**X-Gap: Using Strategic Planning to Close the Project Execution "Gap"**

Teams and organizations are constantly plagued by project execution errors and failures. These failures create an execution gap -- a gap between what an individual and/or team plans to do and what they actually do instead. Just as retention rapidly degrades after learning, so does project execution after strategic planning. So what can be done?

In 1885, Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, famously demonstrated a theory concluding that people start forgetting what they learn as soon as they learn it. In his "forgetting curve" study, he demonstrated that humans forget half of what they learn within an hour of learning it, and by the following day, they have forgotten a full two-thirds of the new information. Since Ebbinghaus' study, psychologists have discovered that there are many ways to improve retention and memory; however, if memory is so fragile, what is its impact on project execution and strategic planning – getting the things done that you and your team should do?

**Strategic Planning: The Execution Gap Meeting**

Strategic planning is a form of team learning. When approached collaboratively, planning is a knowledge-creating and problem-solving process. And strategic planning can create much detail that is difficult to manage, and therefore, execute. Great project execution requires 100% retention in the team learning process. Without such a perfect level of retention, project execution will falter; however, just as there are techniques to improve individual retention after learning, there are techniques to improve the team's project execution after strategic planning. One of these techniques is the Execution Gap Meeting, or X-Gap.

In principle, the X-Gap is simple. Get the team together at regular intervals during the project execution phase, address the progress of each individual task that must be performed, and take action before progress falls behind. In "Teambuilding: Proven Strategies For Improving Team Performance," recognized as the authoritative work on the fundamentals of team building, the authors note the importance of regular interventions within teams to prevent regression like that of the Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve. Furthermore, they note that regression is more effectively halted when regular interventions are held to focus on tasks as a team rather than on a one-on-one, supervisor-to-subordinate basis. It sounds like a simple strategic planning technique; however, in practice, holding an effective X-Gap requires discipline.

One of the greatest challenges to leading an X-Gap is controlling the discussion and keeping it on task. Fundamentally, the X-Gap is a transparent strategic planning method of applying peer pressure to enhance project execution performance. So, participants have a tendency to provide excuses and open up lengthy discussions to distract the group from individual accountability. X-Gap leaders must fight this tendency.

Leading an effective X-Gap requires a commitment to four basic principles – focus, resolution, action and frequency.

**Principle Number One: Focus**

First, X-Gap meetings should be short and focused only on the tasks required. This strategic planning technique is not an opportunity for open discussion, complex problem solving or the exchange of general information. It has only one item on the agenda – the review of all due and open tasks within the plan. In an X-Gap, the leader convenes the meeting on time and proceeds task-by-task through the project by asking each task owner to report their progress.

Responses should be succinct. Completed tasks and tasks in-progress but not yet due are simply either "completed," "on track," or "green." Tasks that are in progress but have some uncertainty about the capacity to complete them as planned are "yellow." Finally, tasks that are past due or have encountered some critical obstacle that must be addressed are "critical" or "red." The latter two classifications are the target of the X-Gap strategic planning meeting. The X-Gap leader's purpose is to identify and isolate those "yellow" and "red" category tasks for further review.

**Principle Number Two: Resolution**

The second basic principle of the X-Gap is to take action to resolve uncertainty, ambiguity and any other obstacles. Once project execution gaps are exposed, the leader should make decisions and possibly reallocate resources in order to close those gaps. Some explanation and discussion is usually necessary. Therefore, X-Gap leaders must remain on their guard against unproductive, rambling discussions. Those responsible for the task targeted for discussion should succinctly explain the issue to the team and state what they believe they need in order to accomplish the task – to close the gap. This need is usually stated as a request for resources or a decision from the leader.

At this point, teams will tend to want to have an open discussion about the matter; however, the X-Gap leader must contain this strategic planning discussion to only a few minutes. If the team is allowed to take too much time, then there will be less time to address other "red" and "yellow" tasks. As a rule of thumb, any task that requires more than two minutes to explain and discuss should be deferred to a separate discussion that takes place after the X-Gap meeting. Leaders must keep the X-Gap meeting focused and moving along smoothly so that all the relevant tasks within the plan are addressed.

**Principle Number Three: Action**

X-Gap meetings should identify specific actions that must take place during the project execution phase, unless all tasks are completed or on task as planned. Leaders should take care to either clearly indicate the actions that must take place as a result of the task review process, or indicate how and when decisions or other resolutions will take place and who is responsible for them. They must determine whether or not additional resources are required, who will acquire them and by when. And if further deliberation is required to achieve a decision, leaders must decide when this will take place and which team members will be a part of the discussion. Successful strategic planning in X-Gap meetings should never conclude without clarity about the next steps to take.

**Principle Number Four: Frequency**

Finally, X-Gap meetings should be a recurring strategic planning event that aligns with the team or organization's overall project execution rhythm. If the team holds an X-Gap every Monday morning at 10 a.m., for example, the team will be better able to anticipate, participate more fully, and prepare more thoroughly.

Preparation is the key to a successful X-Gap meeting and strategic planning session. Team membersreport to the X-Gap at their pre-designated time and place with the statuses of their assigned tasks in the plan. This means being prepared to respond to its overall status, as well as providing both a succinct description of a status that is "yellow" or "red." Participants should be prepared to answer the question: "What do you believe is required to move forward?" Of course, there are often certain dependencies outside an individual team member's control that may be the underlying cause. Hence, the purpose of the X-Gap is to expose these project execution issues and address them appropriately as a team. Good preparation also means that individuals can stand in for others unable to attend the X-Gap, providing a status of their tasks and discussing what is needed to move forward.

An X-Gap strategic planning meeting must be led. As a teacher leads a classroom and utilizes techniques to help students improve retention, a leader should utilize techniques like the X-Gap to improve project execution.   
  
**About the Author**James D. Murphy, the founder and CEO of [Afterburner, Inc.](http://www.afterburnerconsulting.com/), has a unique, powerful mix of leadership skills in both the military and business worlds. After graduating from the University of Kentucky, Murphy joined the U.S. Air Force where he learned to fly the F-15. He has logged over 1,200 hours as an instructor pilot in the F-15 and has accumulated over 3,200 hours of flight time in other high-performance jet aircraft. Murphy, Afterburner's leadership keynote speaker, has helped top business leaders transform strategy into action, demonstrating how the concepts of the Flawless Execution(SM) [strategic planning model](http://www.afterburnerconsulting.com/pyramid/strategic-planning-model.html) could be applied to business process improvement and engaging the proven model - "Plan. Brief. Execute. Debrief." Through his leadership, Afterburner has landed on *Inc. Magazine*'s "Inc. 500 List" twice. Murphy has been featured in a variety of prestigious publications and has appeared on CNN, Fox News, and Bloomberg News to name a few. For more information on Afterburner, Inc., please call 877-765-5607 or visit [www.afterburnerconsulting.com](http://www.afterburnerconsulting.com/).