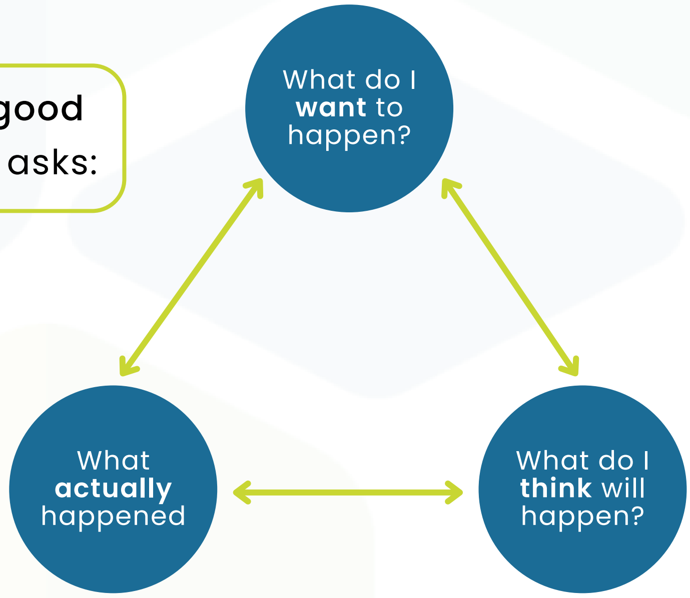
The Planning Triangle: 3 Questions Every Business Must Answer

Introduction

If your team is **constantly reforecasting, arguing over assumptions,** or **lurching from crisis to crisis**—your planning system isn't broken. It's just **uncalibrated.**

Most businesses fail not because they lack ambition, but because they **confuse planning with prediction.** They expect **precision instead of alignment.** They run meetings instead of **building systems.** That's why we use the **Planning Triangle**—a **simple, repeatable framework** for **Integrated Business Planning (IBP)** that turns **strategy into action** and **action into insight.**

At its core, every **good planning process** asks:



These questions, when asked on a recurring cadence and across functions, **drive the conversations that matter.** They **build accountability** without blame. And they create the **learning loops** that separate **resilient companies** from **reactive ones.**

Chapter 1: The Triangle, Explained

The Planning Triangle isn't a strategic model—it's a behavioral system. Each question reflects a specific planning mindset:

- "What do we **want** to have happen?" = **AMBITION**

This is your commercial goal—usually defined by topline growth, product launches, or market expansion.

- "What do we **think** will happen?" = **PROJECTION**

This is your best estimate based on current data, trends, and known risks.

- "What **actually** happened?" = **RESULTS**

This is where performance is compared to plan and assumptions are evaluated.

Every major planning process—S&OP, IBP, financial budgeting, demand planning—**should live inside this triangle.** If you're not consistently revisiting these questions, you're **not running a planning system**. You're running a guessing game.

Chapter 2: Why the Triangle Matters in IBP

Integrated Business Planning isn't just about systems integration—it's about cognitive alignment. The triangle forces:

Cross-functional Accountability
Sales can't just sandbag forecasts. Ops can't overbuild based on best-case scenarios. Finance can't run cash models in a vacuum.

The Planning

Assumption Tracking
Most forecasts fail not because the math is wrong, but because the logic is unexamined. The Triangle builds memory into your system.

Feedback Loops
Planning isn't one-and-done. Every cycle should be a chance to refine your model and your mindset.

IBP **fails** when it **becomes a performance dashboard**. It **succeeds** when it **becomes a learning system.**

Chapter 3: What Breaks Without It

When teams **skip one side** of the Triangle, **things unravel:**

If You Skip Ambition

Plans get overly cautious and disconnected from growth.

If You Skip Project Realism

Resources get misallocated and surprises multiply.

If You Skip Hindsight

Nobody gets better—and the same mistakes repeat.

Classic **failure modes** include:

- Rolling forecasts that shift but never learn
- Goals that are aspirational but unanchored
- Reviews that are backward-looking but not corrective

Using the Triangle **forces** teams to **treat planning as a dialogue**, not a document.

Chapter 4: Applying the Triangle Daily

This framework only works if it's embedded into your operating rhythm. Here's how to make it real:

Weekly

Use the Triangle to **review forecasts vs. targets, update known risks**, and **flag deviations** in real time.

Monthly

Conduct **variance analysis** and **hold forecast owners accountable** for changes in logic.

Quarterly

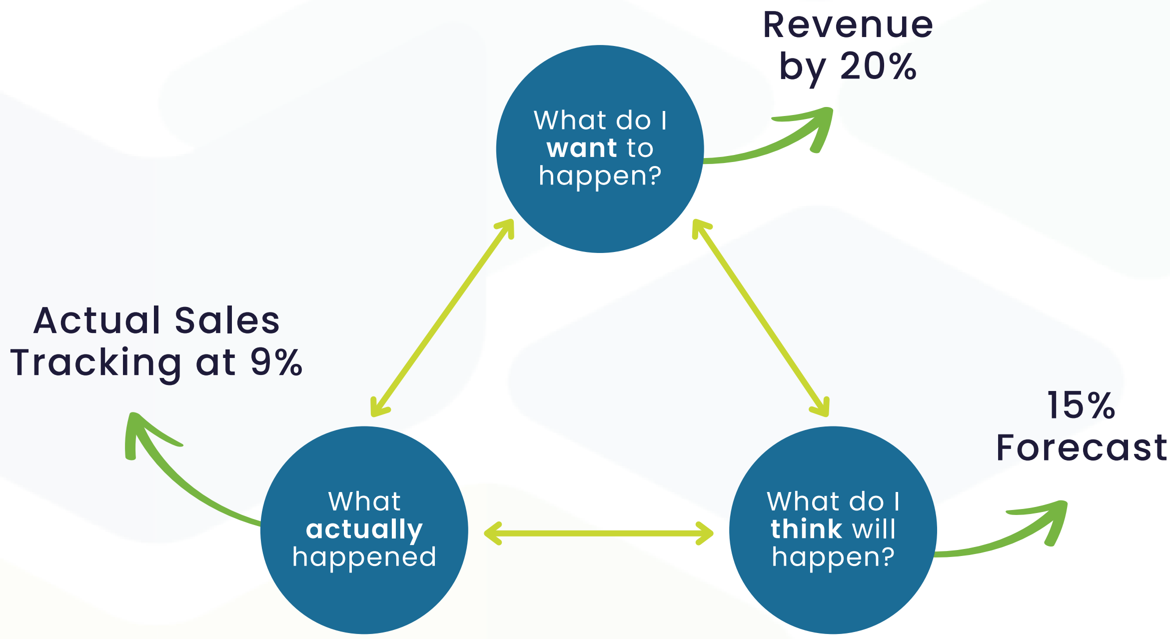
Revisit ambitions—do they still **reflect strategic intent?** Has your resource allocation **matched your growth thesis?**

Tools like **Relay** and **Parabola** can **automate parts** of this loop—tracking assumptions, pulling historical forecast versions, and flagging gaps. **But technology only reinforces the habits you already have.**

Chapter 5: Example in Action

Let's say your brand sets a **goal to grow revenue by 20% (want to happen).** The sales team **forecasts 15%** based on retailer commitments and DTC trends **(think will happen)**, and you plan inventory and hiring accordingly.

Midway through Q2, **actual sales are tracking at 9% (what actually happened)**. In many organizations, this triggers **panic or blame.**



But with the Triangle, your team **already documented the assumptions behind the 15% forecast**—marketing spend, wholesale lift, repeat rates. Now you can **identify what shifted and adjust, not just react.** This creates a **healthy tension between aspiration and realism** and helps you **recover faster and forecast better next time.**

Conclusion

Integrated Business Planning doesn't start with a tool or a meeting.

It starts with three questions, asked consistently:

1. What do we **want** to have happen?
2. What do we **think** will happen?
3. What **actually** happened?

When your team **internalizes this loop**, planning stops being about heroics—and **starts becoming a scalable system.**

The Planning Triangle gives you **alignment, accountability, and agility.** And that's how you turn IBP from a buzzword into a **business advantage.**

We help founders **start, scale, and exit** their businesses, focusing on **boosting profitability and cash flow** through **enhanced supply chain operations.**

Whether in short-term or long-term collaborations, we serve as a **critical extension of your team**, offering **strategic partnerships** and **day-to-day management**, while also **fostering the development** of your internal full-time team as your business **scales up.**

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