

# Minding the Failure Gap

Senior leaders are charged with meeting a **DIZZYING ARRAY OF EXPECTATIONS**, including delivering on quarterly financials, investing in long term growth, providing reassurance to jittery customers and markets, disrupting the status quo, introducing new products, reliably delivering on legacy products, maintaining employee focus and productivity, and managing rapidly shifting operating models (just to name a few).

Meanwhile, further down in the organization, leaders are equally challenged to be both efficient and innovative, to cut costs and grow revenue, to do more with less and to prioritize customers, employees, culture, and financials, which makes no sense, because that's not what prioritization means. It sounds exhausting, doesn't it?

**TRANSFORMATIONS FAIL  
WHILE LEADERS ARE BUSY  
DOING OTHER "MORE  
IMPORTANT THINGS"**

Leaders are often in their roles because they've proven adept at navigating these kinds of conflicting expectations while delivering consistent results. You may find that you or your colleagues are in that exact situation – leading because you've demonstrated operational excellence and reliability. Unfortunately, these skills don't translate well when an organization needs to transform across its value chain, from the inside out. **When it comes to full organizational transformation, it is easy to fall into the Failure Gap – the space between agreeing that something is a good idea and aligning to make it happen.** It's where good intentions go to die.

We see the Failure Gap most often when leadership teams come to agreement on priorities, strategies, opportunities to pursue, or transformational changes that are needed without doing the hard work of **aligning on how to do it together**. The bigger the change, the wider and deeper the Failure Gap grows. And as the gap increases, so does the space between success and failure for the leadership team. People start to buckle down in their own areas and distance themselves from the transformation goals that were set.

It is so interesting that when asked why transformation efforts fail, executives rank culture as the number one reason. They point to employees and peers who resisted change. Sometimes they blame the customer or say things like ‘we were too far out in front of the market’. Or they point to the investment community, griping that they couldn’t catch a break to make the necessary investments. All of these are legitimate challenges to transforming a company.

But, what we see far more often as the biggest barrier is the leaders themselves. They don’t know how to go first and visibly change how they lead before asking other people to do the same. And so, the same decisions, investments, and priorities are maintained throughout the organization. The result?

The big transformation that everyone agrees needs to happen gets sucked into the Failure Gap.

**IF YOU DON'T NEED TO  
TRANSFORM HOW YOU  
LEAD, YOU PROBABLY  
AREN'T TRANSFORMING  
YOUR COMPANY OR TEAM.**

Here’s the hard truth. **The single most consistent factor in many of these types of situations is that leaders of an organization must change personal mindsets and behaviors to make change happen, and they aren’t doing that work.** Change starts with self, and leaders must be willing to go first and take the leap from agreement to alignment before they ask anyone else to do the same. By going first, leaders build a bridge for the rest of the company to join them in transforming individually and organizationally.

We’ve found **6 key actions** that tell us executives are serious about transformation. They include:

- 1 Stopping pet projects and investments that don’t support transformation
- 2 Reallocating human and financial resources to other areas of the organization, even if it means giving up personal status and power
- 3 Honestly assessing people in the organization to determine if they can learn, develop, and grow into the needs of the future
- 4 Changing the stories that are told about success and failure and finding new ones that define success in the future
- 5 Delaying or renegotiating short-term results, even if it means experiencing a sense of personal impact or loss
- 6 Doing things for collective success that might feel personally painful

If your company is going through transformation and leaders haven’t done something in all these areas they may be stuck in agreement. Or worse, they may have fallen into the Failure Gap. Digging out means knowing what alignment looks like, and how to get there.



The four Cs of alignment help leaders to bring clarity to the mindsets and group dynamics that get in the way of transformation, in addition to the organizational factors that need to be addressed. Through that clarity, connections are built with each other and to the organizational goals, which drives commitment to behavior and decision making changes that are required to change. When clarity, connection, and commitment are established, they fuel the courage to act differently as leaders when it gets hard (which it always does).

**CLARITY:** Clarity brings focus and attention to how to lead individually and collectively to deliver on strategies, plans, and transformations. Too often, leaders are deeply invested in what needs to be done but fail to give equal energy to how they will change personally to deliver on it. You need to create clarity around the mindsets and group dynamics that are getting in the way of transformation.

**CONNECTION:** Leaders need a connection not only each other but also to the shared goals of the transformation. Most teams underleverage the power of the collective leadership experience. By working differently as a leadership team, you can hold each other accountable to delivering a transformed organization.

## LEADERS MUST BE WILLING TO CHANGE HOW THEY LEAD BEFORE ASKING OTHERS TO CHANGE WHAT THEY DO

**COMMITMENT:** Leaders must have a commitment to personally doing what needs to be done to transform. This isn't about getting other people to change. It is about how you as a leader model the way and change how you lead before asking other people to change what they do. When transformation plans aren't backed up with a personal commitment from leaders to visibly change, it has a fraction of the power needed to succeed. You might get there, but it will be slower and more expensive than you anticipated.

**COURAGE:** It takes courage to change yourself before you work to change others. But it is a crucial part of leading and transforming your organization or team. Here's why. If a transformation doesn't require the most senior leaders in an organization to change, it probably isn't much of a transformation.

## IT TAKES COURAGE TO CHANGE YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WORK TO CHANGE OTHERS

To cross the Failure Gap and align to deliver together as a team, leaders need to ask three questions:

- 1 How do I need to work differently to make this happen?
- 2 How do we need to work differently to make this happen?
- 3 How can we work together to support this transformation as a team?

If you want to transform your organization, you will have to navigate the Failure Gap and go beyond agreeing that transformation is a good idea. You will need to align and deliver together as a leadership team. You can start by answering those questions as a team (hint: this can't be done solo). Then you need to go further and understand the tradeoffs, blockers, and ways of leading that will get you where you want to go.

If you are ready to do the work to align and deliver together, give us a shout. We have tools, resources, and solutions that will help you and your team move through the failure gap to get aligned to your boldest aspirations.



*Julie Williamson, PhD*  
**Managing Partner / CEO**

Julie is a Managing Partner at Karrikins Group as well as an experienced keynote speaker and published author. A leading voice in how alignment can transform leaders and organizations, Julie has worked around the world with all types of companies, helping them set and execute on strategy and transformation.

Hear more about the power of alignment on her podcast, The Failure Gap at [www.thefailuregap.com](http://www.thefailuregap.com)

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