



IM TruePoint Perspective

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Why Great Strategies Still Die in the Organization

*The seven silent killers blocking execution,
learning, and adaptation*



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Turning hidden barriers into organizational fitness in a VUCA world

Why This Matters Now

Most executive teams do not fail because they lack intelligence, analytical horsepower, or strategic intent. They fail because the organization cannot reliably convert strategic ambition into coordinated action, honest learning, and timely adaptation.

That is why now is the right moment to revisit the silent killers.

The original research on the silent killers of strategy implementation showed that the biggest obstacles to execution are usually not visible in organization charts, scorecards, or strategy decks. They sit below the surface as mutually reinforcing barriers in leadership behavior, team effectiveness, communication, coordination, and organizational capability. These barriers remain highly relevant today.

The newest 2025 research gives us an additional reason to write this paper now. It confirms that the original six silent killers still appear across organizations operating in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments, and it brings renewed attention to a seventh barrier that has become especially consequential in contemporary organizations: **inadequate delegation of authority and decision rights**.

That addition matters. In a more stable world, organizations could often compensate for weak delegation through hierarchy, planning, and control. In a VUCA world, that compensation mechanism breaks down. Strategies are necessarily incomplete. Conditions shift quickly. Emerging issues appear at the operational edge. Customers, partners, technologies, and business models evolve faster than annual planning cycles. Under such conditions, organizations do not only need better execution. They need faster learning, better cross-boundary coordination, and more disciplined initiative closer to the work.

This paper argues that the silent killers should therefore be understood not only as barriers to execution, but as barriers to **organizational fitness**: the ability to align strategy, capabilities, culture, and leadership so the organization can deliver today while adapting for tomorrow.

This is the central leadership challenge. Not simply to communicate a strategy more clearly, and not simply to train better leaders, but to build an organizational system that makes truthful dialogue, coordinated execution, and distributed judgment possible.

Main Components

Why The Silent Killers Still Matter

The original framework identified six silent killers of strategy implementation and learning:

1. Top-down or laissez-faire senior management style
2. Unclear purpose, strategy, values, and priorities
3. An ineffective senior management team
4. Poor vertical communication
5. Poor coordination across functions, businesses, or borders
6. Inadequate down-the-line leadership skills and development

The updated research gives stronger visibility to a seventh:

7. Inadequate delegation of authority and decision rights

These seven barriers are best understood as a system, not a checklist.

A fragmented top team weakens the quality of direction. A top-down or conflict-avoiding leadership style from the top leader makes difficult trade-offs harder to surface and resolve. The strategy is then experienced below as unclear, politically contested, or inconsistent. Poor coordination across functions, businesses, and borders slows the translation of intent into action. Weak vertical communication prevents senior leaders from hearing how the organization actually experiences the strategy. Inadequate development of lower-level leaders leaves too little capability in the system to carry change. And when authority remains too centralized, people closest to customers, operations, and emerging opportunities cannot act quickly enough to learn and adapt.

The result is familiar: meetings become busier, governance heavier, and communication louder, yet the organization becomes slower, more cautious, and less coherent.

Purpose deserves special emphasis here. As the updated research indicates, in a context where the future path is less knowable in advance, shared purpose becomes an essential part of strategic direction. It helps people make better decisions when detailed answers are unavailable and supports coherence without over-centralization.

This is why the silent killers are so enduring. They are not isolated management problems. They are a self-reinforcing syndrome that degrades three things simultaneously: the quality of direction, the quality of implementation, and the quality of learning.

Figure 1 captures this system logic clearly. It shows how the original six barriers interact across three performance effects: low quality of direction, low quality of implementation, and low quality of learning and execution. It also makes visible the most important update from the 2025 research: inadequate delegation of authority now sits alongside closed vertical communication at the center of the framework. That is significant because it shows that the organization's challenge is no longer only to communicate strategy downward and surface truth upward, but also to push judgment and decision-making authority closer to the work. In a VUCA world, the seven silent killers should therefore be read not only as an execution framework, but as a diagnosis of organizational adaptability.

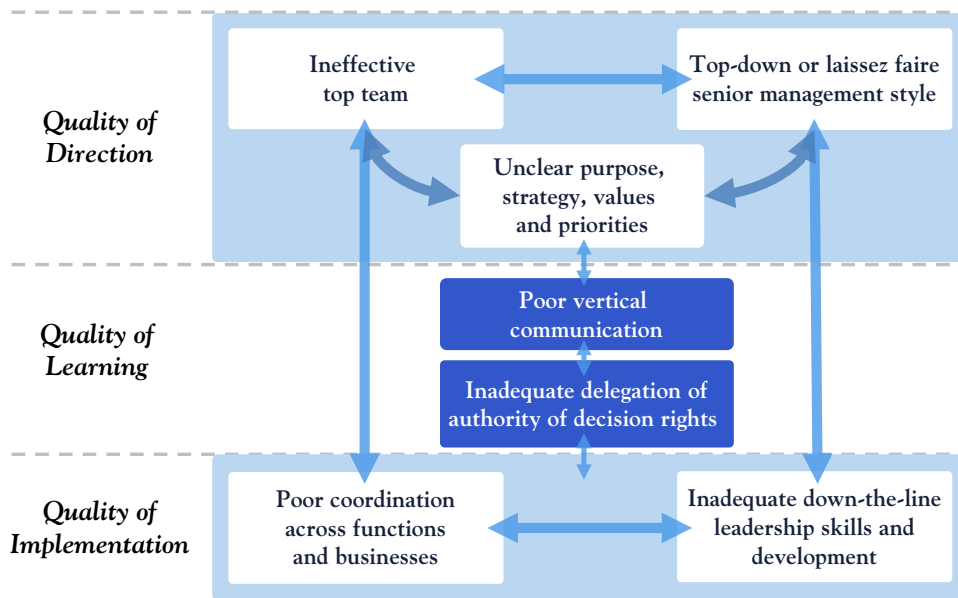


Figure 1: Silent Killer Framework, Including a Seventh Barrier, and Thereby Fit for a VUCA World

A Modern Executive Case: Strong Strategy, Weak Organizational Fitness

A global medical technology company. By most conventional measures, the company looked strategically sophisticated. Its top team was full of highly accomplished executives, several with elite strategy backgrounds. It had a formal strategy process. It had planning capability. It had smart people and a serious agenda.

Yet the CEO was confronting a basic and uncomfortable reality: the company could not reliably turn strategy into results.

That tension captures the modern leadership dilemma. In many organizations, the issue is not that strategy quality is too low. It is that organizational fitness is too low. The business knows where it wants to go in broad terms, but the system is not built to translate strategic intent into coordinated execution and fast learning.

Truth does not travel upward with enough candor. Coordination does not travel sideways with enough discipline. Authority does not travel downward with enough clarity. The organization becomes strategy-rich and adaptation-poor.

That is precisely why the seventh killer is so important. In fast-moving environments, leaders cannot expect the center to make every meaningful decision. The organization must be able to interpret, test, respond, and learn closer to the point of action. When that does not happen, the top becomes overloaded, the middle becomes cautious, and the organization falls behind the pace of change.

The Fit To Compete Diagnosis

A Fit to Compete lens provides a useful backbone for understanding the silent killers because it focuses on the alignment of strategy, capabilities, culture, and leadership. The seven killers show where that fit has broken down. But the silent killers themselves remain the central diagnostic logic in this paper, and Figure 1 gives the clearest representation of that logic.

The figure organizes the seven barriers into three interdependent effects:

1. Low quality of direction

At the top of the figure sit three barriers that weaken direction: top-down or laissez-faire senior management style, an ineffective senior management team, and unclear purpose, strategy, values, and priorities. These barriers undermine the organization's ability to make clear choices, communicate consistent priorities, and create alignment around what matters most.

2. Low quality of implementation

At the bottom of the figure sit the barriers that weaken implementation: poor coordination and collaboration across functions, businesses, and borders; inadequate down-the-line leadership skills and development; and, now more visibly, inadequate delegation of authority and decision rights. Together they slow execution, overload the top, and prevent the organization from responding quickly enough.

3. Low quality of learning and execution

At the center sits poor vertical communication, now linked in the updated figure with inadequate delegation of authority. This middle zone matters because it connects learning and execution. When truth does not travel upward and authority does not travel downward, the organization cannot correct course fast enough. The result is silence, delayed learning, and lower-quality execution.

Seen this way, the silent killers are not only obstacles. They are signals. They tell leaders where strategy, capabilities, culture, and leadership have drifted out of alignment. Fit to Compete is the overarching concept: it names the quality the organization needs, while the seven silent killers explain why that quality is missing.

Why The Updated Research Matters Now

The addition of inadequate delegation of authority and decision rights is important, but it should be understood in the context of the broader framework rather than as a stand-alone discovery.

The main point is that the full syndrome remains highly relevant in a VUCA world. Senior leaders still struggle with direction-setting, lower levels still experience silence and filtered communication, and organizations still underperform when coordination and leadership capacity are weak. The updated research sharpens the culture by making visible how delegation of authority has become more consequential in environments that require faster response, more experimentation, and more judgment closer to the work.

In such conditions, leaders cannot know enough, fast enough, to specify every answer in advance. The organization must operate with clearer guard rails and greater local agency at the same time. That means leaders need to become much more deliberate about what should be tightly aligned and what should be delegated.

The non-negotiables should be few and clear: purpose, values, strategic intent, economic logic, enterprise priorities, and a limited number of design principles. Within those boundaries, the organization needs room to test, pilot, solve, and adapt (see next paper in the series, *The Learning Serpent*). Without that room, lower levels are held accountable for outcomes without being given sufficient authority to influence them.

The consequence is not only slower execution. It is weaker learning. Yet this should not distract from the larger conclusion: the seven silent killers still need to be addressed simultaneously as a system.

A Systemic Leadership Agenda To Address The Silent Killers

The silent killers should be understood as the systemic barriers that prevent organizations from moving up the 45-Degree Zone. They weaken the quality of direction, the quality of implementation, and the quality of learning at the same time. That is why they cannot be addressed through isolated actions or disconnected initiatives. Leaders must first make the barriers visible through honest diagnosis and open vertical communication.

They must then clarify strategic direction and priorities, strengthen the effectiveness of the senior team, improve coordination across boundaries, and reset decision rights so that authority is pushed closer to the work with clear guard rails.

Finally, they must establish a repeatable learning cadence that allows the organization to surface emerging constraints, act on what can be solved locally, and elevate the few critical issues that require system-level changes. In this way, addressing the silent killers becomes the organizational work required to enable sustained movement up the 45-Degree Zone.

- *Start with diagnosis and the leadership team:* Organizations cannot act effectively on the silent killers until they make them visible. The starting point is therefore honest diagnosis through structured mechanisms that allow undistorted information to reach the top. This directly addresses poor vertical communication and the tendency to avoid difficult issues.

But diagnosis alone is not enough. The leadership team must also be able and willing to act on what it learns. An ineffective top team is itself one of the core silent killers. That is why work on the leadership team is inseparable from diagnosis. Leaders need to confront conflict, make explicit trade-offs, and hold one another accountable for enterprise outcomes rather than narrow functional interests.

- *Clarify purpose, priorities, and direction:* With a more honest view of reality, the leadership team can define a clear strategic “from-to,” a small number of priorities, and the trade-offs required by the strategy. This directly addresses the silent killer of unclear purpose, strategy, values, and priorities. Clarity at this level creates coherence across the organization without over-specifying execution.
- *Redesign the system to support the strategy:* Once direction is clear, the organization must align its structures, processes, incentives, and forums with that direction. Many silent killers persist because the system contradicts the strategy—for example, by demanding collaboration while continuing to reward silo performance. Redesigning the system helps address weak coordination and systemic misalignment by ensuring that desired behaviors are reinforced in daily work.
- *Reset decision rights and enable disciplined empowerment:* A critical barrier in many organizations is unclear or overly centralized decision-making. Clarifying who decides what, with clear guard rails and escalation paths, addresses top-down control and weak delegation. This increases speed and initiative while maintaining strategic coherence.
- *Build leadership capacity through real work:* Leadership capability cannot be built through training alone if the organizational context remains unchanged. Managers develop most effectively when they are given real responsibility for cross-boundary problem-solving and meaningful change. This addresses the silent killer of inadequate down-the-line leadership development while reinforcing collaboration, accountability, and learning.
- *Install a repeatable learning cadence:* Because the silent killers are dynamic, they must be surfaced and addressed repeatedly. Organizations need a regular cadence for reviewing both business results and organizational health, including decision speed, quality of collaboration, and candor in communication. This strengthens learning and creates the conditions for ongoing adaptation and re-alignment of the system design if needed.
- *Focus on a few critical shifts:* A common symptom of the silent killers is initiative overload. The answer is not more activity, but greater discipline. Leadership teams should concentrate on a small number of high-leverage changes derived from the diagnosis so that effort is focused on root causes rather than dispersed across disconnected initiatives.
- *From sequence to system:* In practice, this agenda has a logical starting sequence, diagnosis, leadership teamwork, and strategic clarification, but it quickly becomes a system. Insights from the learning cadence leads to renewed diagnosis. Changes in structure and decision rights reveal new barriers. The leadership team must therefore revisit trade-offs, priorities, and design choices continuously.

This reflects the nature of the silent killers themselves. Because they operate as a reinforcing system, breaking them requires coordinated action, and sustaining progress requires continuous adjustment.

What This Means For Organizations Fit To Compete

The deeper implication of the updated silent killers research is that competitive advantage increasingly depends on organizational fitness.

Fit organizations are not those with the most detailed plans. They are those that can align strategic direction with the capabilities, culture, and leadership required to execute and adapt. They can maintain coherence without over-centralizing. They can create accountability without suppressing initiative. They can hear inconvenient truths before those truths become performance failures.

This is why the silent killers deserve executive attention now. In a world that demands both delivery and adaptation, they reveal where the organization is over-controlled, under-aligned, under-developed, or too silent to learn.

This also connects this paper to the broader series. The Silent Killers diagnose the barriers. The 45-Degree Zone describes the leadership logic required to balance delivering today and securing tomorrow. The Learning Serpent describes the architecture for turning strategy, execution, and learning into a continuous organizational cycle. Together, they describe not separate models, but a connected view of what it takes to build an organization fit to compete.

The opportunity is significant. When leaders address the seven silent killers as a system, they do more than improve execution. They create the conditions for a healthier organization: clearer direction, stronger leadership team, better coordination, more capable managers, faster learning, and more disciplined delegation. In other words, they build an organization better able to compete.

Summary And Conclusions

Great strategies still die in the organization because execution failure is rarely only an execution issue. It is more often a system issue.

The latest research confirms that the original six silent killers remain as relevant as ever. It also shows that a seventh barrier—inadequate delegation of authority and decision rights—has become central in a VUCA world. This is not simply because speed matters more, but because adaptation now depends on judgment, initiative, and learning being distributed more broadly across the organization.

The leadership implication is clear. Organizations do not overcome the silent killers through better messaging, isolated training programs, or structural changes in isolation. They overcome them by addressing the full system: aligning strategy and purpose, strengthening the leadership team, improving cross-boundary coordination, creating honest conversation, building leadership capacity at multiple levels, and delegating authority with discipline.

This is the work of organizational fitness.

For executive teams, the question is no longer whether the silent killers exist. The question is whether the organization has the courage and discipline to surface them, address them as a system, and turn them into capabilities.

That is how great strategies stop dying in the organization.

About This Perspective

This paper curates and builds on established research on the Silent Killers, the 2025 update on the silent killers in a VUCA world, and related work on organizational fitness, system alignment, and capability development. It is written as an executive perspective in the style of an IM TruePoint white paper: concise, practical, and aimed at helping leadership teams connect strategic ambition with organizational reality.

This work is part of a broader series. The Silent Killers diagnose the organizational barriers to strategy execution, the 45-Degree Zone defines the leadership logic for sustainable transformation, and the Learning Serpent provides the organizational architecture that enables continuous strategy-to-execution learning. A forthcoming book will bring these perspectives together more fully.

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About TruePoint Innovation in Management

In close collaboration, IM TruePoint brings innovative management knowledge and practices to leaders and their teams, so that they can navigate the complexities of today's world and build capabilities to learn and adapt faster than competition. We are convinced that leaders who manage to integrate both economic and social value, what we call Higher Ambition, will prosper in the long run.

Our expertise is to deeply understand the whole system – your purpose, strategy, organization and people. We help unearth the friction points in your system and get people talking about how to solve them so that actual solutions can be implemented. We partner with you as you align your leadership and build capability for continuously adapting and consistently delivering both short-term and long-term performance.

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