



THE 6-DAY STRATEGY

*How to create a killer strategy for your business in
less than a week*

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Why spend 6 months developing a 1-year plan?

At the end of a particularly long and gruelling strategy meeting a CEO once turned to me and said, *“In a few years time people will laugh at us for developing three-year plans.”* He was right. With the pace of business change today, driven by technology and globalization, long-term plans last about as long as an ice storm in the desert. As military experts put it, plans rarely survive contact with the enemy.

Despite these new realities many executive teams remain stuck with twentieth century approaches to strategy development. It is still common for companies to take six months or more to develop their new growth strategies. This prolonged, inefficient and largely ineffective approach – involving colossal data analysis projects, the creation of a series of 100-slide decks, and periodic executive meetings where directors are presented with findings and recommendations to comment on – may suit consultants looking to maximize fees, and even some executives who want to look as if they’re in control, but it does little to help businesses succeed in fast-changing markets.

A new mindset and new approaches are needed to create a robust and compelling strategy at pace. But it can be done. ***The 6-Day Strategy*** is a tool that can help you set the direction, and generate the focus necessary for you to succeed at a pace that is 20 times faster than traditional approaches. And in a world where plans rarely last a year, gaining a six-month start on your competitors can create lasting advantages and benefits for your business.

The 6-day strategy in action

An overview of ***The 6-Day Strategy*** is set out in Figure 1. The process provides a logical and natural flow for the discussion and dialogue necessary to develop a clear and compelling strategy for your company. Many executive teams, in addition to using consultants to create strategy proposals for the business, also run annual strategy off-sites, for a day or two, or put half a day or more in the diary every few months. In my experience, however, these sessions can lack focus. Urgent operational matters are added to the agenda, for instance, to make best use of the executive team’s time together, and discussions can simply end up focusing on the previous few weeks’ or months’ trading, rather than developing a deeper and more fundamental understanding of your strategic direction.

A structured and disciplined approach is needed to ensure that you make rapid and relevant progress. Perhaps surprisingly, a robust structure also enables you to be more creative in your thinking, and a well-designed strategy process that involves your key players effectively, can have a transformative effect on the future success of your business. The process can act as a springboard for new and better ways to implement the strategy.

There are five fundamental elements of ***The 6-Day Strategy*** that help ensure success:

1. Executive involvement and leadership

The development of your organisation's future strategy should never be delegated to an external consultant, or summarized onto a presentation for sign-off. Delivering a new growth strategy is hard work, and executives must fully own the goals they are setting for their business. This can only be achieved through direct involvement, not through detached assessment.

As Dennis Sadlowski, the former CEO of Siemens Energy in the USA, once said to me about the approach he took to strategy development with his management teams, "Engagement starts with involvement, and I ensured that the executive team and key managers at the next level were intimately involved in the development of our growth strategy. We didn't rely on external consultants to tell us the way forward; we led the work ourselves, doing our own blocking and tackling to make sure we understood the detail."

This means that, as leaders of your business, you must be willing to dedicate the time together, engage with the critical issues and opportunities facing your organisation and work through the alternatives to find the best strategy. Setting the future direction of the business and establishing the critical priorities are two of the biggest roles of any leadership team. Managing operational performance can be delegated to other managers; setting strategy cannot. As with Dennis Sadlowski, this doesn't mean you can't invite other key managers to get involved – although the process becomes slower and more cumbersome if you have more than, say, 10 or so people in the room – but the entire executive team should be fully involved in the entire process to maximize the results.

Figure 1: *The 6-Day Strategy*

Day	Objective	Key Questions	Inputs	
1	Our current position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define the key issues and opportunities facing the business over the next 1-3 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do customers think of us? How effective is our financial performance? How attractive are our markets? How strong are our competitive positions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer research Financial reviews Market assessments Strategic position assessments Competitor reviews
2	Future possibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify growth options beyond the next 3 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How could our markets evolve? What new opportunities might be created? What are the capabilities for future success? What are the implications for us? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market forecasts Reviews of other, similar markets Reviews of new, high-growth competitors and 'leading edge' customers Social and technology trends
3	Setting the direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree our core strategic direction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are our top goals? What's our #1 goal? How should our 'playing field' evolve? How will we win? What are the competitive advantages we need to secure and develop? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outputs from the first two days
4	Defining the organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine the priorities for executive focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the critical organisational capabilities we need to develop? What kind of talent do we need – now and in the future? How should we best engage and involve our people? How will we lead this organisation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Output from Day 3 Talent assessments Organisational engagement scores Operational scorecards Future capabilities assessments
5	Shaping the agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine the priorities for executive focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do we need to focus on to deliver our emerging strategy? What are our executive priorities? What are the underlying goals, objectives and milestones? Who will be accountable for delivery? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outputs from Day 3 and Day 4 Talent assessments
6	Preparing for launch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish how you will lead and manage the execution of the strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How will we communicate, involve and engage our people in the next stage of work? How will we manage the key programmes of activity? What are the key risks of this strategy and how will we manage them? Are we fully aligned on our new strategy and next steps? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outputs from Day 3, 4 and 5 Programme management best practices Communication and engagement best practices

2. Future focus

Just because this is a rapid strategy process does not mean that it should just deal with the short-term issues of the business or create a series of 'quick wins'. Six days is ample time to review what's happening at the leading edges of your markets and to peer over the horizon at new opportunities and emerging realities and trends. Think big, use this opportunity to have team discussions that you perhaps haven't had before, and you may just find that you unearth previously hidden growth ideas and concepts.

Day 2 is specifically focused on thinking beyond the immediate future of the business. Given the turbulence and dynamic nature of most markets it is critical that you don't simply project current trends, but that you also look for potential discontinuities and shifts in your business. Taking the effort to consider what your customers will be doing in more than a couple of years' time can also help you consider more fundamental and step-change improvements to your proposition and your organisation.

As a result, you may want to bring in specialists from outside your industry, or experts in technology, social trends or innovation into the session to help stimulate new thinking. Alternatively, you may want to design and go through more creative exercises.

As part of one of our strategy projects, for example, a retail leadership team worked to create three alternative futures for their industry and, on the basis of the insights gained, identified five new growth ideas they hadn't previously identified. Alternatively, a consumer goods client stepped into the future by asking what would happen to their business if Google acquired it. Again, this process of breaking away from the current business and market realities led to new growth ideas for the leadership team to consider.

3. Preparation and support

The quality of the results of the strategy process is directly dependent on two factors: (1) the quality of the preparation and inputs; and (2) the quality of the discussions and dialogue of the team. We'll deal with the second success factor in point 4, below, but in terms of the preparation and inputs, there are three critical areas you need to focus on:

1. **A robust factbase.** In too many strategy sessions there is simply too much data. People end up getting lost in the analysis and lose sight of the key issues at stake. With data, it's not the quantity that counts; it's the quality that's paramount. Facts are needed so that conversations aren't merely the sharing of different opinions and that a mirror is held up to the leadership team to make sure they focus on the realities of their situation, but the focus of the discussions need to be on the future and how you will address your agreed issues and opportunities. A 10-20 page insight pack covering financial, customer, competitive and market insights, will provide a suitable point of reference for the meetings without confusing everyone by providing information overload.

2. **Participant preparation.** Everyone should come to the initial meeting with a clear understanding of the objectives, their role and initial views, ideas and questions. This requires a structured approach to briefing that should include the following:
 - An introductory conversation with the owner of the process (usually the CEO or equivalent) and the key facilitator (see point 4, below) to provide an overview of the process and to gain initial feedback and respond to any questions;
 - A focused questionnaire, designed and collated by the facilitator, on key questions and hot topics, to gauge the initial thoughts of the participants and to help stimulate thinking and to finesse the design of the process;
 - Sharing the factbase a week or so ahead of the strategy process, together with one or two relevant articles – possibly concerning the future of your industry, interesting new management thinking, or new approaches to one or more of your critical process (such as innovation). As with the factbase, though, the key is not to overload the participants with data, but to provide sufficient initial food for thought to fuel the initial conversations; and
 - An initial mini-project for each of the participants. In addition to the questionnaire and fact-base we have found that giving participants a small, say two-hour, assignment ahead of the initial session also helps to get the juices flowing. This can be done in pairs or small groups, rather than individually. At one company, for example, pairs of participants reviewed selected companies in completely different industries and were tasked with identifying three new ideas for growth that they believed could be transferred into their business.
3. **Support team.** Throughout the six days, you will raise plenty of questions. Not all of these can be answered immediately, but you will find that many of them can be resolved with a little background analysis and research. We've found that having a small support team – covering finance, marketing, operations and HR – can help to sort out these issues as the meetings progress, helping to build and maintain the momentum of the sessions.

4. Structure and facilitation.

In Figure 1, we've set out an overview of the areas of discussion for each day of the **The 6-Day Strategy** process. In reality, however, no two processes are the same. Each organisation is unique and while the overall flow will be similar between different businesses, the specific design of the meetings will be different. Each day needs to be designed according to the company's needs and the ongoing outcomes of the sessions.

This means that a dedicated meeting designer should be involved to ensure that the specific topics, the tools and frameworks used, and the specific activities that enable the team to reach clear, robust and aligned conclusions in the fastest time possible. A clear structure also requires, in most cases, that an independent facilitator is used to guide and moderate the discussion, enabling the CEO or meeting leader to focus on the content of the meeting rather than being overly concerned with managing the process.

5. Maintaining the momentum

Each day of **The 6-Day Strategy** has a different objective and questions to answer, as set out in Figure 1. This ensures that you build up momentum and make rapid progress and development. Over the six days you might not answer all the questions you identify as a team, but don't let a search for perfection drive out success. After all, it's far easier to change direction once you're moving, than it is to try and turn the wheel when you're at a standstill.

It's also possible, of course, to breakdown the six days into a series of shorter sessions. This works equally well if you maintain the focus over a two or three week period, but if you end up spreading out the sessions over two or three months you're hardly any further forward from more traditional strategy approaches. What's more, you also end up taking time to reconnect with the work to date, and team members can become detached from the outputs of the work.

Implementing At Pace

Developing a new strategy for your business is only the start of a process of change and improvement. As you launch the outputs of your work you must continue to involve, engage and align your people around your new goals and priorities. What's more, the strategy will inevitably evolve in the face of new environmental realities and your own experience of implementation: some things will work, others won't.

The work is Sisyphean in nature; it is never finished, and one of your key jobs as a leader of your business is to ensure that your strategy remains both valid and alive. **The 6-Day Strategy** kick-starts this positive cycle of success, helping to make sure that your organisation doesn't simply spin its strategic wheels, but gets into gear and starts to make things happen at a pace that is at least in line with rate of change in your markets.

As you and your colleagues become aligned around your future direction, other positive changes will emerge. Managers will find it easier to make decisions, for instance. They will also see that the leaders of their organisation have acted quickly and decisively to move the business forward.

Once sustained, these positive behaviours translate into a company that is not only faster, but one that is also more confident, more responsive and far more proactive. In other words, The 6-Day Strategy can help your organisation develop the traits of companies that win.

Stuart Cross is the owner and director of Morgan Cross Consulting and is an expert on strategy, growth and performance improvement. Since its launch in 2006, Stuart's business has attracted market-leading clients including Alliance Boots, Avon Cosmetics, Aimia, GlaxoSmithKline, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Wm Morrison Supermarkets. Global Professional Publishing published his book, The CEO's Strategy Handbook.



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