

From Executive Access to Organizational Action: Strategic Legitimacy and Opportunity Development in Complex B2B Markets

Octavio Pimenta Reis Neto

octaviopneto@gmail.com

Universidade Estadual de Campinas <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7865-7526>

Research Article

Keywords: Business Development, B2B marketing, Executive attention, Opportunity development, Interorganizational relationships

Posted Date: September 28th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11167188/v1>

License: © ⓘ This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[Read Full License](#)

Additional Declarations: The authors declare no competing interests.

Abstract

Business Development (BD) in complex B2B markets often begins before a conventional buying process exists. This integrative review examines how external BD professionals convert executive-level access into organizationally sponsored and actionable opportunities. Drawing on the attention-based view of the firm, issue selling, boundary spanning, organizational inertia, executive sponsorship, opportunity development, and interorganizational trust, the study develops an integrated framework explaining how executive access can evolve into organizational action. The framework distinguishes Executive Access from Executive Attention and proposes Strategic Legitimacy as a mechanism linking BD capability to scarce executive attention. It further introduces Strategic Current-State/Future-State Tension, Selective Status-Quo Reconfiguration, and Opportunity Architecture to explain how attention develops into strategic reconsideration, active sponsorship, organizational mobilization, and durable interorganizational relationships. Strategic BD is positioned as boundary-spanning opportunity development rather than advanced selling or networking. Ten propositions are advanced to guide future empirical research.

1. Introduction

Business Development occupies a distinctive position in industrial and business-to-business markets. It is often associated with relationship building, opportunity identification, market development, and commercial growth, but many BD assignments begin before a conventional buying process exists. The prospective opportunity may require a customer to reconsider a process, technology, investment, partnership, operating model, or strategic priority. In such settings, the BD professional is not merely responding to demand; the individual is helping create the conditions under which a customer can recognize, evaluate, sponsor, and organize an opportunity.

Business Development remains conceptually fragmented. Wei and Lin (2024) show that BD encompasses multiple strategic and commercial traditions rather than a single dominant theoretical foundation. This fragmentation creates room for a mechanism-based account of strategic BD in complex B2B environments.

The present study began with a recurring observation from executive practice: opportunities often become easier to develop after a BD professional reaches the person who owns the relevant business problem or its strategic consequences—the chief executive officer, general manager, business-unit president, or equivalent decision maker. The observation can easily be misunderstood as a matter of hierarchy: if the “boss” agrees, the organization will act. That interpretation is too simple.

Executive access does not guarantee organizational action. A senior executive may allocate time because an issue appears strategically relevant, because the external actor is considered credible, or because an institutional relationship already exists. The meeting creates an opportunity for attention; it does not create attention automatically. The executive must decide that the issue is sufficiently relevant, credible, and consequential to merit scarce cognitive and organizational resources.

This distinction connects strategic BD to the attention-based view of the firm. Ocasio (1997) explains organizational behavior in terms of how decision makers distribute attention among issues and alternatives, while Dutton and Ashford (1993) show how actors attempt to influence which issues receive top-management attention. Brown et al. (2017) provide complementary B2B evidence that top-management attention can affect relationship-marketing performance and firm value.

We propose Strategic Legitimacy as the mechanism that helps explain why some external BD professionals obtain sustained executive attention. Strategic legitimacy refers to the perceived credibility and relevance of the external actor as a participant in a strategically important business conversation. It can be supported by experience, contextual knowledge, intellectual breadth, systems thinking, and the ability to connect technical, operational, financial, and strategic issues.

A second issue concerns the customer's current state. Strategic BD cannot be reduced to identifying weaknesses. Existing configurations survive because they produce value. They contain investments, routines, capabilities, relationships, knowledge, technologies, risk controls, and organizational identities. A strength can therefore become a source of inertia when the external environment changes. Organizational inertia research distinguishes resource and routine rigidity (Gilbert, 2005) and shows that inertia and capabilities are dynamically interdependent (Larsen & Lomi, 2002).

This leads to the concept of Selective Status-Quo Reconfiguration. The objective is not to “break” the status quo indiscriminately. It is to determine what should be preserved, leveraged, reconfigured, or eventually replaced.

A third issue concerns the transition from executive interest to organizational execution. Executive attention may create momentum, but implementation requires ownership, stakeholder participation, resources, governance, milestones, decision rights, and continuity. Research on executive involvement in key accounts and executive sponsorship indicates that senior involvement is multidimensional and that nominal sponsorship should not be treated as equivalent to effective organizational support (Guesalaga et al., 2014; Chandler & Thomas, 2015; Young & Jordan, 2008).

The present paper therefore introduces Opportunity Architecture to describe the organizational configuration required to move an opportunity from executive endorsement toward execution. Opportunity Architecture comprises the sponsor, business owner, stakeholders, workstreams, resources, governance, milestones, risks, decision gates, and commercial pathway.

Finally, the paper revisits C-Level networking. Executive relationships are valuable, but their strategic value should not depend indefinitely on a single salesperson, BD professional, or account executive. Interorganizational trust can develop across interpersonal and organizational levels (Zaheer et al., 1998; Schilke & Cook, 2013). The objective is therefore not maximum interpersonal dependence but appropriate institutionalization without overembeddedness.

The research question is: How can an external Business Development professional convert executive-level relational access into an organizationally sponsored and actionable opportunity in complex B2B markets? The paper addresses four related questions: (1) how executive access becomes meaningful executive attention; (2) how current-state knowledge supports strategic reconsideration; (3) how executive involvement becomes active sponsorship and organizational mobilization; and (4) how C-Level relationships can evolve into durable interorganizational relationships. Table 1 summarizes the research questions and the theoretical mechanisms through which the study addresses them.

Table 1
Research Questions and Theoretical Mechanisms

Research Question	Theoretical Focus	Expected Explanatory Contribution
How does executive access become meaningful executive attention?	Attention-Based View; issue selling; strategic legitimacy	Explains why access alone is insufficient
How can current-state knowledge support strategic reconsideration?	Organizational inertia; status quo; sensemaking	Explains selective rather than indiscriminate change
How does executive involvement become organizational action?	Executive sponsorship; governance; opportunity development	Explains the transition from attention to mobilization
How can C-Level relationships become durable?	Boundary spanning; interorganizational trust	Explains institutionalization without overembeddedness

The paper makes five contributions. First, it positions strategic BD as boundary-spanning opportunity development in B2B markets. Second, it distinguishes Executive Access from Executive Attention and proposes Strategic Legitimacy as an intermediate mechanism. Third, it integrates customer current-state diagnosis with organizational inertia and strategic reframing. Fourth, it introduces Opportunity Architecture as a bridge between executive sponsorship and organizational action. Fifth, it reframes C-Level networking as a path toward institutional relationship development rather than as an end in itself.

2. Methodology

The manuscript is submitted as a Review Article. It adopts an integrative literature review design for theory development. Integrative reviews are appropriate when a problem crosses theoretical traditions and requires synthesis of conceptual and empirical evidence (Torraco, 2005; Whitemore & Knafl, 2005). The design is intended to build and refine a conceptual explanation rather than estimate an aggregate effect size.

The literature search was organized around eight domains: Business Development; executive and managerial attention; issue selling; boundary spanning; executive involvement and sponsorship;

organizational inertia and status quo; opportunity development; and interorganizational trust and embeddedness.

Six RIS exports supplied from searches conducted through the Brazilian CAPES Portal were processed. The files contained 122 records in total (30, 30, 1, 1, 30, and 30). Deduplication by DOI where available and normalized title otherwise removed 30 duplicate records, leaving 92 unique records.

The 92 unique records were screened using title and abstract information. Eighty-two records were excluded because they did not materially address one or more focal mechanisms. Ten reports were retained for eligibility assessment, and nine were retained for qualitative and theoretical synthesis. The resulting literature-selection process is presented in Fig. 1.

The CAPES retrieval was supplemented by targeted scholarly searches and citation chaining to identify foundational theoretical contributions and highly relevant empirical studies that were not necessarily retrieved by the six supplied exports.

An adversarial stage was incorporated to identify evidence that could challenge the emerging framework, including ineffective executive involvement, sponsorship limitations, boundary-spanner role stress, organizational resistance, status-quo persistence, and relational overembeddedness.

Because the CAPES exports constitute a bounded retrieval universe rather than direct Scopus or Web of Science exports, the study does not claim exhaustive database coverage. It is presented as an integrative, theory-building review with a transparent CAPES retrieval component.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1 Business Development as strategic boundary-spanning work

Business Development has historically been difficult to define consistently. Wei and Lin (2024) show that BD encompasses multiple perspectives associated with identifying, developing, and exploiting opportunities. In the present study, strategic BD is defined as the organizational activity of identifying, shaping, legitimizing, and orchestrating opportunities that may create significant value for both customer and provider.

This definition separates strategic BD from transactional selling without denying the importance of sales. Sales typically operates once a sufficiently defined commercial opportunity exists; strategic BD may operate earlier, when the opportunity itself must be understood, framed, sponsored, and organized.

3.2 Executive attention and strategic legitimacy

Ocasio's (1997) Attention-Based View explains why executive interaction matters: senior decision makers face severe limits on time and attention. Dutton and Ashford (1993) similarly show how

organizational actors attempt to influence which issues receive top-management attention. Brown et al. (2017) provide complementary B2B evidence that top-management attention can influence relationship-marketing performance and firm value.

External BD professionals differ from internal issue sellers because they normally lack formal authority inside the customer. Their influence therefore depends on perceived relevance, credibility, contextual understanding, and legitimacy. Strategic Legitimacy is proposed as the perceived right and capability of an external actor to participate in a strategically relevant business conversation.

Proposition 1

Executive access increases the opportunity for executive attention, but executive attention depends more directly on perceived Strategic Legitimacy than on hierarchical access alone.

Proposition 2

Strategic Legitimacy mediates the relationship between strategic BD capability and meaningful executive attention.

3.3 Boundary spanning

Boundary spanners connect organizational domains with different information, interests, incentives, and decision logics. Strategic BD performs this function when it translates technology into business consequences, customer strategy into opportunity, operational problems into investment logic, or supplier capabilities into customer-specific outcomes.

de Ruyter et al. (2009) show that boundary-spanning B2B teams can affect customer satisfaction and sales, while Satheesh et al. (2024) highlight the role of autonomy, support, and role stress in boundary-spanning work. Table 2 summarizes the theoretical traditions integrated into the proposed framework and specifies the contribution of each perspective to the present study.

Table 2
Theoretical Foundations Integrated into the Proposed Framework

Theoretical Tradition	Core Insight	Contribution to Present Framework
Business Development	BD spans multiple strategic and commercial traditions	Defines strategic BD as opportunity shaping and orchestration
Attention-Based View	Organizational action depends on scarce attention	Explains why executive access is insufficient without attention
Issue selling	Actors influence which issues receive senior attention	Explains strategic reframing and legitimacy
Boundary spanning	Actors translate knowledge across organizational boundaries	Explains BD's cross-organizational role
Organizational inertia	Resources and routines can resist change	Explains persistence of the customer current state
Executive sponsorship	Senior involvement varies in effectiveness	Explains transition from attention to mobilization
Opportunity development	Opportunities evolve through interaction and knowledge	Supports Opportunity Architecture
Interorganizational trust	Trust develops across interpersonal and organizational levels	Supports institutionalization of C-Level relationships

Proposition 3

Strategic BD effectiveness is positively associated with boundary-spanner autonomy and organizational support and negatively associated with role conflict and ambiguity.

4. Customer Current-State Knowledge and Selective Status-Quo Reconfiguration

A strategic BD conversation should begin with the customer's current configuration rather than with the supplier's offering. The diagnostic question is not simply “What does the customer need?” but “Why does the customer operate as it does today, and under what future conditions could that configuration become strategically insufficient?”

A current-state diagnosis should examine strategic objectives, competitive position, operating model, technologies, capabilities, investments, routines, decision architecture, stakeholder relationships, financial constraints, regulatory conditions, strengths, weaknesses, dependencies, and sources of inertia. SWOT analysis can be useful as a managerial tool, but it does not by itself distinguish weakness from inertia.

Organizational inertia research reinforces the distinction. Gilbert (2005) separates resource rigidity from routine rigidity. Larsen and Lomi (2002) model inertia and organizational capabilities as interdependent dynamic processes. Huang (2013) shows how open innovation can help firms confront inertia in business-model innovation; Dooley (2018) provides evidence that routine rigidity can cause rational innovations to be ignored; and Norling (2024) identifies status-quo bias as a constraint on digital transformation.

The framework therefore proposes Selective Status-Quo Reconfiguration. Figure 2 maps current value against future relevance: high-value/high-relevance elements should be preserved or leveraged; low-value/high-relevance elements may require reconfiguration; low-value/low-relevance elements may be deprioritized; and high-value/low-relevance elements may require gradual replacement.

Proposition 4

Deeper Customer Current-State Knowledge increases the ability of strategic BD professionals to distinguish valuable strengths from change-inhibiting inertia.

5. Strategic Current-State/Future-State Tension

Diagnosis alone does not create an opportunity. The customer may understand its current situation and still see no reason to change. Strategic Current-State/Future-State Tension describes the perceived discrepancy between what the current configuration enables and what a strategically desirable future configuration requires.

The concept does not imply that the current state is deficient. A customer can be highly competent today while facing future conditions that change the value of its existing configuration. Strategic BD therefore has to establish a credible future-state requirement rather than merely expose present weaknesses.

Proposition 5

Strategic Current-State/Future-State Tension increases the likelihood of strategic reconsideration when future-state requirements are credible and sufficiently consequential.

6. Strategic Reframing

Strategic reframing transforms a technical, operational, or commercial observation into a strategically meaningful issue. Näslund and Perner (2012) show how dominant organizational stories shape interpretations of change, while Vinokurova and Kapoor (2020) show how actors in large firms can shape evaluation criteria to facilitate innovation. Strategic BD therefore involves making the opportunity intelligible within the customer's existing decision logic.

Proposition 6

Strategic reframing increases the likelihood that a current-state/future-state discrepancy will be interpreted as a legitimate strategic issue rather than as external criticism of existing competence.

7. From Executive Attention to Active Sponsorship

Executive attention is not equivalent to executive commitment. Guesalaga et al. (2014) show that top-management involvement in key accounts has multiple dimensions, while Young and Jordan (2008) and Chandler and Thomas (2015) demonstrate the importance—and limitations—of top-management sponsorship.

Active Executive Sponsorship is defined behaviorally. An active sponsor legitimizes the opportunity, establishes priority, identifies an accountable business owner, mobilizes stakeholders, facilitates resources, participates in critical decisions, removes barriers, and maintains continuity when resistance emerges.

Proposition 7

Active Executive Sponsorship increases the probability that executive attention will be converted into organizational mobilization.

8. Opportunity Architecture

Once executive attention becomes sponsorship, the central question changes from “Is this interesting?” to “How will the organization make this happen?” Opportunity Architecture describes the organizational configuration required to act on an opportunity: strategic challenge, current state, future state, value logic, sponsor, business owner, stakeholders, workstreams, resources, governance, milestones, dependencies, risks, decision gates, and commercial pathway.

Shepherd et al. (2022) conceptualize opportunity development as a social process in which opportunities are built and engaged through communities of inquiry. Opportunity Architecture extends that logic toward organizational execution. Table 3 summarizes the core components of Opportunity Architecture and the managerial question associated with each component.

Table 3
Opportunity Architecture: Minimum Components for Organizational
Action

Element	Question
Strategic challenge	Why does this opportunity matter?
Current state	How does the customer operate today?
Future state	What should become possible?
Value logic	What value could be created?
Sponsor	Who provides strategic legitimacy?
Business owner	Who owns the outcome?
Stakeholders	Who must participate?
Workstreams	What activities are required?
Resources	What resources are needed?
Governance	How will decisions be made?
Milestones	What must happen and when?
Decision gates	What must be demonstrated?
Risks	What can prevent progress?
Commercial pathway	How will value eventually be captured?

Proposition 8

Active Executive Sponsorship facilitates the formation of an Opportunity Architecture that aligns ownership, stakeholders, resources, governance, and decision processes.

Proposition 9

Opportunity Architecture increases the probability that strategically relevant opportunities will progress from executive endorsement to organizational initiative, conditional on customer readiness and organizational support.

9. C-Level Networking: From Personal Access to Institutional Relationship

C-Level networking is frequently evaluated through the number of senior contacts or meetings obtained. Such measures indicate access, but they do not establish whether the relationship creates strategic

value. Figure 3 proposes a progression from Access → Attention → Trust → Sponsorship → Organizational Relationship.

Interpersonal trust can initiate a relationship, but the longer-term objective should be appropriate institutionalization. Zaheer et al. (1998) distinguish interpersonal and interorganizational trust, while Schilke and Cook (2013) explain how trust can develop across organizational levels.

Institutionalization should not become overembeddedness. Excessive dependence on a narrow set of trusted individuals can reduce exposure to alternative information, partners, and perspectives.

Proposition 10

The durability of strategic C-Level relationships increases when interpersonal trust becomes appropriately embedded across organizational actors and routines, subject to the boundary condition of relational overembeddedness.

10. Integrated Executive-to-Opportunity Development Framework

The preceding sections identify a set of mechanisms that are individually established in different research traditions but are rarely integrated into a single explanation of strategic Business Development in complex B2B markets. The present framework brings these mechanisms together to explain how an external BD professional can move from relational access to organizational action. The framework does not assume that executive access automatically produces influence or that the process is strictly linear. Rather, it conceptualizes opportunity development as a contingent sequence in which each transition creates conditions for the next while remaining vulnerable to interruption, resistance, or iteration.

The proposed pathway begins with Strategic BD Capability, which enables the external actor to enter the customer's strategic conversation with sufficient contextual knowledge, cognitive breadth, and boundary-spanning capability. Executive Access provides an enabling condition for interaction with senior decision makers, but does not itself constitute influence. Strategic Legitimacy determines whether the external actor is perceived as sufficiently credible and relevant to warrant scarce executive attention. Executive Attention then creates the possibility for deeper diagnosis, strategic reframing, and mobilization.

Customer Current-State Diagnosis represents the next transition. The BD professional must understand not only customer weaknesses but also the strengths, investments, routines, capabilities, and relationships that explain why the current configuration persists. This diagnosis enables the identification of Strategic Current-State/Future-State Tension and supports Selective Status-Quo Reconfiguration: elements that remain strategically valuable can be preserved or leveraged, while elements whose future relevance is declining can be reconfigured, deprioritized, or gradually replaced.

Strategic Reframing translates this diagnosis into a strategically legitimate issue within the customer's decision logic. When the issue receives sustained executive attention, Active Executive Sponsorship

becomes the critical mechanism through which attention can be converted into organizational mobilization. Sponsorship is therefore conceptualized behaviorally rather than symbolically: the sponsor must help establish priority, assign ownership, mobilize stakeholders, facilitate resources, and maintain organizational continuity.

Opportunity Architecture provides the organizational structure through which sponsorship can become executable action. It connects the strategic challenge and future state to ownership, stakeholders, workstreams, resources, governance, milestones, risks, decision gates, and a commercial pathway. Finally, Organizational Action and Commercial Realization can create the conditions for Institutional Embedding, through which the value of the original C-Level relationship becomes less dependent on a single individual and more resilient at the interorganizational level.

Figure 4. Executive-to-Opportunity Development Framework. Executive access is treated as an enabling condition rather than an outcome; strategic legitimacy, attention, diagnosis, reframing, sponsorship, and opportunity architecture mediate the path toward organizational action.

The pathway should be interpreted as sequential in logic but contingent in operation. Progression from one stage to the next is not automatic: executive access can fail to generate legitimacy, attention can fail to generate strategic tension, sponsorship can fail to generate organizational mobilization, and an apparently well-structured opportunity can fail because of insufficient readiness or organizational support. Consequently, the framework allows for iteration, particularly between diagnosis, reframing, sponsorship, and Opportunity Architecture.

The framework is formalized through ten propositions that connect its principal constructs and mechanisms. Table 4 consolidates these propositions, their underlying mechanisms, theoretical foundations, and expected outcomes.

Table 4
Propositions and Supporting Theoretical Mechanisms

Proposition	Mechanism	Primary Theoretical Foundation	Expected Outcome
P1	Executive access → executive attention, conditioned by Strategic Legitimacy	Attention-Based View; issue selling	Greater executive attention
P2	BD capability → Strategic Legitimacy → attention	Boundary spanning; executive cognition	Higher-quality executive engagement
P3	Boundary-spanning capability → effective translation	Boundary-spanning literature	Better cross-functional alignment
P4	Current-state knowledge → inertia diagnosis	Organizational inertia	Better change strategy
P5	Current/future tension → reconsideration	Attention and change literature	Strategic reconsideration
P6	Reframing → issue legitimacy	Issue selling; organizational narratives	Greater acceptance
P7	Active sponsorship → mobilization	Executive sponsorship	Organizational commitment
P8	Sponsorship → Opportunity Architecture	Governance; opportunity development	Executable opportunity
P9	Opportunity Architecture → organizational action	Opportunity development; governance	Implementation
P10	Institutionalization → relationship durability	Interorganizational trust	Relationship resilience

Taken together, the propositions specify the theoretical logic of the framework. P1–P3 explain how BD capability and executive access can generate meaningful executive attention through Strategic Legitimacy and boundary-spanning capability. P4–P6 explain how customer diagnosis, recognition of current-state/future-state tension, and strategic reframing can create conditions for strategic reconsideration. P7–P9 explain how executive attention can be converted into sponsorship, Opportunity Architecture, and organizational action. P10 extends the model beyond the individual executive relationship by proposing that appropriate institutionalization can increase relationship durability while remaining subject to the boundary condition of relational over embeddedness.

These integrated mechanisms provide the basis for the theoretical and managerial implications discussed in the following section.

11. Discussion

The first theoretical contribution is to distinguish Executive Access from Executive Attention in strategic B2B Business Development. Access is an enabling condition; attention is an allocation of scarce executive resources. The distinction is consistent with the Attention-Based View and issue-selling literature and extends those perspectives to an external organizational actor.

The second contribution is Strategic Legitimacy. The framework does not claim that degrees, titles, or years of experience automatically produce influence. Rather, professional knowledge becomes consequential when it is converted into customer-specific understanding and useful strategic interpretation.

The third contribution concerns the customer current state. The framework integrates organizational inertia with BD diagnosis and argues that effective opportunity development requires recognition of both strengths and sources of inertia. Selective Status-Quo Reconfiguration therefore differs from generic disruption logic.

The fourth contribution is Strategic Current-State/Future-State Tension. Identifying weaknesses is insufficient because customers need a credible reason to reconsider an established configuration. The construct focuses on future requirements rather than declaring the current state deficient.

The fifth contribution is Opportunity Architecture. Existing literatures explain executive attention, sponsorship, opportunity development, and organizational change from different perspectives. The present framework connects them by specifying the organizational elements that must be configured for an opportunity to move from executive endorsement toward action.

The sixth contribution concerns C-Level networking as shown in Table 5. The paper shifts the unit of value from personal network size toward interorganizational relationship resilience. The C-Level relationship is important, but its ultimate value lies in enabling a broader organization-to-organization relationship rather than creating dependence on one individual.

Table 5
Failure Points in the Executive-to-Opportunity Pathway

Failure point	What happens	Diagnostic question
Access without legitimacy	Meeting occurs but attention is superficial	Why should this executive spend time on this issue?
Attention without tension	Executive agrees but sees no reason to act	Why change now?
Tension without reframing	Change is perceived as criticism	Does the proposal threaten current competence or identity?
Sponsorship without architecture	Executive supports but organization does not move	Who actually owns the outcome?
Architecture without readiness	Project exists but stalls	Is the organization prepared to execute?
Relationship without institutionalization	Relationship depends on one person	What happens if this executive leaves?

12. Managerial Implications

The framework provides a practical development path for BD professionals. Table 6 describes five maturity levels.

Table 6
Strategic Business Development Maturity

Level	Orientation	Central question
1	Transactional	What can I sell?
2	Relational	Who do I know?
3	Consultative	What does the customer need?
4	Strategic	What should change?
5	Orchestrating	How can the organization make it happen?

The progression is not simply hierarchical; it represents increasing complexity in the object of BD. Figure 5 provides a complementary executive-engagement view.

The progression described above also implies a corresponding development of the capabilities required from strategic Business Development professionals. Moving from transactional and relational activity toward strategic opportunity orchestration requires the integration of cognitive, diagnostic, relational, strategic, orchestration, and institutional capabilities. Table 7 summarizes these competency domains and their respective development objectives.

Table 7
Core Competency Domains for Strategic BD Professionals

Competency domain	Development objective
Cognitive capability	Breadth of knowledge and systems thinking
Diagnostic capability	Ability to understand the customer's current state
Relational capability	Ability to establish credible relationships at multiple levels
Strategic capability	Ability to identify future-state implications
Orchestration capability	Ability to mobilize stakeholders and construct Opportunity Architecture
Institutional capability	Ability to transform personal relationships into organizational relationships

For managers, the practical implication is that executive networking should not be evaluated only through meetings or introductions. More meaningful measures include executive attention, sponsor activation, stakeholder mobilization, opportunity-architecture completeness, progression through decision gates, and the extent to which relationships become organizational rather than person-dependent.

13. Research Agenda

Future research should test whether perceived Strategic Legitimacy predicts executive attention more strongly than formal hierarchical status.

Researchers could investigate whether breadth and integration of professional experience are better predictors of executive engagement than years of experience alone.

Qualitative research could examine how experienced BD professionals distinguish customer strengths from organizational inertia and how they decide which elements to preserve or reconfigure.

Experimental research could compare alternative framings of the same current-state/future-state discrepancy and measure executive perceptions of legitimacy, urgency, and threat.

Longitudinal studies could distinguish nominal from active executive sponsorship and identify the organizational behaviors through which sponsorship becomes mobilization.

Opportunity Architecture should be operationalized and tested using dimensions such as sponsor clarity, ownership, stakeholder completeness, governance, resource sufficiency, milestones, decision gates, and commercial pathway.

Dyadic and longitudinal studies could investigate how interpersonal C-Level relationships evolve into organizational trust and how institutionalization affects opportunity resilience.

Future research should examine boundary conditions including industry, organizational size, opportunity complexity, uncertainty, regulatory intensity, customer change readiness, executive turnover, organizational support, BD autonomy, relationship maturity, and relational overembeddedness.

14. Limitations

First, the framework is theory-building and has not been empirically validated. The propositions should therefore be treated as propositions for future testing rather than established causal relationships.

Second, the CAPES retrieval universe is bounded. Although the search was supplemented by targeted scholarly searches and citation chaining, the study does not claim exhaustive retrieval from Scopus, Web of Science, or all other major bibliographic databases.

Third, Business Development remains terminologically fragmented. Relevant research is distributed across strategy, marketing, sales, organizational behavior, entrepreneurship, project management, innovation, and interorganizational relationships.

15. Conclusion

Strategic Business Development in complex B2B markets cannot be adequately explained as advanced selling or as executive networking. Executive access matters, but it is only the beginning.

The central process proposed in this paper is the conversion of access into attention, attention into strategic reconsideration, reconsideration into sponsorship, sponsorship into Opportunity Architecture, and Opportunity Architecture into organizational action.

The framework suggests that this conversion depends on Strategic Legitimacy, deep knowledge of the customer's current state, recognition of the difference between strength and inertia, credible construction of current-state/future-state tension, strategic reframing, active executive sponsorship, and disciplined Opportunity Architecture.

C-Level networking is consequently repositioned as an enabling relational mechanism rather than the ultimate objective. The strategic goal is to create a credible executive conversation that can become an organizationally legitimate, sponsored, structured, and executable opportunity, while allowing the relationship itself to evolve from interpersonal trust toward institutional resilience.

In this sense, the strategic BD professional is neither simply a salesperson nor merely a networker. The role is that of a boundary-spanning business strategist who combines knowledge, judgment, diagnosis, relationships, and orchestration.

Declarations

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Manuscript Preparation Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) as an AI-assisted support tool for manuscript organization, structural refinement, language and readability improvement, literature-search support, and compliance with manuscript formatting and submission requirements. The tool was used under continuous human oversight and did not replace the author's scientific judgment, conceptual reasoning, interpretation of the literature, or responsibility for the research. All relevant sources, arguments, interpretations, and citations were independently reviewed and verified by the author, who critically evaluated and edited the resulting material and takes full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the published article.

Funding Sources

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The work was undertaken as an independent scholarly initiative by the author, without external financial support, with the objective of contributing to the development of knowledge relevant to Business Development and B2B management.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

No primary dataset was generated or analyzed in this study. The study is based on published literature and a bounded literature-retrieval process described in the Methods section. The literature-search records used for the review are reported transparently in the manuscript, and the underlying published sources are available through their respective bibliographic databases and publishers.

Ethics Statement

This study did not involve human participants, personal data, animal subjects, or experimental procedures. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

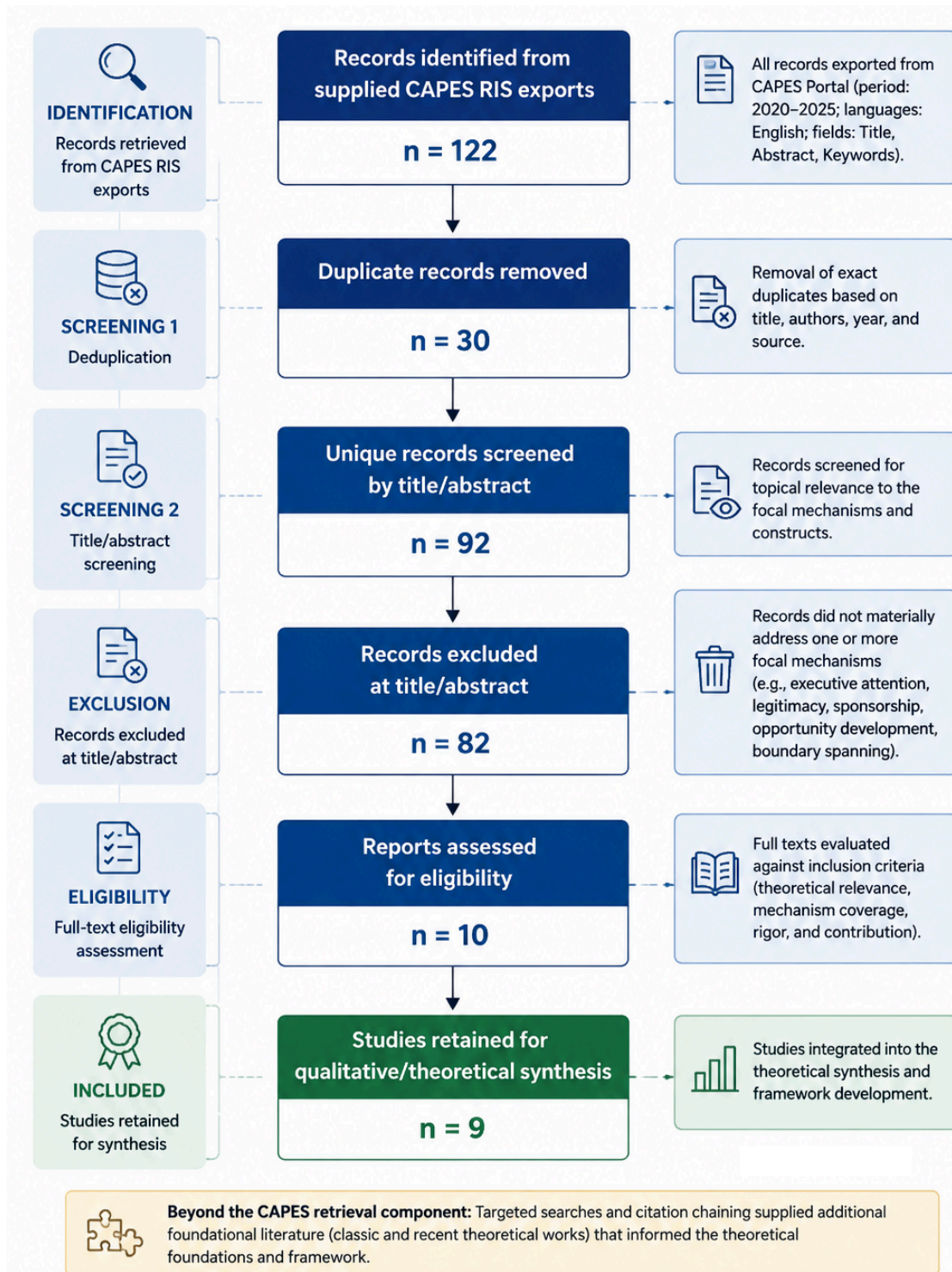
Octavio P. Reis Neto: Conceptualization, Methodology, Literature investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration, and Validation.

References

1. Brown BP, Mohan M, Boyd DE (2017) Top management attention to trade shows and firm performance: A relationship marketing perspective. *J Bus Res* 81:40–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.07.020>
2. Chandler DE, Thomas JL (2015) Does executive sponsorship matter for realizing project management value? *Project Manage J* 46(5):46–61. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pmj.21521>
3. de Ruyter K, de Jong A, Wetzels M (2009) Antecedents and consequences of environmental stewardship in boundary-spanning B2B teams. *J Acad Mark Sci* 37:470–487. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-009-0138-0>
4. Dooley K (2018) Routine rigidity and environmental sustainability: Why rational innovations are regularly ignored. *Bus Strategy Environ* 27:70–81. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.1984>
5. Dutton JE, Ashford SJ (1993) Selling issues to top management. *Acad Manage Rev* 18(3):397–428. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.1993.9309035145>
6. Gilbert CG (2005) Unbundling the structure of inertia: Resource versus routine rigidity. *Acad Manag J* 48(5):741–763. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2005.18803920>
7. Godefroid M-E, Plattfaut R, Niehaves B (2023) How to measure the status quo bias? A review of current literature. *Manage Rev Q* 73:1667–1711. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-022-00283-8>
8. Guesalaga R, D'Haese M, Rossi M (2014) Top management involvement with key accounts: The concept, its dimensions, and strategic outcomes. *Ind Mark Manage* 43(7):1146–1156. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2014.06.004>
9. Huang H-C (2013) Overcoming organizational inertia to strengthen business model innovation: An open innovation perspective. *J Organizational Change Manage* 26(6):977–1002. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-04-2012-0047>
10. Larsen E, Lomi A (2002) Representing change: A system model of organizational inertia and capabilities as dynamic accumulation processes. *Simul Model Pract Theory* 10(5–7):271–296. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1569-190X\(02\)00085-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1569-190X(02)00085-0)
11. Näslund L, Pemer F (2012) The appropriated language: Dominant stories as a source of organizational inertia. *Hum Relat* 65(1):89–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711424322>
12. Norling K (2024) Digital transformation or digital standstill? Status quo bias in Swedish public sector strategies. *Transforming Government: People Process Policy* 19(1):91–107. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TG-04-2024-0078>
13. Ocasio W (1997) Towards an attention-based view of the firm. *Strateg Manag J* 18(S1):187–206. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-0266\(199707\)18:1+<187::AID-SMJ936>3.0.CO;2-K](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-0266(199707)18:1+<187::AID-SMJ936>3.0.CO;2-K)

14. Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD et al (2021) The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 372:n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
15. Satheesh S et al (2024) Enabling boundary spanners in public-private collaboration. *Public Adm* 102(2):405–424. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12927>
16. Schilke O, Cook KS (2013) A cross-level process theory of trust development in interorganizational relationships. *Strategic Organ* 11(3):281–303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127012472096>
17. Shepherd DA, Sattari R, Patzelt H (2022) A social model of opportunity development: Building and engaging communities of inquiry. *J Bus Ventur* 37(1):106033. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2020.106033>
18. Torraco RJ (2005) Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples. *Hum Resour Dev Rev* 4(3):356–367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484305278283>
19. Vinokurova N, Kapoor R (2020) Converting inventions into innovations in large firms: How inventors at Xerox navigated the innovation process to commercialize their ideas. *Strateg Manag J* 41:2372–2399. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3209>
20. Wei Y-M, Lin H-M (2024) Revisiting business development: A review, reconceptualization, and proposed framework. *Cogent Bus Manage* 11(1):2351475. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2351475>
21. Whittemore R, Knafl K (2005) The integrative review: Updated methodology. *J Adv Nurs* 52(5):546–553. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03621.x>
22. Young R, Jordan E (2008) Top management support: Mantra or necessity? *Int J Project Manage* 26(7):713–725. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2008.06.001>
23. Zaheer A, McEvily B, Perrone V (1998) Does trust matter? Exploring the effects of interorganizational and interpersonal trust on performance. *Organ Sci* 9(2):141–159. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.9.2.141>

Figures



Note: The nine retained studies represent the auditable CAPES retrieval component.

(Source: Author own work)

Figure 1

PRISMA-informed flow of the supplied CAPES literature search. The nine retained studies represent the auditable CAPES retrieval component; foundational literature identified through targeted searches and citation chaining is retained separately

Strategic actions depend on the current value of the status quo (low–high) and its future relevance (low–high).

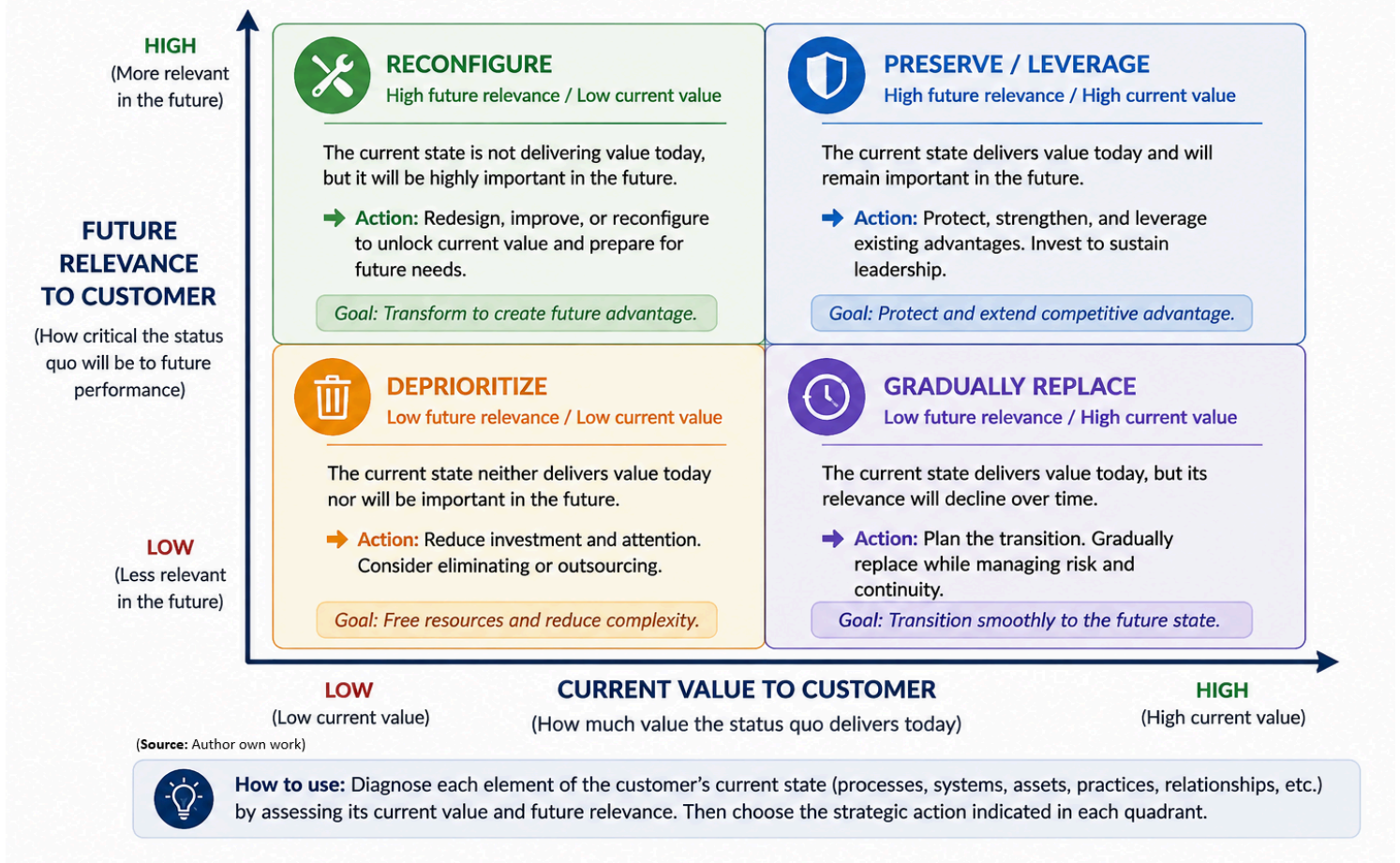


Figure 2

Customer Current-State Diagnosis and Selective Status-Quo Reconfiguration

A relational progression from individual-level access to durable, organization-level collaboration.



(Source: Author own work)



BOUNDARY CONDITION: Institutionalization should increase relationship resilience, but not lead to rigidity. The relationship must preserve openness to alternative knowledge, ideas and partnerships.

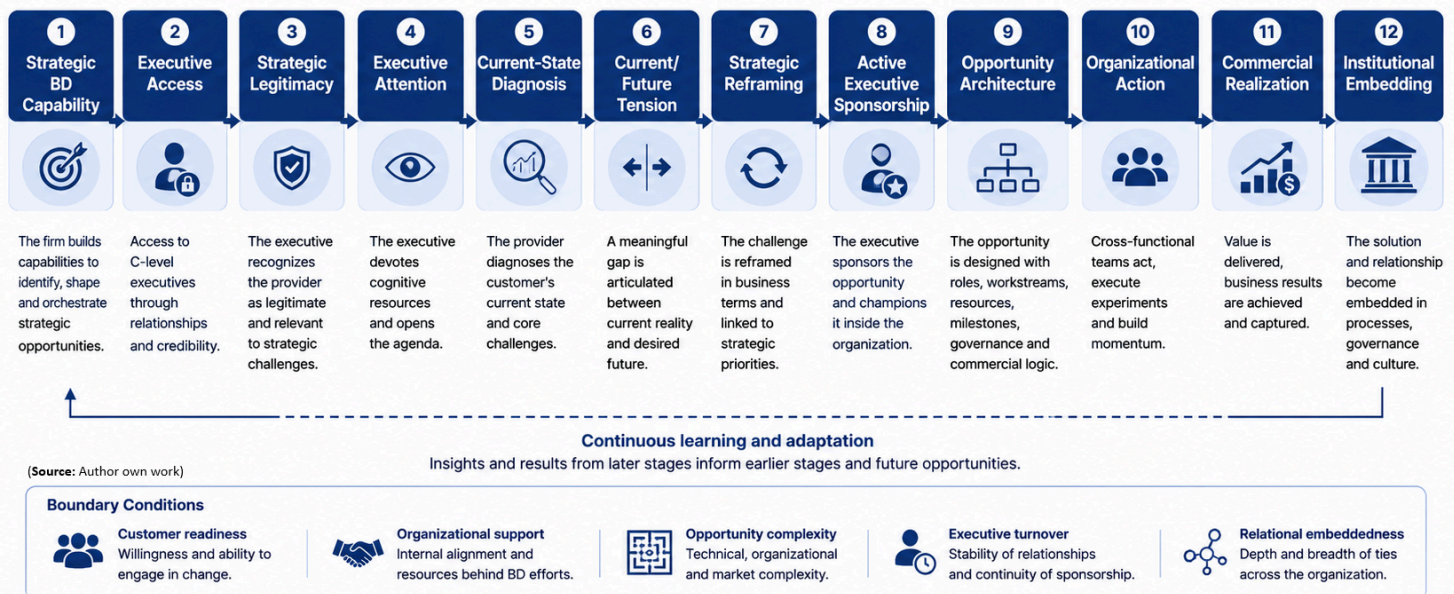


TAKEAWAY: The objective is not just access, but the evolution of a personal connection into a durable, organization-level relationship capable of supporting complex opportunity development.

Figure 3

From Interpersonal C-Level Networking to Institutional Relationship.

A sequential process through which executive engagement is transformed into institutionalized opportunity value.



(Source: Author own work)

Purpose: To convert executive relationships and insights into structured organizational action and sustainable opportunity value.

Figure 4

Executive-to-Opportunity Development Framework. Executive access is treated as an enabling condition rather than an outcome; strategic legitimacy, attention, diagnosis, reframing, sponsorship, and opportunity architecture mediate the path toward organizational action.

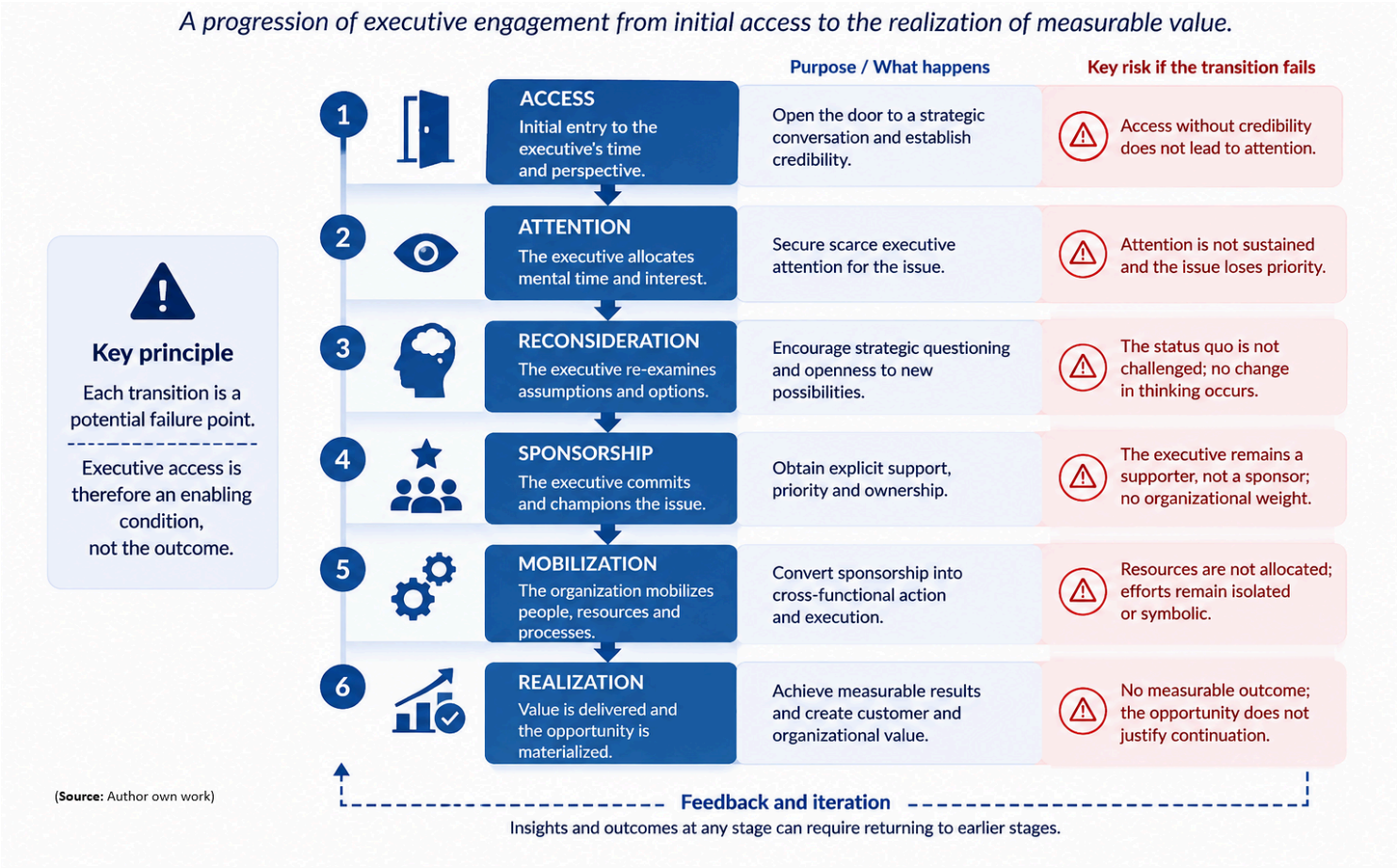


Figure 5

Executive Engagement Ladder. Each transition represents a distinct conversion challenge rather than an automatic consequence of the preceding stage.

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- [GraphicalAbstractManagementBD.png](#)