

— AN EXECUTIVE BRIEF

The VES Framework.

How to speed up strategy execution by redesigning the decision environment — and how to run the diagnostic with your team.

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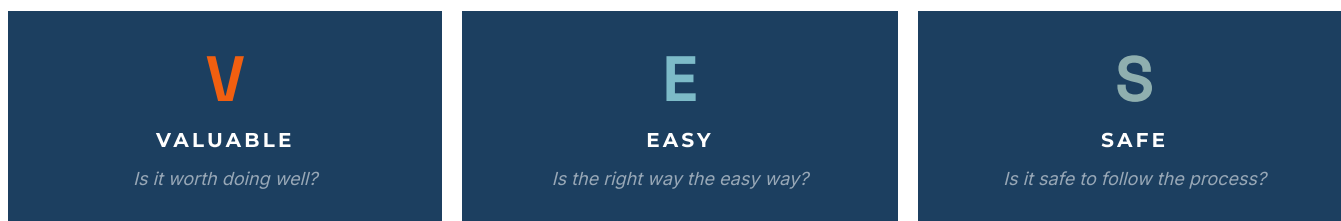
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— OVERVIEW

The problem isn't motivation. It's the environment.

Most execution frameworks focus on visible levers: people, process, and tools. What they miss is the decision environment — the daily conditions that determine whether people choose the right behavior. You can have motivated teams, adequate resources, and clear direction, and still watch strategy stall. The reason is almost always in the conditions people are working in, not the people themselves.

The VES Framework is a diagnostic that identifies three questions people answer, often subconsciously, when they decide how to do their work:



When the answer to any one is no, people route around the system — regardless of how well the change has been communicated.

VES applies at any level an organization operates: a single project team, a functional portfolio, or an enterprise-wide initiative. The three questions don't change. The subject of the diagnosis does.

Unlike a checklist or a change management framework, VES is a diagnostic. It doesn't prescribe solutions — it tells you where to look. The intervention depends on what the diagnosis reveals.

RESEARCH GROUNDING

The VES Framework is grounded in decision-environment research, including a 2021 meta-analysis published in *PNAS* that reviewed more than 200 studies across populations, industries, and contexts. The consistent finding: changing environmental factors — not just communications or training — produces durable behavior change.

— THE THREE FILTERS

Three questions. One honest answer each.

Each filter is a potential drag point. When any one fails, behavior drifts — toward workarounds, toward minimal compliance, toward the path of least resistance. The goal of the VES diagnostic is to find which filter is broken, then design around it.

V

VALUABLE

"Does this feel worth doing well amid competing priorities?"

The first drag point is often invisible. Work doesn't feel worth doing carefully — not because people don't care, but because the connection between the task and its intended outcome has never been made clear. Or it competes with something that feels more urgent on an ordinary day.

SIGNALS

- Low engagement — people do the minimum to satisfy the ask
- Requirement is met on paper; no one is engaged with the outcome
- Participation is high when a senior leader is watching, then fades

E

EASY

"Has enough drag been added that doing it the old way is more efficient?"

Friction is cumulative. A tool that takes three extra clicks. A status report that pulls data from four systems. An intake form that asks for information nobody has yet. None of these is impossible. Together, they make the old way feel smarter than the new one.

SIGNALS

- Workarounds that replicate the function more efficiently
- Adoption strong at launch, soft 60–90 days later
- "We tried it but went back" — said informally or formally

S

SAFE

"What does someone risk by following the process — and what do they risk by skipping it?"

Psychological safety isn't just about speaking up in meetings. It's about whether following a new process or surfacing a problem feels riskier than staying quiet. When visibility carries risk, people optimize for invisibility — and the system looks healthy until it isn't.

SIGNALS

- Status reports that consistently show green, even on troubled work
- Problems surface only when they're critical — never early
- Formal adoption looks strong; actual behavior hasn't changed

Note: More than one filter can be broken at the same time. When all three are failing, the issue is usually systemic — the organizational decision environment needs to be examined across all the conditions shaping behavior. That's the territory of the Momentum Map (see page 6).

— WHERE IT APPLIES

VES is most useful when the symptom is a behavior gap.

A behavior gap is the distance between what strategy calls for and what's actually happening in day-to-day work. VES doesn't diagnose the strategy — it diagnoses the conditions people are working in when they decide whether to follow it. Three of the most common places to run the test:

01**PMO OPERATIONS****When a PMO team is struggling with speed and discipline.**

When a PMO is perceived as slow or bureaucratic, adding more governance rarely helps. Run the VES test on the PMO's own outputs first. A status report nobody reads (not valuable). A portfolio tool that takes three hours to update (not easy). An intake process that publicly exposes gaps in project definition (not safe). This often reveals why internal customers are routing around the PMO rather than through it.

The question to ask: Are the processes, tools, and governance we're building valuable, easy, and safe for the people expected to use them?

02**PROJECT ADOPTION****When a project is struggling to get user adoption or realize benefits.**

A new system goes live. Training is complete. Leadership has endorsed it. Within weeks, people go back to their spreadsheets and old shortcuts. Standard change management responds with more communication and training. VES asks a different question: has this change made the work easier and less risky, or just differently hard?

The question to ask: Are the new tools, processes, or behaviors valuable, easy, and safe in the context of someone's actual workday?

03**ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE****When behavior gaps appear across multiple initiatives.**

When workarounds and surface-level compliance show up consistently across a portfolio, the issue is usually something bigger than any individual project. The organizational conditions shaping how work gets done — incentive structures, informal norms, cultural defaults — are often the same conditions creating drag everywhere. Solving this project by project won't work.

The question to ask: Is the decision environment itself creating the drag — and who holds the levers to change it?

— RUNNING THE DIAGNOSTIC

A four-step test you can run before your next meeting.

The VES diagnostic isn't a survey or a scoring system. It's a structured way to look honestly at one behavior — from the perspective of the person who has to do it — and find where the friction actually lives. It takes less than 10 minutes. The worksheet on page 8 is designed for individual use or team facilitation.

01 Name the behavior.

Pick one specific behavior that isn't happening the way strategy calls for. Be precise — not "low adoption" but "PMs aren't updating the portfolio dashboard before the Monday review." The more specific the behavior, the more useful the diagnosis.

02 Shift perspective.

Read the behavior from the perspective of the person doing the work on an ordinary day — not from the executive sponsor's chair. The honest answer almost always lives in the gap between what strategy assumes and what a Tuesday afternoon actually feels like for that person.

03 Run the three questions.

Answer each honestly. Be willing to sit with an uncomfortable no. The goal isn't to confirm that everything is fine — it's to find the real drag point so you can address it instead of adding more communication and accountability on top of a broken filter.

04 Find the broken filter — and go there.

If any answer is no or unclear, that's where the real work lives. More communication, more training, and more accountability won't reach a broken V, E, or S filter. You have to redesign the environment around it.

THE THREE QUESTIONS — QUICK REFERENCE

V — Valuable

Does this feel worth doing well amid competing priorities?

If no → clarify the outcome before adding pressure.

E — Easy

Is the old way still more efficient? Could steps be removed, automated, or consolidated without losing rigor?

If yes → reduce friction before adding governance.

S — Safe

What do people risk by following the process — and what do they risk by skipping it? Does visibility feel safer than silence?

If unsafe → address the environment before expecting honesty.

— IMPLICATIONS FOR PMOS

The diagnostic that changes the conversation.

PMOs see behavior across initiatives — not just inside one project or one team. When one project has an adoption problem, it might be project-specific. When workarounds and surface-level compliance show up consistently across a portfolio, the issue is usually the organizational decision environment.

That's good news. It means the problem is solvable at the system level, not just one project at a time. Better change management on every individual initiative won't solve a systemic issue. The pattern has to be named across initiatives, and the diagnosis has to reach the leaders who hold the structural levers.

PMO directors are among the few people in an organization who can see these patterns clearly enough to name them. That conversation — from symptom to system — is the one that changes things. Most PMOs haven't started it yet.

BEYOND VES — THE MOMENTUM MAP

VES is the fast signal. The Momentum Map is the full diagnosis.

VES tells you which filter is broken. It doesn't tell you why. For that, the underlying execution system has to be examined across six dimensions that shape behavior:



The Momentum Map traces root causes across all six dimensions — identifying where the lever actually sits, not just where the symptom shows up. It's the broader diagnostic Sara uses with organizations at The Persimmon Group.

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Sara Gallagher

PRESIDENT, THE PERSIMMON GROUP

Sara Gallagher is President of The Persimmon Group and a recognized expert in strategy execution, PMO leadership, and project portfolio management. For more than fifteen years, she has helped organizations — from Fortune 500s to fast-moving startups — bridge the gap between strategic ambition and execution reality.

A frequent speaker, author, and instructor, Sara has contributed to *PMI.org*, *CIO Magazine*, and *PM Playbook*, and has delivered keynotes and whitepapers on strategy execution, organizational change, and high-performing teams. Her consulting spans energy, finance, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, and technology.

— NEWSLETTER

Big Dumb Questions

Sara publishes *Big Dumb Questions*, a weekly newsletter for PMO leaders and executives who want to see strategy move off PowerPoint and into the real world.

The obvious questions no one wants to ask first.



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CHANGE I AM DIAGNOSING

DATE & TEAM / CONTEXT

V Valuable

Does my team feel this change is worth their time and effort right now?

Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong

Think about this change from the perspective of someone managing competing priorities on an ordinary day. Does doing it well feel connected to an outcome that matters to them — or does it compete with something that feels more urgent?

WHAT SIGNALS SUGGEST VALUE IS STRONG OR WEAK?

WHAT WOULD MAKE THIS FEEL MORE GENUINELY VALUABLE — FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVE?

E Easy

Is it frictionless enough to do the right thing — or is the old way still easier?

Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong

Consider the steps, tools, and handoffs between the current state and the desired behavior. Where does friction accumulate? What would have to be true for the new way to feel like the easier choice?

WHERE DOES FRICTION SHOW UP IN THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THIS CHANGE?

WHAT IS ONE SPECIFIC FRICTION I HAVE THE ABILITY TO REDUCE?

S Safe

Do people feel safe to try, to fail, and to be honest about their experience?

Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong

Think about what is visible and what is invisible in this process. What do people risk by following it — and what do they risk by skipping it or staying quiet about problems? Does honesty feel safer than silence?

WHAT SIGNALS SUGGEST SAFETY IS HIGH OR LOW?

WHAT HAVE I SAID OR DONE THAT MIGHT BE REDUCING SAFETY — AND WHAT COULD I DO DIFFERENTLY?

MY WEAKEST LEVER IS

● V ● E ● S

ONE ACTION I WILL TAKE THIS WEEK