2026 BENCHMARK REPORT

The Strategy Execution Benchmark

Why strategy doesn't fail at the whiteboard — it decays in the gap before the work.

Based on 180 Strategy & Operations Leaders · Companies of 50–200

86%
OF WORKFORCES CAN'T NAME THE STRATEGY

83%
GET NO AUTOMATIC SIGNAL ON DRIFT

60%
NEVER CLEANLY RESOLVE A FAILING PRIORITY

WHAT'S INSIDE

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FOREWORD

Where Strategy Actually Dies

Ask a leadership team whether their strategy is working and you'll hear "on track." Ask the person responsible for executing it — the VP of operations, the head of strategy — what actually happens between the planning offsite and the quarterly review, and the picture changes.

The strategy gets set. Almost everyone gets that part right. What happens next is where the value leaks out — and it doesn't leak because people abandon the plan or fail at it. The leaders in this study are engaged: most review execution weekly or monthly, spend real hours on it, and feel confident in their view. The failure isn't effort. It's that nothing in the operating system around the strategy keeps it alive.

We surveyed 180 strategy and operations leaders at companies of 50–200 people and asked a deliberately practical set of questions about what happens to strategy after it's decided. The findings are sharper than we expected — and they point to the same conclusion four different ways. **86% of leaders say most of their people can't even name the top priorities. Only 7% say most daily work connects to strategy. 83% have no automatic signal when something goes off track. And 60% never cleanly resolve a priority that's clearly failing.**

Strategy doesn't fail at the whiteboard. It decays quietly in the gap between the plan and the day-to-day — because nothing keeps it named, connected, visible, and decided. This report measures that decay, and shows what the organizations that have closed it do differently.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Four-Part Decay

93%

of leaders say a meaningful share of daily work does **not** ladder up to strategy. Only 7% say most of it connects.

86%

say most employees can't name the top 3 priorities unprompted

83%

learn a priority is off track only by looking, being told, or being surprised

01 **Strategy nobody can name can only be reported on.**
Just 14% of leaders say more than three-quarters of their people could state the top priorities right now. You cannot execute against a plan you can't recall.

02 **The work and the plan drift apart at the starting line.**
Only 7% say 76–100% of daily work connects to strategy. For everyone else, a large share of effort is already disconnected from the plan.

03 **Visibility is pull, not push.**
83% find out about drift through a review, an escalation, a moving metric, or an outsider. Only 17% have a tool that surfaces it automatically.

04 **Failing priorities are as likely to vanish as to get a decision.**
60% don't cleanly resolve a priority that's clearly off track. "Quietly dropped" (39%) has all but caught "formally revised or killed" (40%).

Named, connected, visible, decided — **four things an operating system has to maintain.** Where they lapse, strategy doesn't fail loudly. It fades.

SECTION 1

The Naming Gap

Strategy nobody can recall can only be reported on

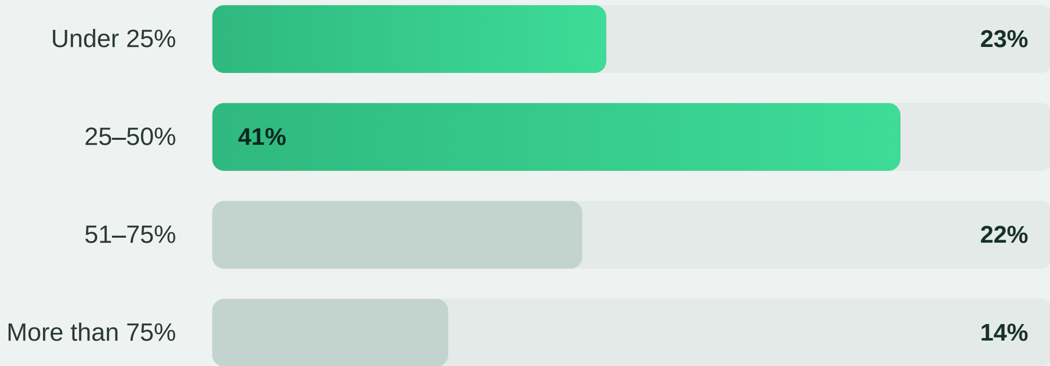
86%

CAN'T NAME THE TOP 3 PRIORITIES

The first thing that has to survive the trip from planning to execution is the strategy itself — as something people can hold in their heads. It mostly doesn't. Asked what share of their employees could state the company's top three priorities right now, unprompted, only **14% of leaders** said more than three-quarters could. The rest are running organizations where the strategy has to be looked up to be known.

What share of employees could name the top 3 priorities, unprompted?

AS ESTIMATED BY THE LEADER RESPONSIBLE FOR EXECUTION



Nearly two-thirds of leaders (64%) say half or fewer of their people can name the strategy. A goal that can't be recalled can't be pursued deliberately — it can only be performed at review time.

The naming gap starts with how strategy is stored

Part of why recall is low: for many teams, the strategy has no durable home. **13% of leaders** say their strategy either lives only in their head or the exec team's, or isn't written down anywhere central at all. A strategy that exists mainly as a slide deck seen once a quarter is structurally hard to remember — and impossible to keep in front of people between reviews.

41%
Store strategy in a goals / OKR document

26%
Rely on a slide deck as the primary artifact

13%
Have no central written strategy at all

SECTION 2

The Laddering Gap

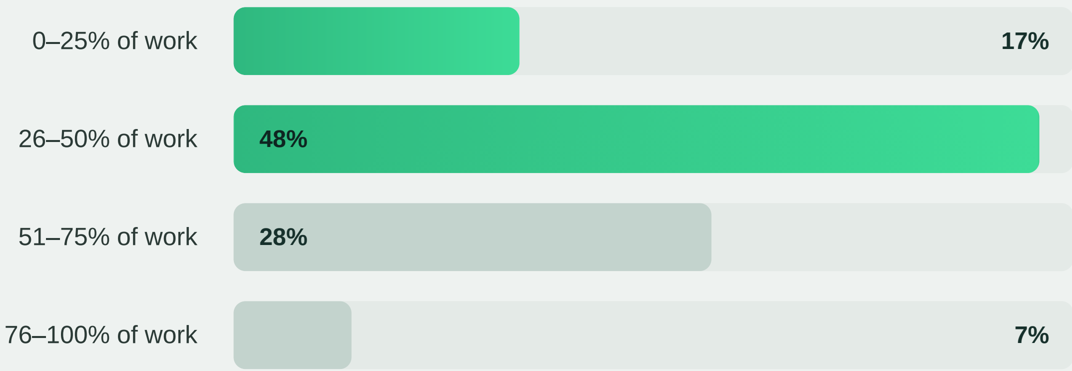
The work drifts from the plan the moment the quarter starts

7%

SAY MOST WORK LADDERS UP TO STRATEGY

Even where strategy is named, the second break happens fast: the daily work doesn't connect to it. Asked what share of their teams' day-to-day work actually ladders up to company strategy, only **7% of leaders** said 76–100%. Nearly two-thirds put it at half or less. This is the gap between what a company decided to do and what its people are actually spending their hours on.

What share of day-to-day work actually ladders up to strategy?



93% of leaders say a meaningful share of daily work does not fully ladder up to strategy. The plan and the work are two different things — and the distance between them is where strategy quietly loses.

Translation is slow — but it's not the real problem

Getting strategy from "decided" to "reflected in every team's work" takes time: **78%** of leaders say it takes two weeks to a full quarter, and for teams at the slow end, the quarter is a third over before everyone is aligned. But — as Section 5 shows — the initial translation is not where most leaders say strategy breaks. The hand-off is a one-time cost. The laddering gap is the ongoing one: work that started aligned drifts out of alignment as priorities shift and nobody re-connects them.

TIME FROM STRATEGY SET TO ALL TEAM WORK ALIGNED	SHARE OF LEADERS
Same week	22%
2–4 weeks	43%
About a quarter	32%
It never fully does	3%

SECTION 3

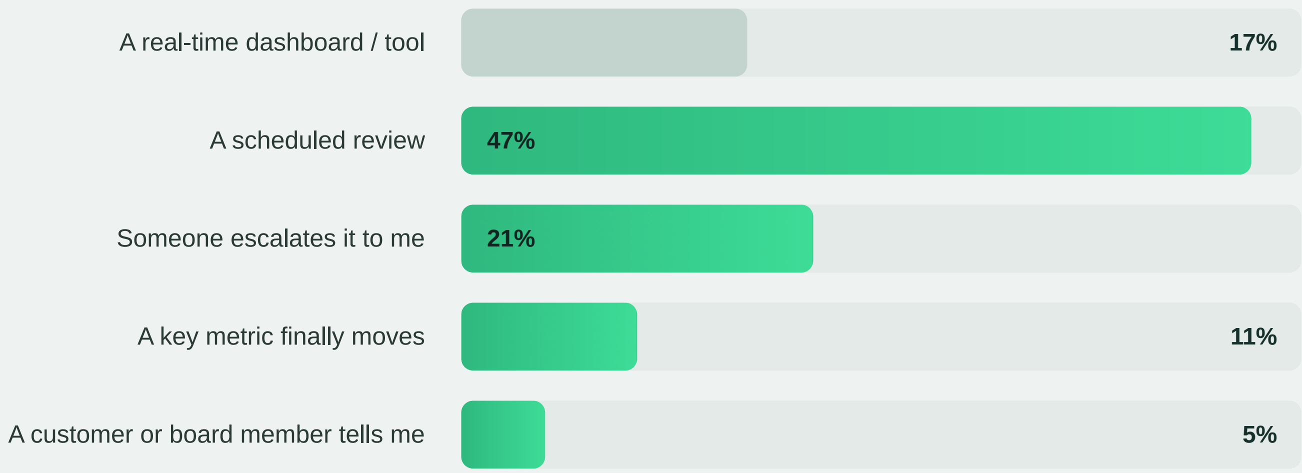
The Visibility Gap

Leaders don't get told when strategy slips — they go looking

83%
GET NO AUTOMATIC SIGNAL ON DRIFT

Here is the most revealing finding in the study, and the one no comparable benchmark has named. These leaders are not blind — **88%** say they're at least somewhat confident in their view of execution. The problem is subtler and more dangerous: **nothing surfaces a problem to them.** They have to go and find it. Visibility is pull, not push.

How do you usually find out a strategic priority is off track?



Only **17%** of leaders learn about drift from something that surfaces it automatically. The other **83%** find out by attending a meeting, being escalated to, watching a metric move, or — for 1 in 20 — hearing it from a customer or the board. By then, the drift has already happened.

Progress reaches leaders on request, not by default

Between planning cycles, **62%** of leaders say execution progress reaches them only when they ask for updates or when a scheduled review comes around. Just 35% can see it live, any time. The default state is dark; someone has to switch the lights on.

VISIBILITY BETWEEN CYCLES	
Live, any time	**35%**
Only when I request it	46%
Only at scheduled reviews	16%
Largely invisible	3%

> *Asked what they'd most want to see about execution that they currently can't, one operations leader answered simply: "To have an alert to let me know."*

SECTION 4

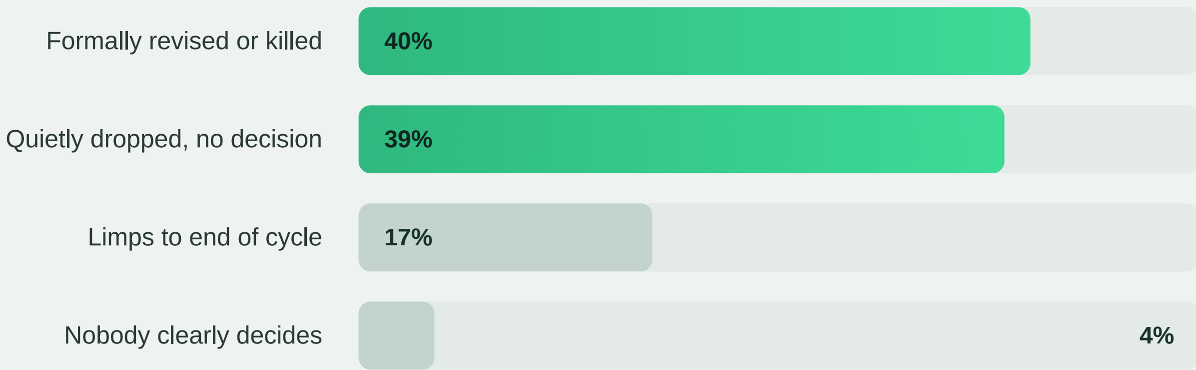
The Resolution Gap

When a priority fails, most companies never make the call

60%
DON'T CLEANLY RESOLVE A FAILING PRIORITY

The final break is the quietest. When a strategic priority is clearly failing mid-cycle, only **40% of leaders** say it gets formally revised or killed. The other **60%** describe some version of nothing happening: the priority is quietly dropped, it limps to the end of the cycle, or nobody clearly decides either way. Strategy doesn't usually fail with a bang. It's abandoned without anyone saying so.

When a priority is clearly failing mid-cycle, what usually happens?



A failing priority is now **almost exactly as likely to vanish silently (39%) as to get a real decision (40%).** The absence of a decision is itself a decision — just an unaccountable one.

The lag compounds the silence

Because visibility is pull (Section 3), problems also arrive late. **21%** of leaders say a priority is typically off track for a month or more before they personally know — and once they know, the majority of failing priorities still won't get a clean resolution. Late detection plus no forced decision is how a strategic bet dies without a post-mortem, and without anyone learning from it.

41%
Know within days that a priority is off track

41%
Take a couple of weeks to find out

21%
Take a month or more to find out

SECTION 5

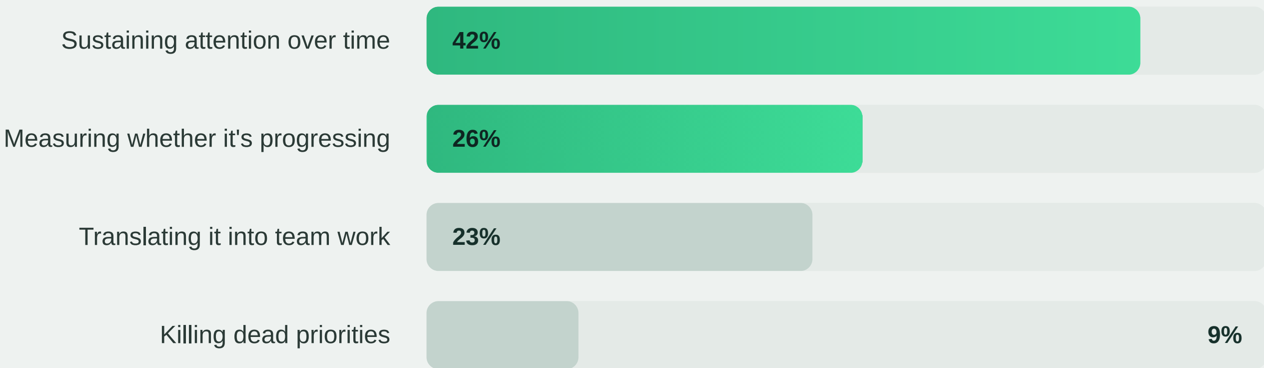
Where It Breaks — And What It Runs On

Sustaining beats launching, and the tooling can't keep up

61%
RUN STRATEGY ON SPREADSHEETS, DOCS OR NOTHING CENTRAL

Two final data points tie the decay together. The first: leaders are clear that strategy doesn't break at the launch. Asked where it most often breaks down, only **23%** pointed to the initial translation into team work. **68%** pointed downstream — to sustaining attention on it over time, and to measuring whether it's actually progressing. The hard part isn't the kickoff. It's everything after.

Where does strategy most often break down?



The second: the infrastructure most of this runs on can't do the sustaining or the measuring. **61%** of leaders manage strategy execution on spreadsheets, docs and wikis, a general project tool, or nothing central at all. A spreadsheet doesn't send a reminder, surface a drifting priority, or force a continue-revise-kill decision. It creates the appearance of management while leaving every gap in this report wide open.

What runs strategy execution today?

INFRASTRUCTURE	SHARE OF LEADERS	
Purpose-built strategy / OKR software	22%	surfaces drift
Spreadsheets (Google Sheets / Excel)	37%	manual, static
Docs or a wiki	17%	manual, static
A general project management tool	18%	tasks, not strategy
Nothing central	7%	invisible

The breakdown points leaders name — **sustaining attention and measuring progress** — are exactly the two things a static spreadsheet cannot do. The tooling gap and the execution gap are the same gap.

SECTION 6

Who Sets Strategy Shapes Whether It Survives

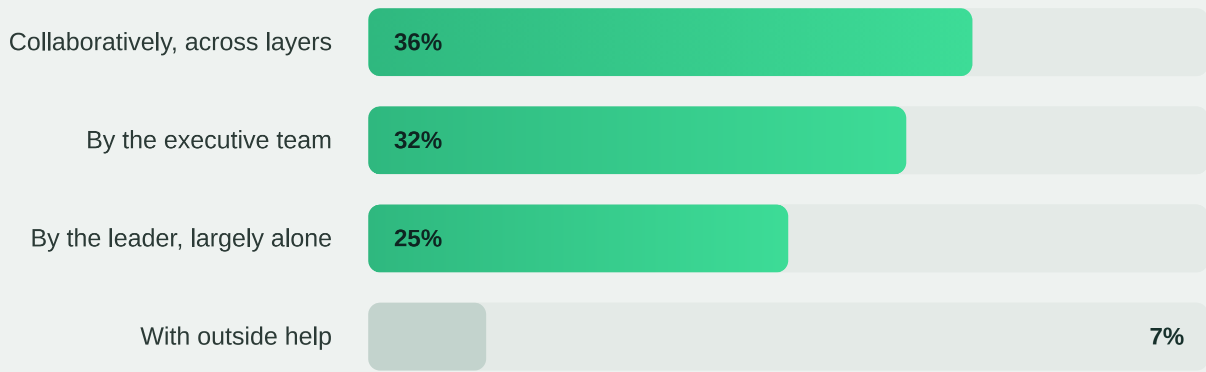
25%

OF LEADERS SET STRATEGY LARGELY ON THEIR OWN

Solo-set strategy has no co-owners to keep it alive

The four gaps don't hit every company equally. One upstream choice shapes how badly strategy decays downstream: who sets it in the first place. At companies of this size, **a quarter of leaders (25%) set strategy largely on their own**, and another 32% keep it inside the executive team. Only 36% set it collaboratively, with input from multiple layers. That matters, because a strategy only one or two people authored has no one else invested in keeping it named, visible, and alive between reviews.

How is company strategy primarily set?



57% of strategies are set by one person or a small executive group with no wider input. The narrower the authorship, the fewer people there are to notice — and care — when the strategy starts to drift.

The pace problem: fast companies can't afford slow detection

Detection lag (Section 4) is dangerous for everyone, but it's most costly for the companies moving fastest. In this sample, **48% of companies grew more than 20% in the past year** — and at that pace, a priority that's off track for weeks before anyone notices is weeks of fast-moving resources pointed the wrong way. The faster the business, the higher the price of pull-based visibility.

16%
Grew more than 50% in the past year

32%
Grew 21–50% — fast enough that drift compounds quickly

8%
Declined or stayed flat

A deeper cut worth running. Crossing growth rate against detection lag shows how much faster high-growth teams need their signal to be. If you're reading the underlying data, filter detection lag (Q11) by growth band (Q2) — the pattern is that the cost of slow visibility rises with the speed of the business.

PROFILE

What Best Looks Like

A data-driven profile of organizations where strategy stays load-bearing

These aren't theoretical best practices. They're the conditions that separate strategy people actually execute against from strategy they merely report on — mapped to the four gaps this report measures.

Named	Every employee can state the top priorities unprompted. Strategy has a single, durable, always-visible home — not a deck seen once a quarter.
Connected	The majority of daily work visibly ladders up to a company objective. When priorities shift, the links are re-drawn — not left to drift.
Visible	Drift surfaces automatically. A priority going off track triggers a signal to the person accountable — it isn't discovered at the next review or by an outsider.
Decided	Every failing priority gets a real ending — a logged continue, revise, or kill. Nothing quietly disappears, and every miss produces a decision to learn from.
Sustained	The operating rhythm keeps attention on strategy between reviews, not just during them. Progress is measured continuously, not assembled the night before.
Instrumented	Runs on infrastructure built to surface drift, force decisions, and connect work to strategy — not a spreadsheet that only records what someone remembers to type.

The distance between this profile and where most organizations sit isn't a capability gap. It's a **systems gap** — and systems can be fixed.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Where Does Your Organization Stand?

Score each of the six dimensions from 1 to 5. Circle where you honestly sit between the two ends, then add up your total below.

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5
Named *Can people recall the strategy?* (1 Nobody can recall the priorities — Everyone names them unprompted 5)	1	2	3	4	5
Connected *Does the work ladder up?* (1 Work is disconnected from the plan — Most work visibly ladders up 5)	1	2	3	4	5
Visible *How does drift reach you?* (1 Discovered by accident — An automatic signal the moment it slips 5)	1	2	3	4	5
Decided *What happens to a miss?* (1 Failing priorities quietly vanish — A logged continue / revise / kill every time 5)	1	2	3	4	5
Sustained *Is attention continuous?* (1 Attention only at reviews — Kept live and measured continuously 5)	1	2	3	4	5
Instrumented *What does it run on?* (1 Spreadsheets and docs — Software that surfaces drift & forces decisions 5)	1	2	3	4	5

Add up your six scores
out of 30

25–30 · High performance — strategy is named, connected, visible and decided.

16–24 · Developing — clear leverage points visible in your lowest scores.

Below 16 · At risk — strategy is decaying quietly. Start with the Action Plan overleaf.

ACTION PLAN

Four Moves, In Order of Impact

Data-backed. Prioritized. Starting next quarter.

1

HIGHEST IMPACT · VISIBILITY

Make drift surface itself.

83% of leaders have no automatic signal when a priority slips — they go looking. The single highest-leverage change is turning visibility from pull to push: a priority that goes off track should trigger a signal to the person accountable, not wait for the next review. This is what shrinks the detection lag that lets strategy die quietly.

2

QUICK WIN · NAMING

Give strategy one durable home everyone can see.

86% of workforces can't name the top priorities, and 13% have no central written strategy at all. Put the top three to five priorities in one place every team can reach — not a deck seen once a quarter. A strategy people can name is the precondition for everything else in this report.

3

CULTURAL · DECISIONS

Give every failing priority a real ending.

60% of failing priorities never get a clean decision — they're quietly dropped or limp along. Name what happens when a priority goes off track: a logged continue, revise, or kill. The consequence doesn't have to be punitive. What matters is that it happens every time, and that the decision is visible.

4

STRUCTURAL · CONNECTION

Move off the spreadsheet.

61% run strategy on spreadsheets, docs, or nothing central — infrastructure that can't sustain attention or measure progress, the exact two things leaders say break down most. Purpose-built software makes the naming, connecting, surfacing and deciding structural instead of dependent on someone remembering to update a file.

CONCLUSION

Closing the Decay Gap

This report set out to answer one question: if strategy works, why does so little of it survive contact with the quarter? The data answers it clearly. Strategy doesn't fail at the whiteboard. It decays in the gap between the plan and the day-to-day.

And it decays in four specific, measurable ways. It isn't **named** — 86% of workforces can't state the priorities. It isn't **connected** — only 7% say most work ladders up. It isn't **visible** — 83% get no automatic signal when it slips. And it isn't **decided** — 60% never cleanly resolve a failing priority. None of these is an effort problem. The leaders in this study care and show up. It's a systems problem.

86%
Can't name the strategy

83%
No automatic signal on drift

60%
Never cleanly resolve a miss

None of the fixes are exotic. Name it once, connect the work to it, make drift surface itself, and give every miss a real decision. These are operating disciplines, not features — and the organizations that run them don't have better strategy. They have strategy that's still alive at quarter-end. Closing the decay gap is where the next generation of execution performance is hiding.

METHODOLOGY

About This Research

An independent survey of how strategy actually gets executed.

The Strategy Execution Benchmark 2026 is based on survey responses from 180 strategy and operations leaders — the people directly responsible for how strategy gets executed — at companies of 50–200 employees. All confirmed active responsibility for strategy execution before completing the survey. Questions were framed to make ordinary execution shortcomings feel normal to admit, reducing the social-desirability bias that suppresses honest answers from senior leaders.

Total respondents	180
Respondent role	VP / Director / Head of Strategy & Operations, Business Operations, Strategic Initiatives, Transformation & Enterprise Execution
Company size	50–200 employees
Responsibility	All confirmed accountable for strategy execution
Survey period	2026

A note on the data. All findings are self-reported and reflect respondents' own assessment of their strategy and execution. Results describe association, not causation. No control group was used, and outcomes will vary by organization size, implementation quality, and leadership commitment. No OKRs Tool customers were included in the sample — findings reflect what practitioners experience in practice, not what any vendor would hope they'd say. We've been deliberately transparent about these limits because an honest number is more valuable than an impressive one.

ABOUT

OKRs Tool

Goal-setting built for growing companies that want strategy to actually get executed.

OKRs Tool is a strategy-execution platform built for growing companies — without the bloat of enterprise software or the chaos of spreadsheets. Every feature exists for one reason: to close the four gaps this report measures, and keep strategy named, connected, visible, and decided.

- **One home for the strategy**
  The top priorities live in one place every team can see and name — not a deck seen once a quarter. Closes the naming gap.

- **Hierarchical alignment**
  Connect every team goal to a company objective and see the whole thing roll up in one map. Closes the laddering gap.

- **Drift that surfaces itself**
  Automatic check-in nudges and at-risk flags push problems to the person accountable — instead of waiting for the next review. Closes the visibility gap.

- **A decision on every miss**
  Off-track priorities trigger a logged continue, revise, or kill — so nothing quietly disappears. Closes the resolution gap.

- **Live executive view**
  Real-time dashboards show progress, forecast, and what needs a decision now — visible any time, not assembled before a review.

- **Set up in an afternoon**
  Guided onboarding gets your first cycle live fast. No consultants required.