

The Missing Middle Between Strategy and Execution

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Semantic Foundry

Most organisations have two things in reasonable shape.

They have a strategy. It exists in some form — a board presentation, an annual plan, a set of stated priorities. It may be more or less coherent, more or less specific, but it exists. Leadership has made decisions about where the organisation is going.

They also have implementations. Systems that process transactions. Processes that serve customers. People who run operations. The daily machinery of the organisation, however imperfect, is running. Something is being delivered.

What most organisations do not have is the layer in between.

The layer that connects what the strategy requires to what the operations deliver. The governed picture of what the organisation needs to be able to do — expressed clearly enough to evaluate whether the current implementations serve the strategy, and precisely enough to guide what gets built when they don't.

That layer is the middle. And in almost every large regulated organisation, it is missing.

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The consequences of the missing middle are everywhere, even if the cause is rarely named.

The board approves a new strategic direction. Customer onboarding needs to move from days to minutes. The objective is clear. The business case is approved. The programme launches. And then, six months later, the organisation is still trying to determine what needs to change. Process teams are mapping workflows. Architects are analysing systems. Everyone is busy. Nobody is implementing the strategy.

This is the missing middle made visible. The strategy exists. The implementations exist. The connection between them — the governed picture of what capabilities need to change and how — does not.

Or consider a different version of the same problem. A CIO wants to modernise a core platform. The technical case is clear. But when the business case goes to the CFO, there is no way to trace the proposed investment to specific strategic outcomes. The

technology team knows what they want to build. They cannot explain, in terms the business can evaluate, why the current system is preventing the strategy from executing and what changes would fix it.

The business case fails. Not because the investment was wrong. Because the layer that would have made the connection visible — that would have allowed the CIO to say ‘this strategy requires this capability, this capability is currently limited by this implementation, this investment removes that limitation’ — does not exist.

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Every large organisation has people whose job is to bridge this gap.

Programme managers who translate strategic priorities into delivery plans. Business relationship managers who carry context between the business and the technology function. Solution architects who connect business requirements to technical design. Transformation offices that track whether change programmes are landing.

All of them are doing, manually and imperfectly, what a governed middle layer would do structurally and reliably.

The reason the bridge is so hard to maintain is that it has no foundation. Every handoff depends on the quality of the communication between the people on either side of it. Every translation depends on the skill of the translator. The moment any of those people leaves, changes roles, or gets pulled to a higher priority, the connection weakens. The bridge that was maintained through human effort and relationship becomes a gap again.

The middle is not missing because nobody is trying to fill it. It is missing because nothing structural is holding it in place.

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The disciplines that should produce the middle layer exist. Enterprise architecture. Business architecture. Capability modelling. Value stream analysis. These are mature disciplines with decades of practice and bodies of literature.

The challenge is that these disciplines, as typically practised, produce artefacts that describe the middle layer without governing it. The capability map gets built. It captures a moment in time. It sits in a repository, referenced occasionally, updated rarely. The next programme doesn’t reference it. The next acquisition doesn’t update it. The duplication it identified is still there, three years later, because identifying it was never enough to do anything about it.

The difference between a capability map that describes what the organisation does and a governed middle layer that every implementation is derived from and traceable to is the difference between a photograph and a blueprint. The photograph shows you what was there at a moment in time. The blueprint governs what gets built.

Most organisations have photographs. None of them has the blueprint.

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The missing middle is not a technology problem. It is an ownership problem.

The operating model is currently owned by nobody. It lives in the technology function because the technology is where most of it is encoded. But the technology function does not own the business intent the technology is supposed to serve. The business owns the intent but not the model. Nobody is responsible for the connection between the strategy and the implementation. Nobody owns the middle.

A governed middle layer is a business artefact. It is expressed in business language. It is validated by the people who understand the business. It is governed by the domains that own the capabilities. When the strategy changes, the business updates the capability definitions that the strategy affects. When an operational change happens, the domain experts who own that capability update the model.

The model belongs to the business — not to a programme, not to a consultancy, not to the technology function.

That ownership shift is what makes the middle layer sustainable. Every previous attempt to close the gap has been owned by the wrong people, in the wrong form, with the wrong connection to both the strategy above it and the implementations below it.

Every organisation has a strategy. Every organisation has implementations.

Almost none have the layer in between that keeps the two connected over time. The next piece names what that layer is — and what it takes to make it real.

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