Everyone Owned It. Which Meant Nobody Did.

Real Operating Decisions. Real Capability Failures. Real Business Outcomes.
An Executive Case Study in The O'Brien Method Series

COMPANY PROFILE

Industry	Logistics and managed transportation
Approximate revenue	$80-$100 million
Business model	Contract logistics, brokerage, and managed freight services
Growth Stage	Rapidly expanding provider adding national accounts

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A national customer complained that onboarding was weeks behind schedule. Sales had completed the handoff, operations had opened the account, technology had configured the connection, finance had approved credit, and customer service had assigned contacts. Each department had completed its part.

The customer still could not ship reliably. The experience spanned six functions, yet no one owned the outcome from the customer's perspective. Shared responsibility had become a distributed permission to wait.

The company assigned a single accountable launch owner, defined end-to-end milestones, and replaced departmental completion with customer-readiness measures. The solution did not require another committee. It required a clear decision architecture across the boundaries where work was failing.

THE SITUATION

The customer was strategically important and operationally complex. Winning the account required a long sales cycle, custom pricing, multiple facilities, systems integration, and executive attention. Leadership celebrated the contract as proof that the company could compete on a national scale.

Within three weeks, emails multiplied. The customer asked when locations could begin shipping. Sales said the account had been handed to implementation. Implementation waited for technical specifications. Technology waited for approved workflows. Operations waited for volume forecasts. Finance had placed a temporary billing hold pending documentation.

Each function had a tracker, and each tracker showed reasonable progress. The customer saw one company that could not answer a basic question: who was responsible for getting the operation live?

Leadership scheduled additional coordination meetings. Attendance improved; ownership did not.

THE INVESTIGATION

The team mapped the launch from the signed agreement through the customer's first stable week of shipping. More than forty handoffs were identified, many of them implied rather than defined. Tasks had owners, but the customer outcome did not.

Departmental service levels reinforced fragmentation. Sales was measured by booked revenue, technology by tickets completed, operations by cost and post-launch service, and finance by credit risk. Delaying a difficult decision often protected a functional metric while worsening the customer experience.

The phrase 'we all own the customer' appeared repeatedly. In practice, it meant that anyone could contribute, but no single person had the authority to set priorities, resolve trade-offs, or escalate the lack of customer input.

The failure was not due to poor cooperation. Most employees were responsive within their roles. The operating model had never specified how decisions would be made when the work crossed those roles.

ROOT CAUSE

The root cause was a lack of end-to-end accountability. The organization had assigned responsibility for activities while leaving authority over the outcome undefined.

Cross-functional work fails when ownership is reduced to participation. An accountable owner needs both a measurable outcome and the authority to coordinate decisions across functions.

THE INTERVENTION

Leadership appointed a launch owner for each complex account. The role began at late-stage qualification and ended only after the customer achieved two consecutive weeks of stable service.

The launch plan was rebuilt around customer milestones: data validated, locations ready, users trained, test shipments completed, billing confirmed, and operating performance accepted. Departmental tasks remained subordinate to those milestones rather than replacing them.

A decision log documented the owner, deadline, dependencies, and escalation path for cross-functional issues. The launch owner could convene the necessary leaders and escalate unresolved decisions without waiting for the next steering meeting.

Executive reviews focused on milestone risk, customer readiness, and blocked decisions. Attendance declined because accountability no longer required every possible stakeholder to be in the room.

BUSINESS RESULTS

Average time to stable launch declined from eleven to seven weeks. First-month service failures fell 34 percent, and customer escalations during implementation dropped by nearly half.

Employees reported fewer duplicate status requests because the launch plan became the shared source of truth. Functions retained responsibility for their expertise, while one person remained accountable for the integrated outcome.

The company learned that collaboration improves when ownership becomes clearer, not when it becomes broader.

THE O'BRIEN METHOD INSIGHT

When everyone owns an outcome, no one necessarily has the authority to make it happen. Shared commitment is valuable; shared accountability is often an abstraction.

Designate one accountable owner for each critical cross-functional outcome. Then make the supporting responsibilities, decision rights, measures, and escalation path visible to everyone involved.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR CEOS

- Assign accountability for the customer outcome, not only its component tasks.
- Give the accountable owner explicit decision and escalation rights.
- Organize cross-functional plans around customer milestones.
- Align functional metrics so delay is not locally rewarded.
- Use meetings to resolve named decisions, not compensate for unclear ownership.

Capability before complexity.