Landing Is the Hardest Part

– why strategies and change must be completed, celebrated and embedded

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Most leadership teams are good at taking off. The strategy is set, the kickoff is held, and the projects are launched with energy and good intentions.

But every pilot knows that it is the approach and landing that demand the most. You are close to the ground, there is the least room for error, and this is where it is decided whether the trip was a success.

This article is about why so many strategies and changes never land – and what leaders can do to bring them safely down to earth.

Projects tend to fizzle out

Many organisations rush on to the next initiative before the previous one has landed. There is no closure, no celebration, no learning and no embedding in everyday work. Slowly the organisation slides back to the old ways – and the next time management presents a new strategy, the scepticism is a little greater.

I once described it like this: Sometimes a project dies like a balloon pricked with a needle – suddenly it is all gone. Other times it is like letting go of a balloon without tying a knot. You get a feeble sound and a limp result as it all falls to the floor.

Landing is about tying a knot in the balloon, so it is still fun to play with afterwards.

A stable approach – or go around

A pilot who does not have a stable approach does not just land anyway. He aborts, goes around and tries again. That is not a defeat. It is professionalism.

In organisations, the opposite often happens. Victory is declared too early because the project period has ended, the budget is spent, or management's attention has moved elsewhere. But a change that only lives on slides and in a status meeting has not landed.

It takes courage to say: “We are not ready to land yet.” And it takes discipline to follow up until you are.

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The flight plan decides the landing

A good landing begins long before take-off. When I plan a flight, I start with the destination and the weather – and with the fuel. Many strategies have no buffer: Capacity is planned down to the last drop, leaving nothing in reserve when the wind turns.

Pilots use checklists – even after thousands of hours. Discipline beats talent. The danger is that the more experience you have, the fewer checks you make. That also applies to leadership teams who have “done this before”.

Before departure, you brief the crew. But understanding is not the same as shared ownership. So do not ask “Is that understood?”, but “What did you hear?”. Along the way you adjust the course instead of giving up the goal, you always have an alternative approach – a plan B – and you maintain calm authority when it gets turbulent.

Execution is ensuring accountable follow-up against the intent

The landing is not decided at the last moment. It is decided by how you have flown all the way. Three leadership classics point to the same thing:

Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan show in “Execution” that it is robust dialogue and consistent follow-up that turn strategy into results. Not the impressive plan, but the disciplined conversation about what works and what does not.

Jon Katzenbach shows in “The Wisdom of Teams” that mutual accountability – holding each other to agreements, not just the boss – is what distinguishes a real team from a working group. When only the boss follows up, you rarely land together.

And Stephen Bungay shows in “The Art of Action” that clear intent and back-briefing make it possible to act quickly without losing direction. Back-briefing means that the recipient repeats in their own words what the task is about. What the leader says is often not that important – it is far more interesting to hear what the employees have understood. I have written more about intent in “Hope Is Not a Method”.

Mutual accountability does not happen by itself. It requires the team to have defined together what is good enough – and how to tell each other when it is not. That is the idea behind shared high team standards: Standards that the team owns make it legitimate for everyone to follow up – not just the boss.

Learn from what succeeded

Many organisations only evaluate what went wrong. That is a pity, because it is not the mistake itself we learn from. If you only look at the mistakes, you know afterwards what not to do – but not what actually worked and how to do it again.

That is why we work with success analysis: A structured review of the situations where the team performed at its best. What did we do? Who did what? Which conditions were present? The pattern behind peak performance can be repeated – and it is often the quickest way to land the next project better.

Celebration is part of it. It marks that something has ended, gives meaning to the effort that has been made, and releases energy for what comes next. A leadership team that never celebrates teaches its organisation that nothing is ever finished.

When the employees land the project themselves

At Christiansen & Essenbæk, the project "Trivsel – 360 grader" (Well-being – 360 degrees) was coming to an end in the spring of 2012. As early as autumn 2011, we began preparing to embed it. We trained 12 hourly-paid crew representatives on an intensive residential programme in instruction techniques, communication, collaboration, working environment, health and team leadership. They were to be the hub, even when the health and safety manager, the HR manager or the CEO was not there to look over anyone's shoulder.

In the last half hour of the course, I revealed that they themselves would have the responsibility, time, money and authority to plan and run the company's big project closing day. At first there was complete silence. Did I mean it? Yes, I did. If we did not practise taking responsibility ourselves before the project ended, what would happen afterwards?

The framework and budget were clear, but the responsibility and decisions were theirs. I deliberately stayed away in the last days beforehand so they could feel the responsibility and achieve a success they owned. On 25 May 2012, every employee met at 7 a.m. for breakfast, team allocation and activities at eight stations. Danish national radio broadcast live, and one of the crew representatives, Christian, explained why sickness absence had fallen so markedly: "You look forward to coming to work."

As a thank-you, the crew representatives received a pocket knife with the company logo on one side of the blade and the words CREW REPRESENTATIVE on the other. There was not a dry eye in the house. The project "Trivsel – 360 grader" first won the Danish Working Environment Award and then Børsen's CSR Communication Award, based on my book "Lederens inspirationsguide" (in Danish).

Embedding did not stop with the celebration. Two-person task forces from the health and safety committee toured the construction sites and followed up on the three priority areas from the well-being survey. The survey was repeated eight months later to see whether leadership behaviour had actually changed. The principle was simple: Turn the answers into concrete actions – otherwise do not ask.

You can never embed a project 100%. But 20% is better than 0. And what is embedded by the employees themselves lasts the longest.

Train the landing before it matters

Follow-up and mutual accountability are not something you decide on at a strategy seminar. They are something you train. On our 2–4-day training expeditions in nature, both in Denmark and abroad, focusing on execution in practice, teams and leaders work with OLTC instructors – and every exercise is linked directly to the company's strategy. Participants experience first-hand what happens when an agreement is not followed up, and how a team lands a difficult task together.

The same applies in everyday work. A fixed rhythm of short follow-up meetings that look at both results and collaboration is often more important than the perfect plan. I have written more about training under pressure in "From Retreat to Simulator".

Checklist before landing

Ask before you declare an initiative complete:

- **Closure:** Is it clear what is finished – and who owns the rest?
- **Celebration:** Have we recognised those who made the difference?
- **Learning:** Have we captured what worked and what we will do differently next time?
- **Evaluation:** Have we measured against the intent – not just the plan?
- **Embedding:** Is the new part of routines, goals and roles, even when the project is gone?

Three questions for the leadership team

Ask yourselves:

- Which of our initiatives have taken off but never landed?
- Do we hold each other mutually accountable – or is it only the boss who follows up?
- Who owns the change when the project ends?

Conclusion – land before you take off again

Taking off is easy. Landing is hard. But it is the landing that decides whether the strategy turns into results – or just another flight that never came back down to earth.

Landing requires robust dialogue, consistent follow-up, mutual accountability and a clear intent all the way down. And it requires management to take the time to close, celebrate, learn, evaluate and embed before the next initiative takes off.

This article builds on my LinkedIn articles "Flyveplanlægning i lederskab" (2026) and "Eksekvering i praksis" (2016) and my book "Lederens inspirationsguide" (2012).

Does your strategy need to land as results in everyday work?

Cronquist Consult ApS helps executive teams and leadership teams with strategy execution, follow-up and embedding. Read more here:
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