

FIELD NOTE · EA PRACTICE · 02

Start With Purpose

Most Enterprise Architecture practices don't fail at architecture. They fail at purpose — and get rebooted. A working guide to the one question the survivors answer first.

DRAWN FROM THE TOGAF® LEADER'S GUIDE TO AN EA CAPABILITY

- Support Strategy — target architecture & roadmaps, 3–10 years out
- Support Portfolio — align cross-functional, multi-project change
- Support Projects — clarify purpose, requirements, compliance
- Support Solution Delivery — how change gets designed & shipped
- The Four Death Traps — how EA practices talk themselves into a reboot

Here is a pattern the industry keeps repeating. An EA team is stood up. It builds reference models, publishes standards, convenes a review board. A few years in, a new CIO arrives, asks what value it delivers, doesn't get a crisp answer — and shuts it down. Eighteen months later, someone proposes standing EA back up. The Open Group's own leaders' guide is blunt about it: the most common EA practice in industry is **a re-boot after a failed attempt**. The teams that survive can say, in one sentence, what their architecture is *for* — before they draw a single diagram. The guide names four purposes, and an EA Capability serves *one or more* of them; a mature practice often spans several. But it earns them in sequence, starting from one clear, sponsored purpose. None is more "real EA" than the others — the failure isn't serving one purpose or four, it's never naming any, or claiming all four before you can sustain one.

PURPOSE 1 Support Strategy

"Where are we going?"

The broadest mandate: deliver a target architecture and roadmaps of change over a three-to-ten-year horizon, spanning many programs and portfolios. Architecture here identifies change initiatives, sets their terms of reference, finds synergies across them, and governs the execution of strategy through the portfolio. This is the purpose that earns EA a seat at the strategy table — and the one most often claimed without the sponsorship to sustain it.

KEY DECISIONS

- ◆ Whose strategy is this architecture serving, and will they defend its budget?
- ◆ What planning horizon does the enterprise actually operate on?
- ◆ How will roadmap changes be traced back to the shift in context that caused them?

WATCH OUT FOR

- ✗ Claiming a strategy mandate the executive team never actually granted.
- ✗ A roadmap redrawn every year with no record of why — reads as chasing a moving target.
- ✗ Target architecture with no owner accountable for reaching it.

PURPOSE 2 Support Portfolio

"Which initiatives — and how do they fit?"

One level down: cross-functional, multi-project change across a single portfolio. Architecture identifies the projects, sets their terms of reference, aligns their approaches, surfaces synergies and dependencies, and governs execution across the set. This is where EA stops being abstract and starts settling real arguments about which initiatives proceed and how they interlock.

KEY DECISIONS

- ◆ Which portfolio, and who owns the trade-offs between its initiatives?
- ◆ What dependencies between projects must architecture make visible?
- ◆ How does governance feed back into both architecture and project conformance?

WATCH OUT FOR

- ✗ Cataloguing projects without ever influencing which ones survive.
- ✗ Synergies named in a document but never realized in delivery.
- ✗ A governance role with no teeth — advice nobody is required to hear.

PURPOSE 3

Support Projects

"Is this doing the right thing?"

Narrower still: architecture in service of a single project's delivery method. Its job is to clarify the purpose and value of the project, identify requirements that address synergy and future dependency, assure compliance with architectural governance, and support integration and alignment with other projects. This is the most tangible purpose — and the easiest to reduce to a compliance checkpoint that teams learn to route around.

KEY DECISIONS

- ◆ Does the project's purpose and value survive honest architectural scrutiny?
- ◆ Which requirements protect against future dependency and rework?
- ◆ Where does this project have to integrate with others, and who owns those seams?

WATCH OUT FOR

- ✗ Becoming a gate teams design around instead of a partner they consult.
- ✗ Compliance sign-off with no view of the value the project is meant to create.
- ✗ Reviewing projects in isolation, missing the integration risk between them.

PURPOSE 4

Support Solution Delivery

"How is it built & shipped?"

The narrowest and most concrete: architecture supporting the deployment of a solution — a single project or a significant part of one. It defines how the change will be designed and delivered, identifies the constraints, controls, and architecture requirements the design must honor, and acts as a governance framework for the change itself. Value is realized on deployment and use, so this purpose lives closest to where value actually lands.

KEY DECISIONS

- ◆ What constraints and controls must the design provably honor?
- ◆ How does architecture govern the change without becoming a bottleneck?
- ◆ What does "delivered and in use" look like — the definition of done for value?

WATCH OUT FOR

- ✗ Confusing "delivered" with "deployed and used" — value is the latter.
- ✗ Controls documented but not enforceable in the delivery pipeline.
- ✗ Governance that slows shipping without measurably lowering risk.

The enterprise's leadership are your customers

The guide is unambiguous about who an EA Capability serves: **the enterprise's leadership are the EA Capability's customers**. Purpose isn't an internal preference — it's a read on what those customers are paying for. Get it wrong and you build beautiful artifacts for an audience that never asked.

The Four Death Traps

Naming a purpose is necessary but not sufficient. The guide catalogues the ways an EA Capability talks itself into a reboot. Four recur often enough to name outright — and each has a cheaper fix than rebuilding the practice from scratch.

Trap 1 Advising mistaken for deciding

The most common death trap, and the guide's language is unusually sharp: confusing "supporting decision-making" with "decision-making" is "simply wishful thinking." Executive management is a directive function; an EA Capability is an advisory one. Architects who lobby for outcomes instead of arming decision-makers with honest trade-offs are chasing authority without the accountability that comes with it.

The fix: measure the value of good advice — recommendations accepted, risks surfaced early — not decisions seized. Keep decision rights and outcome accountability where they belong.

Trap 2 Standards over transformation

The guide's most quotable finding: EA teams that focus on and deliver key organizational transformations are *statistically more successful* than teams that focus on standards, reference architectures, processes, and governance structures. Standards are an output, not a reason to exist. A team known only for saying no is a team a new CIO can cut without noticing a gap.

The fix: anchor the practice to a transformation someone in the business is measured on. Let standards serve that, not stand in for it.

Trap 3 Value before buy-in

The classic bottom-up, or "revivalist," trap. It is easy to get caught in recurrent cycles of trial and error that repeat themselves on every reboot. Delivering value before securing a sponsor "has wrought many challenges" — the Leader is left acting on interpretation and assumption, and when the sponsor doesn't value what was delivered, the team hasn't just failed again, it has burned scarce resource doing it.

The fix: secure buy-in — financial allocation and resource commitment — before delivering value, not after. Assume the goal is to make the enterprise a better place, and get that agreed.

Trap 4 No named purpose

The root cause under the other three. The guide keeps returning to it: the message that an EA Capability is a function of context and purpose "is often lost." Without a named purpose the team has no test for what to work on, drifts toward producing documents nobody asked for, and cannot answer the one question that decides its funding.

The fix: answer it out loud — "what would the enterprise do if this capability did not exist?" If the answer isn't concrete, fix the purpose before anything else.

The Purpose Test

Ten questions to answer before you establish — or reboot — an EA practice. They come straight from the guide's own guidance on context, purpose, and success measurement. Score one point per honest "yes." Below seven, you are building on the same ground the last attempt failed on.

- ☐ You can name **which purpose(s)** this capability serves, and the sponsor agrees — and if you're establishing or rebooting, you're starting with one.
- ☐ There is a **named executive sponsor** who will defend the budget through a leadership change — not just the one who chartered it.
- ☐ You can answer "**what would the enterprise do if this capability didn't exist?**" with something concrete, not a platitude.
- ☐ The team knows it **advises**; decision rights and outcome accountability sit with the executives it serves.
- ☐ Success is measured by **decisions influenced and transformations delivered**, not documents produced.
- ☐ A **charter** states the extent of overlap with other functions, the shared responsibilities, and what EA will explicitly *not* do.
- ☐ **Buy-in was secured before value delivery** — financial allocation and resource commitment are real, not assumed.
- ☐ The roadmap is run like a **real project**: milestones, deliverables, and someone accountable for keeping it true to plan.
- ☐ The capability is **scoped to a purpose, not the org chart** — the next reorganization shouldn't break it.
- ☐ Someone tracks **which point-of-view documents get read, and by whom** — the earliest leading indicator of real influence.

How this is evolving: from projects to products

The guide frames three of the four purposes in project and portfolio terms — 2016 vintage. The industry has since shifted toward **product-centric operating models** (see The Open Group's D-PROM, 2022), organizing technology around persistent digital products and value streams rather than start-stop projects.

This doesn't retire the four purposes — it raises the stakes on starting with one. A continuously-funded, value-measured product model demands a **clearer, more durable statement of purpose** than a project ever did, not a vaguer one.

Going Deeper: References

The source and the standards behind this note, roughly in reading order. All links verified July 2026.

The TOGAF® Leader's Guide to an EA Capability (G168)

The Open Group guide this note is drawn from — establishing and evolving an EA Capability. Start here.
publications.opengroup.org/g168

The TOGAF® Standard

The architecture method itself — the framework the Leader's Guide interprets for practitioners.
opengroup.org/togaf

TOGAF Standard, 10th Edition — Introduction

A current, navigable overview of the ADM and the architecture domains referenced throughout.
pubs.opengroup.org/togaf-standard/introduction

The Open Group Architecture Forum

Where the TOGAF standard and its companion guides are maintained and evolved.
opengroup.org/architecture-forum

Association of Enterprise Architects (AEA)

The professional body for EA practitioners — behind much of the research on EA success and failure.
globalaea.org

MIT CISR — Ross & Weill on EA

Home of the research behind *Enterprise Architecture as Strategy* — tying EA to an operating model and business execution.
cISR.mit.edu

A Digital Product-Centric Reference Operating Model (D-PROM)

The Open Group's 2022 model for the shift from project/silo IT to product-centric operating — where a named purpose matters most.
publications.opengroup.org/w223

About the Author

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