

3 SECRETS TO PLANNING WITH CONFIDENCE WHEN YOU'RE UNCERTAIN ABOUT EVERYTHING

Scaling

By Rosie Yeo



Ask an executive which game is closest to the way we play corporate strategy and you could expect to hear a range of responses. Monopoly because it's all about making smarter investment decisions than other players. Chess because you need to be two moves ahead of the other player. Perhaps Twister!

During the past two years, strategy may have felt more like a frustrating game of Snakes and Ladders. It didn't matter how carefully you planned or how clever your strategy was—every roll of the die seemed to land you on a snake, with supply chain disruptions, lockdowns, and constant rule changes sliding you further away from your objectives.

We talk about uncertainty being the only certainty during the Covid-19 pandemic. But the reality is that uncertainty is ever-present in our life and work. Whether it's digital disruption, economic fluctuations, or the kids' refusal to put on their socks, we can't control everything, and we can't always predict how things will change.

In the 18th century, the French philosopher Voltaire wrote, "Le doute n'est pas un état bien agréable, mais l'assurance est un état ridicule." Loosely translated, it means, "It's not comfortable to be unsure, but it's absurd to be certain."

Most of the time, particularly in strategy, we don't always face up to how many things are out of our control.

So how do we keep moving forward and making bold decisions with confidence? Here are three keys to long-term planning in uncertainty and one option you can take right now if you're really stuck on where to go next.

1. Adapt Your Mindset: Approach Uncertainty With Curiosity

Strategic thinking doesn't start from certainty—it starts with curiosity. There's a myth that to be considered strategic, you need to know everything. You need to be the smartest person in the room. I've worked with many boards and executive teams over the years, and while there is one attribute that differentiates high-performing teams from the others, it's not IQ. Nor is it net worth or their level of commitment to a cause.

High-performers walk in with curiosity. They are brave enough to say they don't know and open-minded enough to consider other perspectives and possibilities. 'Not knowing' can be a powerful source of innovation because we're not locked into familiar pathways.

Encouraging 'not knowing' could be as simple as:

- As a leader, be honest with your team about something you are not certain of.
- During meeting introductions, ask everyone to state one thing they're interested in learning from others in the room (rather than what they are experts in).
- List knowns and unknowns as part of your conversations about the future (and be imaginative with it).

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2. Rethink Risk: Start With Shared Ambition

Bold strategic moves involve making a decision to do things differently or a decision to do different things. The more resources you invest in big strategic decisions, the higher the stakes. Not everything is within your control, however, so even the best-planned strategies carry some risk.

Too often, we focus on risk first rather than starting from a genuine consensus about our shared long-term ambitions. With a clear long-term vision, teams can make braver decisions because they can view the risks in the context of what matters most. We can understand the stakes, ameliorate the risks, and be confident that what we're about to do is worth it.

3. Don't Do It Alone: Creative Collaboration Powers Bold Ideas

We have understandably been distracted by all the things we couldn't control over the past two years. But on the upside, how good have we become at on-the-spot creative adaptation?

Now is the perfect time to harness that collective creativity and apply it to planning bolder strategies for your long game.

We need to give ourselves and our teams the chance to wonder and the time to explore new ideas together. You don't have to move too far out of your comfort zone to encourage a more creative approach. Try changing the way you set up your meeting room, rephrase questions to spark imaginative responses, and most importantly, give your people the space, trust, and time needed to explore ideas together.

When you feel completely paralyzed by uncertainty about the long term, use this scenario planning exercise to help you make constructive short-term strategic decisions:

- Map out a best-case and worst-case scenario.
- Identify hurdles and enablers to success in each scenario.
- Highlight the top three hurdles and enablers common to both scenarios, and identify and implement strategies to address each of them.

In times of uncertainty, we need more bold ideas, not fewer. The way we collaborate is key to building the confidence needed to make strategic choices and move ahead.



Author: Rosie Yeo, author of *Go For Bold: How to Create Powerful Strategy in Uncertain Times*, is a strategist and facilitator. She designs and leads strategic planning in boardrooms and executive off-sites and injects energy and focus into larger meetings and complex policy consultations. She is known as a strategy alchemist because of her skill in helping leaders and teams collectively imagine and achieve a better future. Visit www.rosieyeo.com.au.

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