

CASE STUDY

From Overwhelmed to On Track: How Apex Industrial Found Its Growth Path — One Step at a Time

A StoneWater Group Partnership Story

9

Initiatives Mapped

1

Priority Initiative
Launched

+68%

Staff Clarity Score

94%

Customer Retention

The Situation: Big Dreams, Bigger To-Do List

Apex Industrial Solutions makes the kinds of products that keep factories running — specialty cutting fluids, lubricants, and process chemicals that most people never think about until they run out. For nearly two decades, Apex had quietly built a loyal customer base across the Midwest by doing things the right way: quality products, honest relationships, and showing up when it mattered.

Then came the growth plan.

Leadership had laid out an ambitious roadmap — new product lines, a distribution expansion, an ERP system overhaul, an updated sales process, and a formal key account management program, among others. Nine major initiatives in total. It was exactly the kind of bold vision that gets a leadership team fired up in a conference room.

The problem? Apex had 47 employees. And the world wasn't making things easier.

“We’d get excited about moving forward, then spend the next two weeks just reacting to problems. It felt like two steps forward, five steps back.” — Operations Manager, Apex Industrial

Rising raw material costs and a shifting tariff landscape were putting pressure on margins and straining customer relationships. Conversations that used to be about partnership and growth were increasingly about price increases and delivery timelines. Every firefight pulled a team member away from the growth initiatives. The mountain of work kept growing, but the team's bandwidth wasn't.

Something had to give. But leadership wasn't sure what — or where to even begin.

The Core Challenges

- 9 competing strategic initiatives with no clear priority order
- Limited staff capacity stretched across daily operations and change work
- No formal framework for planning or sequencing major initiatives
- External pressure: tariff volatility and material cost increases
- Customer friction created by pricing and supply chain disruptions
- Team morale dipping under the weight of constant context-switching

Why StoneWater Group?

Apex's CEO had heard about The StoneWater Group through a peer in a local business network. The StoneWater Group isn't a typical consulting firm — they don't show up with a pre-built playbook and a generic slide deck. They work alongside organizations as a partner in strategy and change management, helping leadership teams find clarity, build momentum, and actually execute.

For Apex, that distinction mattered. They didn't need someone to tell them they had too much on their plate. They needed a partner to help them figure out what to do about it.

The Approach: Start with the Map

The first thing The StoneWater Group did was slow down. Not stop — but slow down long enough to get a complete picture.

Together with Apex's leadership team, SWG facilitated a structured initiative assessment. Every proposed project was put on the table and evaluated across four dimensions: strategic alignment with the growth plan, resource requirements, expected outcomes and benefits, and the level of organizational change it would demand.

The result was a visual change map — a living document that gave the leadership team, for the first time, a single view of everything they were trying to accomplish and how it all fit together. Or in some cases, how it didn't.

“Seeing it all laid out like that was equal parts terrifying and clarifying. We finally had a shared language for the work ahead.” — CEO, Apex Industrial

From there, SWG guided Apex through a prioritization exercise — not based on what felt most urgent, or what the loudest voice in the room wanted, but on which initiative would generate the most momentum for the overall growth plan. Which one, if done well, would make the next ones easier?

The answer surprised some people. It wasn't the ERP. It wasn't the new product line. It was the key account management (KAM) program.

In a period of external pressure and customer friction, strengthening the company's most strategic relationships would stabilize revenue, reduce firefighting, and free up the internal capacity needed to tackle everything else. It was a force multiplier.

Going Deeper: Planning the Work That Actually Matters

With the KAM initiative identified as the priority, StoneWater Group shifted into strategic planning mode. This phase was about far more than a project timeline. The goal was to build a complete picture of the change:

- What specific steps were required, and in what sequence?
- Who owned what — and did they have the capacity?
- What were the likely speed bumps, resistance points, and failure modes?
- What did success actually look like — in measurable terms?
- How would the change affect Apex's key customers, and how would they be brought along?

That last point was a deliberate choice. In many change initiatives, customers are an afterthought. SWG pushed Apex to bring select customers into the conversation early — sharing the vision for the KAM program, gathering their input, and making them stakeholders in the outcome. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

SWG also conducted a change risk assessment — mapping out the human side of the initiative. Who would be most impacted? Where would resistance likely show up? What communications and support structures needed to be in place to minimize disruption and keep people moving in the same direction?

The output of all this work wasn't a thick binder that would sit on a shelf. It was a clear, practical change roadmap that every stakeholder could understand, point to, and act from.

The Results: Momentum Changes Everything

Within six months of launching the KAM initiative, the impact was visible across the organization.

For the Business

- Key account retention climbed to 94%, up from 81%
- Time spent on reactive customer issues dropped by nearly 40%
- Leadership reclaimed an estimated 12+ hours/week of strategic capacity
- Staff reported a 68% improvement in clarity around roles and priorities (internal pulse survey)
- Two additional initiatives from the change map were formally launched within the following quarter

For the Team

- Employees described feeling “like we’re actually making progress” for the first time in over a year
- Cross-functional communication improved as shared language around the change map took hold
- Customer-facing staff felt better equipped and more confident in difficult pricing conversations
- The culture of reactive firefighting began to shift toward proactive, planned execution

“We still have a big mountain to climb. But now we know which path we’re on — and why. That changes everything.” — VP of Sales, Apex Industrial

What This Means for You

Apex Industrial isn’t unique. Across industries, ambitious small and mid-sized businesses are sitting on powerful growth plans that never fully launch — not because the ideas are bad, but because the path to execution is unclear, the team is stretched thin, and every day something urgent crowds out something important.

The StoneWater Group exists for exactly that moment. We don’t take over. We don’t add overhead. We partner with you to build clarity, create structure, and help you make real progress on the things that actually move the needle.

If any part of Apex’s story sounds familiar — the competing priorities, the capacity crunch, the feeling that you’re working hard but not getting traction — let’s talk.

Ready to find your first step?

Reach out to start a conversation. No pressure, no pitch — just a real talk about where you're at and where you want to go.

info@stonewatergroup.com | www.stonewatergroup.com