

How Covid has changed our approach to strategic planning

Can you remember the last time you brought your team together for a long-term planning session? The past two years have shown us we're more adaptable, more resilient and more creative than we could have ever imagined. We've had to act fast and respond to a constantly changing landscape and we've proven ourselves to be incredible innovators.

But while we've been great at managing well in the moment, many of us have not had the time or confidence to focus on the long game.

I'm sure you heard something like this: "We just need to survive the next six to 12 months then we'll worry about the future." That approach makes sense during a crisis. But we can't afford to stay fixed in the moment for ever. Because great strategy is all about building success over time.

We need to start looking up and further ahead again, with a longer time horizon. The further out we gaze, the more ambitious we can become. If I committed today to run a marathon in two years' time, then it's possible to design a pathway towards achieving that ambition.

Here are a few positive changes in the way we approach planning, post-pandemic that we can take advantage of.

1 WE WILL WANT TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY

So many things have changed, including how we work. During Covid disruptions, some managers loved the freedom from rigid planning cycles – they could jump in and get things done without long approval processes. We've surprised ourselves with our adaptability and flexibility, and now people are looking for interesting and flexible ways of approaching planning meetings too.

With my clients, some of the first business meetings to return in-person

are planning sessions. So, our planning sessions need to provide the opportunity for people to rebuild trust and a shared sense of ambition.

Practically, that means we need to allocate more time for big picture discussions and to reset the focus on the future. We also need to use creative prompts and have fun with them, to re-engage people in the conversations, encourage open-ended dialogue and avoid rushing through packed agendas.



2 SHARED AMBITION WILL BE A POWERFUL FORCE FOR CHANGE

Our priorities have also changed. We want to work on things that produce positive results and are meaningful. This shift towards purpose is important because it's changing the way people talk about strategy. Understanding and defining an organisation's core purpose is essential to create the shared ambition that drives the creation of powerful strategy.

If you're not sure about what those shared ambitions are, set a time horizon and consider: What does the future look like in that year, for your sector and stakeholders? What changes are you accelerating and declining? If you could do anything for anyone, what could that

be? How would the world be a better place because of your contribution? And what is the agreed organisational purpose – who we are, who we serve and what difference we want to make into the future?

The greater clarity and consensus you have on your shared ambition, the more momentum you will generate towards achieving it.

3 COLLECTIVE CREATIVITY IS KEY TO SUCCESS

It's only by collaborating and harnessing collective creativity that we find solutions to our biggest problems. That's also how we build the confidence needed to do things differently and address ongoing uncertainty head on.

Marketers are immersed in creative all the time, but even your accountant has needed to do things differently over the past few years. You might have been surprised by seeing others' abilities in creative thinking and problem solving.

One key to inspiring creativity is to look wider than before during your planning discussions. Seek out alternative perspectives and information sources, including during your meetings. Reframe your questions to inspire different thinking. Don't just ask: "What have been our successes and failures?" Also ask: "What have you changed your mind about this year?"

If you haven't yet scheduled time with your team to refocus on your long game, now is the perfect time. You just need some inspiring questions. And one of the most powerful questions remains: "What if?"

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