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CENDARA REFLECTIONS

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# The Earliest Warning Signs Are Rarely Found in the Metrics

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*Why execution failures are often visible long before performance declines*

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**JOSE L. RODRIGUEZ**  
FOUNDER, CENDARA COMMERCIAL

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

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## Executive Reflection

Commercial organizations invest heavily in measuring performance.

*Revenue.*

*Market share.*

*Forecast accuracy.*

*Launch milestones.*

*Brand health.*

These metrics matter. They shape decisions, inform strategy, and guide resource allocation. But some of the most important indicators of future success or failure never appear on a dashboard.

They show up in conversations. In meetings. In decisions. In the willingness—or unwillingness—of people to raise concerns before problems become visible.

After more than two decades working across launches, forecasting, analytics, portfolio strategy, and commercial leadership, I've come to believe that many execution failures are visible long before any performance metric begins moving in the wrong direction.

The challenge is simple: the earliest warning signs are behavioral, not operational. And because most organizations focus on outcomes, they often overlook the conditions that produce those outcomes.

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### KEY REFLECTION

*The behavior changes first. The metrics follow later.*

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## The Assumption Most Organizations Make

Most organizations operate under an understandable assumption: if there is a significant execution problem, the metrics will eventually reveal it. And eventually, they do.

*Revenue begins to miss expectations.*

*Timelines slip.*

*Forecasts are revised.*

*Milestones move.*

*Resources are redeployed.*

But by the time these signals become visible, the underlying issues have often been present for months—sometimes longer.



I've seen organizations with strong strategies, capable leaders, sufficient resources, and attractive market opportunities still struggle to achieve expected outcomes. In hindsight, the warning signs were almost always visible. Not in the business reviews. Not in the dashboards. Not in the KPI reports. They were visible in how people behaved.

## The Signals We Often Miss

Most commercial organizations monitor lagging indicators exceptionally well. They are far less likely to monitor the leading indicators that determine whether execution is strengthening or deteriorating.

LAGGING INDICATORS	LEADING INDICATORS
Revenue	Decision velocity
Market share	Quality of escalation
Forecast accuracy	Cross-functional trust
Budget performance	Clarity of ownership
Milestone achievement	Willingness to challenge assumptions
Customer adoption	Organizational learning speed

The distinction matters. Lagging indicators tell us what has already happened. Behavioral indicators often reveal what is about to happen.

## What I've Learned to Watch For

When execution begins to weaken, the earliest warning signs are subtle. Individually, they seem insignificant. Collectively, they tell a very different story.

### Activity Replaces Progress

Teams become highly active. Meetings increase. Workstreams multiply. Updates become more frequent. Yet when asked what has actually moved forward, the answer becomes surprisingly unclear. Busy organizations are not always productive organizations.

### Updates Replace Decisions

Leadership meetings become status reviews rather than decision forums. Information is shared. Challenges are discussed. Yet few meaningful decisions are made. Momentum slows—even while everyone appears engaged.



## Silence Gets Mistaken for Alignment

People nod. Questions decrease. Discussion feels efficient. From the outside, alignment appears strong. In reality, uncertainty may simply be going unspoken. Healthy disagreement is often a sign of engagement. Silence can mean many things. Alignment is only one possibility.

## Small Delays Stop Triggering Concern

A deadline moves a few days. A review is postponed. A deliverable slips by a week. No single delay seems important enough to escalate. But small delays accumulate quietly into significant execution risk.

## Concerns Move Outside the Room

This is one of the signals I pay closest attention to. People begin expressing concerns privately that they are unwilling to express publicly. You hear:

*“I don’t think we can realistically hit that timeline.”*

*“We’re not as ready as people think.”*

*“I wish someone would raise this issue.”*

When truth goes underground, execution risk rises dramatically.

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# What Healthy Teams Do Differently

The healthiest teams I’ve observed are not necessarily the smartest, the most experienced, or the best resourced. What distinguishes them is how they behave.

## They Tell the Truth Early

Risks surface while they are still manageable. Concerns are raised before they become crises. Reality moves quickly through the organization.

## They Make Decisions in the Room

People with decision authority are present. Decisions are made. Ownership is assigned. The team moves forward.

## They Escalate Early, Not Heroically

Healthy teams do not celebrate firefighting. They prevent fires. Issues are surfaced while options still exist.

## They Assume Positive Intent

When problems emerge, the first question is not “Who caused this?” It is “What happened, and how do we solve it?” This preserves trust and accelerates problem-solving.



## Leaders Model Intellectual Honesty

The strongest leaders I've worked with were not the ones who projected certainty at all times. They were the ones comfortable saying: "Here's what we know. Here's what we don't know. Here's how we're going to learn." Rather than weakening confidence, this behavior strengthens it.

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## A Different Definition of Execution Readiness

Many organizations define readiness in operational terms—resources, budgets, headcount, systems, timelines. All of these matter. But increasingly, I believe execution readiness should also be evaluated behaviorally.

- Can people raise concerns without fear?
- Can disagreements occur productively?
- Are decisions made efficiently?
- Do issues escalate quickly?
- Is ownership clear?

These questions often provide a more accurate picture of execution readiness than any project plan.

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## Questions Every Leader Should Consider

- 01** When was the last time someone openly challenged a leadership assumption?
- 02** What concerns are being discussed privately but not publicly?
- 03** How many leadership meetings result in an actual decision?
- 04** Could every member of the team describe the critical path in one sentence?
- 05** Where are small delays becoming normalized?
- 06** If execution began deteriorating today, would you recognize the behavioral signs before the metrics changed?

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## Final Reflection

One of the most important lessons I've learned is that execution rarely fails suddenly. It usually fails gradually.



*Quietly.  
Behavior by behavior.  
Conversation by conversation.  
Decision by decision.*

Long before performance declines, organizations often reveal exactly what is happening beneath the surface. The question is whether leaders are paying attention to the right signals.

Because by the time an execution problem becomes visible in a dashboard, the behaviors that created it have often been present for months.

CLOSING THOUGHT

*Execution begins long before launch day.  
And so do the warning signs.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jose L. Rodriguez is Founder of Cendara Commercial, a commercialization advisory practice focused on helping biopharma organizations strengthen strategic alignment, execution, and operational decision-making across complex commercialization environments.

ABOUT CENDARA COMMERCIAL

Cendara Commercial helps biopharma organizations transform strategic intent into coordinated execution by strengthening organizational alignment, decision-making, accountability, and execution readiness.

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*What behavioral signals have you found most predictive of success—or failure—inside commercial organizations?*

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