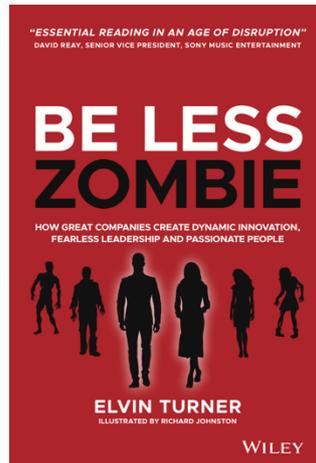


BE LESS ZOMBIE

Quick-Start Innovation Strategy Workshop



(This is an extract from *Be Less Zombie: How great companies create dynamic innovation, fearless leadership and passionate people*)

What follows is a broad outline of a workshop that I use to help companies get started when a clear strategy isn't always available. Feel free to adapt it to suit your own purposes.

Preparation

- Schedule a meeting for the senior team in a month's time (ideally no more than 12 people, fewer is preferable). In my experience you'll need the best part of a day to do this justice. Don't be tempted to shortcut it – you will *definitely* regret it on the day.
- As part of the invitation to the workshop provide each person with three blank postcards. On each postcard participants must write one critical milestone that the company needs to have achieved in three years' time. This is a milestone for the *whole company*, not just their function. Keep it deliberately vague at this stage (you'll see why in a moment). Also ask them to consider emerging trends and their potential impact on these milestones, too.

- Book a meeting room (ideally offsite) with a large wall that everyone can comfortably stand in front of, and that you are allowed to write on or cover with flipchart paper. (Nothing worse than the first step of your innovation strategy failing because the venue doesn't allow Blu Tac!)

The Meeting

- Copy this on to the meeting room wall:

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3

- On a separate piece of flipchart paper, write the title "Dependencies" followed by these headings (which will act as prompts):
 - Insights
 - Products / services
 - Revenues / savings (or other value)
 - Resources
 - Relationships
 - Capabilities
 - Collaboration
 - Partnerships
 - Leadership
 - Decision-making
- Put the flipchart paper somewhere visible nearby
- Invite each team member to briefly share their top three priorities with the group (the leader goes last). Either stick the postcards on a wall or lay them on the floor and gather around them

A quick aside: This is a great way to reveal the true alignment of your collective assumptions and priorities, something that often remains hidden and can be a cause of team conflict. It's actually based on a technique that music industry expert Chris Parles uses to help rock bands develop business strategies.

“When people are forced to reveal what matters most, it subtly points to their values, beliefs and expectations – which are often hidden,” he says. “That’s not only a great way to create strategic alignment but also helpful in considering the cultural journey that a rock band, or any team, team will need to go on together.”

Keeping the original question about milestones vague forces everyone to volunteer what matters most to them, rather than leading the conversation with revenue targets or market share. It’s a useful technique in lots of settings.

Back to the workshop...

- When everyone has shared, discuss what has emerged. What stood out for people? Which factors were most common? What does that potentially reveal about you as a group? What’s missing? If everyone brought financial metrics, what does that say about our true value for people and culture? If it’s overly competitor-focused are we lacking in true customer focus?
- Collectively agree the top three milestones for three years’ time.
- With this in mind, turn to the three-year timeline on the wall and, using the list of prompts to help, ask yourselves: “What would need to be true for us to deliver these milestones?” Start by writing down some specific dependencies in the right-hand box and work backwards chronologically i.e. in the example above, complete the Year 3 box first, then move to the Year 2 box etc. (Note: You don’t need to use all of the dependency prompts, only those that make sense)

This process will help you lay the foundations of an innovation strategy in broad terms. Inevitably you’ll be making a lot of assumptions at this stage, but you’ve started! You’ve overcome the biggest barrier stopping most companies from becoming more strategic about innovation.

By the end of your session you’ll have a three-year prototype innovation strategy to begin working with. Of course, you’ll need to take it to the next level of detail with a wider to be actionable, but you will have made a good start.

You’ll also have started building some powerful storytelling collateral that will be invaluable when you engage the rest of the business with the journey. The UK board of drinks giant Pernod Ricard framed an exercise like this as a “1,000 day journey”. It became a very useful communications hook to hang initiatives, progress and plans on to – helping employees to see how the bigger picture was continually unfolding beyond the cut-and-thrust of everyday busyness.

Typically, most leaders say that a workshop of this kind this is the best and most valuable conversation that they have had in a very long time. "We should do this more often!" is a common refrain.

The next task is to start validating those assumptions and identifying and trends coming from the future that could prevent you achieving your success outcomes. But also look out for those which could work to your advantage.

Appoint owners for the different areas that you've discussed.

Agree another meeting date in 30 days' time. The aim of that meeting will be to assess your learning and narrow your conversations to a more refined version of the strategy. At that point you're ready to start communicating with the wider company and developing action plans.

No-one leaves the room yet...

But here's what typically happens next.

You leave the meeting feeling energised, only to be sucked into your inbox's zombie tractor beam, and 28 days later you all find yourselves looking for excuses to postpone the meeting. Which you do. But when the momentum is lost and rarely recovers.

Before you leave the room, devote the last 30 minutes to answering this question: "What would need to be true for us arrive back in 30 days ready for a productive discussion?" Be deliberate, be realistic, and be accountable to one another. Design the journey that you need to succeed. (This alone is a good reason to invite a facilitator to lead the session).

And if you're tempted to tag the discussion onto the end of your next board meeting, don't. Believe me you *won't* get to it. And even if you do, it'll only receive the dregs of your energy and the conversation will fizzle. This conversation needs its own space.

This is a good enough way to get started. It's a way into a conversation that can otherwise feel too tenuous to begin. It also helps to ground people in the reality of what it will *really* take to innovate and what people's respective leadership roles will need to be.

However, because innovation is an argument, the senior team must make this a new top three priority for themselves and design accountability measures to keep it

there. I've worked with so many companies who leave the first meeting feeling invincible, only to find it was largely forgotten six months later.

Peter Drucker famously said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Zombies are more subtle. They quietly gnaw away at innovation strategy until you don't realise that its missing.

For more resources to help you to increase your innovation performance, visit: www.belesszombie.com

To buy *Be Less Zombie: How great companies create dynamic innovation, fearless leadership and passionate people*, visit: getbook.at/BLZ

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