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EXECUTIVE ADVISORY AND COACHING

Corporate Planning

Aligning a leadership team behind one goal



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AT A GLANCE

Aligning a leadership team behind one goal

How science companies plan from the vision to the next move

A handbook by Christian Soschner

5 to 10

YEARS

The vision

The vision describes the company you want to have built.

3 to 5

MILESTONES

The missions

Three to five milestones the whole company can recognise.

0 to 6

MONTHS

Operations

I plan the first six months in detail.

THE FEEDBACK LOOP

Every month, what you learn flows back into the plan



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CHAPTER 01

Every winner had a plan

Over the years I have spoken with CEOs, investors, athletes and artists, in boardrooms and in more than a hundred recorded conversations for my show. I have yet to meet one who reached the top without a plan.

The details differ from person to person, yet the pattern repeats itself with remarkable consistency, and it has four parts.

01 **They see the goal before they reach it.** As Arnold Schwarzenegger tells it, Michael Phelps rehearsed his split times in his head as a teenager, down to the tenth of a second, and then swam them lap after lap. Jack Nicklaus said he pictured every shot before he hit it, in practice as well as in tournaments. In business the picture is larger and takes longer to come true. Nvidia opened its graphics chips to general computing with CUDA in 2006, and Tae Kim describes how Jensen Huang spent the following years preparing the company for an era of GPU computing that few people could picture yet.

> Sources: Arnold Schwarzenegger, *Be Useful* (2023), on Phelps. Jack Nicklaus, in his own account for *Golf Digest*, and in Olivia Fox Cabane, *The Charisma Myth* (2012). Tae Kim, *The Nvidia Way* (2024), on CUDA and the era of the GPU.

02 **They break the long road into three to five milestones.** Each milestone is a place they can recognise when they arrive.

03 **They plan the next stretch in fine detail.** Training sessions, product releases, hiring dates and customer meetings: everything in the near term has a date, an owner and a clear result.

04 **They check progress every day and adjust the near term.** The big plan changes on the rare occasions when life forces a new picture on them.

Many companies miss one of these four parts. Some hang a vision on the wall and leave the milestones beneath it empty. Others build a detailed budget with no destination for it to serve.

A second group does plan, and spends its energy on the wrong part: the spreadsheet. Weeks go into cell formulas, version control and the fourth decimal of a forecast. The spreadsheet is a tool. It records the plan. The plan itself is a shared picture of where the company goes, held in the heads of the people who do the work.

This handbook describes how I build that picture with leadership teams, and how I keep it alive month after month.

CHAPTER 02

What planning is for

Strategic and operational planning have one purpose: to align every stakeholder behind one big goal. That goal is the corporate vision, five to ten years out.

Stakeholders means everyone whose decisions move the company, from the board and the leadership team to the employees who deliver the work. Investors, partners, key customers and suppliers follow.

When people know where the company goes and what their own part is, teams become hard to beat. Effort flows in one direction, every small win adds to the next one, and people start to pull each other forward.

The reverse is painful to watch. I have seen teams fall apart because people worked twelve-hour days and could not see what their work contributed. Ambition without direction burns people out. The hours were real. The link between the hours and the goal was missing.

Large companies invest serious time in this alignment. Reed Hastings described in 2020 how Netflix gathered its top leaders from around the world several times a year, with the explicit task of aligning on a north star. Ray Dalio describes alignment at Bridgewater as a deliberate, constant and systematic effort.

Sources: Reed Hastings and Erin Meyer, *No Rules Rules* (2020), chapter on context and the Quarterly Business Review. Ray Dalio, *Principles* (2017), on alignment in an idea meritocracy.

A good plan answers three questions for every person in the company:

01 Where does the company go?

02 What matters most on the way there?

03 What do I contribute this month?

Everything else in this handbook serves those three answers.

The research backs the first question. Edwin Locke and Gary Latham summarised 35 years of goal-setting studies: in study after study, specific and demanding goals led to higher performance than the instruction to do your best. The effect depended on commitment to the goal, feedback on progress and the complexity of the task.

Source: Edwin A. Locke and Gary P. Latham, "Building a Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting and Task Motivation: A 35-Year Odyssey", *American Psychologist* 57(9), 2002, 705–717.

CHAPTER 03

Three horizons and one feedback loop

In a blog post in 2008, I summed up this work in three German words, and I use them today: *Ziele planen, setzen, erreichen*. Plan the goal, set it in the calendar, reach it step by step. The rest of this chapter shows how that frame scales to a whole company.

A company plan works at three distances. The further out you look, the broader the strokes. The closer the work, the finer the detail.



VISION	MISSIONS	OPERATIONS
5 to 10	6 months to 5	0 to 6
YEARS	YEARS	MONTHS

CHAPTER 03

The vision: five to ten years

The vision describes the company you want to have built. Write it as a place, with enough detail that people can picture themselves standing in it: the customers you serve, the problem you have solved for them, the size and reputation of the company, the people around the table.

A good test comes from the investor world. Nick Sleep and Qais Zakaria, the investors behind the Nomad fund, practised what they called destination analysis: they ask where a business should stand in ten or twenty years, what management must do today to raise the odds of arriving there, and what could stop it. A leadership team can ask itself the same three questions.

Source: William Green, *Richer, Wiser, Happier* (2021), on Nick Sleep, Qais Zakaria and destination analysis.

A long horizon changes how people decide today. Jim Collins made the point with his idea of the 20 Mile March, in an investor podcast I wrote about in 2021: a company that sets itself 20 percent growth for one year knows what to do this year, while a company that sets 20 percent for 20 consecutive years starts to weigh every decision by its consequences decades ahead.

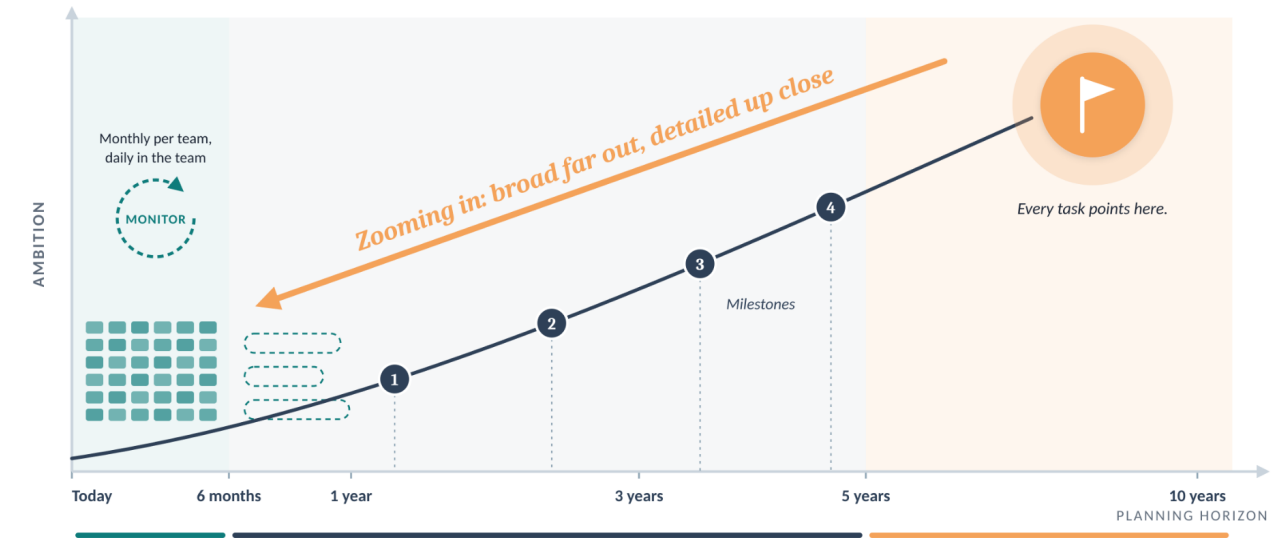
Source: my article "What is the Benefit of Setting a Goal like ComLB31?", Medium, 16 September 2021, https://medium.com/@christian-soschner/what-is-the-benefit-of-setting-a-goal-like-comlb31-f6449f572a27

A clear vision tells you what to leave out. Brian Armstrong made this point when he described Coinbase as a mission-focused company: time is limited, every company has to choose the change it wants to bring to the world, and large goals can take decades.

Source: Brian Armstrong, "Coinbase Is a Mission Focused Company" (2020), Coinbase blog.

ZOOMING IN

Broad for the vision, detailed for the next six months



OPERATIONS
Now to 6 months
Tasks with owners and dates; 6 to 12 months in rough lines

MISSIONS
6 months to 5 years
3 to 5 big milestones that take ground toward the vision

VISION
5 to 10 years
One big goal, one focus, 1 to 3 key figures at most

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CHAPTER 03

The missions: six months to five years

One focus and one to three key figures

Over the long run, a company needs few numbers. One to three key figures are enough, and every figure beyond that pulls attention away from the vision.

For that reason the CEO sets one focus for about four years, chosen for the stage the company has reached. The company grows revenue, builds a new division, or cuts its costs. The key figures follow from that focus, and they decide every close call between two good options.

Between the vision and today's work lie the missions. I borrow the word from the military on purpose. A long-term objective is like a territory you want to reach. Each mission is shorter, has its own clear outcome, and moves the company one stage closer to that territory.

Military planners work backwards. They start with what has to be true at the objective, define what counts as success, and then plan back from that point to the first action. Execution then becomes a matter of persistence.

> Source: Mark Lauren with Joshua Clark, *You Are Your Own Gym* (2010), on the "backwards planning" timeline in military mission planning.

Fabrizio Conicella described the same logic for life-science companies on my show. Strong entrepreneurs, in his words, start from the future and work back through the phases of development, a practice planners call backcasting. Some teams forget that their product needs fifteen years of investment before it reaches the market, and the plan has to account for every one of those years.

> Sources: Beginner's Mind, EP 169, "Why New Year's Goals Fail by February: Even for Disciplined People", 11 January 2026, segment with Fabrizio Conicella, https://beginnersmind.buzzsprout.com/779930/episodes/18489056-ep-169-why-new-year-s-goals-fail-by-february-even-for-disciplined-people. Full conversation: EP 157, "Fabrizio Conicella: Why Europe Keeps Losing the Next Breakthroughs in Medicine", https://beginnersmind.buzzsprout.com/779930/episodes/17091873-ep-157-fabrizio-conicella-why-europe-keeps-losing-the-next-breakthroughs-in-medicine

Three to five missions are enough. Each one is a milestone the whole company can recognise: a product approved, a market entered, a round closed, a partnership signed, a profit threshold crossed.

Choose milestones that stay valid when the economy moves. Interest rates, competitors and customer budgets will change over five years. A milestone like "first product on the market in Europe" survives those changes. A detailed revenue line for year four does not.

Operations: now to six months

Operations turn the next mission into tasks, and every task gets one owner, one date and one result that anyone can check. Ray Dalio compares a good plan to a movie script: you can see who does what, and when. He sketches the plan in broad strokes first and then drills down to tasks with timelines, until the costs, the people and the time match.

> Source: Ray Dalio, *Principles* (2017), on designing a plan like a movie script.

I plan the first six months in detail. Months seven to twelve stay rougher and leave room for what the team learns. The world moves fast, and a plan locked down to the last line for twelve months starts to defend itself against reality.

CHAPTER 03

The feedback loop: cause and effect

The fourth part closes the circle. You monitor execution to learn whether what you put in produces what you want to get out.

Every plan contains assumptions about cause and effect. If the sales team makes forty qualified calls a week, you expect a certain number of meetings. If you hire two engineers, you expect the product release to move forward by a quarter. Write the expected result down before the work begins. At the review, compare it with what came out, and decide whether to repeat the action, change it or stop it. What works gets more resources. What does not help gets cut.

Eric Ries calls this loop build, measure, learn. It started as a method for startups, and it works in any company that makes decisions under uncertainty.

> Source: Eric Ries, *The Lean Startup* (2011), on the build-measure-learn loop and validated learning.

THE FEEDBACK LOOP

Every month, what you learn flows back into the plan



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CHAPTER 03

Try it: from the vision to a decision this month

01 Take ten minutes with a blank page. Write one sentence about what your customers can do in ten years because your company exists. Below it, name the three to five milestones that mark the road from today to that picture.

02 Take the nearest milestone. Ask what has to be true the week before you reach it, then ask the same question of each answer, until you arrive at a decision someone on your team can make this month. Give that decision an owner, a date and a result anyone can check.

03 Then read the page from the bottom up. Can each owner explain which milestone the work serves? If yes, you have the first draft of a plan.

Give the next decision an owner and a date

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Start right away with a preparation sheet, a 60-minute session and a written de-brief within 24 hours, with one recommendation and a dated next step.

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Free 15-minute call

Get to know me and describe where your company stands and the decision in front of you.

Book a free 15-minute call ↗

CHAPTER 04

Everything follows from the vision

Many companies run this sequence backwards. They start with the market and the next pitch, and try to work out a purpose afterwards. It works better the other way round, or at least with both running in parallel.

Knowing what you want to build comes first. The market then informs the path. The depth of the vision gives the work its direction. The people you need follow from both: investors, partners, board members and the team.

This order matters most in front of investors. Pitching to investors without clarity on where the company wants to go wastes everyone's time, whether the money comes from venture capital, private equity or public markets. First you decide where you want to go. Then you look for the parties who want to travel the same road.

Mike Maples describes what happens otherwise. A team pitches, collects rejections, and adds a slide for every objection it hears. The deck grows into what he calls a "Frankendeck", and the story about the future disappears under the patches.

Source: Mike Maples Jr. and Peter Ziebelman, *Pattern Breakers* (2024), on "Frankendecks".

> A strong pitch deck comes out of the planning work as the summary of a plan the leadership team believes in.

In my experience, a company makes three pitches, in a fixed order. First to customers: does someone have a problem pressing enough to pay for a solution? Second to the team: is the vision strong enough to make good people join before the company can pay them well? Third to investors, after the first two answers are yes.

Source: my article "Is Pitching to Investors Killing Your Startup Before It Even Begins?", Medium, 11 September 2023, https://medium.com/@christian-soschner/is-pitching-to-investors-killing-your-startup-before-it-even-begins-920d29563fbd

THREE PITCHES

Customers first, then the team, then investors



A strong pitch deck comes out of the planning work, as the summary of a plan the leadership team believes in.

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CHAPTER 04

The business plan is a thinking tool

Startup teams tell me, time after time, that writing a business plan wastes time because everything changes at high speed. I see it the other way round.

A business plan, or its one-page cousin, the Business Model Canvas, forces you to think through the chapters that matter: the customer, the problem, the value you offer, how you reach the customer, how money comes in, what it costs and who you need. The result is a baseline hypothesis of how your business can work.

Sources: Alexander Osterwalder and Yves Pigneur, *Business Model Generation* (2010), on the nine building blocks. My own walk-through of the canvas and the workshop format I use with it: "How to Create a Business Model Canvas", Medium, 29 July 2020, https://medium.com/entrepreneurship-innovation/how-to-create-a-business-model-canvas-4e8dcbbbdb5a

I learned the principle behind it in my first project management lecture at the University of Graz. Professor Otto Krickl told us to start every project with the big picture and to work down to the details after the big picture stands. I have worked that way from that day on. The canvas is a modern form of the same idea, and I fill in the customer side first and the cost structure last, to keep money worries from cutting the creative work short.

> Without that baseline, you have nothing to measure your results against. A month of hard work tells you nothing when nobody wrote down what it was supposed to produce.

And you have nothing to show investors about what you produce today and what you will do with their money. Alejandro Cremades advises breaking the capital you need down by funding rounds and business milestones, into steps that take you where you want to go over the next 18 to 24 months. That breakdown comes straight out of a mission plan.

Source: Alejandro Cremades, *The Art of Startup Fundraising* (2016), on breaking down capital needs by rounds and milestones.

Few investors take the time to explain to a team what is missing from its story. They say "sorry, not for us" and move to the next company. The better a team understands its own idea and the causes and effects behind it, the better it can explain both to every stakeholder it needs.

CHAPTER 05

Cause and effect: the work behind the numbers



Most of my planning work involves few numbers. It is the modelling of cause and effect across the whole value chain: which activities create which results, which results bring in cash, and what has to happen first for the next step to work.

When that model is clear, you can explain it to anyone, inside the company or outside it, in a few minutes and without slides. A new employee understands where her work fits. A board member sees why the company asks for a decision now. An investor sees what his money will set in motion.

> Numbers are the final translation of that model, and the people who keep the books can build the detailed figures once the logic stands.

Three scenarios, plus growth and survival

The future has a habit of arriving different from the forecast, which is why I plan every mission with scenarios.

- **The base case:** what happens if the main assumptions hold.
- **The best case:** what happens if the key drivers outperform.
- **The bear case:** what happens if the key drivers disappoint.

Two further cases complete the picture once the base line exists. The **growth case** shows what the company needs to accelerate when a door opens. The **survival case** shows the minimum the company needs to stay in business when a door closes.

Scenario planning has a long history in sectors where conditions change fast and without warning. Luis Pareras recommends it for science-driven companies, where a single trial result or regulatory decision can move the whole plan.

Source: Luis Pareras, *Fast Forward Thinking*, on scenario planning and flexible strategic plans in science-driven companies.

CHAPTER 05

The pre-mortem

Once the scenarios stand, I run a pre-mortem with the leadership team. Everyone imagines that the plan has failed, and writes down why it failed.

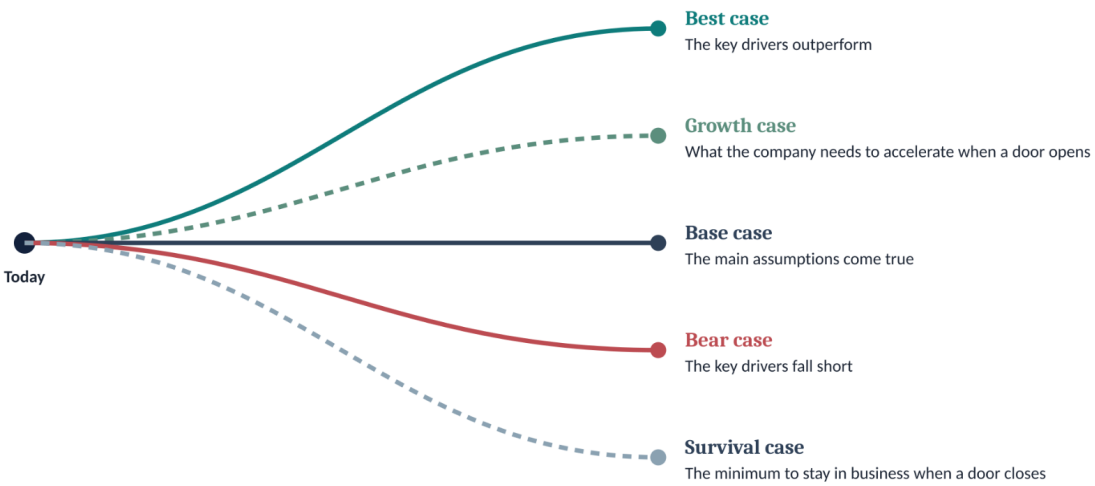
Gary Klein developed the method and described it in the Harvard Business Review in 2007. He built it on research into what psychologists call prospective hindsight: when people treat an outcome as certain and explain it, they name more reasons for it than when they forecast.

Sources: Gary Klein, "Performing a Project Premortem", *Harvard Business Review*, September 2007. Deborah J. Mitchell, J. Edward Russo and Nancy Pennington, "Back to the Future: Temporal Perspective in the Explanation of Events", *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 2(1), 1989, 25–38.

The pre-mortem puts the risks on the table while the team has time to act. For the most likely and most damaging failures, the team then writes a counter-plan: the early warning sign, the response and the person who acts. When the problem arrives, the company follows a plan instead of improvising one.

SCENARIOS AND PRE-MORTEM

Five paths for the next mission, and a plan for what can go wrong



PRE-MORTEM

Imagine the plan has failed. Why? Then write the counter-plan.

WARNING SIGN	RESPONSE	OWNER
Recruiting for the key role runs two months late	An interim hire through the network	COO
Trial enrolment falls behind plan	Two more clinical sites	Head of clinical
The first large customer delays its order	Bring the second customer forward	Head of sales

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CHAPTER 06

Same structure, different granularity

A listed group, a scale-up and a startup all need a vision, missions and operations. The core structure stays the same. What changes is the focus and the level of detail.

Ben Horowitz makes the point for executives: the job of a big-company executive differs from the job of a small-company executive. The plans they work with differ in the same way.

Source: Ben Horowitz, *The Hard Thing About Hard Things* (2014), on big-company and small-company executives.

Listed companies

In most listed companies the core business model works. The task is to serve more customers with a proven solution, raise the quality of the service, and grow revenue and profit inside the vision and mission.

Cause and effect are well understood. Plans can run top down and in detail, and the monthly review checks that the company stays on track in a well-established model.

Scale-ups, Series A to IPO

The vision is clear, the first business model works, and the company knows it can scale into its first market. The team is working out the exact causes and effects as it grows. Which channel brings the best customers? Which price survives as volume grows? Which hire opens the next stage?

The plan needs more flexibility in operations. Targets move as the team learns what drives growth, while the missions stay fixed.

Startups

A startup needs clarity on its big goal from day one. Its first mission lies ahead: the first business model that shows it can scale.

Eric Ries defines a startup as an institution that creates something new under conditions of extreme uncertainty. Short-term planning stays rough and follows the cash. Clayton Christensen adds a lesson from decades of research: guessing the right strategy at the start matters less than keeping enough resources, and enough credibility, to get a second and third attempt.

Sources: Eric Ries, *The Lean Startup* (2011), definition of a startup. Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma* (1997), on conserving resources to iterate toward a viable strategy.

Research organisations

In life sciences I work with many research organisations. From a planning point of view, the same logic applies. The outcome is different: more know-how, patents, and publications in journals with a high impact factor. Luis Pareras describes research as the transformation of money into knowledge. Innovation and entrepreneurship then turn that knowledge into financial returns and benefits for society, with innovation as the bridge between the two.

The funding follows the same logic. A team searching for solutions to disease at the molecular level has a strong vision. In many cases foundations, grants and partners fit that vision better than venture capital.

Source: Luis Pareras, *Fast Forward Thinking*, on research, innovation and entrepreneurship.

CHAPTER 06

What each stage needs to prove next

The three horizons stay the same in every organisation. What changes is the question the next milestone has to answer.

- **A listed company** proves that a new line of business fits the focus and earns its place next to the core.
- **A scale-up** proves that it can win customers in the next market with the same success as in the first.
- **A startup** proves demand: customers who pay for the solution and come back.
- **A research organisation** proves the next body of evidence: data, a patent, a partner who commits.

In every case the monthly review asks the same questions. The answers change with the stage.

SAME STRUCTURE, DIFFERENT GRANULARITY

What changes from a listed company to a research organisation

	LISTED COMPANY	SCALE-UP	STARTUP	RESEARCH ORGANISATION
Main task	Serve more customers with a proven solution; grow revenue and profit	Scale into the next market	Find the first business model that can scale	Create know-how, patents and high-impact publications
What is known	Cause and effect, well understood	The first model works; the drivers emerge with growth	The big goal; the rest is a hypothesis to test	The scientific vision and the path to impact
Operational plan	Top down and detailed	Detailed for six months, flexible beyond	Rough, and it follows the cash	Milestones of evidence: data, patents, partners
How targets move	Stable inside the focus	Targets move as the team learns; missions stay fixed	Fast, after every test	With each result and funding decision
Typical funding	Cash flow and capital markets	Venture capital and growth equity, up to IPO preparation	Founders, angels and seed funds	Foundations, grants and partners

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CHAPTER 07

The planning year

A plan that comes out of a binder one day a year dies in that binder. I run planning as a rhythm across the year.

THE PLANNING YEAR

One rhythm, built backwards from the goal



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Summer: the strategic offsite.	The leadership team leaves the office for a workshop and revises the strategic plan: the vision, the missions, and what the past year taught about cause and effect.
September: the missions.	The team reviews the big milestones against the updated strategy and the market.
Autumn: the operational plan for the next business year.	The first six months get detailed tasks, owners and dates. Months seven to twelve stay rougher on purpose. Today everything moves fast, and a company that locks itself into a detailed twelve-month plan loses its ability to respond.
Every month: the review.	Every team, department and division meets to check progress, look at the gap to the plan, and agree on the actions for the month ahead.
Every day: the team.	On the team level, people check daily what moves the goal forward today.

CHAPTER 07

Review progress every month

Dalio recommends the same monthly discipline: report planned and actual progress, state the expectations for the next period, make people accountable for their outcomes, and adjust the plan to reality.

Source: Ray Dalio, *Principles* (2017), on executing a plan and reporting at least monthly.

The research points the same way. A meta-analysis of 138 studies with close to 20,000 participants found that monitoring progress improves goal attainment, and the effect grows when progress is written down and reported to someone else. Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer studied close to 12,000 diary entries from professionals and found progress in meaningful work, small wins included, to be the event most present on people's best workdays. A monthly review in every team builds both into the year: recorded progress, and visible wins.

Sources: Benjamin Harkin et al., "Does Monitoring Goal Progress Promote Goal Attainment? A Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence", *Psychological Bulletin* 142(2), 2016, 198–229. Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, *The Progress Principle* (2011).

The rough second half of the operational year has a long pedigree. Jeremy Hope and Robin Fraser argued in *Beyond Budgeting* that fixed annual budgets lock a company into a year of assumptions the market can overtake before the year is out, and recommended steering with relative targets and rolling forecasts instead.

Source: Jeremy Hope and Robin Fraser, *Beyond Budgeting* (2003).

One test for every task

Every task must point toward the big goal. When a task does not, cut it. Work for safety, compliance and the continuity of the business counts as pointing to the goal: it keeps the company alive on the way there. In most companies this single rule frees more capacity than any new hire, and it costs no more than an honest hour per team.

Put the next review on the calendar

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CHAPTER 08

Built with the whole organisation

Leadership sets the rough direction, and after that the whole organisation joins the thinking about how to get there.



Every employee needs to know what she or he contributes to the goal. The more people take part in building the plan, the more they own the outcome. In most cases they know best what needs to happen in their area, because they do the work every day. Ask them.

The monthly meeting in every team, department and division serves this purpose. The team aligns on what it works on this month and how that work moves the next milestone. People who helped build a plan defend it when the work gets hard, because they recognise their own thinking in it.

Mike Maples paraphrases eight principles for teams that set out to build a breakthrough. One of them: involve the whole team in the big picture, because people become more creative when they see beyond their own role.

Source: Mike Maples Jr. and Peter Ziebelman, *Pattern Breakers* (2024), on principles for breakthrough teams.

As Walter Isaacson describes it, Robert Noyce ran Intel's business units like small, agile companies. Decisions that needed buy-in from other units went into open meetings where the people in the room could challenge the prevailing view, instead of travelling up the hierarchy.

Source: Walter Isaacson, *The Innovators* (2014), on Robert Noyce and Intel's meeting culture.

CHAPTER 09

When to change the target

In business, everything comes back to revenue and cash flow. When an initiative has produced no cash flow after years of trying, and the team has studied its causes and effects with care, change the target.

The decision is hard because people have invested years of their lives, and a clear method makes it fair and fast for everyone involved.

A change can happen on three levels, and each one has its own owner.

- Change the work when the team finds a better way to reach the mission.
- Revisit the mission when new evidence changes what the company can achieve: a trial result, a partner's decision, a market that moved.
- The vision changes by decision of the board, on the evidence and with the consequences of each option on the table.

For a company before its first revenue, the evidence takes the place of the cash flow.

Eric Ries frames the question as pivot or persevere: is the company making enough progress to believe that its original hypothesis is right, or does it need a structured change of course? Ries adds that a team with a vague hypothesis cannot fail in a clear way, and without a clear failure it lacks the impulse to change.

Source: Eric Ries, *The Lean Startup* (2011), on pivot or persevere.

Running ideas like small ventures

Some of the most successful companies treat new ideas as small ventures inside the company.

At Amazon, Jeff Bezos set clear conditions before investing shareholders' money in a new business: the opportunity must be able to earn the returns investors expect, grow large enough to matter for the whole company, serve customers who are underserved today, and allow Amazon to offer customers a distinct difference. Most of the inventing at Amazon, he wrote, follows one pattern: somebody has an idea, other people improve it, others raise objections, and the team then solves those objections.

Sources: Jeff Bezos, letter to shareholders for 2006, on the conditions for a new business. Jeff Bezos, *Invent and Wander* (2020), with an introduction by Walter Isaacson, on how inventing works at Amazon.

CHAPTER 09

Running ideas like small ventures

Coinbase launched an internal program in 2021 that put 10 percent of its resources into ideas pitched by its own employees. Selected ideas went through a review every quarter, and the company said from the start that it expected to stop some of them. In 2026 Brian Armstrong described a newer format: twice a year, anyone in the company can pitch a "next bet" to a panel of product leaders, and one yes from the panel is enough to start.

Sources: Coinbase, "Introducing Project 10%: Building a Culture of Repeatable Innovation at Coinbase", 2021, https://www.coinbase.com/blog/introducing-project-10-percent-building-a-culture-of-repeatable-innovation-at-coinbase. Coinbase, "Coinbase's Product Principles", https://www.coinbase.com/blog/coinbases-product-principles. CoinDesk, "Coinbase Earmarks 10% of Resources to Funding Staff-Pitched Moonshots", 21 April 2021. Benzinga, on Armstrong's "one yes" rule, April 2026, https://cdn2.benzinga.com/markets/tech/26/04/51671990/steve-wozniak-hp-coinbase-brian-armstrong-one-yes-innovation-rule

Ilya Strebulaev and Alex Dang describe the same principle in *The Venture Mindset*: fund initiatives in tranches, and build mechanisms to defund and close the ones that do not work.

Source: Ilya Strebulaev and Alex Dang, *The Venture Mindset* (2024).

Alex Dang explained the mechanics on my show with a poker analogy. A team sees a few cards, then more, and decides at each stage whether to stay in, double down or fold. He described how Amazon launched its one-to-two-hour delivery service, Prime Now, in a single New York zip code, collected feedback, and scaled to other cities after the results came back positive. Amazon's own announcement from December 2014 confirms the start in parts of Manhattan, with free two-hour and paid one-hour delivery. Ideas that fail the test get closed, he said, and every innovation lab that keeps them alive fills up with zombies that drain attention from the real winners.

Sources: Beginner's Mind, EP 152, "Alex Dang: Billion-Dollar Bets: Why VC's Best Decisions Go Against the Crowd", 4 February 2025, Prime Now at about 1:04:14, https://www.buzzsprout.com/779930/episodes/16563558-ep-152-alex-dang-billion-dollar-bets-why-vc-s-best-decisions-go-against-the-crowd. Amazon, "Amazon Introduces Prime Now", press release, 18 December 2014. Excerpt in EP 169, https://beginnersmind.buzzsprout.com/779930/episodes/18489056-ep-169-why-new-year-s-goals-fail-by-february-even-for-disciplined-people

The method stays the same in every case. Any employee can suggest an idea and look for a sponsor inside the company. The idea then runs for a fixed period, in many cases a year. If it works, it scales. If it does not, it stops, and the team takes the lessons into the next idea.

Four questions decide whether an idea gets that year:

1. What outcome must the idea show to keep going?
2. How much money does it need?
3. What will you do with the money?
4. With whom?

Decide what earns another round of funding

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CHAPTER 10

The toolbox

These seven exercises form the core of my planning work. Each one fits on one page.

01 **The destination.**
Write a page about the day the company reaches its vision. Who are the customers? What has changed for them? Who works in the company? What do people say about it? Read it aloud to the leadership team, and revise it until everyone recognises the same place.

02 **The milestone map.**
Start at the vision and work backwards. Which three to five milestones must be true on the way there? Write each one as an outcome a stranger could verify.

03 **The baseline.**
Fill in a Business Model Canvas for the company as it stands, and a second one for the company at the next milestone. The difference between the two pages is the work ahead. For a new business line, I run it as a workshop: the team brainstorms 10 to 20 value propositions, narrows them to five, spends one hour on a full canvas for each, and then commits to one.

04 **The scenario fan.**
For the next mission, write the base, best and bear case, then the growth and survival case. Name the two or three drivers that decide which case comes true.

05 **The pre-mortem.**
Imagine it is one year from now and the plan has failed. Everyone writes down why, on their own, for five minutes. Collect the reasons, rank them, and write a counter-plan for the most likely and most damaging ones.

06 **The monthly review.**
Five columns: the result to date, the outlook on the current course, the gap to the target, the action, and the owner with a date. Every review ends with who does what by when.

07 **The task check.**
List what each team works on this month. Next to each task, write the milestone it moves, or mark it as safety, compliance or continuity. Cut the tasks with an empty box.

CHAPTER 11

Where the method comes from

> Corporate planning is the work I have done the longest.

It started before my career began: in philanthropic organisations and in the newspaper project of my chess club. From the 1990s onward, computer games trained me to think from the outcome backwards.

Commercial school and the University of Graz gave me the tools, and my first project management lecture gave me the principle: big picture first, details after. Since the mid-1990s I have planned my own weeks in time blocks. Since 2001 I have kept a written goal map for my own years, with work, learning, sport and private life on one page. Today it lives in my notes, reviewed every week and every month. As a project assistant at evolaris, I worked on its first project, an EU programme, with the Universities of Graz and St. Gallen and with Harvard.

In M&A at Agrana, Atos Origin, Österreichische Post and One, I learned how large companies plan, align thousands of people and track progress month by month. In C-level and advisory board roles in more than seven drug-development and medtech companies, among them Nabriva Therapeutics, Themis Bioscience, Yaqrit and OncoOne, I built the same structure with leadership teams in startups and scale-ups, up to preparation for an IPO.

Martial arts and 17 races at marathon distance or longer taught me the same lesson from another side. The race is the big goal. The training plan gets the detail. The plan changes along the way, and the goal stays.

Over 26 years in leadership roles, the tools have changed with the size of each company. The logic has stayed the same.

CHAPTER 12

Questions and answers

01 Is corporate planning only for large companies?

Every company needs a vision, missions and operations. A startup needs them as much as a listed group. The difference lies in the level of detail, as chapter 6 shows.

02 My company has a budget. What changes?

A budget answers how much money goes where this year. A plan answers where the company goes and why each euro moves it closer. When the plan comes first, the budget becomes its translation into numbers, and every line has a reason.

03 Do you build the financial model?

My focus lies on the logic behind the numbers: the goal, the missions, cause and effect, and the rhythm that keeps everyone aligned. Your team, or the people who keep your books, then build the detailed figures on that logic.

04 How long does a planning project take?

That depends on where the root cause lies. Bring the decision in front of you to Your Next Move: you leave the session with one recommendation and a dated next step. If the company needs a wider project, you and I agree on its scope before it starts.

05 The board asks for more numbers. What then?

Start from the focus and the one to three key figures. Every additional number has to show which key figure or which mission it moves. Numbers that pass the test go into the board pack. The rest stays in the operational detail where the teams use it. The board sees the result to date, the outlook, the gap and the action against the agreed figures. When the board needs a new figure, the leadership team proposes it against the vision and the focus, and the board decides.

CHAPTER 12

Questions and answers

06 Does the whole team need to take part?

Leadership sets the direction. The more people contribute to the plan after that, the more they own the outcome. I work with boards, leadership teams and employees.

07 What if the board and the leadership team disagree on the next mission?

Start with the decision in dispute. Each person writes down the outcome they want for the company and the evidence that would change their view. If both sides want the same outcome, the disagreement lies in an assumption: name it, give someone the task of testing it, and decide on the result. If they want different outcomes, put both options on one page, with their consequences, and take the decision to the body that has the authority.

08 Do you work with research organisations?

Yes. The planning logic is the same. The outcomes differ: know-how, patents and high-impact publications, with funding from foundations, grants and partners.

09 Do you work in German?

This handbook is in English. Sessions run in English or German.

10 Is my company's information confidential?

Yes. Every engagement runs under a contract, and client work stays confidential. For the same reason, this handbook uses published cases from books and companies, and none of my own.

CHAPTER 13

How to work with me

Every engagement starts with one of two steps.

A free 15-minute call.

You get to know me, and you describe where your company stands and the decision in front of you.

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Your Next Move, EUR 500.

A structured first assessment in three steps, for one fixed price. Within 24 hours of booking, you receive a preparation sheet. The two of us then work through your situation in a 60-minute session on Zoom, in English or German. Within 24 hours after the session, you receive your de-brief: my core observations, one high-impact recommendation and a dated next step, plus the recording and the transcript.

Book Your Next Move ↗

From there, the work follows your situation. A planning project runs in a clear sequence:

1. **What you want to achieve.**
   You and I define the goal and the problems you see on the way.

2. **The root causes.**
   The work drills down from the symptoms to their causes. Sometimes the company lacks a big vision. Sometimes the vision is clear and the missions are missing. Sometimes the plan is fine and the monthly rhythm has stopped.

3. **The scope.**
   That assessment sets the work, milestone by milestone, and you decide before each one.

Some clients continue with me in an executive or advisory board role, to keep the plan alive over the years.

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