

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

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$cD + fdE = V^2$

The Last Mile

How Forward Deployed Executives Turn Strategy into Validated Value

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The BrainDance Collective, LLC

PREPARED FOR PRIVATE EQUITY SPONSORS, INDEPENDENT SPONSORS, SEARCH FUND BUYERS AND THE EXECUTIVES ACCOUNTABLE FOR RESULTS
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Executive Summary

Organizations rarely fail for lack of strategy. They fail in the last mile: the span between a well-designed plan and an operating reality that has to change week after week. In a PMI study, 61 percent of executives admitted their firms often struggle to bridge the gap between strategy formulation and day-to-day implementation. Simon-Kucher's 2025 value creation research found that 67 percent of failed private equity value-creation initiatives fail for controllable reasons, with poor implementation the most cited cause at 53 percent.

The technology industry has rediscovered an answer to its own version of this problem. Forward deployed engineers, software engineers who embed inside a customer's environment until the product actually works, have become one of the fastest-growing roles in tech, with postings up more than 1,000 percent in 2026 over the prior year. This paper argues that the same logic applies one level up. The scarcest resource in a transformation is not code or a better plan. It is senior judgment, exercised inside the business, on a fixed rhythm, by someone accountable for the result.

We express that idea as an equation, **cD + fdE = V^2**, and use it throughout this paper:

- **cD, Change Design:** the strategy, research, roadmap and measurement plan that define what must change, in what order, and how success will be proven.
- **fdE, Forward Deployed Executive:** a senior operator embedded inside the business with real decision authority, a weekly operating cadence and an AI-augmented toolkit, who carries the design into action and corrects course as evidence arrives.
- **V^2, Value Validation:** one number from 0 to 100, always reported with its margin of error (for example, *V^2 86 ± 4*), that tells sponsors how likely the planned outcome is to land and how much of that judgment rests on live evidence.
- **Why it matters to sponsors:** certainty becomes something leadership can watch converge, month by month, instead of something it discovers at exit.
- **Two ways to put it to work:** BrainDance deploys the equation through a contract operating partner model for owners of capital and a program leader model, built on our Collective Execution™ framework, for organizations running major programs. Both are described at the end of this paper.

The Last Mile Problem

Most leadership teams can describe their strategy. Fewer can describe who, specifically, is carrying it through the operating week: making the cross-functional calls, holding managers to new behaviors, noticing when an assumption breaks, and changing the plan before the quarter is lost. That work is the last mile, and it is where value is decided.

The pattern is consistent across the evidence. McKinsey reports that large-scale transformations fall short about 70 percent of the time. Simon-Kucher's 2025 study found that when value-creation initiatives fail, the causes are mostly within the owner's control: poor implementation, unrealistic business cases and resistance inside the portfolio company. The plan was rarely the problem. The deployment was.

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Figure 1: The Last Mile of Strategy: change design and verified value are joined only when someone senior is deployed to close the span.

The last mile breaks down at four predictable points:

Stall point	What it looks like	What a forward deployed executive does
The handoff	The strategy is presented, approved and handed to a team that did not build it	Stays from design through delivery, so intent does not get lost in translation
Decision latency	Cross-functional calls wait weeks for the next steering meeting	Holds decision rights or a direct line to them, and decides inside the week
Adoption	New processes launch; managers quietly keep the old ones	Works at manager level until the new behavior is the default
Measurement	Progress is reported as activity and red-yellow-green status	Wires the scorecard to live data, so results are measured, not narrated

What Silicon Valley Rediscovered: The Forward Deployed Model

Palantir coined the forward deployed engineer in the mid-2000s, embedding engineers directly with government and defense agencies where software delivered from a distance simply would not work. The idea was simple: instead of building one capability for many customers, a forward deployed engineer focuses on one customer across many capabilities, and stays until the system is in production and in use.

In 2026 the model went mainstream. *Fortune* reported that postings for forward deployed engineers rose more than 1,000 percent from January to August 2026 versus the prior year, with Microsoft, Google, OpenAI

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and Anthropic all hiring for the role. The driver is the same last-mile problem in a new setting: McKinsey's 2026 State of AI survey found that nearly nine in ten organizations now use AI regularly, yet only 44 percent are scaling it and 37 percent report an impact on EBIT. Capability is plentiful. Deployment is scarce.

The executive translation. Forward deployed engineers close the last mile of software. Forward deployed executives close the last mile of strategy. The principles carry over directly: proximity to the real operating environment, end-to-end ownership of the outcome, and a feedback loop that improves the design as the work proceeds. What changes is altitude. A forward deployed executive works across finance, operations, people and technology at once, with the authority to make trade-offs that no engineer, and no outside advisor, is positioned to make.

How the forward deployed executive differs from the familiar alternatives:

Dimension	Traditional advisor	Interim executive	Forward deployed executive
Primary output	Recommendations and a plan	Continuity in a vacant seat	A designed change, deployed and verified
Where they sit	Outside, with periodic visits	Inside, in one function	Inside, across functions, with board access
Owns the outcome?	No; owns the advice	Owns the function	Owns the measured result of the change
How success is measured	Deliverables accepted	Seat covered	V^2 rising and its margin narrowing
What remains after	A document	A hiring gap filled	An operating rhythm the team runs itself

The V^2 Equation™

THE V^2 EQUATION™

$$cD + fdE = V^2$$

Change Design plus a Forward Deployed Executive produces V^2, Value Validation: the likelihood, within a stated margin of error, that the planned value will be realized and proven.

The philosophy behind the equation is borrowed from statistics. A forecast without a margin of error is an opinion. A forecaster earns trust by stating both a number and how sure they are of it, and by narrowing that range as data arrives. We believe transformation should be governed the same way. Certainty is not a feeling at the steering committee. It is a band that tightens as estimates are replaced by evidence.

Each component reduces a different kind of uncertainty. Change Design reduces uncertainty about *what*: whether we are solving the right problem, in the right order, with a baseline we trust. The Forward Deployed Executive reduces uncertainty about *whether and when*: the variance between what was designed and what actually happens in the operating week. Neither can do the other's job.

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DEFINITION

cD Change Design

The disciplined definition of the change: what must be different, in what sequence, why it is worth doing, and how we will know it worked. Change Design is scored from 0 to 50 across five factors, each 0 to 10:

- **Measured baseline:** the starting point is measured, not assumed
- **Defined outcomes:** every objective has a target, an owner and a value
- **Sequenced roadmap:** milestones, dependencies and decision points are explicit
- **Research-backed evidence:** market, peer and benchmark research supports the case
- **Measurement plan:** each outcome has a metric, a data source and a cadence

Inputs we use: strategic research, diagnostic interviews, financial models, roadmaps and benchmark data.

DEFINITION

fdE Forward Deployed Executive

A senior operator embedded inside the business who carries the design into the operating week and owns the measured result. The fdE is scored from 0 to 50 across five factors, each 0 to 10:

- **Decision authority:** holds, or has a direct line to, the decision rights the change requires
- **Embedded cadence:** present on a fixed weekly rhythm, not on call
- **Instrumented dashboards:** leadership sees live data, not narrated status
- **AI-augmented capacity:** agents extend research, monitoring and analysis beyond one person's hours
- **Course-correction speed:** time from a signal to a decision to a changed plan

The fdE is a role, not a title. It can be filled by a contract operating partner, a fractional CFO or strategy officer, or a PMO lead with executive standing.

DEFINITION

V^2 Value Validation

The sum of the cD and fdE scores, from 0 to 100, reported with its margin of error. The two Vs are deliberate: value counts only once it is validated, so the score measures the value and the evidence behind it together. It answers the sponsor's real question: how likely is the planned outcome to land, and how much of that answer rests on live evidence?

- **85 to 100, Locked:** the outcome is on track and the evidence is strong
- **70 to 84, Converging:** on track, with specific gaps to close
- **50 to 69, Exposed:** material risk; intervention required
- **Below 50, Speculative:** the outcome depends on hope more than design or deployment

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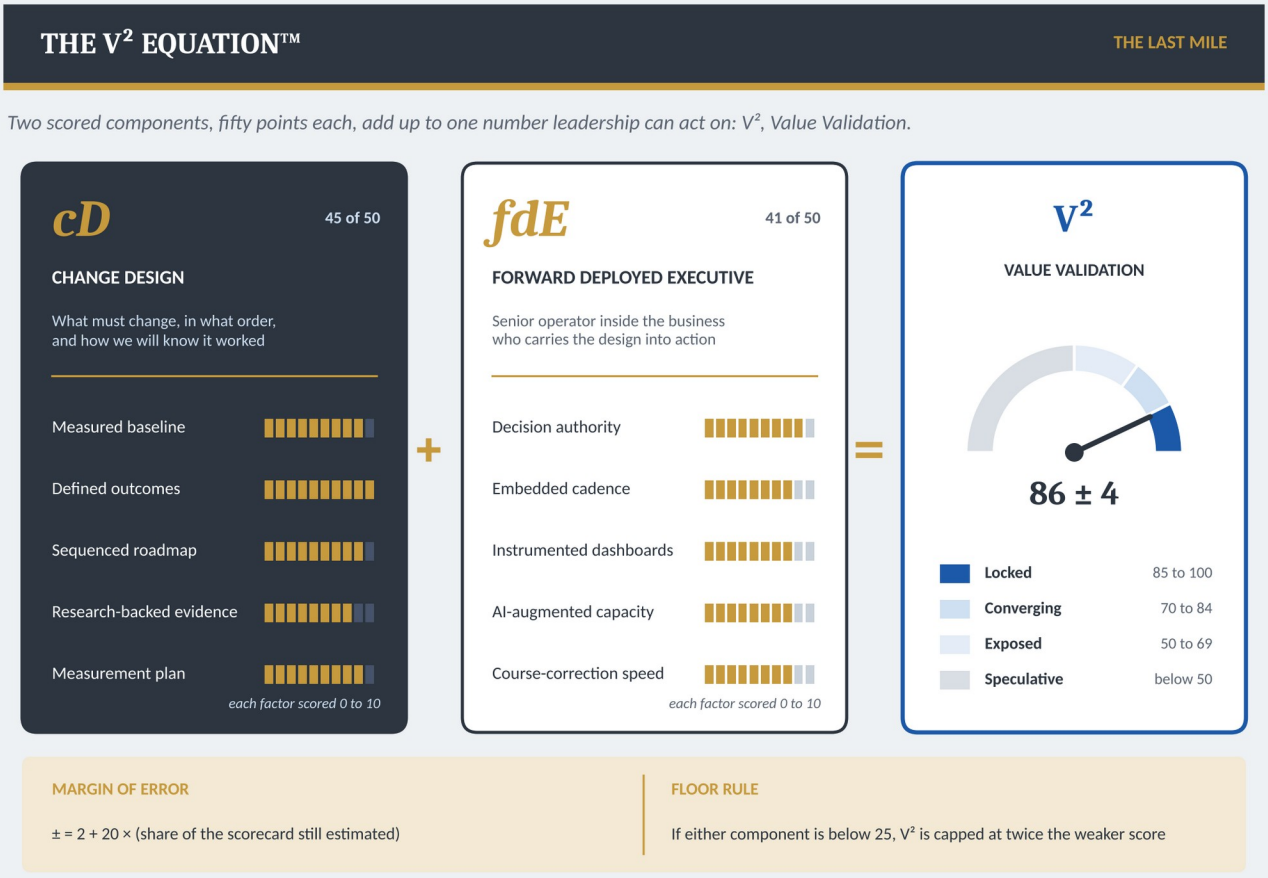


Figure 2: Anatomy of the V² Equation™: ten scored factors roll up into one Value Validation score with its margin of error.

Why the Plus Sign Has a Floor

The equation is additive by design, because both components contribute independently and leaders should see each one's share. But the plus sign has a floor. A brilliant strategy with no one deployed to carry it is not worth half the certainty; it is worth very little. So is a capable executive running an untested plan.

> THE FLOOR RULE
>
> **If either component scores below 25 of 50, the V² is capped at twice the weaker score.**
>
> A 44 cD with a 6 fdE does not score 50. It scores 12. That single rule captures the most expensive pattern in value creation: the shelfware strategy, approved and admired, with no one accountable for deploying it.

The Margin of Error

A score without a margin invites false precision, so every V² carries one. The margin reflects how much of the scorecard is still an estimate rather than a measured, live data feed. Early in an engagement, much of the picture is estimated and the band is wide. As the fdE instruments the business, the band narrows.

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THE MARGIN FORMULA

$$\pm = 2 + 20 \times (\text{share of the scorecard still estimated})$$

With 70 percent of metrics still estimated, the margin is ± 16. With 10 percent estimated, it is ± 4. The floor of 2 points acknowledges that no operating forecast is ever perfect.

The V^2 is a structured judgment, not a guarantee and not a formal statistical confidence interval. Its value comes from consistency: the same ten factors, scored the same way, every month, by people inside the work. Over many engagements, that consistency is what lets the score be calibrated against what actually happened.

Scoring in Practice

Each factor is scored 0 to 10 against plain anchors, so two experienced operators looking at the same business should land within a point or two of each other:

Component	Factor	What a 10 looks like	What a 2 looks like
cD	Measured baseline	Audited starting metrics, agreed by finance and operations	A number from last year's board deck
cD	Defined outcomes	Targets, owners and dollar value for every objective	Goals stated as themes
cD	Sequenced roadmap	Milestones, dependencies and decision dates in one view	A list of initiatives
cD	Research-backed evidence	Benchmarks, peer data and customer evidence support the case	The plan rests on intuition
cD	Measurement plan	Every outcome has a metric, source and review cadence	Success will be judged at year end
fdE	Decision authority	Explicit decision rights or a same-week line to the sponsor	Advice only; decisions wait for the board
fdE	Embedded cadence	Weekly operating reviews the executive personally runs	Monthly check-ins
fdE	Instrumented dashboards	Leading indicators refresh automatically from source systems	Spreadsheets assembled by hand before meetings
fdE	AI-augmented capacity	Agents monitor, research and draft continuously	One person's hours are the ceiling
fdE	Course-correction speed	Signal to changed plan in days	Problems surface in the quarterly review

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IN PRACTICE

Worked example: a founder-led distributor at Day 60

A lower middle market distributor, recently recapitalized, is sixty days into a margin and working-capital program. The scores at the 60-day review:

- **cD = 40:** baseline 9, outcomes 9, roadmap 8, research 7, measurement plan 7
- **fdE = 32:** decision authority 5, cadence 8, dashboards 7, AI capacity 6, course correction 6
- **Floor rule:** neither component is below 25, so no cap applies
- **Margin:** 40 percent of the scorecard is still estimated, so ± = 2 + 20 × 0.40 = 10

Result: V^2 72 ± 10, Converging. The lowest factor is decision authority. Pricing decisions still wait for a monthly owner meeting. The fdE brings a one-page Executive Intervention Brief to the sponsor, who formalizes pricing decision rights. At the 90-day review the score is **81 ± 7**.

Illustrative example built to show the arithmetic; it is not a client result.

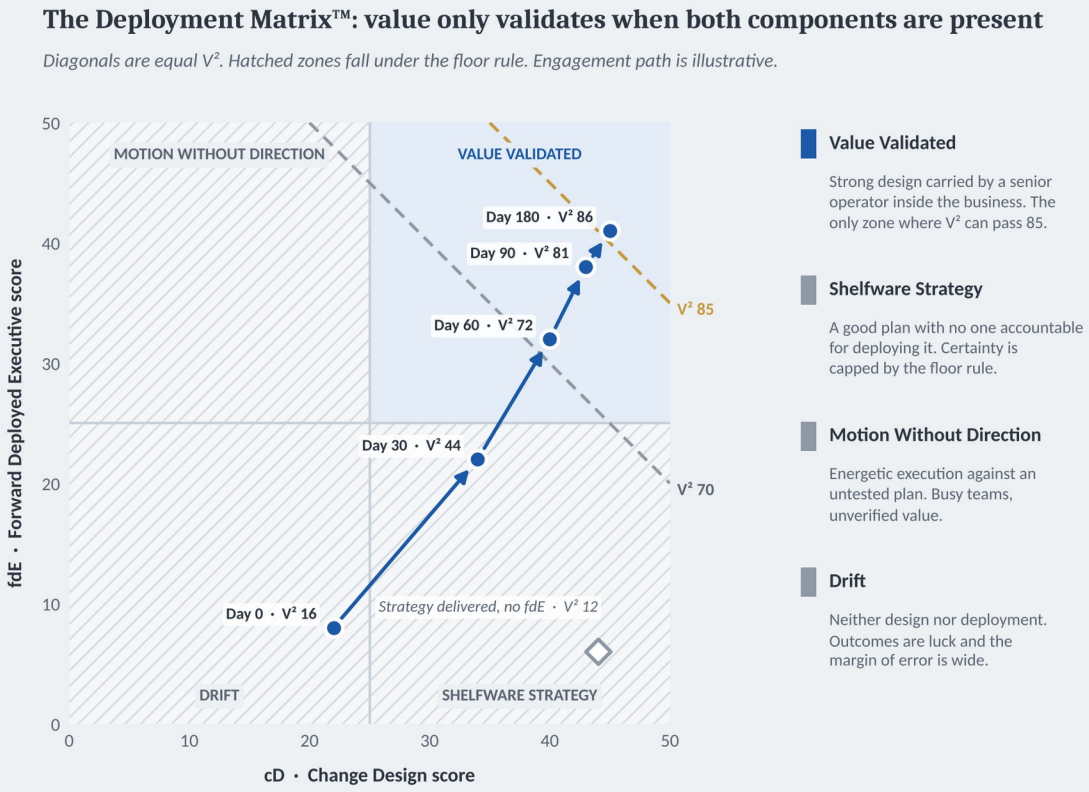


Figure 3: The Deployment Matrix™ plots both components. Only the upper-right zone can reach a Locked V^2.

The Deployment Matrix gives sponsors a fast diagnostic for any initiative in the portfolio. Programs in the lower right have good plans and no one to carry them. Programs in the upper left are busy but unproven. The path to certainty almost always runs the same way: shore up the design first, then deploy the executive, then let evidence narrow the band.

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Inside the Work: The Forward Deployment Cycle™

Change Design enters once. The forward deployed executive then runs a loop every week until certainty locks, and only then transfers ownership. The cycle is deliberately simple, because it has to survive real operating weeks.

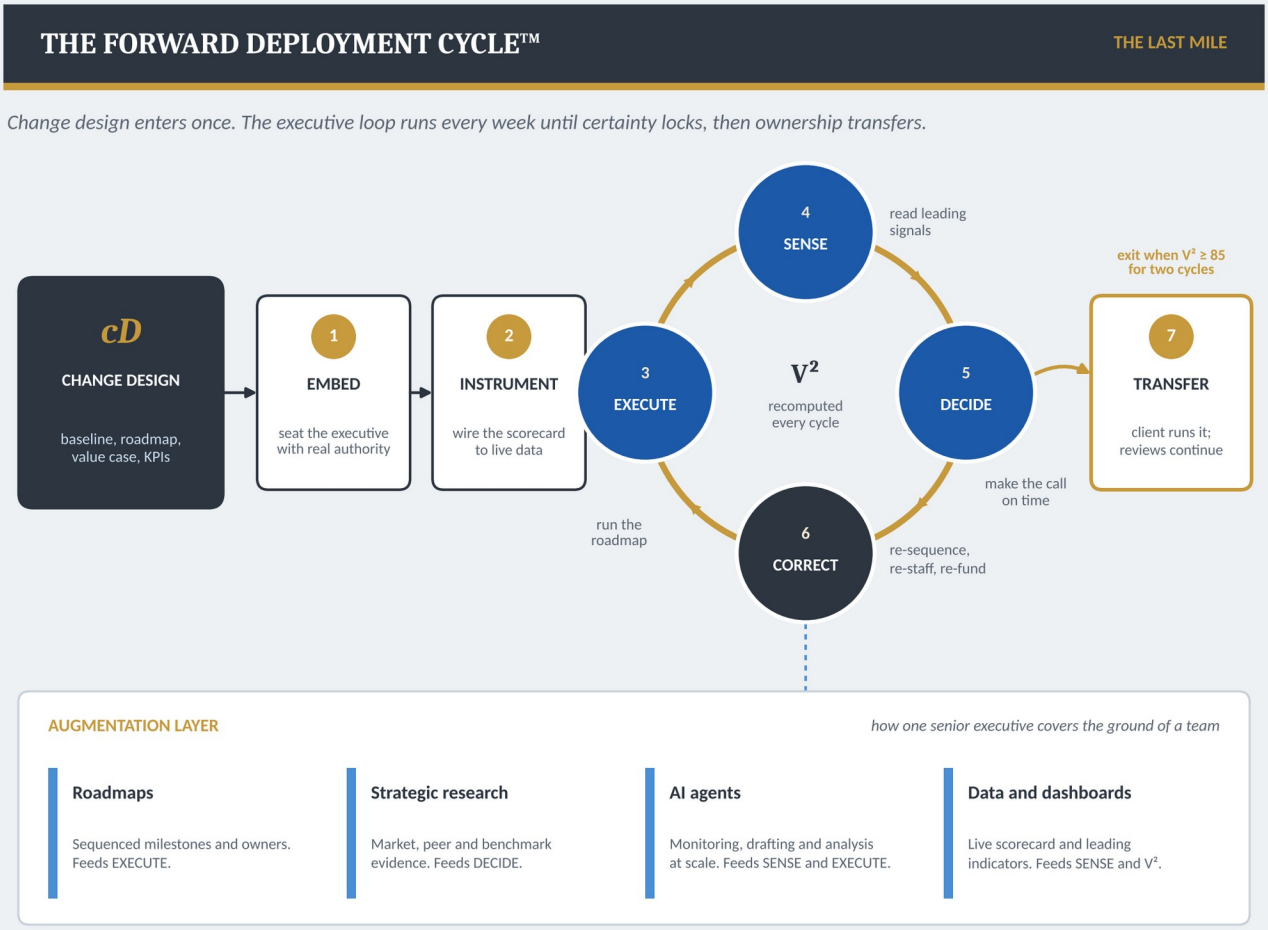


Figure 4: The Forward Deployment Cycle™: seven steps, a weekly loop at the center, and an augmentation layer beneath it.

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Step	What the fdE does	Evidence it produces
1. Embed	Takes a seat with defined decision rights, a sponsor line and a weekly calendar	Decision rights charter; operating calendar
2. Instrument	Connects the scorecard to source systems and sets leading indicators	Live dashboard; first V^2 with its margin
3. Execute	Runs the roadmap through managers, not around them	Milestones met; owners named
4. Sense	Reads leading signals and AI-flagged anomalies before they become results	Risk and assumption log
5. Decide	Makes or escalates the call inside the week	Decision ledger with dates
6. Correct	Re-sequences, re-staffs or re-funds the plan	Updated roadmap; recomputed V^2
7. Transfer	Hands the rhythm to the leadership team once V^2 holds at 85 or above for two cycles	Ownership plan; scheduled value reviews

The Augmentation Layer

One senior executive cannot cover the ground of a full consulting team by working more hours. They cover it by working with better instruments. Four tools sit beneath every cycle:

- **Roadmaps.** A single sequenced view of milestones, owners and decision dates, so the weekly review starts with what happens next rather than what happened last.
- **Strategic research.** Market, peer and benchmark evidence gathered before a decision is made, so calls rest on data rather than the loudest opinion in the room.
- **AI agents.** Agents monitor data feeds, compile research, draft briefs and analyze variance continuously. They extend the executive's reach; they do not make the call. Judgment stays with the person accountable for the result.
- **Data and dashboards.** A live scorecard of leading and lagging indicators that leadership can read in minutes, which is also the evidence that narrows the V^2 margin.

Watching Value Converge

Because the V^2 is scored the same way every month, sponsors can watch certainty build, or erode, in time to act. The Convergence Curve shows the typical shape: the score rises as design gaps close and the executive takes hold, and the band narrows as live data replaces estimates. The contrast case is familiar to every sponsor: a strong strategy delivered and left, whose certainty decays while its uncertainty widens.

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Each scheduled review asks a different question:

Review	What is tested	Typical decision
30-day	Is the design sound and the executive embedded?	Close design gaps; confirm decision rights
60-day	Are leading indicators moving?	Re-sequence or re-staff the weakest workstream
90-day	Is adoption real at manager level?	Intervene where behavior has not changed
180-day	Has value been verified against the baseline?	Lock, transfer ownership and schedule assurance reviews

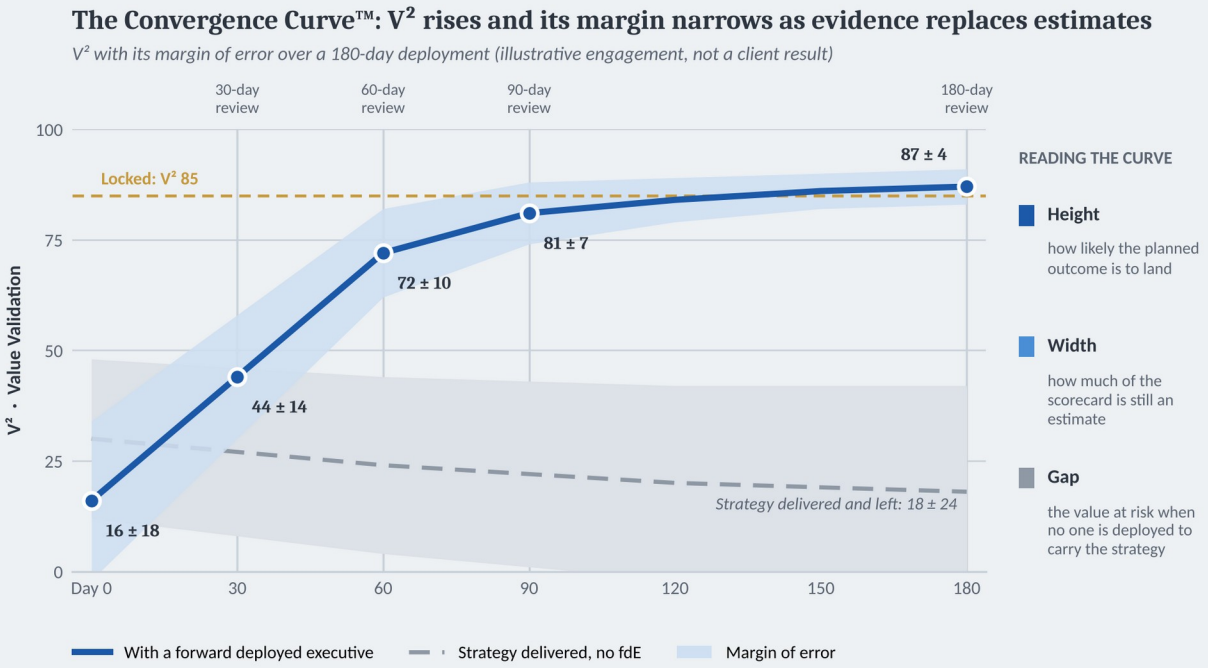


Figure 5: The Convergence Curve™: V² and its margin over a 180-day deployment, against a strategy delivered without a forward deployed executive.

Evidence in Practice: cD + fdE in Our Work

The equation is new; the practice behind it is not. It is distilled from engagements our team has led as embedded executives in staffing, private equity, technology and government. The examples below show both components at work, ending with an engagement where the equation is running live.

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Across sectors, the same pairing of design and deployment has produced measurable results:

Engagement	cD: what was designed	fdE: how it was deployed	Result
PE-owned telecom	Overhead and operating model redesign	Board seat and operating partner role	30%+ overhead reduction; 5%+ long-term operating income gain
Staffing and logistics company	Enterprise change plan after losing a client worth 30%+ of revenue	Embedded change and sales leadership	25% sales increase; 6X sales team; 15% recruiting efficiency gain
Software company	Turnaround and capital plan	Turnaround leadership inside the company	$23M raised; monthly cash use down 25%+
IRS Large Business & International	Predictive workload selection models	Bi-weekly executive briefings with division leadership	Improved selection of complex multinational cases

Results as published in BrainDance case studies. The IRS engagement was led by Ivona Grimberg at Booz Allen Hamilton, before BrainDance Collective was founded.

IN PRACTICE

SelecSource Staffing: the equation running live

A Georgia light-industrial staffing firm with strong fill rates, weak associate retention and stalled revenue growth. BrainDance principals Tracy Williams and Ivona Grimberg are embedded with the CEO as sponsor.

- **Change Design:** diagnosed the real constraint (associates were placed but did not stay, consuming recruiter time on backfills), relaunched the value proposition, assessed the technology stack and built a business development plan with a phased five-stage rollout and a $12M revenue target.
- **Forward Deployed Executive:** weekly leadership meetings focused on fill, retention and branch growth; a CEO-led dashboard review; a 90-day technology and process implementation; and 45-day sprints on turnover, AI and business development.
- **Measurement:** a shared scorecard tracking revenue, gross margin, fill rate, time to fill and 7, 30 and 90-day associate retention by branch and client.

The 2027 planning cycle, run with the CEO and VP of Finance, is designed so the operating rhythm outlasts the engagement.

Where Capital Meets Company: Our Contract Operating Partner Model

We deploy the V^2 Equation in two ways, each fitted to a different kind of client. Both pair change design with a senior operator who stays inside the work until value is validated, and both report progress the same way: a V^2 score with its margin of error, reviewed with the sponsor on a fixed cadence.

The first is our **contract operating partner model**, built for owners of capital. Private equity firms, independent sponsors and search fund buyers often need operating-partner capacity at a specific company for a specific period, without adding a permanent partner to the firm. A BrainDance contract operating

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partner fills that role as the forward deployed executive: building the change design with management, sitting between the capital and the company, running the weekly cadence and reporting V^2 to the board.

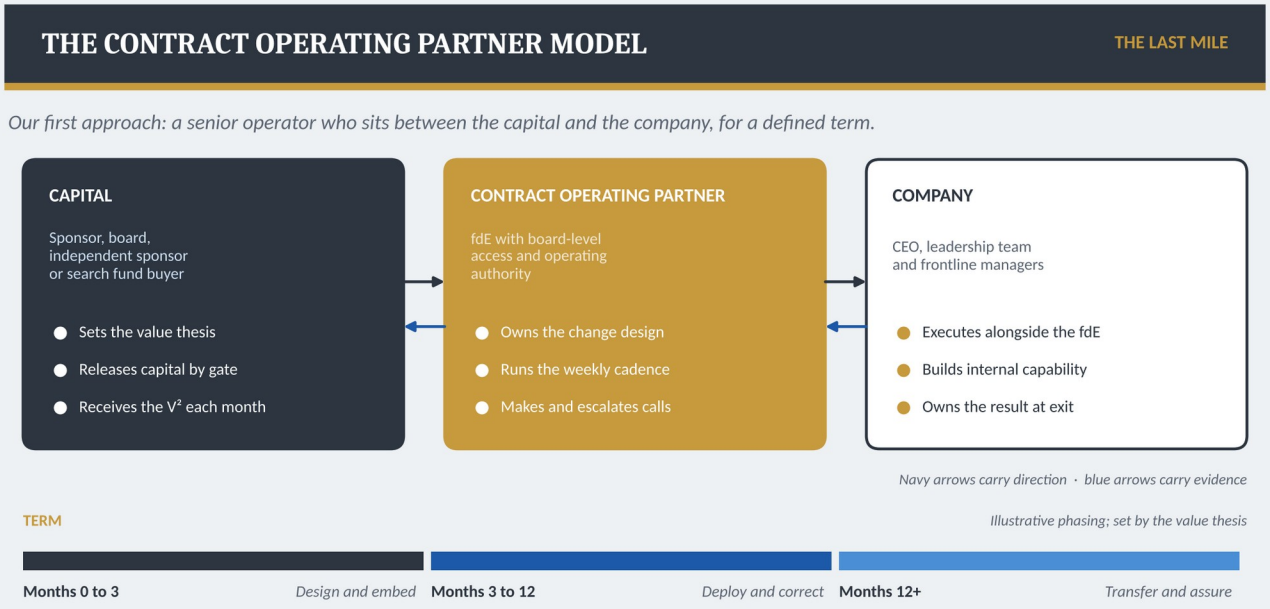


Figure 6: Our contract operating partner model: cD + fdE deployed between capital and company for a defined term.

Where the model fits best:

Situation	Why cD + fdE fits
Post-close value creation plan	The first 100 days set the trajectory; design and deployment start on day one
Underperforming portfolio company	Diagnoses whether the plan or the deployment is failing, then fixes the weaker component
Add-on integration	Integration is a last-mile problem: systems, people and decisions across two companies
First-time CEO after a search fund acquisition	An experienced operator alongside the new CEO, with a defined exit as capability builds
Founder or family transition	Carries the change while the next leadership team is built and ownership is transferred

Where Strategy Meets Delivery: Our Program Leader Model

The second is our **program leader model**, built for organizations running a major program: a technology implementation, an acquisition integration, an operating model redesign or a mission-critical government initiative. Here the forward deployed executive takes the program leadership seat and runs the work on **Collective Execution™**, our executive-led value realization system, introduced in Issue No. III of this series.

At its core is **the Synapse Method™**, which keeps leadership direction (the Signal layer) and delivery work (the Response layer) in one rhythm through a shared scorecard and a fixed briefing cadence. The program

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leader serves as the Synapse. Each of five executive stage gates, Frame, Architect, Mobilize, Drive and Realize, ends in a formal leadership call, and every call is informed by the current V^2 score.

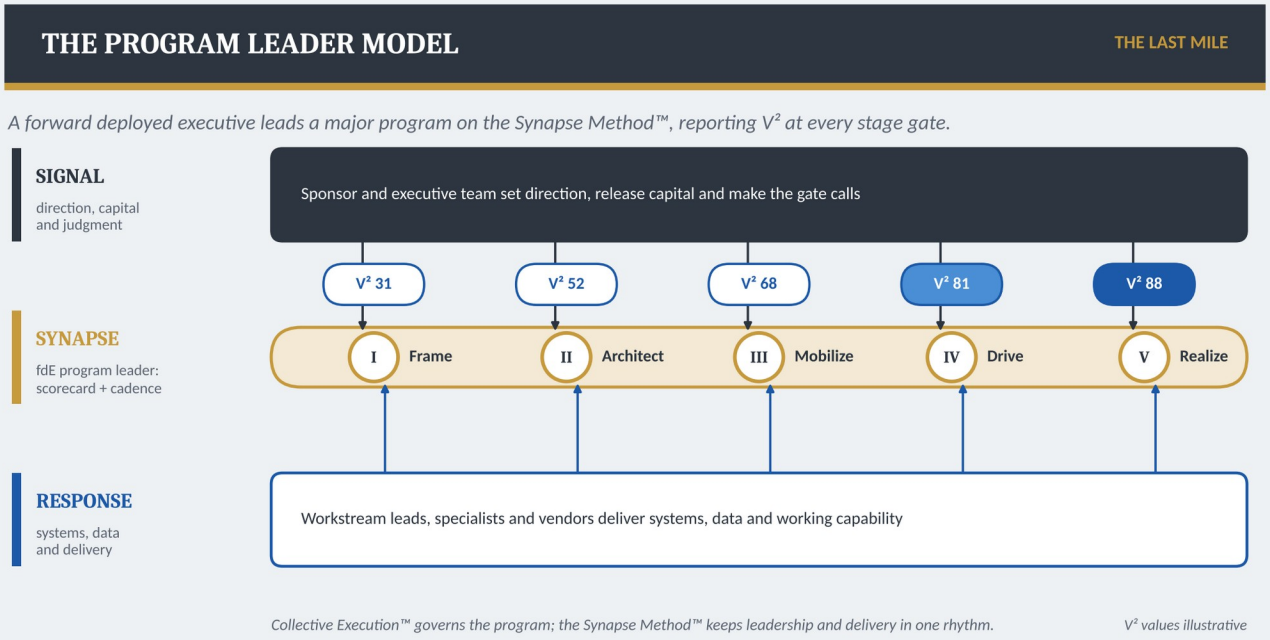


Figure 7: Our program leader model: a forward deployed executive leads the program on the Synapse Method™, with V^2 reported at every gate.

The two approaches share one equation and differ in where the executive sits:

Dimension	Contract operating partner	Program leader
Built for	Owners of capital and their portfolio companies	Organizations running a major program
Where the fdE sits	Between the board and management	Between leadership and delivery teams
Change design focus	The value creation plan	The program roadmap and outcome architecture
Cadence	Weekly operating reviews; monthly V^2 to the board	Weekly reviews and executive briefings; V^2 at every gate
Hand-off	To management once V^2 locks	To internal owners at Gate V

Beyond these two models, the same equation underpins our fractional CFO and strategy officer engagements and our integrated executive offices. The form changes with the client. The arithmetic does not.

Conclusion

Strategy is a hypothesis. Deployment is the experiment. Certainty is what the evidence says about the result. Sponsors who govern transformation by status reports discover the outcome at the end. Sponsors who govern it by certainty can see it forming, and intervene while intervention is still cheap.

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The imperative for sponsors and boards is practical: score the design before funding it, deploy a senior executive who owns the result inside the business, instrument the work so evidence replaces estimates, and insist on a number with a margin of error every month.

Final Thought

Strategy is rarely the scarce ingredient. Deployment is.

Design the change. Deploy the executive. Validate the value.

If you would like to score an initiative in your portfolio, or talk through what a contract operating partner or program leader could do inside your organization, let's connect: letstango@braindancecollective.com.

Appendix: Glossary and Sources

Term	Meaning
V^2 Equation™	cD + fdE = V^2: Change Design plus a Forward Deployed Executive produces Value Validation
cD, Change Design	The scored definition of what must change, in what order and how success will be proven (0 to 50)
fdE, Forward Deployed Executive	A senior operator embedded in the business who carries the design into action and owns the measured result (0 to 50)
V^2, Value Validation	The sum of cD and fdE (0 to 100), reported with a margin of error
Margin of error	± = 2 + 20 × the share of the scorecard still estimated
Floor rule	If either component is below 25, the V^2 is capped at twice the weaker score
Deployment Matrix™	A two-axis view of cD and fdE that sorts initiatives into four zones
Forward Deployment Cycle™	Embed, instrument, then a weekly loop of execute, sense, decide and correct, ending in transfer
Convergence Curve™	V^2 and its margin plotted over time
Contract operating partner model	A BrainDance executive serving as a portfolio company's operating partner for a defined term
Program leader model	A BrainDance executive leading a major program as the Synapse between leadership and delivery
Collective Execution™ and the Synapse Method™	BrainDance's executive-led value realization system and its dual-layer operating model (see Issue No. III)

Sources

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- BrainDance Collective website case studies and internal engagement materials.

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About the Author

Tracy L. Williams is Principal and Lead Strategist at The BrainDance Collective, a Wharton-educated operator whose career runs through finance, technology, operations, government contracting, entrepreneurship, consulting and private equity. She serves clients as a fractional chief financial and strategy officer and PMO lead, and has served as contract CFO, turnaround lead and operating partner in situations where the only acceptable finish line was a number that held. That experience is the origin of the V^2 Equation: in her work, strategy has never been the scarce ingredient. The scarce ingredient is a senior operator inside the business, measuring what is true and changing course before it is too late.

About The BrainDance Collective

The BrainDance Collective is a collection of experienced executives who design and execute solutions to complex problems, achieving the primary mission of a private company or agency shoulder to shoulder with its team, from within the organization. Guided by three commitments, Integrity Over Everything, Partners Not Vendors, and People Are the Point, BrainDance brings 150+ years of combined executive experience across Fortune 500 brands to bear on strategy, technology adoption, and operating performance.

Think Big. Solve Together.

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