A PRACTICAL DIAGNOSTIC FOR LIVE INITIATIVES

The Capability Gap Triage

Six questions to test before training, communication, or another tool becomes the default fix.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Start with a live problem, not a preferred solution.

Use the six questions with the people closest to the work. Thirty honest minutes can keep a plausible fix from becoming the only fix considered.

Name the symptom

Describe what you can observe without naming its cause.

Test each condition

Look for evidence. Do not settle for assumptions or anecdotes alone.

Find the constraints

More than one condition may be breaking execution.

Match the response

Choose interventions only after the pattern is visible.

BEFORE QUESTION ONE

Name what is happening.

A request usually arrives with the solution already chosen. Pull it back to the observable problem.

WRITE ONE SENTENCE

Who is struggling to do what, under which conditions, and what happens as a result?

ASK FOR EVIDENCE

- What did someone see, hear, or measure?
- When did the problem begin?
- Who experiences it, and who does not?
- What changed around the same time?

> Replace “they need training” with the actual symptom: missed decisions, repeated errors, abandoned transactions, rework, or a workaround that has become the real process.

KNOWLEDGE + SKILL

Could people do this correctly if everything else were working? 1

LOOK FOR

- People are trying to do the work correctly and cannot.
- The errors reflect missing knowledge, judgment, or practiced skill.
- Someone with the right expertise succeeds under the same conditions.

TEST IT

Ask someone to perform the task on realistic work. Observe where they hesitate, guess, or cannot explain the decision they made.

Likely response: practice on realistic work, useful feedback, repetition, and support through the first live attempts.

TOOLS + ACCESS

Do the tools support the task?

2

LOOK FOR

- Missing permissions, unreliable data, or configuration that does not match the work.
- People share credentials, hand work to a power user, or rebuild outputs elsewhere.
- The system requires information people do not have when they need to act.

TEST IT

Follow one real transaction from beginning to end. Note every extra login, manual handoff, missing field, and off-system step.

Likely response: access repair, data cleanup, configuration changes, or a tool decision. Training cannot compensate for a system that blocks the task.

WORKFLOW

Does the workflow make the right way the easy way?

3

LOOK FOR

- The approved process takes longer than the workaround.
- The new tool sits on top of an old sequence of reviews and handoffs.
- People complete the new process and duplicate the work elsewhere “just in case.”

TEST IT

Map the real workflow, including exceptions. Compare time, effort, and risk between the official path and the workaround.

Likely response: remove redundant steps, retire the old process, redesign handoffs, or change the order of work.

OWNERSHIP + DECISION RIGHTS

Is it clear who owns the outcome and who is expected to decide?

4

LOOK FOR

- Approvals sit in queues because ownership is assumed rather than assigned.
- People have the information to act, but no shared understanding of who is expected to make the call.
- Meetings end with agreement but no owner, date, or definition of done.

TEST IT

Ask three people who owns the outcome, who is expected to decide, and who provides input. Compare the answers.

Likely response: named owners, explicit decision roles, clear escalation rules, and meetings that produce real commitments.

INCENTIVES

What are people actually rewarded for?

5

LOOK FOR

- The new process prioritizes accuracy while targets still reward speed.
- Leaders praise the outcome but ignore how the team produced it.
- The old behavior remains the safest route to a strong review or bonus.

TEST IT

Compare the requested behavior with the metrics, deadlines, recognition, and consequences people experience.

Likely response: align measures and consequences with the new behavior. People will follow the signal that carries the most weight.

SUPPORT + REINFORCEMENT

What happens after the first attempt?

6

LOOK FOR

- Support disappears just as real volume and exceptions begin.
- Managers reinforce the old way through what they ask, accept, or ignore.
- Questions depend on one unofficial expert or a side channel.

TEST IT

Trace the first three live attempts. Identify who answers questions, reviews output, corrects mistakes, and helps people handle exceptions.

Likely response: manager reinforcement, feedback inside the workflow, accessible expertise, and support sized to the operation rather than the launch date.

THE MEASUREMENT QUESTION

What operational signal would tell you capability is real?

Completion, logins, and activity show whether preconditions exist. They do not show whether the work improved.

CHOOSE ONE OR TWO SIGNALS

- Cycle time, error rate, or rework on the process that matters.
- Use of the old workaround after launch.
- Quality or speed of the decision the new data should improve.
- Ability to perform without a project team or heroic expert holding it together.

> Agree on the signal before launch, and put it in the hands of the business owner accountable for the operation.

READ THE PATTERN

The answer is often a combination.

Mainly question 1	Build learning around a confirmed knowledge or skill gap. Include realistic practice and useful feedback.
Mainly questions 2–5	Fix the operating conditions. Access, workflow, decision rights, and incentives sit outside the course.
Mainly question 6	Design the stretch after launch. Put reinforcement, expertise, and feedback where the work happens.
Several questions	Coordinate the interventions. A strong course cannot overcome a broken workflow, and a better workflow will not close a real skill gap.
No shared answer	The disagreement is diagnostic. Bring the right people into a facilitated working session before selecting the fix.

YOUR NEXT MOVE

Diagnose the constraint before you fund the response.

Use this guide before the next training request becomes a program, before communication is asked to compensate for workflow, or before sensible behavior gets labeled resistance.

The principle

Training is a tool, not the solution.

Capability

What the organization can reliably do with the skills, tools, workflows, decision rights, incentives, support, and reinforcement it actually has. On an ordinary day. Without depending on heroics.

The next time an initiative stalls, diagnose the constraint before you fund the response.