Build: when Execution Becomes the Scapegoat

Regina Lewis Welcome to the inside straight and card lingo. And inside straight is a hand with only four of the five cards needed to win. The missing card is what we're calling the gap. But we're not here to talk about poker. Instead, this site Inside Straight deals with all things branding and communications and the gaps that foil even the best laid plans. For example, a gap in brand alignment can cost ten percent of annual revenue. A poor reputation sixty percent, a crisis triggered by a failed implementation, fifty percent of stock value over two years. Miscommunications leading to corporate inefficiencies up to eight figures. So who's minding the gap and who are we? We're a group of seasoned pros from various sectors who've banded together for this series of critical conversations on the hands that we've all been dealt. We're here to say the quiet parts out loud. In each game, we'll ask three critical questions to help close the gap. One what's really going on here? Two what assumptions were made? Three what solutions would we recommend? Let the games begin. The build when execution becomes the scapegoat. Here's the anchor question. Are we building the right thing in a way that can hold over time? Let's jump into this. So by way of explanation, has anybody ever been in a situation where you've followed the brief, executed perfectly only for the client or the leadership to come back and say, it's not what we really wanted, or it's your fault the sales didn't go up or we didn't raise more funding or dot dot dot. Fill in the blank. I'm wondering if anybody's ever been dealt this.

Russell Holley Hand straight away.

Regina Lewis Oh, yeah.

Russell Holley Please. Hello.

Regina Lewis Let's hear from the diamonds.

Russell Holley Diamonds are in. And. And I think that I'm going to be looking at that. I think it's systems and resources very much a resource issue. So that's it. I'm in there.

Mark Evans Yeah. Well obviously okay. Obviously it's it's clubs execution and build what gets built and whether it holds over time. Yeah. I've seen countless examples of this, I think not wanting to point fingers, but I think that one of the types of project that goes wrong the most is web build. And for a lot of reasons, for.

Russell Holley Definitely no finger pointing.

Mark Evans No finger finger pointing.

Russell Holley At all.

Mark Evans But I think that.

Regina Lewis But point four, not five.

Mark Evans Yeah, yeah. I think that people have problems visualizing things, but you know, that's fine. And we have processes that help us get around that so that, you know, we present to people what we can build. But I think that before that is, is the process where you have to have a document that is technical enough to guide the developers, but is in as plain English or as in layman's terms in describing how something will work as well. And that is part of our web development process called the PhD process. It's iterative and you can go backwards and forwards. But what it principally does and what I think, you know, we've all fallen into this trap of writing something so technically dense that the client looks at it and goes, yeah, I think I now understand what that means and what it will deliver to us. And then, of course, when you deliver the website, they go, well, why doesn't that work like that? Or why haven't we got a, you know, an all singing, all dancing CRM system? Or why doesn't this not do this. Talk to Salesforce or Sage or whatever. So I think that is part of the fundamental process for us and the way that we've changed a part of what we do when we're designing websites. Another part of that is now that we develop everything in Figma, but I think that you can be caught up with technical jargon, and you can be talking above people's heads and not explaining really what what you mean. And I think we've seen that very recently in discussions we've had with clients around AI search and SEO and E and G, and people sort of understanding of, you know, whose responsibility is this? And, and how do we make that work? Or how do you make that work when actually a lot of, a lot of those answers to those questions are, well, we all need to make it work. And this is this is your contribution.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel I'm going to throw in hearts to us because it does fall back on the teams. A lot of what a lot of what Mark is talking about his teams, and I remember sitting in so many of those types of meetings with external teams building for us. And the one question I'll always ask the team is, what do you think is going to be the challenge for your internal comms team? And people will look everywhere around the room about, will it be this, will it be that? And then you look at them and say content like content. Nobody ever thinks about the fact that content will need to be planned. Content will need to be rewritten, adapted, you know, to this.

Russell Holley I, I, I, I, I, I, as soon as you started mentioning that the pain was coming up from my feet into the head of how many times I say to or we say to clients, do not underestimate the content evaluation.

Mark Evans The amount of time it's going to take you to.

Russell Holley Unbelievable. Because.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And the migration and all of that.

Russell Holley Yeah, a lot of the time.

Regina Lewis Nobody can do it for you, though. It has to.

Russell Holley Come from I don't want to digress, but they turn around and it is part of the issue is that they turn around and say, well, we want to migrate all the content. Why do you want to migrate it?

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel All right. Yeah, you're going to take every bit of this.

Russell Holley So it's the resources. Exactly. My card. It's I think a lot of a lot of the I'd say I'd never want to say that we dissatisfy anybody. But when it when it comes down to where things haven't quite worked as well as they should do, I think it's under a misunderstanding where the pain points. And you were mentioning, you know, understanding the pain of an organization and then you can deliver the medicine really to everybody knows their acronyms and things and analogies is where does the where's the medicine best place? And, and I think that all of this, all of the pain or a lot of the pain we've tried to engineer out of processes is trying to interrogate far more the client at the beginning of the process again. Yeah. Previous episodes you get the brief is the brief, right? No, not really, because it's like, give me a website. Here's the structure of the old website. So they're giving you the structure and you're thinking, well, is that right? So where does your interrogation start? So we, we, we try and interrogate, find where those pain points are right at the beginning of the process. And everybody says they do that. Every agency will turn around and say, well, we do that. I don't think that because the majority of the websites that I still think are produced are very superficial. They don't really deliver anything that is of any benefit. Content, as Mark was saying, some of the content, you know, have they rewritten that? Is it AI specific? Is it, you know, search engine optimized all of these different parameters that are in there.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And do they do they have it in house to do like any of that, you know, planning the fact that they may have to give that back to the agency to actually work on. And so that that's part of it. The other thing for me is scope creep and the ways in which you can move, right?

Regina Lewis Scope creep.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel You know, how you can get out of there so fast. Like you'll have this brief and the brief is delivered and then someone in the organization will decide, hey, no, we need to add on these other things too. And that is way out of the scope of the project, you know.

Russell Holley But it's always, yeah, let's it has to be added to the same budget.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel That's right. The budget's not going to change. We they want to know.

Russell Holley All it like.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Can you squeeze this into it can't cost that much more. Right? Okay. It doesn't take that.

Regina Lewis Much before we go too far. Sorry I have yet to throw in. Sorry. Card.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Go ahead.

Regina Lewis So we don't have all the cards in the in the pot. So if if I can I'm going to throw in spades because this is definitely structural. And I'm going to say branding and communications are brought in to mask business problems. Because if there's a scapegoat, it means that there's blame. And if there's blame, that's an accountability issue. And if the organization is not being holding itself accountable to the decisions that it makes, that's an integrity problem. And if an integrity problem is allowed to persist, then you have a cultural problem. Again, it's baked into the foundation. It's never been corrected. It's going to be an ongoing problem, and you're going to see things like budget creep, scope creep, changing of initiative and say, what I really meant is, but what I really did is and not have that integrity and making themselves whole in their decisions and standing behind them and absorbing the blame and saying, hey, it was my fault. I know nobody's going to do that, but there is a way to correct the issue or something that's gone astray very early in the process without having finger pointing spades in.

Russell Holley I think that's I think your card needs to stay in, I think.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel That is a key card.

Regina Lewis Call, a thing we got to call a thing. A thing.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel That's right.

Regina Lewis And we also have to hold these organizations accountable and responsible because we know especially, you know, like my background, as I said, is public relations. All you have is your reputation. All you have is your integrity. People don't remember you worked for Pretty in Pink Corporation. They remember you and they remember you told me this and then you did that. If your who does not match your do you're out of business. And yet organizations bring people like us in. But they don't hold themselves accountable to the same standards and principles that they write in their values. How about living up to your values, Mr. or Miss Corporation?

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Mhm.

Russell Holley Okay.

Mark Evans But I think sometimes as well, you, you get involved in a process where something happens that then because of the way that you've started the project, that compounds subsequent efforts. I remember many years ago, we did a brochure for a client in the. The designer decided that we were going, this is in the old, bad old days when we were talking about typesetting and having to send out. Oh, God. Sorry about that. But because they had a very narrow column measure, they ended up with large rivers, the large white gaps in between the types. So the designer thought it'd be a really good idea if we manually cut those gaps out and then inserted a little wave graphic to fill that hole in. And that's a great that's a great thing to do. You know, we thought it was great. We budgeted for that. We allowed for that when we were we were costing the job. And the account exec went back to the client and they were very happy and they loved it and it looked great. What nobody really thought about was, well, what if the client changes the copy five times? And then we have to do all of that another five times. And I remember getting hauled into the MD's office saying, Mark, um, artwork. Why is the artwork budget two hundred percent over budget? When I had to explain to him why I was let go out of the office and the account handler was brought into the office? Um, so it wasn't then my fault, I'm very glad to say, but it's just things like that that, you know, you need to flag these things in advance. And I think that the account exec hoped that we'd sweep it under the carpet and but yeah, things like that. As you say, projects go things that you don't think about, but, you know, you need to be looking up the road a bit more. I think as well, it's, it's.

Regina Lewis There's, there's a, there's a saying how you go in is how you come out.

Mark Evans That's exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Russell Holley It's interesting that when you introduced it, it was like, you know, the, the execution becomes the scapegoat. Um, feeling slightly vulnerable here. It does the word um, execution mean agency or does the execution mean. I think it does internal staff because both, it's it's both. Yeah. In my experience, there's no such thing as, uh, as the client's wrong. The client's always right. Yeah. Even though.

Mark Evans Um, even when they're wrong, they're right there.

Russell Holley Right, right, wrong all the time. Yes. Um, and I again, experience is one of those things that we would much rather put our hands up and say oversight. Everyone's human even that.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Mhm.

Russell Holley We didn't we didn't predict or whatever. And let's find a solution rather than analyze how it happened. And we can do that later. We need to X, Y, and z. Um, and I, and I do think that a lot of the time, uh, we live in a blame culture.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel True.

Russell Holley So therefore let's.

Regina Lewis Especially.

Russell Holley Now, let's find someone to blame for something that might not have turned out exactly how we wanted it to be. There are. Yeah. The problem with, with a lot of the technologies that we use or the, the, um, the platforms that we use, they're so complex organizations want to have something that delivers on specific targets, but they also then want to manage every aspect of that really to keep costs down.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Right.

Russell Holley Micromanage their small teams. They, they want to be able to they want to be able to manage those. So you, you've not only got to look at the front end of of a solution. How your audiences will see something.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel The back.

Russell Holley End, how they will. Yeah, exactly. The back end. Mhm. Often. And wind the clock back a few years. We we left that part out. We just thought, well, we're only going to focus on the front end. And it was even written in the scope. There it is. We, we were going to do this. And then it was like, uh, I don't like the back end, but it's not in the scope. And that's where these mission creep comes in. Yes. But you can't leave out it's part of this. So all of a sudden your, your, that mission creep has, has not just crept. It's, it's leapt. It's, it's running down the road. And you're thinking, how do I haul that back? Um, because you.

Regina Lewis Say, I'm going to surmise that it's not the execution that's the scapegoat. It's the process that's the scapegoat because.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Yeah, that feels right.

Regina Lewis I would say process our process driven and their procedural. And if you don't factor in the back end at the beginning, it's an order of magnitude change to factor in. And at the end, and that's what's not understood. The process that it's process and procedural, it's like, oh, you just do magical things. Oh, it's just writing or it's just this when it's much more complex and much more.

Russell Holley It's like pulling a rabbit. It's like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. You just pull that website out the hat and way. There it is. Right.

Regina Lewis And but magic has science behind it. There's a whole process behind it that you don't see.

Russell Holley Well, it's sleight of hand. The sleight of hand.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel But it's sleight of hand.

Regina Lewis But the MC is the rabbit coming out. You don't see the years that that magician had to train to be able to do that and make it look like it wasn't sleight of hand.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And how hard can it be? So in other words, it needs to be something I can write that this that this team can do. I can draw. They don't think about any of those things. Like once again, in a previous episode, we talked about capabilities. Again, they're not looking at their team to understand whether or not if that's if that complete website, for example, is handed over to them. Do they know how to actually manage the back end, you know, effectively and in, in a way that, you know, leaving that work, you know, the

tougher, more complex work to the agency? Do they they never ask those questions. There's an assumption that somehow this website will get updated and it'll be done. Yeah, it's in house.

Regina Lewis Yeah. If we if we build it, we can drive it.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Yeah.

Regina Lewis Yeah. And maybe, maybe you can't because maybe it's a, it's a tank and it's all computerized.

Russell Holley You can't drive.

Regina Lewis It. It's not a.

Russell Holley Car. You know, when I threw my card in, it was, you know, systems really and resources. Um, and you, you get these sort of briefs. you're not allowed to interrogate, as Carolyn was talking about. What are the skill sets inside? You know, we're going to rewrite all the content or we're going to write, you know, rewrite some of this content and you think, right, okay, well, you need to write it in a specific way. Mhm. And sometimes you then whomever you're discussing that with, I'm an editor. I know how to write well. Yeah. But you need we've got, we've got a template that's a different job to. Because right now it's not it's not about writing any longer. No, it's it's about making sure a process. Here's the process and this is what you need to add. And so therefore that content process time is exponentially increased. That's right. Um, yeah. And so, and I think that if I was looking back at the things more, so I think on the digital side than, um, mission creep or anything like that. Um, I think on print sometimes on because it's more a visual thing that you can very quickly sort of adjust from a visual perspective. I don't think brand. I don't think I've got any. Have you got any branding examples, Mark, that you could.

Mark Evans Well, I mean, the thing that the, the, the one thing that brand. Obviously, if you're not working to a set strategy, everybody has their own opinion, don't they? And I like red, I like orange, I don't like this typeface, I don't. But that's irrelevant. We should be talking about the personality of the organisation. So that's, that's the only where it comes in. But mostly it is digital. Yes. And I think it is either because the client doesn't understand the process or doesn't understand the technical solution that you're put in front of them because they don't understand it, which is your fault because you haven't explained it properly. But I think a lot of problems happen because things happen out of sequence, and that makes the build much more complicated and much more fragmented. So the mistakes creep in. But also it comes back to this content thing again. And you know, it's so difficult to write, rewrite all of the content on a website, especially if you're doing it as part of a brand exercise. That's right. Especially if you're doing it as part of, oh, hey, what's the tone of voice or. And especially if you're saying, hey, are we optimizing page structure, page content according to SEO for AI? I mean, it's a whole nother thing. Again, and this is what we're getting into now. I think that some of the websites that we're building now, you know, are going to involve an enormous amount of additional effort. And the client has actually anticipated and also extra effort from us being able to tap into that and saying, well, this is the SEO derived search terms, keywords that you should be integrating within these articles. And we're doing it at the moment for a client. They've got lots of content on their website, but none of it is SEO optimized. And even the page structure is wrong. So that's a whole that's a whole job. I mean, that's, uh. Wow. That's weeks of work. I mean, we're just doing one part of the website at the moment, and it's three weeks work just for one, one section on their website to do with one bit of content.

Russell Holley But that does come back, you know.

Regina Lewis Before we.

Russell Holley Go there.

Regina Lewis We really do have to get to get to the solution. So in your response, talk about the assumptions made and then let's wrap up and get to solutions. So please go ahead. Russ.

Russell Holley Well, I just think that, you know, my assumptions really this is that, um, God, where do I start? I've got too many things rummaging around in my brain. It's. I think it just stems all comes right the way back to the specifications being correct, the time. Um, so yeah, so, so their solutions really the assumption is I think. More time. I think a lot of these projects need more time, more understanding, more interrogation. Um, that's

their solutions as well as assumptions. But I think that that's what I want to do as a sort of an assumption really from my point.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Yeah. I would agree with what Russ is saying. Time is the assumption internally, their thinking, even from leadership, we have more time than they actually think. You know, sometimes they'll come to you and say, oh, you're going to build a website. You only need about three months for that, you know, and they haven't thought about the size of that website.

Russell Holley To do the copy, though.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Or the.

Regina Lewis Testing.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel They haven't thought about the size of the website. You know, no time has been dedicated to what you're saying, what content you keep, what content you take away, how does it need to be updated, how it needs to align? What's the skills for that? All of those types of things, right? And so they don't think about any what needs, what's getting migrated over to the new website, for example, and making sure that that's not going to cost you. When you do, you know, what are you actually archiving? Where are you going to archive it? So they don't think about any of those sorts of things. And then there is.

Russell Holley Do they assume that the budget's okay, though.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Is that they assume the budget will incorporate for all of these things, right. So time is a huge thing and budget is the other one. Um, it can't cost that much because there seems to be cheaper ways of doing this, right. Can't you just use something cheaper or, you know.

Regina Lewis Or if they have the budget, they don't realize that the scope creep is going to eat into that budget. And what they thought they had to be able to deliver what they thought they wanted is not so anymore.

Mark Evans I think in all the years I've been working on websites, I think there's probably been only once or twice where people have actually said, okay, we've got a contingency in our budget for, oh.

Russell Holley That's a good.

Mark Evans Word.

Russell Holley Contingency.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Contingency.

Mark Evans So that's the.

Regina Lewis one I wrote down to.

Russell Holley Beat you to it.

Mark Evans Hang on to your hats, you know. But I think for me.

Regina Lewis Beat me to.

Mark Evans It. It comes back to. Yeah. Obviously time allowing more time. Internal capacity. You know someone you've got three people in the team. They've all meant to be working on brand web layouts, copy content, you know, population migration.

Russell Holley Can I add another one.

Mark Evans In and.

Russell Holley Another.

Regina Lewis Yeah.

Russell Holley Go on.

Mark Evans Just finally. Yeah. I think really for me, it's process and order process. You need to have a process and you need to stick to that order process.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And one last one, a project manager and a project manager.

Russell Holley Yeah, yeah.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel A project manager sitting on the, the, the client side project manager also, which is talking to the project manager in the agency.

Russell Holley But there's a, I'm going to throw throw curveball here, a project manager within the organization. And I, one of my assumptions really is. There's a huge proportion of Geneva that's going to probably stab me on the way to the airport or something. Is the consultant that comes in. Ah yeah. So here we are. They need a new website. So let's just bring a consultant in to do the brief to do some of the project to run it, maybe even implement it. And then they disappear.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Mhm.

Russell Holley They, they very rarely impart any of their information on because that's their unique, you know, their intellectual property. Otherwise, why would they ever ask me back if I possibly train them or I do this. Right. But the agency's always asked to, to um, train and give away their sort of intellectual property. But one of the processes and resources that I think is misused, misplaced, mismanaged is the, that, that consultant that comes in and it goes back to previous podcasts. Is that why are you getting a consultant as an individual? Just going to do that one aspect and then they, they walk away and never necessarily pay another play another role in it when the agency is then going to build, manage, support and develop. Why aren't they being brought in right at the early stages to almost write that brief? You know, so it goes. I know I don't want to rehash some of the previous. So process is wrong. Utilizing the wrong people at the wrong time and again. Change. Change the mechanism. Sorry, I climb off my.

Regina Lewis Okay. All right. So if I could weigh in here, my solution is, like you said, rest to go back to the process and I'm going to say the quiet part out loud. You make it painful. Um, and by making it painful is you break down each process into every micro step and you make sure that there's a check in and a sign off on every single step. And when I was on the agency side, I think that we always did too, was to, use your your word that you brought in Mark is contingency. Have a contingency plan because we always have plan A, plan B and plan C, always in your back pocket, but also set aside twenty to thirty percent of the budget for contingency because you know something is going to go sideways. A mind is going to be changed. The ball is going to be dropped on the client's side. So you do have to protect yourself and have that that budget and that time set aside for that. Gotcha. And so, yeah, just making sure that there's accountability factored in and baked into the process because the client is going to go, oh, I don't want to sit on all of these nineteen meetings. It's like, yeah, but you're not going to sit in those quarterly meetings and change your mind because you went to company X and you saw their website and it was pretty and you wanted to make the yellow more yellow, right? And I'm speaking from actual experiences.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel I have.

Russell Holley Been there.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Yeah.

Russell Holley Magenta, pink, magenta.

Regina Lewis In the beginning so that you discourage bad behavior? Or as one of my my bosses used to do, she had an actual category in the billing. You know, we have the little billing numbers. It was a grousing fee.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Should.

Regina Lewis Apply the grousing fee. I'm not saying that that's the thing to do, but something to think about.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Something to think about. Mhm.

Russell Holley So any other solutions? I think we've covered a lot of we.

Mark Evans Yeah.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel I think we have.

Regina Lewis Yeah. Yeah. It comes down to accountability. And what problem are they really solving because they do have pain. But is the website going to solve your pain or is it another problem?

Russell Holley But when you and I'd like to try and end on why should there be any scapegoats? And exactly. That's that's embedded into this blame thing is that I think we live in a, in a very, um, blame oriented.

Regina Lewis Shallow.

Russell Holley Culture.

Regina Lewis Yeah. Shallow.

Russell Holley Very shallow. Yeah.

Regina Lewis Well, we live in an Instagram. We live in a like what is it, Snapchat. You do it and then it disappears, you know, and there's no traces of your bad behavior.

Russell Holley A lot of, I think a lot of the, the, the issues become accumulative. It's, it's, you know, we, we go into these things as partners. We, we try and reintroduce, I think we've lost it post Covid, the social side of, of the bond between an agency and a, um, and a client that those, you know, building up relationships with them to understand them, how everything works. Um, I think procurement as a, as a factor has removed that. Mhm.

Regina Lewis Yeah. It's terrible.

Russell Holley You know, can't even buy him a coffee.

Regina Lewis You need.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel That closeness.

Russell Holley Yeah. So those, and I think that that affects everything. And I just love, love going into going into organizations, creating relationship. And therefore it's not a blame game if something hasn't quite worked out. It's it's not. The beauty with online environments is that it can be adapted. It can, you know, at a cost, at a time factor. So, and again, yeah, I think a lot of online environments are sort of people think there's still a fait accompli that, you know, it's been designed, it's been built. That's how it should be. And I always think online environments are constantly evolving. So that means your solution.

Regina Lewis They have to.

Russell Holley It's not really.

Regina Lewis Wrong. You have to stay up with trends. But the other thing too is you mentioned relationships. I think one critical thing is, especially when you're the agency partner is, is the person across the table from you your equal?

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Yeah.

Regina Lewis Because if that person is not skilled and up to the skill, if they drop a ball internally, that that's going to be put into to your column because I don't want to face this. The fact that they have skill gaps.

Russell Holley So you are you almost suggesting a problem? Are you almost suggesting when you sit down with someone, say, right, let's share CVS?

Regina Lewis But no, but you know, you know, you know how somebody approaches a project. It's how they start, you know, the way that somebody approaches a project, how much they how much they know. But and if they start going to the pretty parts, you know, that they don't know the fundamentals. They don't understand strategy. I'm not saying that that person's you're inferior. I'm saying that you may have to bring them along and factor that in and not in a condescending way, but to help them be able to evaluate the work and bring that partnership more closely together. It's not to separate or to keep them one down. It's to bring them up because you have to recognize who you're sitting across from. Because I've, I've rarely in an agency These situations had appeared. I've rarely come into a situation internally where the person that preceded me is up to the job. It's just rare. And I'm not saying that arrogantly. I'm saying that factually and it creates all sorts of

ripple effects. And so it does always come back to skill because that's usually where the gaps are. People internally want to save salary and don't bring the right person in house. That's not your problem, but it is something that you can solve.

Russell Holley Listeners, thanks for listening in to the inside straight. You know, we don't promise perfect, perfect outcomes. You know, we just prompt it promises better ones. Subscribe to the inside straight, send us your stories for analysis, follow us on social channels for clips, reflections, and conversations beyond the episode.