Why Projects Misalign, and the One Shift that Fixes It[1]

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Abstract

This article draws on fifteen years of working between strategy and execution to identify the structural reason most project alignment initiatives fail — and to offer a specific, seven-question tool any project manager can use before the next kickoff. It is not a communication problem. It is not a stakeholder engagement problem. It is a sequencing problem: teams start the alignment conversation in the wrong place.

Most project teams begin by agreeing on where they are today — the problems, the constraints, the existing systems. The issue is that different people experience today differently, and those differences produce quietly different pictures of where the project is going. No one notices until execution is underway and the team is pulling in opposite directions.

The solution involves a single structural shift: establish a complete, verified picture of where you are going before anyone describes where you are today. This article explains why that shift works, shows what it looks like in practice through two case studies, and introduces the Seven-Question Execution Hypothesis, a practical tool that captures the full destination picture in 30 to 40 minutes and can be used immediately, with no new platform or methodology training required.

The article also addresses why this shift has become more urgent in the age of AI: AI planning tools amplify whatever frame they are given. When that frame is incomplete, AI amplification makes the problem more coherent and faster. When the frame is a complete, verified destination picture, AI amplification works in the project's favor.

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Introduction

I have spent most of my professional life in a position that many project managers know well but rarely talk about: The space between what leadership decides and what the team executes.

From that position, you can see things that are invisible at higher levels. You see how a strategic intention leaves a leadership meeting as one thing and arrives at the delivery team as something different. Not because anyone was careless or misleading, but because the space in between was never deliberately designed. In that gap, interpretation takes over.

Over the years, I watched the same pattern repeat across organizations, industries, and transformation initiatives of every size. A project would launch with enthusiasm, a clear scope, strong sponsorship, and often well-established methodologies such as Agile or Scrum in place, and what appeared to be full alignment. A few months later, teams were arguing about things that felt like they should have been settled on day one.

The diagnosis was almost always wrong. Leaders called it a communication problem. Consultants called it a change management gap. Retrospectives called it a stakeholder engagement problem.

> ***It was none of those things. It was a structural problem caused by starting the alignment conversation in the wrong place.***

Most project alignment conversations begin with the current state. The kickoff meeting documents the problem, the constraints, the existing systems, and the pain points. The project charter captures where we are and what is broken. The assumption built into this sequence is that shared understanding of the present produces a shared vision of the future.

It does not. It produces something that looks like alignment, but no consensus of today quietly hides different pictures of tomorrow. Everyone agreed on what was wrong. No one verified they were imagining the same thing when they pictured it fixed.

This article is about that structural problem and a specific, practical fix. The fix does not require a new methodology, a new platform, or organizational change. It does not replace methodologies like Agile or Scrum; it strengthens them by ensuring that the decisions and alignment they depend on are explicit, shared, and verified before execution begins.

The fix requires a sequence change and seven specific questions answered before the planning begins. The article draws on professional practice across complex transformation initiatives in the United States and Latin America, and on the *Solo Decision Architecture* framework developed at BC-DS[2]. The seven-question tool introduced here is available as a free, AI-guided session at convoking4.com.

1. Why Alignment Breaks Down

1.1 The Real Cause

Here is the thing about alignment failures that most retrospectives get wrong: the disagreement was already present at the kickoff. It just was not visible yet.

When a team aligns on the current state, agreeing on what the problem is, what is broken, and what constraints exist, they agree on something that different people experience in completely different ways. A senior leader experiences the current state as a strategic gap. A delivery team member experiences it as daily operational friction. A product manager experiences it as a backlog with no clear governing principle.

When the conversation begins in this territory, it begins at the point of maximum divergence. Any consensus produced is a consensus on one interpretation of a divergent reality, not on a shared picture of where the project is going.

The divergence then travels invisibly through the project or initiative. Everyone executes with slightly different success criteria in their head. Every decision gets made against a slightly different implicit destination. A few months later, a change request or a scope question surfaces the disagreement, and the team spends weeks resolving something that could have been identified from day one.

I have started calling the accumulated cost of this pattern Decision Debt[3]: the compound cost of assumptions that were never examined and alignments that were declared but never verified. Like financial debt, it compounds silently. Unlike financial debt, it never

[2] Hernandez, MH 2026, Solo Decision Architecture
[3] Montero and Hernandez, 2026, Business Decision Architecture

appears on any project dashboard until it surfaces as a missed outcome nobody can fully explain.

Three Signs of Decision Debt in a Project

1. Clear scope, unclear outcome. Everyone knows what is being built. Nobody can state precisely what will be different in the world when it is done.

2. Aligned on the plan, not on the destination. Different team members would give different answers if asked: What does success look like when this project is finished?

3. Change requests evaluated against the plan, not the destination. The question asked is "Does this fit the scope?" rather than "Does this move us closer to what we are trying to achieve?"

1.2 Why the Conventional Sequence Produces This Problem

The conventional project charter and kickoff sequence are well-intentioned but structurally backwards. It documents where we are, defines what is wrong, identifies constraints, agrees on scope, and sets the plan in motion. This feels like rigor, and it would be rigorous if shared understanding of the present produced a shared vision of the future.

But it does not. It produces what I call the Illusion of Alignment: a state in which everyone has agreed on the analysis of the present, but no one has verified that they are aiming at the same future. The team declares alignment when people stop arguing. The actual test: Are we all picturing the same thing when we imagine this project succeeding?

Three specific patterns consistently produce this illusion. I have observed each of them across transformation initiatives in organizations of every size. They remain invisible in the moment and become recognizable only in retrospect.

The Three Faces of the Illusion of Alignment

The decision was already made before the meeting. The kickoff existed to confirm what leadership had already decided, while maintaining the appearance of collective input. People agreed on the analysis because disagreeing felt risky, not because they genuinely shared the vision.

The real picture never made it to the top. Frontline teams had the most accurate understanding of what was happening. As that information moved upward, it was softened, delayed, and translated into something leadership was comfortable hearing. By the time it reached the decision-makers, it was no longer the same picture.

People stopped arguing, but they did not agree. Alignment was declared when the room quieted down. Execution teams then interpreted the strategy through their own understanding. The divergence emerged quietly, months later, as outcomes out of expectations.

2. The Fix — Start with Where You Are Going

2.1 Backcasting as an Alignment Strategy

Backcasting is a planning approach that starts with the destination rather than the current state. Instead of asking "where are we and where could we go?" it asks "where do we need to be, and what must be true for us to get there?" The future is fixed first. The present is then navigated from that commitment.

The term comes from futures studies, where researchers in the 1970s and 1980s observed that forecasting from present conditions systematically underestimated what was possible and constrained ambition to what current systems could already produce[4]. The alternative—backcasting—reverses this logic: first define the desired outcome, then identify the structural changes required to achieve it. This approach has been used for decades in long-range energy planning and climate policy.

But it has not made it into everyday project management as an alignment strategy. It has remained a long-range planning technique, not a kickoff practice. This article makes that translation.

The structural logic is simple. When the destination is fixed before the current-state analysis begins, constraints cannot quietly shrink it. The current state gets described as territory to be navigated, honest, fully mapped, rather than as the ceiling of what the future is allowed to be. And when every team member works backward from the same verified destination, differences in current-state experience become differences in path rather than differences in destination.

[4] Robinson, J. B. (1990). Futures under glass: A recipe for people who hate to predict.

When you start with today	When you start with the destination
Constraints shape the destination before it is fully articulated.	The destination is fixed before constraints are mapped; they cannot shrink it.
Different people's experience of today produces different implicit pictures of tomorrow.	Everyone works backward from the same verified destination. Path differences are manageable.
AI tools amplify whatever assumptions are in the first prompt.	AI tools amplify a verified, shared destination; amplification works in the team's favor.
Alignment is declared when people stop arguing.	Alignment is verified against a specific, shared picture of success.

2.2 Why a Destination Statement Alone Is Not Enough

Most teams that try to start with the future stop at one question: "What does success look like?" That is a start, and it is better than starting with the problem. But it is not enough to prevent the alignment failures described above.

A destination statement without the human picture, who specifically benefits, gives teams a metric to execute toward without knowing who they are building for. Execution decisions get made on technical grounds rather than human ones. A destination statement without the systemic picture, what changes in the world when the threshold is crossed, gives teams a finish line they can cross without generating the value the project was supposed to produce.

Neither a destination statement nor a success metric tells the team what they are honestly starting from, or when they must arrive. Without those two elements, every gap estimate, every resource plan, and every timeline is built on assumptions.

The complete foundation for genuine alignment requires seven specific elements, all verified, all mutually consistent. I call this the Execution Hypothesis: a testable claim about where the project is going, why it matters, who it serves, what changes in the world, when it is starting, and where it must arrive. The Gap Map, the measurement of structural distance between here and there, is only reliable when all seven elements are present.

3. The Seven-Question Execution Hypothesis

The following seven questions replace the current-state-first project charter opening. They can be incorporated into any existing PM workflow, kickoff meeting, project brief, sprint planning session, or stakeholder alignment conversation, without platform adoption or methodology training.

Run them in sequence. The order matters: the destination end (Questions 1 through 4) must be established before the origin end (Questions 5 and 6) is described. Describing where you are before fixing where you are going allows the present to quietly limit what the future is allowed to be.

Thirty to forty minutes in a kickoff session. One conversation that replaces weeks of mid-execution misalignment.

The Seven-Question Execution Hypothesis — Complete Before Any Planning Begins

Q1 — What does success actually look like?

Not what seems achievable. Not what the stakeholders will accept. What the team genuinely wants to be true when this project is done, before constraints are considered. Written fast, without filtering for realism.

Why this matters: if this question is not asked before constraints enter the room, the constraints will quietly shape what the team thinks it wants. The destination will already be smaller than what was genuinely needed before anyone consciously chose to make it smaller.

Q2 — What specific, verifiable change proves the project worked?

Not the deliverable. Not the output. The actual change that will exist when the project succeeds. Specific enough that someone unfamiliar with the project could confirm it happened without needing to judge or interpret. If the answer requires judgment to evaluate, keep refining until it can be answered Yes or No.

Why this matters: Without a verifiable success definition, a team can execute flawlessly, deliver everything in scope, and still fail to produce the outcome the project was supposed to generate. This question closes the gap between reaching the finish line and generating value.

Q3 — Who specifically benefits when this succeeds?

Not categories, specific people, or clearly described groups. The individuals whose situations change, whose possibilities open, whose daily work becomes different when the project is delivered. Write down names or specific roles. Not 'our customers', which customers? Which colleagues? Which communities? Which Stakeholders?

Why this matters: When teams cannot name who they are building for, execution decisions get made on technical grounds rather than human ones. This question makes the human purpose visible

before execution begins, and surfaces divergence when different team members name different people.

Q4 — What changes in the broader system when the threshold is crossed?

Beyond the project's immediate scope, what is structurally different in the organization, the market, or the field where this destination exists? What becomes possible that was not possible before? What closes permanently that was open?

Why this matters: a project can hit every KPI and still fail to produce systemic change if the systemic picture was never named. This question catches the gap between the finish line and the value the finish line was supposed to unlock, before the project begins.

Q5 — Where are we honestly starting from?

Now, and only now, describe the current state. Not the version the organization is comfortable hearing. The honest operational picture across five areas: financial position, team capabilities, existing processes, competitive reality, and current risk. Describe it in relation to the destination just established; the gap between here and there is what the plan must close.

Why this matters: the current state anchors every gap estimate, timeline, and resource plan. If it is described honestly, the plan is built on accurate measurements. If it is softened, every downstream estimate inherits the distortion.

Q6 — What is the verified deadline, not the felt urgency?

Two separate answers are needed. First: how urgently does the team feel the pressure? Five words: fast, honest. Second: what is the actual structural constraint, the regulatory date, the market window, the contractual deadline, that makes this timeline real? The second answer governs the plan. The first tells you how much anxiety is in the room.

Why this matters: When felt urgency is treated as a structural deadline, every milestone, resource estimate, and risk assessment inherits that distortion. Plans built on anxiety rather than verified constraint break at the first real pressure point.

Q7 — What do we know we do not know?

Name the specific things the team is choosing to proceed with despite remaining uncertainty, not every possible risk, but the specific unknowns that surfaced during this conversation and are being consciously accepted. These are named explicitly and carried forward. When they surface in execution, the team already knows they were anticipated.

Why this matters: When unknowns are named before commitment, the team can receive them honestly when they surface rather than treating them as planning failures. This question closes the gap between the plan that was made and the reality that execution will reveal.

When all seven questions are answered honestly and in sequence, the team holds a complete Execution Hypothesis, a testable claim about where the project is going, verified

against seven mutually consistent elements. Not a plan. The foundation from which a reliable plan can be built.

A free, AI-guided session that walks practitioners through these seven questions, applying the Solo Decision Architecture framework[5], is available at convoking4.com. The session captures answers in Stage 1 without AI participation, then uses AI in Stage 2 to validate the translation and test internal consistency across all seven elements.

4. Two Cases of Practice

4.1 When the Hypothesis Is Missing: A Transformation that Hit Its Milestones and Missed Its Purpose

A mid-size professional services organization launched a digital transformation initiative with a six-month timeline, a well-defined budget, and what everyone in the room believed was full leadership alignment. The kickoff meeting was thorough. The project charter documented the problem clearly. The scope was agreed. Enthusiasm was genuine.

Three months into execution, it became clear that the four members of the leadership team had four different definitions of what the transformation was supposed to produce.

The Chief Operating Officer believed the primary outcome was operational efficiency, freeing the operations team from manual friction. The Chief Technology Officer believed it was system modernization, replacing the legacy infrastructure that could not scale. The Chief Revenue Officer believed it was a customer experience improvement, reducing response times and errors that clients were noticing, and reducing the number of tickets to solve issues. The project sponsor believed it was competitive positioning, building capabilities that the market was starting to expect.

Each of these was a legitimate picture of success. None of them was the same picture. And none of them had been named, tested, or verified against the others before the project began.

> ***The alignment failure was not caused by poor communication. It was built into the process from the first meeting, because the conversation started in a place of maximum divergence rather than a place of potential convergence.***

[5] Hernandez, MH 2026, Future Architecture: The Architecture of the Future

Applying the seven-question lens retrospectively reveals exactly where the original hypothesis was incomplete. Questions 1 and 2—what success looks like and what specifically proves the project worked— generated four different answers that were never surfaced or reconciled. Question 3—who specifically benefits— revealed four distinct perspectives, each shaped by the leader's own professional domain. Question 4—what changes in the broader system— produced four different claims about systemic impact, none of which were fully consistent with one another.

The project hit its milestones and delivered its scope. The Execution Hypothesis was incomplete from day one, and because it was incomplete, four leaders were executing against four different partial hypotheses simultaneously. The misalignment was structural, not interpersonal, and it was entirely preventable.

A project recovery session using the seven questions surfaced the divergence in thirty minutes. It was the first time the leadership team had genuinely aligned, not on the analysis of the past, but on a shared, verified picture of what success would look like.

4.2 When the Hypothesis Is Complete: A Charter That Held

A product development team preparing a significant feature investment used the seven-question sequence before the project charter was written. The session opened with Question 1, not the problem statement, not the current backlog, not the business case, but what success actually looked like.

The conversation that followed was harder than a standard kickoff. Answering Question 2, what specifically proves the project worked surfaced two significant disagreements that would otherwise have emerged during execution: one about which user segment the feature was primarily designed for, and one about whether the success metric was adoption rate or retention impact.

Question 3—who specifically benefits—made the disagreement around user segments concrete in human terms. When team members named the specific people they envisioned as benefiting from the feature, the divergence became visible in a way that abstract discussions of "target users" never had.

Both disagreements were resolved before the charter was written. The resolution required forty minutes of focused conversation. The same disagreements surfacing three months into execution — under delivery pressure, with resources already committed — would have required a scope change, a timeline revision, and a stakeholder alignment session that nobody had budgeted for.

The project was delivered with the expected outcome verified at completion. The team attributed the absence of mid-execution scope disagreements specifically to the fact that the charter had been anchored on a complete, verified Execution Hypothesis before the first line of planning work began.

5. Why This Is More Urgent Now: The AI Dimension

The alignment problem described in this article has existed for as long as projects have existed. What has changed is the speed at which it compounds.

AI tools are now present in almost every project planning process. Project managers use them to draft roadmaps, analyze risks, generate stakeholder briefs, and produce sprint plans. These tools are genuinely useful; they reduce the time it takes to produce a first draft of almost anything.

But they have a specific property that makes incomplete alignment significantly more dangerous: they amplify whatever frame they are given.

When a PM opens an AI tool and types a planning question: "help me think through this initiative" or "what are the risks in this approach?", the AI works with the frame embedded in how the question was asked. It elaborates, extends, and makes more coherent whatever assumptions were present in the prompt. It does not challenge the frame. It builds on it.

> ***When the frame is a complete, verified Execution Hypothesis, AI amplification works in the project's favor. When the frame is incomplete, AI amplification makes the incompleteness more coherent, faster, and better justified than any human process could.***

This is not a criticism of AI tools. It is a description of how they work, and the specific risk it creates when planning begins before the Execution Hypothesis is complete. An AI-generated roadmap built on four different implicit destinations produces a very coherent plan toward four different places simultaneously. By the time the misalignment surfaces in execution, it has been elaborated, justified, and defended by every AI output the team has produced.

The minimum viable AI governance decision is not a policy, a platform, or an organizational change. It is one step: complete the seven-question Execution Hypothesis before opening the AI planning tool. When those seven questions are answered first, the

AI is given the right frame. Its outputs serve the verified destination. The roadmaps, risk analyses, and briefs it generates are anchored to a complete, human-grounded picture of where the project is going and who it serves.

The PM who completes the Execution Hypothesis before opening the AI tool is the PM who governs what the AI is building toward. In a world where AI is present in almost every planning conversation, that governance decision is now one of the most consequential things a PM does at project initiation.

6. Practical Implications

Three things change when the seven-question sequence is adopted. None require new platforms, methodology training, or organizational approval.

- **Change when the destination conversation happens.**

  Questions 1 through 4 should be answered before the current-state analysis begins — not after the problem is documented, but before. This is a sequence change that takes thirty to forty minutes in a kickoff session. The misalignment it prevents takes weeks to repair in execution.

- **Make the human picture explicit.**

  Question 3 — who specifically benefits — is the question most likely to surface divergence early and most likely to be skipped. It feels personal and specific in a way that professional planning conversations often avoid. That specificity is exactly what makes it useful. When team members name the same specific people, alignment is real. When they name different people, the divergence is visible before execution begins.

- **Complete the hypothesis before using AI planning tools.**

  The most consequential AI governance decision a PM makes at project initiation is not which tool to use or how to write the prompt. It is whether the Execution Hypothesis is complete before AI participation begins. An incomplete hypothesis given to an AI tool produces confident amplification of an incomplete foundation. A complete hypothesis gives AI tools the right frame to work from.

The bigger change these three practices produce is one the PM profession has not yet named explicitly as a core competency: governing the complete picture of where the project is going — not just the scope and the plan, but the verified human and systemic

picture of what success produces and for whom. That picture is the foundation on which everything else is built. The seven questions are how it gets built.

Conclusion

Project alignment does not fail because teams do not communicate. It fails because teams align in the wrong place, the current state, rather than at the one place from which alignment is possible: a complete, verified picture of where the project is going.

The fix is a sequence change and a more complete starting question. Not just "what does success look like?" but seven specific questions that together form a verified Execution Hypothesis: the destination, the verifiable proof of arrival, the specific people who benefit, the systemic change in the world, the honest current state, the verified timeline, and the named unknowns that execution will reveal.

When all seven are answered honestly and in sequence, the team holds something most projects are built without: a foundation specific enough to measure, human enough to motivate, and complete enough to govern what AI tools are building toward.

The seven questions take thirty to forty minutes. The alignment they produce is real. The misalignment they prevent costs weeks.

> ***Governing the complete picture of where the project is going — not just the scope, not just the plan, but the verified human and systemic picture of what success produces and for whom — is one of the most important things a PM does. The seven questions are how that work gets done.***

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