project success is based on a larger system. The people on the project are only a small microcosm of those who solidify or threaten its success.⁵

So, as the author says, this book takes a wider view by looking at the entire "project stack" from the executive, through middle management to the project manager, and down to the project team.⁶ To this, the author might have added: "And on to those who will engage the resulting asset to realize the intended benefits."

As you have noted from the previous section, and Figure 1 below showing the book's structure, there are five related gaps, i.e., Alignment, Sponsorship, Change Management, Governance and Leadership. These are all fairly well known to most project managers, even if not always well understood. However, the capstone, Common Understanding is clearly an over-arching communication problem, especially where responsibility is concerned.

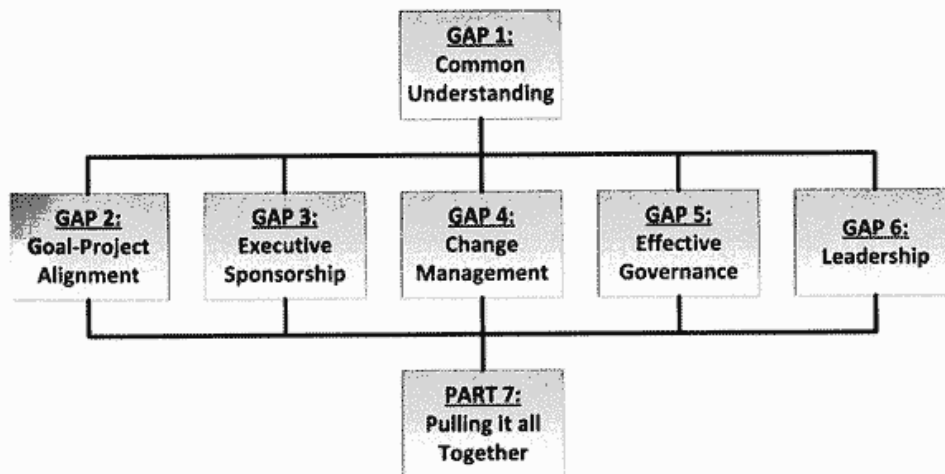


Figure 1: Book Structure

To illustrate this point, the author opens Chapter 1 with a brief scenario in which a project manager is called to present her project's status to an executive audience. However, the audience is really only interested in the project's potential outcome. The meeting does not go well and both parties depart dissatisfied.⁷

Later, our author adds that there is another way to look at this hypothetical project status meeting. He says it could be depicted as a meeting between two disparate groups of people speaking different

languages, almost as if from different countries. On one side of the conference room table are a bunch of risk averse, stay-the-course, profit driven executives. The other side has a group of thrill-seeking, detail obsessed, change mongers, who relentlessly spend money hoping to complete this project so they can move on to the next one.⁸

Well said!

By way of further illustrating the problem, author Todd describes, as a case study, a very personal experience with a state-operated personal health care system. The upshot was that more than one department claimed each had the answer to a particularly severe health problem. Apparently, each was not really willing to admit that the source may be elsewhere, nor willing to work as a team to solve the problem collectively. An unwillingness to communicate may well have been due to an inability to understand each other's professional language.⁹

Todd emphasizes that real project success depends on measuring value that, in some cases, may not be seen for years later, and describes this part of the Gap as follows.

"Big-box retailers, grocery store chains, and outlet stores want us to think that low price equates to value. However, other attributes fit into our internal calculation of value. Qualities such as durability, aesthetics, social status, comfort, and size all factor into the equation that determines value. These characteristics deal with the item's *application*. Projects must concern themselves with this larger systemic view to achieve a common understanding of success among stakeholders. This understanding must reach beyond scope, schedule, and budget to include value."¹⁰

He concludes that:

"Value – project success – comes from many areas. In fact, value could come from cancelling a project that is discovered to be too difficult before it wastes buckets of company money and people's time. Without shifting the focus of project success to a common understanding of its value, the struggle to succeed will continue."¹¹

And under Executive Takeaway:

"People need to talk the same language and it is incumbent on the executives to ensure people have the business acumen and information to understand what is important and how to communicate it."¹²

What we liked – in particular

As I worked my way through the book, one particular example struck home. As noted earlier, Chapter 5 tackles the problem (Gap) of *Understanding Business Change Management*. In this, he provides essential conceptual background and advice for achieving change in the higher ranks of an organization. However, before going further, let us be clear on significantly different types of change relating to projects. For instance, there is Change Management, Management of Change, and now Business Change Management.

- **Change Management** may be defined as "The formal process through which changes to the project plan are approved and introduced".¹³
- **Management of Change** may be defined as "A structured approach for transitioning individuals, groups, and organizations from a current state to a future state with intended business benefits".¹⁴
- **Business Change Management**, as described in this book by Todd Williams, takes Management

of Change beyond the strict domain of asset delivery by extending the concept up through to the top ranks of the sponsoring organization.

Todd opens this chapter with a quote from Peter Senge:¹⁵

"People don't resist change. They resist being changed."

In other words, "I'm all for organizational change so long as it doesn't affect me!" Or as one wag put it, the closer you get to the top, the closer you get to the door, see Figure 2 as an example.



Figure 2

In developing his analysis, Todd notes that there are three precursors that have developed current change management thought:¹⁶

- **Cognitive behavior:** Studies show we need to change expectations and beliefs before changing behavior.
- **Grief process:** All people go through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance when faced with change.
- **Social change theory:** 16% adoption is necessary before a change will take hold in a group.

He adds that it is difficult to deal with individuals in a business because many times too many people are involved. It would all take far too long and in any case concurrency is often essential. You have to work at a macro societal level and address departments, divisions, and corporate cultures. Instead of swaying fifty people, you need to focus on the right 8 to 10 people. Instead of influencing a thousand, you recruit 10 direct reports to sway 16 or 20 each.¹⁷

Todd points to John Kotter's *Change Management Approach* described in his book *The Heart of Change* where he, Kotter, posits:¹⁸

"People change what they do, not because they are given *analysis* that shifts their thinking, but because they are shown a *truth* that influences their *feelings*."

To this end, Kotter prescribes eight steps in a change process directed at executives:

1. Increase urgency: Address people's beliefs and expectation
2. Build the guiding team
3. Get the vision right
4. Communicate for buy-in
5. Empower action
6. Create short term wins
7. Don't let up
8. Make change stick.

Each of these steps is described in some detail in Todd's book.¹⁹ Todd then concludes this chapter by observing:²⁰

"Project change processes are well understood, as are their effects on project scope; they do little to address an individual's behavior. Organizational change management directly addresses the willingness or ability of someone to change expectations, beliefs, and behavior. It is less about adherence to a specification and more about how someone feels."

Downside

This book is written to a high intellectual standard, probably most suited to its intended audience, namely senior corporate management. While most sentences are of reasonable length, hence making their respective messages most forceful, the text on the other hand contains many paragraphs that are unreasonably long.²¹ As a result, pages that have no illustrations of any sort, and together with a relatively small font, all make for an appearance of "heavy reading". Indeed, reading more than three such pages in a row frequently sent me to sleep,²² not from boredom but from failure to assimilate.

I understand that the editor no doubt faced a significant challenge in cramming the whole copy into the book's 300+ pages. But discouraging the reader by squeezing the text on every page is not the way to do it. It seems to me that in the spirit of the rest of the book, *GAP 6: Project Leadership* should really be all about appropriately managing the existence of projects from the upper levels of management, i.e., *Leadership of Projects*.

Moreover, GAP 6, consisting of three chapters, is by far the largest amongst all the GAPS. In any case the subject of Leadership is well traveled in the project management literature. So from a practical standpoint, it might have been better to publish GAP 6 as a separate book.

This book does not have a Glossary of terms. Considering it is all about reaching a "Common Understanding" between the two levels of project and executive sponsorship, and further that these two levels essentially communicate in two different business languages, then a Glossary of Terms would appear almost imperative.

Summary

This book is well written in a clear style. It is also well organized, covering an incredible amount of advice on specifics culled from the experiences of a large number of contributors. Yet it is assembled in a logical structure covering the organizational area from the project level to the CEO. The book also follows a clear path from beginning to end through six separate so-called "Gaps" in the typical organizational hierarchy that connects projects through to the top of the establishment they serve.

The standard takeaway sections and open-ended questions that close every chapter are designed to promote discussion and reveal actual practices good and bad. Therefore, this book is well suited for use in a class of mature students with significant relevant experience.

Indeed, this book is a must-read for executives, middle management, project managers and project teams. They should all find information relevant to their jobs and, at the same time, achieve a much clearer understanding of the roles and responsibilities in the project execution stack. *Filling Execution Gaps* is not just reporting on potential research topics, but rather presents recommended problem-solving techniques that have been used successfully in many businesses.

In short, readers get the information they need to do their jobs.²³

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¹ Todd C. Williams, *Filling Execution Gaps*, published by Walter de Gruyter Inc., Boston/Berlin, USA/Germany, 2017, p. xxxix

² Ibid, p. v

³ Ibid, p iii

⁴ Ibid, p vii

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, pp3-5

⁸ Ibid, p21

⁹ Ibid, p8-10

¹⁰ Ibid, p14

¹¹ Ibid, p16

¹² Ibid, p31

¹³ *Wideman Comparative Management Glossary* entry D04398.

¹⁴ *Wideman Comparative Management Glossary* entry D06855.

¹⁵ *Filling Execution Gaps*, p121

¹⁶ Paraphrased from blocked text on p128

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Adapted from p128

¹⁹ Ibid, p129

²⁰ Ibid, p132

²¹ See Author's Presentation Guide at www.maxwideman.com/issacons4/iac1453/sld001.htm, in particular, Page 7 that presents the "Wideman 3-4-5 Principle".

²² Confession: At age 93, this is a consequence perhaps not surprising.

²³ Culled from observations on page p vii