THINKING / ORGANISATIONAL DECISIONS

Why an agreed decision may still change nothing.

Approval can leave the business working to its old priorities. Leaders need to resolve what the decision requires others to change.

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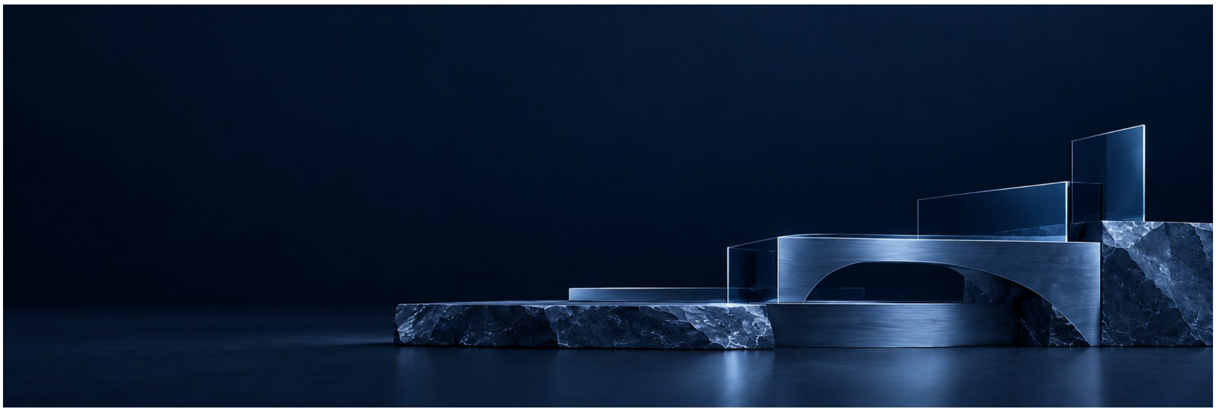
Imagine a leadership team approving a new service. The commercial case is convincing, a sponsor is appointed and a launch date is agreed. Six weeks later, little has moved. The specialists needed for development are still serving existing clients. Sales is waiting for a firm delivery commitment. Operations is waiting for someone to decide which work can be delayed.

Everyone may still support the service. What remains unsettled is whether it takes precedence over obligations the business has already made. Approval has answered whether the idea is worth pursuing, while leaving the people involved to negotiate the consequences. The apparent execution problem contains a decision that management has yet to make.



Key takeaways

An approved initiative can stall because the priorities and commitments around it have not changed.

Naming an owner helps only if that person can secure resources and resolve competing demands.

Before closing the discussion, establish what changes next, what remains conditional and who can settle the unresolved choices.

Find the decision left inside the approval

The new service may have been approved in principle rather than authorised for launch. That distinction is legitimate. Management might want to test demand before committing a delivery team. The difficulty arises when the commercial director hears permission to sell, operations hears permission to investigate and the sponsor believes resources have already been secured. The minutes record agreement without capturing what people have agreed to do.

A useful response is to ask each person affected what they will now do differently. If the answers depend on another budget review, a staffing decision or a customer commitment, those dependencies belong in the discussion. Some can be delegated. Others require the same leaders who approved the service to choose between competing claims. A project plan cannot settle a trade-off its authors have no authority to make.

When a milestone is missed, ask whether anyone authorised the release of the specialists before asking the sponsor to recover the schedule. If that commitment was never made, management still has a choice to resolve.

Make room for the new priority

A McKinsey survey published in 2024 found that only about half of 617 executives and managers said their companies effectively aligned budgets with corporate strategy. Just 53 per cent reported that their organisations routinely fully funded identified priorities. Respondents worked in businesses with revenues of at least $500 million, so these figures describe reported practice in larger companies.[1]

In the service example, an approved budget would still leave a practical question: where will the experienced people come from? Hiring may take longer than the launch allows. Moving people may affect existing customers. Reducing the initial offer may protect delivery but weaken the commercial case. These are choices with consequences for the proposal itself. They deserve attention before a launch date becomes a promise.

Management could agree to postpone an internal project and release two specialists for a defined period. It could authorise a smaller test instead. Or it could conclude that the opportunity does not justify disrupting current commitments. Any of those might be sensible. Continuing to call the service a priority while leaving every existing obligation intact gives the team no usable direction.

Give the owner a workable mandate

A service sponsor might be able to change the development sequence but not withdraw people from client work. That boundary needs to be clear, with someone authorised and available to resolve conflicts. Otherwise, naming an owner merely identifies who will have to chase them.

A July 2026 McKinsey survey of 1,205 executives and managers found that respondents describing their businesses as first movers were more likely to report securing organisational commitment and reallocating resources. These are associations in respondents' accounts, not evidence that moving first guarantees success.[2] A sponsor still needs specific commitments from the people who control the resources, however enthusiastic the leadership team may be.

For the new service, the sponsor and functional leaders should settle the allocation of people before treating the launch as committed. They should also know who can resolve a subsequent conflict with client delivery, and how quickly that person must respond. A short record of these arrangements is useful because it gives people a common reference when circumstances become difficult.

Review what has changed in the business

At the first review, check whether the specialists have been released and the postponed project has stopped consuming their time. Establish whether sales is respecting the agreed scope. These changes show whether the business has made room for the service; completed planning tasks may not.

The review should also distinguish an unresolved commitment from new information. If a key customer no longer wants the service, reconsidering the investment may be good judgment. If a function simply continues to give its old work precedence, management needs to resolve the conflict. Treating both as a failure to execute discourages useful challenge and leaves the underlying priorities untouched.

Agree in advance which developments would justify reopening the decision: a material change in demand, an unacceptable delivery cost or the loss of a necessary capability. Within those limits, let the sponsor adapt the work. This gives the team room to act without turning every adjustment into another approval meeting.

When an initiative stalls, look at the decisions around it before asking for greater urgency. In the new service, progress begins when management settles who can stop doing existing work to make the launch possible. Until then, the team is being asked to deliver a priority that the rest of the business has not been asked to honour.

Sources

1. McKinsey (2024). Tying short-term decisions to long-term strategy. Survey published 20 May 2024.

2. McKinsey (2026). Why accelerated resource allocation matters in the age of AI. Survey published 6 July 2026.

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