

PRAISE FOR UNBLOCK

“Brilliant... provides leaders with a practical tool kit to help Unblock the challenges that hold most teams back.”

*NICK ANDREWS, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF
ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT — EXPEDIA*

“I enjoyed the book a lot – it is easy to read and comprehend. The stories are lively and provide great examples to understand practices described.”

*JULIA HAUTZ, PROFESSOR OF STRATEGIC
MANAGEMENT — UNIVERSITY OF INNSBRUCK*

“This book takes deep organizational experience to impactful practices; it unblocks energy through aligned autonomy. The bad news is: there is no more excuse for not experimenting with these drills.”

CARSTEN STOLZ, CFO – BALOISE

“This book provides many tools and examples from various industries. Instead of lofty new theories, this is a practical guide for effective execution, offering advice that is surprisingly simple yet often overlooked by many organizations.”

*KEES SMALING, CTO INTERNATIONAL —
AEGON*

"I love the many anecdotes and stories, which bring past experiences to life. This book provides many great lessons. It is well-written, and I never got bored."

*MIKE O'RIORDAN, SVP EMEA AND APAC –
INGREDION*

"This book invites you to reflect on the performance of yourself, your team, and your organization. I appreciate that it avoids a one-size-fits-all approach, instead providing modules that you can apply based on your specific context."

*WILMA VAN DIJK, CEO — ROTTERDAM THE
HAGUE AIRPORT*

"Most books you read contain the theory, but few link it with practical, actionable examples. This one does, and is impactful and authentic, easy to digest. It will be the book for the team."

*ANDERS OHRLING, CIO EUROPE —
ELECTROLUX*

"Reading the book was a celebration of recognition. I enjoyed the mix of anecdotes and practically applicable techniques. I will keep picking up this book and using it to continue improving."

*HENK VAN STEEG, HEAD OF SOFTWARE
ENGINEERING — THALES*

"This book is highly relevant. I enjoyed its no-nonsense style, recognizable real-life cases (that often made me 'cringe'), and practical tips that elegantly bring the solutions home."

*BARBARA ARNST, VP AGILITY &
TRANSFORMATION — TELENET*

UNBLOCK

CLEAR THE WAY FOR RESULTS AND DEVELOP
A THRIVING ORGANIZATION

JURRIAAN KAMER

CONTENTS

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT	13
Alignment + Autonomy	15
A new role for leaders	16
Unblocking six elements	17
How to get started	19
How the book is structured	20

STRATEGY

UNBLOCKING STRATEGY	25
Does your strategy help you win?	26
Does your strategy create alignment?	27
1. CREATE ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC INTENT	29
The strategy offsite that felt good but didn't deliver...	29
Avoid the 'air sandwich' and define a strategy that creates focus	33
Articulate the Strategic Intent connected to your big goal	37
2. PRIORITIZE WITH EXPLICIT TRADE-OFFS	42
They wanted it all but ended up with nothing...	42
What happens if you spread your strategic initiatives like peanut butter	45
Make tough choices explicit with Even-Over statements	46
Use Even-Overs to bring your strategy to life	50
DON'T CASCADE YOUR STRATEGY; INTEGRATE IT INSTEAD	52
Improve strategy realization by letting people shape it	53
Let people align themselves to the strategy	54
Strategy is not a once-a-year thing	56

STEERING

UNBLOCKING STEERING	61
Four types of problems that require different methods	62
What about OKRs?	66

3. CREATE A RHYTHM OF PROGRESS WITH 90-DAY OUTCOMES	68
The leadership team that didn't operate like a team...	68
Shared outcomes to improve your leadership team's impact	71
Continuous steering by working in 90-day cycles	73
Opening up 90-day Outcomes across the organization	76
4. MEASURE PROGRESS WITH STEERING METRICS	78
How a bonus provoked irrational behavior...	78
When metrics become targets, the problems start	81
Steering Metrics: leading indicators that inform decisions	83
Form autonomous teams around the metrics that matter	87
No carrots or sticks	88

DECISIONS

UNBLOCKING DECISIONS	93
Pick the right tool for the job	94
5. REDUCE ANALYSIS PARALYSIS WITH REVERSIBLE DECISIONS	95
How a great idea got stuck in meetings...	95
The hidden cost of 'perfect' decisions	98
Hats, haircuts and tattoos	99
Reducing analysis paralysis in your team	100
6. MAKE HIGH-QUALITY, COMPLEX DECISIONS WITH CONSENT	103
How progress stalled when the CEO wanted everyone to agree...	103
Find everyone's range of tolerance	106
Decide how to decide	108
Step 1: The art of making proposals	109
Step 2: Ask clarifying questions before reacting	110
Step 3: Reaction round	111
Step 4: Getting to consent	113

OWNERSHIP

UNBLOCKING OWNERSHIP	119
Two factors that contribute to ownership	120
People don't need to be empowered	121

7. FOSTER AUTONOMY WITH CLEAR DECISION RIGHTS	123
How a disempowered Formula 1 team became world champions	123
Make boundaries explicit to set people free	125
Why RACIs are insufficient	126
Clarify roles and decision rights	127
Improve your leadership team with roles and decision rights	131
8. LET PEOPLE CHOOSE WHAT TO CONTRIBUTE	134
The rise and fall of an innovative idea...	134
A company where everyone can be an entrepreneur	135
Enable people to constantly bring new ideas to life	139
A marketplace for Mission-Based Teams	140
Clarify how much risk is acceptable with the waterline	141
Advice Process for more sensible action everywhere	144
How to coach others to take ownership of decisions	146
Relinquishing control	147
HOW TO CHANGE THE STRUCTURE AND IMPROVE OWNERSHIP	149
The top-down reorg that reduced ownership	150
Co-create the organizational chart with the people affected	153

TEAMWORK

UNBLOCKING TEAMWORK	159
Five dynamics of great teams: 'How' is more important than 'who'	160
9. INCREASE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY THROUGH EMPATHY	163
The hidden history that held the team back...	163
How to improve psychological safety	166
Personal User Manuals: How to work with me	167
Check-in Rounds to connect as human beings	170
Increase empathy with Intentions, Concerns, Boundaries, and Dreams	173
10. DEVELOP HABITS FOR REFLECTION AND FEEDBACK	176
The costly mistake that didn't get him fired...	176
Make learning from failure the norm	179
Retrospectives to unlock continuous improvement	180

Feedback exercises to reduce harmony addiction	184
Closing Rounds for regular micro-reflection	186

MEETINGS

UNBLOCKING MEETINGS	193
What meetings should do for you	194
11. DRIVE PROGRESS WITH COLLABORATIVE TEAM MEETINGS	196
The weekly meeting everyone dreaded...	196
Turning the weekly meeting upside down	198
Why the Unblock Meeting works	204
How to get started	205
DON'T CHAIR YOUR MEETING, BUT LET SOMEONE FACILITATE	207
How to improve every meeting you are in	210
How to have awesome hybrid meetings	211
12. MINIMIZE MEETINGS WITH MEETING ROUTINES	213
The broken telephone game...	213
When (not) to use 1:1s	216
Operating Rhythm: an organization's heartbeat	217
A meeting routine that puts this book into practice	218
Cross-team meeting routines	221
HOW TO REDUCE MEETINGS ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION	225

NOW WHAT?

HOW (NOT) TO CHANGE	233
Growing the change without destroying aligned autonomy	234
How to develop long-lasting cultural change at scale	235
Thank you	240
Resources and services	241
Acknowledgments	243

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: EVEN-OVERS EXERCISE	247
APPENDIX 2: INTEGRATIVE DECISION MAKING GUIDE	249

APPENDIX 3: TRADE-OFFS OF INTEGRATIVE DECISION MAKING	251
APPENDIX 4: PERSONAL USER MANUAL TEAM EXERCISE	253
APPENDIX 5: RETROSPECTIVE STRUCTURE	255
APPENDIX 6: FEEDBACK PARTY EXERCISES	257
APPENDIX 7: UNBLOCK MEETING STRUCTURE	260
Notes	264
Further reading	270
Also by Jurriaan Kamer	273

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

 8 MINS

Do you need to achieve significant outcomes quickly? Perhaps you want to double your company's market share or reinvent its core business. Or you are bringing a new product to market or need to implement regulations.

If so, this book is for you; it's designed for leaders who want to move the needle.

Think back to the moment you took on your role. Do you remember how excited you were about the opportunity to make a lasting positive impact? What about the audacious vision and plans you presented that landed you the job?

How is it going? Are things going according to plan? Chances are, you're becoming impatient because things are moving soooo slowly. When you try to shift the organization to the next gear, it seems blocked. Pushing harder doesn't work. It feels like swimming through peanut butter.

To achieve your goals, you need people to take ownership. You need less talking, more action, less analysis and faster decisions, less bureaucracy, and more initiative—you need to *unblock* your organization.

Let me try to help you.

I'm Jurriaan, a speaker, consultant and co-founder of Unblock, born and raised in The Netherlands. In the past 20 years, I've worked alongside hundreds of leaders worldwide to help them overcome organizational barriers and achieve better outcomes.

Regardless of geography or industry, leaders wrestle with similar problems. Hierarchical, bureaucratic, command-and-control structures are holding back their organizations, whether in pharma, logistics, government, food or financial services.

Even though they have recruited some of the best talent, the new hires quickly run away in frustration. People are disengaged and chase after goals but don't understand why they matter. Decision-making is slow and happens far away from relevant information and expertise. More nimble competitors are innovating and responding faster to customer needs.

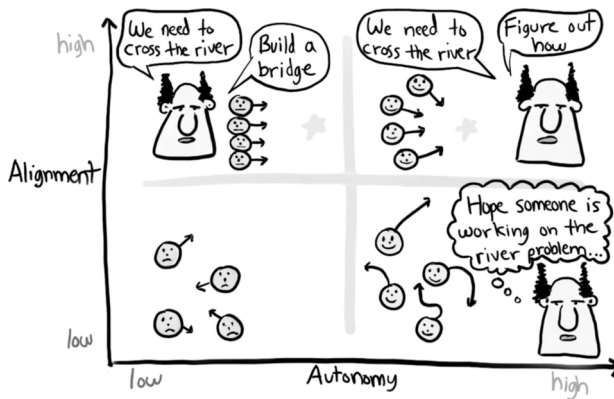
I've always been passionate about creating high-performing organizations that achieve seemingly impossible things *and* are also fulfilling for those who work there. Early on in my career, I achieved great results by shifting organizations toward more trust- and autonomy-based leadership, which allowed them to leverage everyone's thinking power and skills to deliver more value.

But in certain cases, the pendulum swung too far the other way. After I coached leaders to become 'servant leaders'—with a primary aim to care for the well-being of their team—some let go of too much. Although most of the people they 'served' enjoyed their freedom and started working on exciting ideas, others were confused by the lack of direction. Ultimately, it was terrible for business; the lack of cohesion meant that the organizational goals weren't achieved.

It took me several years to unravel this sticky problem. The main question I had in mind was: How can leaders develop a workplace where professionals have the freedom to make important decisions and be aligned with organizational goals?

ALIGNMENT + AUTONOMY

At first sight, alignment and autonomy seem like two opposite ends of a scale. But when I researched the inner workings of the Swedish music company Spotify back in 2012, I learned that this wasn't the case. Spotify had both; they built their organization on *aligned autonomy*.



Drawing by Henrik Kniberg, former agile coach at Spotify. Used with permission.¹

When there is aligned autonomy, the people and teams:

1. are **aligned**, aware of the strategic context they're operating in and what it means for their work;
2. have **autonomy**, the freedom to self-organize and the authority to decide what to do, how they work and how to contribute to the organization's goals based on their expertise and responsibility.

Aligned autonomy is applied by some of the world's fastest, most innovative companies, regardless of industry or geography, including software companies such as Google, Formula 1 racing teams and China-based home appliances company Haier, the fastest-growing appliance manufacturer in the world. But I'll elaborate on that later.

Popular methods of management such as self-management, Lean, Agile, Holacracy, and Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) are also based on aligned autonomy. I've experimented with and found inspiration in all of them. But I don't recommend implementing a single framework dogmatically; no one size fits all. That's why, in this book, I've curated the practices from *across* those methods that I've consistently found effective in accelerating results.

There are a lot of other great books out there—theoretical ones, ideas books, case studies, and many others. But this book is designed to be as pragmatic and practical as possible. It guides you to overcome your blockers and it outlines how to put the practices into *action*.

A word of caution though. For the practices in this book to have the desired effect and create aligned autonomy, they must be applied with the principles of trust, transparency, learning, experimentation, participation, and autonomy in mind.

A NEW ROLE FOR LEADERS

Aligned autonomy requires a different approach to leadership. When decision-making is distributed to the people who do the work, it becomes more important to work 'on' the system, rather than 'in' the system.

Instead of being a metaphorical *traffic controller*, where you know all the details and make the important decisions, this book provides tools to act as a *road designer*. Road designers create the environment where results emerge by providing clarity, direction, and guardrails. They are still in control by setting helpful constraints and explaining *which* problems need to be solved and *why*.

Finally, to manifest cultural and behavioral change, it is important to realize that people "pay more attention to your feet than your lips."² In other words, as a leader, you need to model the behavior you want to see others adopt. That is why I have included tips on how to apply new principles and practices in your *leadership team* so that you and

your colleagues can become an example for the rest of your organization.

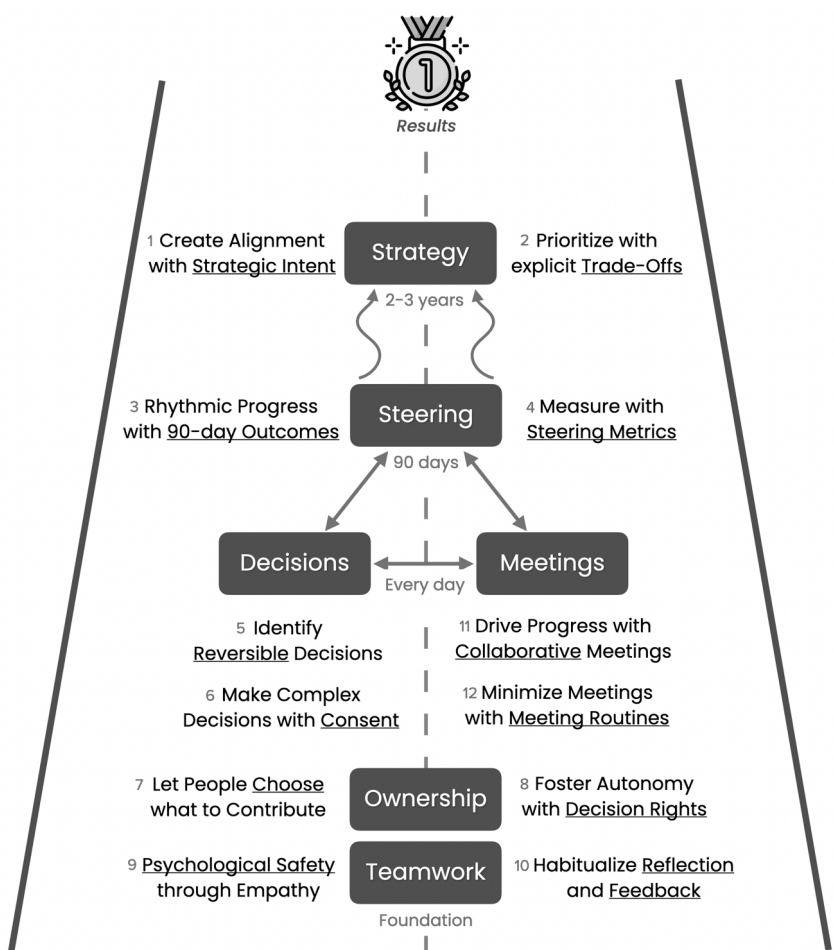
UNBLOCKING SIX ELEMENTS

Unblocking is the process of identifying and removing blockages that prevent an organization from achieving its desired results. Blockages have a similar effect on organizations as they do on drains and pipes: they reduce flow between parts of the system, decreasing overall effectiveness. When there is a blockage, you can't leverage the collective intelligence, talent, and energy of the people in your organization.

Below are six common elements where organizations are blocked. By replacing the blockage with an alternative practice, you can accelerate results and unlock the potential that is already inside:

1. **Strategy:** Craft a strategy that actually creates alignment and focus at scale.
2. **Steering:** Set effective goals and find the right things to measure.
3. **Decisions:** Improve the speed of decision-making at every level, while increasing quality and inclusion.
4. **Ownership:** Develop a workplace where people happily take ownership and can do what is right for the organization.
5. **Teamwork:** Develop psychologically safe teams that master reflection, improvement and feedback.
6. **Meetings:** Get rid of useless meetings and replace them with carefully designed ones that create a heartbeat of progress.

UNBLOCK



WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

The diagram shows how the six elements hang together at different time horizons. For each of the six elements, I will introduce two practices, numbered 1 to 12.

In the final chapter, I cover a modern approach to leading long-lasting cultural **change** efforts that won't fail like most others.

HOW TO GET STARTED

There is no need to unblock all six elements at once. In fact, only change what is broken or add what is missing. Don't touch what works well.

Take a close look at which of these six elements your organization is most blocked by and start there, or take the self-assessment (see below). Then, review the practical methods for each element that can replace your current routines and ways of working. With your team, decide which practice would be most valuable and safe to try.

I say *try* because every organization and team is different. Try a new practice for a certain period, then review it with your team to see if it helped improve your situation. If so, great! If not, appreciate what you've learned. Then, adapt it or try something else. Through your successes, build momentum and enthusiasm. Invite other teams to do the same.

This approach to change is based on the principles of invitation and consent. Instead of forcing people to change, we invite them and ask their consent to try new things. Unlike most blueprint-driven approaches, this experiment-driven approach creates long-lasting change; more about this in the final chapter, 'How (not) to change.'

Over time, you can apply these practices at team, leadership, and organizational level. In some cases, they are *fractal*—they repeat at every level and are interconnected. For example, you can adopt Retrospectives (meetings focused on reflection and improvement) at every level, but the improvement is multiplied when you connect the lessons learned across the levels. You'll read more on this throughout the book.

UNBLOCK

This also means that if you don't have the authority to change the whole organization, you can still introduce these ideas in the team or part of the organization you lead or are able to influence.

* * *

Take the self-assessment

FOR ADVICE ON WHERE YOU'RE BLOCKED THE MOST, TAKE THE FIVE-MINUTE SELF-ASSESSMENT. IT'S A QUESTIONNAIRE TO HELP YOU IDENTIFY WHICH AREAS OF YOUR ORGANIZATION ARE MOST IN NEED OF DEVELOPMENT. YOU WILL ALSO GAIN ACCESS TO A SHORT VIDEO FOR EACH OF THE CHAPTERS: [UNBLOCK.WORKS/SCAN](https://unblock.works/scan)

* * *

HOW THE BOOK IS STRUCTURED

You don't need to read this book from start to finish. The chapters are designed to be standalone, so you can jump directly to what feels most relevant to your situation.

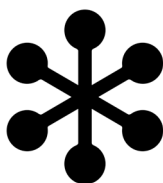
Each practice is introduced through a short case study or story to illustrate what it looks like when *blocked*. The stories are fictional, but based on experience. Feel free to skip them if they are not your cup of tea.

Every chapter ends with a list of outcomes describing what it looks like when *unblocked*. Use it to assess your own situation.

I hope this gives you enough information to dive in. Let's set out on this journey together, clearing the way for results by transforming your organization and enable everyone within it to thrive.

Now, return to the table of contents (or the diagram with the six elements) and jump to the chapter that you are most drawn to.

STRATEGY





"That's our vision statement. Our management likes to keep it real."

By Jonathan Brown, copyright Corporater. Used with permission.

UNBLOCKING STRATEGY

 4 MINS

While you may think that your organization is blocking progress, more often than not, it's the strategy itself that's insufficient.

Strategies often fall flat because they:

- consist of vague long-term aspirations or long lists of detailed tasks;
- lack clear choices, trying to do too many things;
- are too rigid and plan-driven;
- are based on a naive, "let's just do it!" attitude.

But if you get it right, a strategy significantly increases your chances of success. A strategy needs to accomplish two things:

1. It needs to position your organization to outperform competitors in a chosen playing field (a strategy that helps you win).
2. It needs to focus the organization's energy on moving in a specific direction to create a joint outcome. In other words, it needs to inspire a change in what people *do* every day (a strategy that creates alignment).

DOES YOUR STRATEGY HELP YOU WIN?

A strategy is a hypothesis of *how* you will win in the market or fulfill your big ambition. It's a set of choices that allows you to overcome obstacles and capture opportunities.¹

Let's look at an example:

Our strategy is to become the #1 shoe supplier to construction companies.

On paper, this sounds great, but it is not a strategy.

To create a strategy that helps you overcome obstacles and capture opportunities, reflect on the following questions:

- What possible futures can we imagine? What risks and opportunities may emerge?²
- What are the current trends? (economy, nature, tech, society, industry, government)
- What do our customers need? What drives their decisions?
- What is happening with our stakeholders, suppliers, partnerships, and competitors?
- What are the biggest challenges that our people face every day? What gets in their way?
- What capabilities do we have that we aren't leveraging? What capabilities do we need to build?
- What market or industry do we want to be active in?

Go deeper by asking "why?" a few times. The exploration results in a 'diagnosis,' a simple description of the nature of the challenge (obstacles and opportunities) that the strategy is responding to.

So, going back to the shoe-supplier example, how about:

We have discovered that rubber is lightweight, strong, cheap and sustainably produced. Our strategy is to leverage the latest rubber molding technology to produce cheap, high-quality construction shoes, because nobody else offers them.

That's much better. Although I know absolutely nothing about rubber or shoe materials; it might be completely bogus, but I'm sure you catch my drift.

DOES YOUR STRATEGY CREATE ALIGNMENT?

Let's look at another example; Barnes & Noble's 2021 mission statement,³ likely created through many days of wordsmithing in a stuffy conference room where they tried to make everyone happy:

To operate the best omnichannel specialty retail business in America, helping both our customers and booksellers reach their aspirations while being a credit to the communities we serve.

Now, imagine that Barnes & Noble is hiring a new bookstore attendant, and they read this statement. Would they know how they can contribute to the strategy in their daily work? I don't think so.

One of two things can happen when people encounter a bunch of fancy but meaningless words on a PowerPoint slide—such as “to meet customer needs,” “to grow profitably,” or “to differentiate from the competition.” Some shrug their shoulders, ignore it, and get on with their daily work. Others feel confused and frustrated because it doesn't help guide their work.

To let your strategy create focus and alignment across the organization, it should, at the very least, be written in simple terms that everyone can understand—without fluff. Even better, after reading the strategy, everyone should be able to derive what they are expected to do differently in their day-to-day roles and work toward it.

An example of an alternative (book store) strategy could be:

We know people come to our physical stores (rather than buy online) because they want help finding the right book. To become even more famous for matching people's aspirations with their next book, our strategy for next year is to prioritize 'in-store customer conversations even over cost savings'.

UNBLOCK

In the chapters that follow, I'll introduce the practices of Strategic Intent and Even-Overs. These can help you define a strategy that creates alignment and focuses day-to-day action.

Strategy is everywhere. Strategy is fractal, meaning the practice repeats at every level of the organization. For example, a departmental or regional strategy should contribute to the top-level strategy of the whole organization. So, if you don't have the authority to change the whole organization's strategy, I invite you to craft a strategy for the part of the organization you lead or influence that will help you move the needle.

PRACTICE 1

CREATE ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC INTENT

 17 MINS

THE STRATEGY OFFSITE THAT FELT GOOD BUT DIDN'T DELIVER...

In this story, we're following Ali, Head of HR at PrimoCura, a large private hospital. After a two-hour road trip, he arrived at the Woodgrove Inn—a conference location in the middle of the forest.

* * *

Ali loved PrimoCura's annual retreat: being in nature inspired him and helped generate exciting ideas.

Ying, the CEO, invited Ali and the executive team to define next year's strategy. She welcomed the group: "This is always the favorite part of my year. Today and tomorrow, we can think big, define where we want to be, and develop our plans. I invite you to be brave and think out of the box."

"Our North Star goal will stay the same," she continued. "We provide the best possible care to our patients. But it's up to us to decide what it means for next year. "

First, Ying asked the group to develop the strategic pillars—or big themes—for the next year. After a few rounds of discussions, they landed on:

- Patient Care
- People & Culture
- Facilities & Equipment

It captured everything that seemed essential to the hospital right now.

But then, the IT Director asserted, “We need an additional pillar on Digitalization. As you all know, we’re investing heavily in digitizing patient records, providing e-consultations, and enabling patients to schedule their appointments online. This must continue next year.”

Some contested that it should be part of the Patient Care pillar. However, given the significance of the changes and investments, the group ultimately agreed to add it as a separate pillar.

Next, the Financial Director spoke up. “I think we need to add a pillar on Operational Excellence,” he argued. “Next year, we need to do more with less or we won’t meet our financial targets.” The group grudgingly agreed.

For the rest of the day and the following morning, they split into sub-groups to discuss the “must-win battles” for next year, sharing and debating their ideas after every round.

Around lunchtime, they were close to consensus. The positive energy was palpable; everyone was excited and inspired by what had come together during the retreat. They wrote the following strategic goals on a large whiteboard:

Patient Care:

- Launch our new care facility focused on skin diseases.
- Improve patient care by implementing our new teamwork approach in our cardiac and intensive care centers.

CREATE ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC INTENT

People & Culture:

- We work as one diverse team and give each other feedback.
- Hire eighty people through our employee marketing efforts.

Facilities & Equipment:

- Modernize Building Two.
- Replace our MRI machines with new ones.

Digitalization:

- Launch our new patient portal on July 1st.
- Successfully migrate the data from the old system to the new one.

Operational Excellence:

- We reduce costs by 12%.
- Our staff is constantly looking for ways to reduce unnecessary spending.

Ying looked satisfied. She said: “We have time for one more round of improvements. Are there any comments?”

Ali responded, “I like that Patient Care highlights an improvement project we’re doing in cardiac and intensive care, but how about all the other departments that are trying to improve patient care every day? Shouldn’t we include the OneTeam project we are running in our blood center? And what about oncology’s ‘No-more-waste initiative’?”

The group agreed that leaving out those projects would demotivate the teams working on them. Ying proposed to rephrase it to: “Constantly improve patient care through continuous improvement.” Ali responded: “I like that; yes, it sounds great.”

Then the Head of Facilities jumped in: “The modernization of Building Two is a multi-year thing. I propose to change it to “Phase one of the modernization of Building Two is complete”. Ying challenged him: “What would it take to finalize it in the next year?” He responded: “Well, I’d need double the budget, and with the financial targets, I

don't see how that's possible." The group agreed that completing phase one would already be a massive achievement.

At the end of the second day, as he drove home, Ali reflected on the work they had done. The 'wordsmithing' was tedious, but it was a logical part of the process. He felt energized by what they had accomplished. On the other hand, in his gut, he sensed something was off. He just didn't know what yet...

To communicate strategy, the hospital traditionally used a management cascade: they would invite all managers into a meeting room and share the presentation, expecting them to explain it to their teams. This time, they wanted to try something new that would allow them to reach the whole workforce.

One week later, during the morning coffee break, they hosted a half-hour webinar about the new strategy. People were expected to join the virtual meeting if they could do so without sacrificing patient care; others could watch the recording later.

More than 200 people dialed in. The executive team enthusiastically presented the goals for each pillar. At the end, they solicited feedback. The CEO asked, "Are there any questions?"

Resounding silence. Ali was not surprised; he knew speaking in a large virtual room with the executive team present was scary. The meeting facilitator was prepared for this and invited people to submit questions and reactions anonymously via a tool.

Reactions started pouring in:

- "It looks very similar to last year's strategy. The skin care center, the Building Two modernization, and the MRI machines are all ongoing projects. What is actually new?"
- "*Constantly improve patient care through continuous improvement* may sound great on paper, but I have no idea what it means in practice. As a nurse, I'm always improving how we give care. How does this affect my work?"

CREATE ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC INTENT

- “It sounds like cost-cutting is important, so why are we spending money on new MRI machines when the old ones still work fine?”
- “Our main ‘competitor’ has just opened a location close by. They use the latest AI technology to assist doctors. Why is there nothing in the strategy about that?”
- “We have a significant staff shortage. When we try to hire people, we hear time and again that the biggest problem is that we are paying 15% less than other employers in the area. How can we hire 80 new people while cutting 12% costs? What is our strategy for resolving the staff shortage?”

The quantity and tone of the feedback flustered the executive team. There was no time left in the meeting to address the questions, so the CEO concluded: “Thanks for your excellent input. The strategy only defines the WHAT. It is up to you and your teams to develop the HOW. Please refer to your manager to discuss how you can implement the strategy in your team and area.”

Ali heard a collective sigh and tangibly felt the disappointment. Everyone went about their business as usual—and absolutely nothing changed.

* * *

AVOID THE ‘AIR SANDWICH’ AND DEFINE A STRATEGY THAT CREATES FOCUS

Take a moment to reflect on why you believe PrimoCura’s strategy fell flat. Does your strategy suffer from similar weaknesses?

One of the main problems is that PrimoCura’s strategy is an *Air Sandwich*.¹ At the top, they have their purpose: “We provide the best possible care to our patients”, and vague, long-term aspirations such as, “We work as one diverse team.”

At the bottom, they have created an all-encompassing list of everyone’s day-to-day activities. Concrete and short-term goals from, “We have

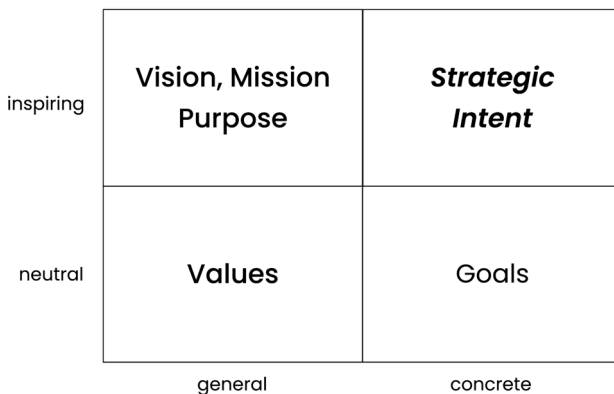
replaced our MRI machines with new ones” to “Our new patient portal launches on July 1st.”

But there is no filling in the middle of the sandwich: the context for the strategy—details and rationale for *why these actions* were selected. If you leave these out, people will find it difficult to get enthusiastic about the strategy, and they will be left wondering why other options didn’t make it.

It also hinders aligned autonomy. There is a risk that teams will create the requested *outputs*. But without understanding the ‘why’ behind the goal, people can’t and won’t use their individual creativity and talents to contribute to achieving the desired *outcomes*. This situation also overloads leaders because people continuously ask for directions, approval or permission.

Defining a strategy with the right balance of generality and specificity is an art. It must be inspiring but concrete. It must explain ‘how’ without prescribing solutions. It must be sufficiently ambitious and long term to allow for multiple solutions but sufficiently short-term to seem achievable.

Author Greg McKeown defines this as a Strategic Intent. In his book *Essentialism*, he explains that a Strategic Intent is “one decision that settles one thousand later decisions.” (See the diagram below.)²



CREATE ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC INTENT

While Vision, Mission, and Purpose statements are inspiring, they are rarely concrete enough to inform day-to-day decisions. Goals (including plans, roadmaps, targets and other tactics) are concrete, but hinder aligned autonomy because they often dictate the ‘how.’ Because strategic intent is both inspiring *and* concrete it fosters alignment and autonomy.

* * *

Example: Digitalizing a bank through Strategic Intent

ABN AMRO is one of the largest and oldest banks in The Netherlands. At the end of 2017, Klaas Ariaans (Director of Personal Banking) set out to reduce overhead costs and accelerate the bank’s digital transformation to meet changing customer needs. He set the following Strategic Intent:

Consumers can manage 100% of their banking needs through video calls.

Today, this doesn’t sound particularly groundbreaking. However, at the time the Strategic Intent was written, less than 1% of customer banking interactions were done by video call; any time you needed to talk to an advisor to secure a mortgage or insurance, or to gain advice about savings or pensions, you were required to schedule an appointment at one of the 100 physical branches across the country.

The Strategic Intent set things in motion like never before. To make it happen, many different departments across the bank had to work together to change more than 49 different processes while staying compliant with regulations. They had to jump over many hurdles, but the clarity and simplicity of the single strategic intent kept them going.

And it worked; 99% of processes are now digitized. As Klaas says: “We are a bank where, for the first time in 200 years, our customers were no longer obliged to come to the office, while human contact remained paramount.”

Customers loved it, and the bank's net promoter score (NPS) went through the roof. Eventually, ABN AMRO closed 75% of their branches, leading to a 39% cost reduction. Both of these results created a huge competitive advantage.

Digitalization also allowed some bank employees to work from home rather than coming into the physical branches from 9-to-5. They could serve customers at more flexible times. This is why Klaas combined the new strategic focus with a reduction in management layers; they went from 278 to 25 executives in one day. More than 3,500 people were given a much larger mandate and are working in self-organizing teams.³

A few more examples

When Tesla started developing technology to create self-driving cars, their goal was not to "launch auto-pilot." Instead, they chose the following Strategic Intent:⁴

Develop a self-driving capability that is 10x safer than humans through massive fleet learning.

The statement highlights the desired *outcome* (extreme safety) and a clear hypothesis of *how* it thought it could achieve it (fleet learning).

After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, many new aid organizations sprung up, driven by the desire to "rebuild New Orleans" in one way or another. This, in itself, is an inspiring purpose, but the vastness of the task was paralyzing. Frustrated by the lack of progress, actor Brad Pitt started the Make It Right Foundation. They chose the following Strategic Intent to create clarity and focus for members:

Build 150 affordable, green, storm-resistant homes for families living in the Lower 9th Ward.

The concreteness made it real and inspiring.⁵

Checklist for Strategic Intent

What these examples have in common is that they are all:

- daring, clear, and meaningful;
- achievable, concrete, and measurable;
- action-oriented (starting with a verb);
- self-explanatory and simple to understand;
- based on a medium-term timeframe (two to five years).

And as a result, they have the potential to inspire people AND help them decide what to do and what *not* to do.

ARTICULATE THE STRATEGIC INTENT CONNECTED TO YOUR BIG GOAL

Here's how I would help Ying, the CEO of PrimoCura, articulate their Strategic Intent:

(Ying): "I see what you mean about our current strategy; it's not sufficiently clear. I want to craft a Strategic Intent, but I'm not sure where to start. Can you help?"

(Me): "Let's start with your organization's purpose. *'We provide the best possible care to our patients.'* That's great, but if you think about everything going on in your environment, what must happen in the next two to three years to enable that? What's essential to providing the best possible care to your patients?"

(Ying): "A lot of different things. We'll need to invest in our buildings and equipment, digitalize our processes, and reduce costs. But solving the staff shortage is undoubtedly the most pressing issue. Because of our aging population, patient demand is only increasing. Excellent care only happens when we have great health professionals, but we can't hire and retain enough of them."

(Me): "What factors are causing the staff shortage?"

(Ying): "Two main factors are hindering us from attracting and retaining senior professionals. First, because of the saturated local talent market, we have to hire people who live further away. They need to relocate but struggle to find affordable and desirable houses. They may join us for a few years, but they leave the moment they want to grow their family."

"Second, the work has become more routine due to increased patient numbers. So, they join more specialized hospitals where they can learn from seeing more complex patients."

(Me): "What could you do to address these obstacles?"

(Ying): "I'd love to provide housing to our staff, maybe even by acquiring real estate we can rent out at below-market rates. I've faced pushback from our supervisory board because it's not our core business, but I'm becoming increasingly convinced that it can unblock our situation."

"I also think we should move routine treatments to outpatient clinics—some of which we may need to start ourselves. This would allow us to give the most complex, innovative treatments to the most qualified people. Other hospitals have done this successfully, but we've never tried it."

(Me): "Can you write it in a short paragraph that articulates your medium-term strategy?"

(Ying): "How about: *'We must become the preferred healthcare employer in our city. We will solve the staff shortage by focusing on complex healthcare and offering housing to our existing and potential employees.'*"

(Me): "That's a great start but let's try to improve on it. What will you actually **do** to get there? Can you articulate the **choices and actions** that need to happen?"

(Ying): "I have the ideas that I shared before, but I'm hesitant to include those actions in the Strategic Intent because I want my HR Director and Chief Medical Officer to come up with more detailed plans on **how** to achieve them."

CREATE ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC INTENT

(Me): “I understand. But it’s helpful if you put a ‘stake in the ground’ and bring it to them so they can shape it further with you. How many people do you need to hire? Are we talking about 50 people, 500 people or 5,000 people?”

(Ying): “We need to grow by about 25% in the next three years. So, roughly 500 people, but it’s up to the departments to create a forecast.”

(Me): “It’s definitely guesswork at this point, but it’s helpful to give a sense of the size of the challenge; to be more concrete. A Strategic Intent should reflect your current hypothesis, which you’ll continue to revise over time as you learn more. How about:

For us to provide the best possible care to our patients, it is essential that over the next two to three years, we:

- *Specialize in complex care by moving routine care into dedicated outpatient clinics.*
- *Hire 500 healthcare professionals to keep up with the influx of new patients.*
- *Offer all new hires and current employees a house at a below-market rate.*

I’ve tried to make it very clear what needs to happen without detailing ‘how’. I think it could inspire action across the organization because it leaves wiggle room for multiple initiatives that feed into this intent.”

(Ying): “I like it, but shouldn’t we also include something about employee marketing and our desire to become the employer of choice?”

(Me): “Yes, I considered adding something like, ‘Become famous for xyz,’ but I think that’s implied by ‘hire 500 new people.’ You can’t do that if you’re unknown in the talent marketplace. It’s not necessary to add things that are implied by other things. Less is more. Departments can look at the intent and say, well, I know what that means for us!”

* * *

In our conversation, we went from identifying the most pressing objective for PrimaCura to address, and diagnosing the main obstacle to achieving it— including its root cause and possible responses—to setting out an integrated set of choices and actions that will help them to succeed.

Defining your Strategic Intent

To uncover the Strategic Intent that will help you move the needle, explore the following questions:

- What will outstanding success look like within the next two to three years?
- How will we know when we have succeeded?

And, to bring our ambition to life:

- What obstacles do we face?
- What choices must we make?
- What offerings, capabilities, or partnerships do we need to create?
- What changes to the organization's ways of working do we need to make?

In a few bullet points, articulate the current hypothesis for what you (everyone in the organization) collectively need to *do*. There may be multiple things; start each statement with a verb to make it active.

Here are a few additional tips:

- I use two to three years as a default time horizon. But it depends on the nature of your ambition, your organization, and the pace of change; it could be shorter or longer than this. Don't confuse the *time horizon* with the *update frequency*. To stay adaptive, review the Strategic Intent several times per year and decide whether it is worth updating.
- Resist the temptation to include all ongoing work in a Strategic Intent. Just focus on the big shifts that need to happen.

CREATE ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC INTENT

- As a test, let someone new to your organization read your Strategic Intent. Then, ask them if they understand the strategy and know what they can do next to support it.

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WORKSHEET

As part of the book's bonus materials, I've included a Strategic Intent Worksheet—a two-page template with checklists that helps you draft your statements. Get it via unblock.works/book-bonus

CHAPTER OUTCOMES

- Our strategy is a response to what we've learned from a diagnosis.
- Our strategy is inspiring, concrete and easy to understand.
- Our strategy creates focus in everyone's day-to-day work.
- Our strategy has a multi-year horizon but is updated more regularly.