INSIGHTS

Strategy Days That Count

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Start with the purpose.
Give the days a clear assignment within the business's planning and decision-making cycle. Match the preparation to the commitment expected.

Use the team's attention well.
Work through trade-offs, challenge assumptions and build shared understanding. Be honest about which decisions are open.

Design what happens afterwards.
Agree owners, next steps and the forums that will carry decisions forward. Review execution and assumptions as conditions change.

Designing for the Monday after

Bringing a leadership team together for strategy days creates a rare opportunity: people who usually work across different priorities, functions and locations can give the same questions their full attention. That time deserves careful preparation and a clear purpose.

The value should be visible on the Monday after. People return with energy and a clearer sense of what matters. They know what has been agreed, what will stop or wait, and where they need colleagues' support. Difficult conversations have strengthened their understanding of one another and what delivery requires.

Getting there starts before the agenda is written. The days need to connect with how the business makes decisions and allocates resources: its budget, capacity plans, product roadmaps and priorities across businesses and regions. Otherwise, even a productive discussion can produce commitments that never enter the plans through which the business operates.

The starting question is simple:

> What does this team need to accomplish together, and what will make that possible?

01
Purpose

Give your strategy days a clear purpose

Where the long-term direction is established, annual strategy days can translate it into priorities, actions and measures for the year ahead. The team takes stock, examines what has changed and works through what delivery requires across functions, businesses or regions.

Other situations call for different work. A new leadership team may need a shared understanding of the business. A portfolio review may require choices between growth options. A change in the market may justify questioning assumptions that previously seemed secure.

Some organizations use several offsites during the year, each advancing a different piece of work. Each needs an assignment specific enough to guide its preparation and design.

Timing shapes that assignment. Before budget finalization, strategy days can influence priorities and resource allocation. After approval, the work may centre on specific objectives, dependencies and sequencing. New priorities remain possible, but the team needs to know which commitments it can change and which require further approval.

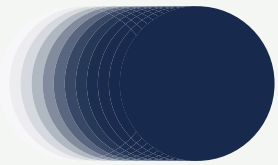
For a country or regional team, the task may be to translate group direction into local choices and identify issues requiring headquarters' involvement.

A simple map helps:

> Where will each intended outcome go next, who decides there, and when?

The answers also clarify who belongs in the room.

What shift does your leadership team need?

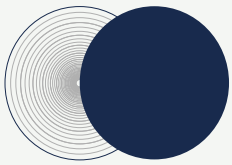


BROADEN

Operational tunnel vision

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New perspectives and possibilities

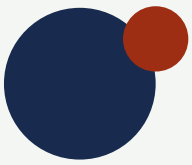


SHARPEN

Competing priorities

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Clear choices and trade-offs

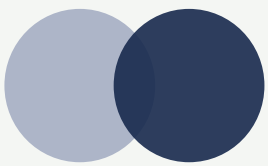


ACTIVATE

Strategic intentions without traction

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Resourced action and momentum



UNITE

Fragmented leadership

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Collective effectiveness

02
Preparation

Match preparation to the commitment

In one aerospace company, the strategy days had a clear purpose: review the portfolio of businesses and products, including existing profit engines and new opportunities, and decide which growth options deserved further work.

I provided the evaluation method and challenged each team's proposal in the weeks beforehand, so the options were ready for a substantive discussion.

More than 30 people attended. Each evaluation hung as a large printout on the wall, and teams pitched their options to the group. Each received a decision: stop, hold or develop further under stated conditions. The next step had a date and a named owner with permission to deepen the business case.

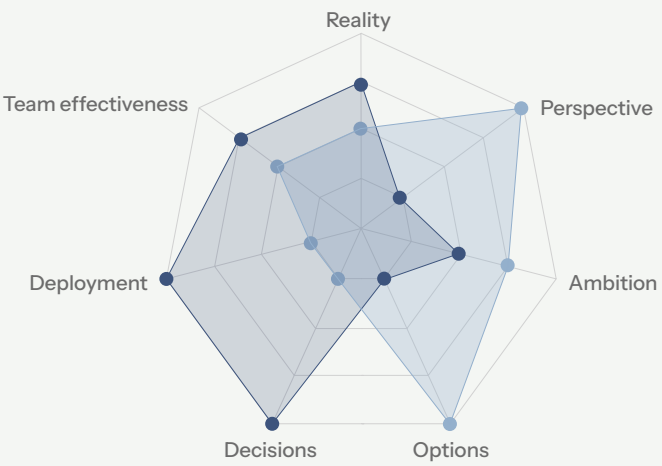
Funding further development was a different decision from approving the eventual investment. That distinction determined how much evidence was needed and gave the discussion its focus.

The days had a runway in and a runway out: evaluations ready before anyone travelled, decisions leaving with a date and an owner, and the next forum a business-case review rather than another offsite.

Preparation should reflect the commitment expected. A decision session needs developed options and sufficient evidence to assess their consequences. Action planning requires a clear picture of performance, changed conditions and commitments already made elsewhere. Exploration needs a well-framed question, relevant inputs and room to discover something new.

An offsite may reveal that a fundamental question has not been examined properly. Commissioning further work can be a sound conclusion, provided the team establishes what remains unresolved and how it will be addressed.

Different challenges. Different designs.



Illustrative outcome profiles

● Execution ● Exploration

Strategic challenge → **Outcome profile** → Workshop design → Follow-through

03
Participation

Give people work worth coming together for

Presentations can establish facts, introduce perspectives and frame decisions. Much of the information-sharing can happen beforehand. The scarce resource in the room is collective attention.

A growth priority may look attractive to sales while raising difficult questions about capacity, working capital and delivery. Those perspectives need to meet. Working through the consequences together can expose dependencies and produce options that no function would have developed alone.

Individual conversations beforehand help me identify where that work is needed: where views differ, which concerns remain unspoken and which disagreements deserve serious time. An external perspective can make some of those conversations easier.

Separating facilitation from decision ownership also allows the CEO to participate fully while someone else attends to the discussion. That includes drawing out quieter contributions, challenging premature conclusions and connecting ideas across the room.

Group work needs enough time for people to build on one another's thinking, examine contradictions and bring the results together. A wall of flipcharts is not yet something people can act on.

04
Assumptions

Test the assumptions behind the direction

A leadership team can leave fully aligned around assumptions it has never examined. An order book depends on customers maintaining their schedules. A forecast assumes prices hold. An investment case relies on a particular pace of adoption or regulatory change. Where those assumptions materially affect the choice, they deserve explicit attention.

In my scenario work, the starting point is a live decision and the uncertainties that could change the answer. For a proposed market entry, what must be true about demand, competitor behaviour or regulation? How would the options perform if those conditions developed differently?

Working through plausible futures can reveal which choices remain attractive, which depend heavily on one outcome and where an alternative deserves consideration. The conclusion might be to proceed, stage an investment, test a critical assumption or preserve an option.

The method follows the question. Scenarios help test choices under different conditions. A nightmare competitor can challenge a comfortable view of the company's advantage. A red team can examine where a proposal could fail.

These exercises earn their place when they change the team's judgement or intended action. The essential question is how much commitment the available evidence warrants.

05
Trust

Be honest about what is open

An offsite loses credibility when people are invited to shape a decision that has already been made. Steering a team towards a predetermined answer while presenting it as the team's own puts trust at risk. If the direction is settled, say so. There can still be substantial work on its implications, obstacles and delivery. If a proposal is open to challenge, allow the discussion to influence it.

Where the final decision belongs to the owner, CEO or board, make that authority clear. The team can develop recommendations, challenge assumptions and assess consequences without being promised a decision it does not own.

Then test what agreement means in practice. What will each leader give more attention to? What stops or is deferred? Which resources move? Where does delivery depend on another function or region?

Agreement that cannot answer these questions is a mood, not a commitment.

06
Setting

Let the setting serve the work

I have run strategy days in production plants and converted industrial buildings, in the Swiss mountains and on the Mediterranean coast. Each setting offered something different. The choice starts with what the team needs to experience, understand or discuss.

A production site can reconnect executives with the capabilities and constraints behind the numbers. Speaking with the people who make and deliver the product can reveal constraints and possibilities that management reports leave out. Bringing a global leadership team to a regional office can similarly bring local colleagues, customers and market conditions into the discussion.

Distance from everyday surroundings can create space for reflection and uninterrupted conversation. For dispersed executives, simply having time together matters. Conversations repeatedly postponed on scheduled calls may finally happen over dinner or on a walk between sessions.

Activities deserve the same thought. An unfamiliar experience may help the team reflect on communication or cooperation. Enjoyment and connection are also worthwhile purposes in their own right.

The programme should leave room for both focused work and conversations that nobody could have put on the agenda.

07

Follow-through

Establish how the team will learn and adjust

A once-a-year workshop cannot settle every choice for the next twelve months. Long-term direction and capability investments may remain valid for years, while assumptions, forecasts and sequencing change much sooner.

The team should leave clear about what it is committing to now, what remains open and what would justify reconsideration.

Priorities need accountable owners, initial milestones and measures of progress. Decisions need to enter the relevant plans, budgets and approval processes. The wider organization needs a clear explanation of what has changed and what that means for its work.

For material commitments, the team should also identify the critical assumptions and the developments that would warrant a review. Someone needs responsibility for watching them.

Quarterly strategy reviews can then examine execution and learning together: **what have we discovered, which assumptions still hold, and where should we accelerate, adjust, stop or commit further?**

This requires judgement in both directions. Some commitments need time to work. Some developments require attention before the next scheduled review.

Before you plan

Five questions for your next strategy days

01 What must this team accomplish together?

02 Which decisions can it take, and what preparation do they require?

03 Which assumptions need to be tested before committing?

04 What does the team need from being together?

05 Where will the conclusions take effect, and how will they be reviewed?

These questions also help determine whether an offsite is the right format. A straightforward communication task may need a shorter meeting. An unprepared decision may require more groundwork or a different assignment.

What should be different on the Monday after your next strategy days?

Clarity when it matters.



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About the author

Dr Frank Heyd advises leadership teams on strategic direction, organization and decisions under uncertainty. His work combines portfolio choices, scenario planning and strategy execution, helping leaders test assumptions and turn decisions into action. He leads Heyd Strategy and is a regular guest lecturer at London Business School.

Discuss your next strategy days

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