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Why Working 'on the Business' Rarely Happens

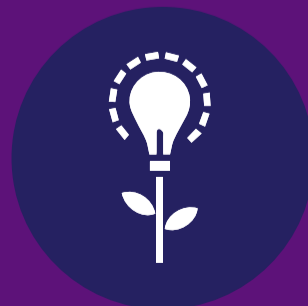
And How to Make It Stick



The difference between momentum and stagnation isn't effort—it's where attention lives.



By Blair Severn



Why Working ‘on the business’ Rarely Happens - *enough*

There’s a quiet truth inside most organizations. Everyone agrees that working on the business is critical...**but almost no one does enough of it.**

Not because leaders don’t care.

Because the business itself pulls them back in.

The Gravity Problem

Running a business has gravity; customer issues, deadlines, revenue pressure, internal dependencies. These aren’t distractions—they’re real. They demand attention. So leadership teams get pulled into execution. Then deeper into execution. Until eventually, they’re operating inside the machine rather than shaping it. Working in the business becomes the default.

Working on the business becomes the exception.

And exceptions don’t scale.

The “Strategy Retreat” Illusion

Most organizations try to solve this with events:

- Annual planning cycles
- Offsite strategy sessions every 3–5 years
- Leadership retreats

They feel productive. Energizing, even. But structurally, they fail because they treat strategy like a moment in time, instead of a system of behaviour. Think of it this way: Have you ever gone on vacation, used the hotel gym every day, felt great—and then returned home and never touched a gym again? That’s what most strategy retreats are.

A temporary break from operational pressure.

That collapses the moment real life resumes.

The Real Issue: Strategy Isn't Embedded

The deeper problem isn't time, it's architecture. Most organizations isolate 'on-the-business' work to a small group at the top where the C-Suite defines direction and the rest of the organization executes. But this creates a structural blind spot where the people closest to customers, friction points, and execution reality are not systematically contributing to shaping the business.

So strategy becomes...

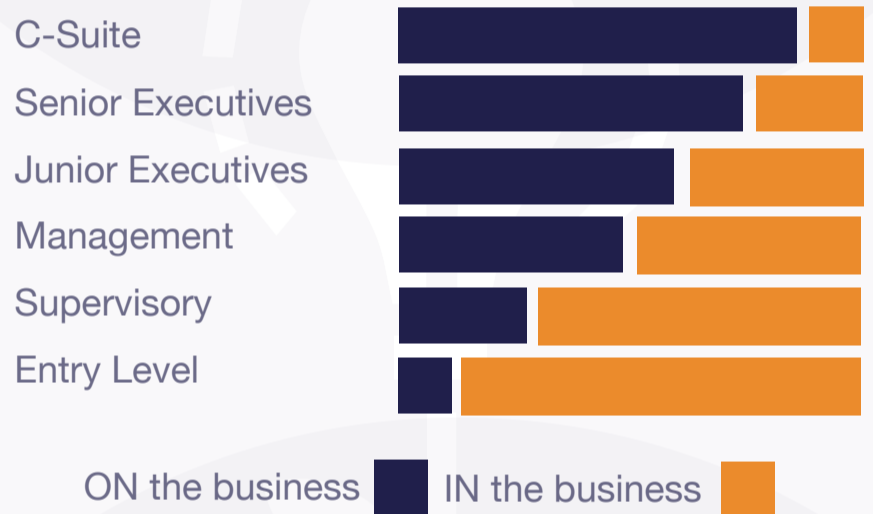
Less grounded - Slower to adapt - Harder to execute.

A Better Model: Distributed Strategic Attention

High-performing organizations don't separate thinking from doing. They distribute strategic responsibility across the organization—with the right balance at each level.

This isn't about everyone doing strategy decks. It's about embedding structured improvement responsibility into every role.

A practical Model looks like this:



From 'Job Duties' to continuous 'Improvement Systems'

Most job descriptions are built around execution eg. responsibilities, tasks, outputs. But very few include accountability for improving the system itself.

That's the shift. When every role includes:

- Defined improvement deliverables
 - Regular participation in structured problem-solving
 - Mechanisms for input and refinement
 - Performance recognition tied to improvement impact
- ...you create a living system.

Not a suggestion box, not ad hoc ideas.

A designed engine for evolution.

Why This Matters at Critical Inflection Points

There are moments when this distinction becomes decisive:

- Scaling beyond founder-led execution
- Resetting competitive advantage
- Aligning leadership around a new direction
- Navigating M&A integration or readiness

These are ‘moments that matter’.

At these inflection points, organizations that rely on episodic strategy struggle. Those with embedded strategic systems accelerate.

**Because they’re not trying to switch modes.
They’re already operating that way.**

A Final Thought

If your organization feels like it’s always busy—but not always advancing, it’s not a capability issue, it’s an attention issue.

And attention, when structured correctly, becomes your greatest strategic asset.

In our **next Think Tank piece**, we explore how to operationalize this model through a flywheel system—turning distributed effort into sustained momentum.

About the Author

Blair Severn is Co-founder and Managing Partner of enabling ideas[®] and creator of The Strategic Blueprint[™]. He advises CEOs and Boards, held corporate leadership roles, and built entrepreneurial ventures. He is recognized for translating complex challenges into clear, actionable direction that enables organizations to navigate critical inflection points with clarity, leadership alignment, and sustained momentum.

About enabling ideas[®]

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