Pre-listing: the year before the scrutiny

Sample, anonymized. Built for a peer running at a listing: S-1 window targeted, bankers circling, board confident, organization untested against outside eyes.

If you only read this paragraph: the equity story and the operating plan are two different documents, and they are drifting apart in ways that only show under questioning. Execution runs on relationships and heroics that work fine and document terribly. And the unit economics live in two heads, the CEO's and the CFO's, which reads as key-person risk the moment a banker asks anyone else. None of this is a culture problem. It is a legibility problem, and diligence is where illegibility gets priced.

ALIGNMENT PULSE (SELF-REPORTED, 0 TO 10)

The pre-listing signature: confidence is the highest bar on the chart and translation is near the lowest. That spread, confidence outrunning evidence, is itself the risk signal, because diligence tests evidence, not confidence.

THE THREE MISALIGNMENTS A BANKER WILL FIND BEFORE YOU DO

STRONG SIGNAL

1. Two documents, one company

What you tell investors and what the org runs on have quietly diverged. Different leaders tell different versions, metrics are defined inconsistently, and the pitch holds only until someone asks the same question twice.

STRONG SIGNAL

2. Heroics do not document

Cross-functional execution runs on relationships: the handoff works because two people like each other, not because it is designed. That is fine at private speed and fatal in a data room, where undocumented reliability reads as no reliability.

EMERGING PATTERN

3. The model lives in two heads

Unit economics and capital logic are broadly asserted and narrowly held. Below the CEO and CFO, leaders can recite the strategy but not defend the math, and diligence interviews go below the CEO and CFO.

WHAT IS ACTUALLY CAUSING THIS

The company is moving toward a listing faster than it is making itself legible: one narrative, documented execution, broadly held economics. Nothing is broken; everything is implicit, and implicit is what public-market scrutiny discounts. The gap will not close on its own, because everyone is busy performing readiness instead of building it. Benchmark: companies that reconcile narrative and operating plan two-plus quarters before the window report materially calmer diligence and fewer late surprises than those that reconcile under banker deadline.

THREE MOVES, NEXT 30 DAYS

Install the one-document rule

The equity story and the operating plan merge into a single owned document. Every quarterly priority traces to a line in the story; every story claim traces to work that exists. Divergence stops being a vibe and becomes a bug with an owner.

Run practice quarters

Operate the forecast-and-commit cadence as if already public for two to three quarters before the street counts them. Measure the calibration error each quarter and manage it down. Discipline is a set of reps, not a memo,

Drill the banker questions

Write the ten questions diligence will ask about the model. Every executive answers all ten without the CFO in the room, tested quarterly. When the model is broadly held, key-person risk disappears from the read and the story survives any interview order.

and the roadshow is a terrible place for rep one.

THE COST OF DOING NOTHING (DIRECTIONAL)

Price it in listing terms. A gap you find costs a working session. The same gap found by bankers costs credibility in the room where your multiple is being argued, and a gap found late enough can cost the window itself. Illegibility compounds quietly until the one quarter when it prices.

THE FIRST 90 DAYS, COMPRESSED

0 to 30
One-document rule installed with an owner; banker-question list written; calibration baseline taken on the current forecast.

30 to 60
First practice quarter closed and scored; exec team drilled on the model; handoffs documented where heroics carried them.

60 to 90
Second practice quarter; calibration error trending down; narrative and plan re-tested under adversarial questioning, internally, on purpose.

What this brief is: a directional signal from one senior vantage point, labeled by confidence, not a diagnosis. The Comprehensive Audit (6 to 10 executive interviews) validates these signals against your own leadership team and produces the shared operating model. TL Partners Strategy Alignment Audit, instrumented by Alyn. thomas@tlpartners.biz