



FOR CEOs, FOUNDERS AND LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Annual Strategic Planning

The SLT's Planning Day(s) Pack

Run planning days that end in decisions, owners and follow-through, not a poster.



One day · 5 to 10 people · decisions before dinner

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Take it and run it yourself; nothing here is held back.

How to use this pack

Planning days are won or lost before anyone sits down.

A leadership team that arrives cold spends the morning warming up, anchors on the first idea spoken, and leaves with a list instead of a plan. The fix is not a better away-day venue. It is three things done in the two weeks before: name the decisions, prime the people, prepare the data. This pack gives you all three, plus the agenda, the scripts and the follow-through templates for the day itself.

It is built from the method we use when we chair these days for clients. You can run all of it yourself, and this pack tells you how, including the parts where having no external chair will hurt. We point those out where they happen, not to sell, but because pretending otherwise would make the pack worse.

WORK THROUGH IT IN ORDER

2-3 weeks out	Name the decisions	03
2 weeks out	Prime the room and set the agenda	05
On the day	Run the agenda and the pre-mortem	08
Within 24 hours	Capture and follow through	10
Any time	Score your day: ten questions that tell you whether it will work	12

Name the decisions

A planning day with no decision to make should be cancelled. "Alignment" and "getting on the same page" are not decisions; they are what happens as a side effect of making them. So before anything else, write the success sentence:

THE SUCCESS SENTENCE

By 5pm on _____ we will have decided _____, and everyone in the room will be able to explain why.

If you cannot fill in X, Y and Z, the day is not ready to book. Typical decisions for a 20-200 person business heading into a new year:

01

Which two or three bets get real resource next year

02

What we will stop doing to fund them

03

What success looks like in numbers by June

04

Who owns each bet

Decide how you will decide

For each decision, write down the decision mode before the day, because arguing about what to decide and how to decide it at the same time is where planning days stall.

DECISION	MODE	MEANING
Our top 3 priorities	Consult, then CEO decides	Everyone's input is heard; one person calls it
What we stop doing	Team consent	Goes ahead unless someone has a reasoned objection
Next year's revenue target	CEO decides, room stress-tests	The number arrives, the room attacks it, it leaves stronger

Examples. Write your own for every decision in the success sentence.

Publish the success sentence and the decision modes with the agenda.

TOP TIP • SCORE BEFORE YOU DECIDE

Use a scoring framework to take the bias out.

Agree the criteria before anyone sees the options, then score every idea against them. The CEO's favourite and the newest hire's idea get marked on the same sheet, which makes the decision fairer, and usually better. ICE and RICE are a start, but they're basic; we bring sharper scoring models fitted to your decisions, and teach your team to use them.

When the room knows in advance who decides and how, the loudest voice loses its structural advantage, and nobody wastes the afternoon relitigating how the morning was decided.

Prime the room

Half your leadership team thinks out loud; the other half thinks on paper first and gets read as "quiet" in cold sessions. Pre-work is how the second half arrives with their best thinking already done, and how you find out what people will not say in front of each other.

Send every attendee these questions two weeks out, answered in writing, back to you (or the chair) 3 days before the day, and not shared with each other:

Q1 What are the three biggest issues facing the business right now?

Q2 What is the one thing we should stop doing, and what would it free up?

Q3 If it were only your call, what would our top three priorities be next year, and why?

Q4 What is the conversation this team needs to have that it keeps not having?

Where the real agenda lives

Q5 What would make this planning day a waste of your time?

Collate the answers into anonymised themes and open the day with them: "Here is what this team said." Nothing builds candour faster than discovering everyone privately agrees the problem exists.

WITHOUT EXTERNAL SUPPORT This is the step where an external chair changes the answers: people tell a neutral outsider things they soften for the boss. If you run it internally, have someone other than the CEO collect the answers.

The pre-read checklist

No number should be seen for the first time in the room; first-time reveals produce reactions, not decisions. Circulate a pre-read of no more than 10 pages, one week out:

- ☐ Last year's plan next to what actually happened, gaps unexplained welcome
- ☐ P&L headlines: revenue, gross margin, and revenue per employee, with trend
- ☐ Pipeline or forward bookings as they stand
- ☐ The 3 customer facts that most surprised you this year (wins, losses, complaints)
- ☐ One page on market and competitor movement
- ☐ The pre-work themes, anonymised
- ☐ **Your goal framework, chosen, and people able to use it.** OKRs, V2MOM, Rocks or a hybrid. If you don't use one yet, pick it now and make learning it part of the pre-work, so the goals block isn't spent teaching syntax.

Require it read; open the day by testing that it was.

TIP • THE EMPTY CHAIR

Save a seat at the table for your customer.

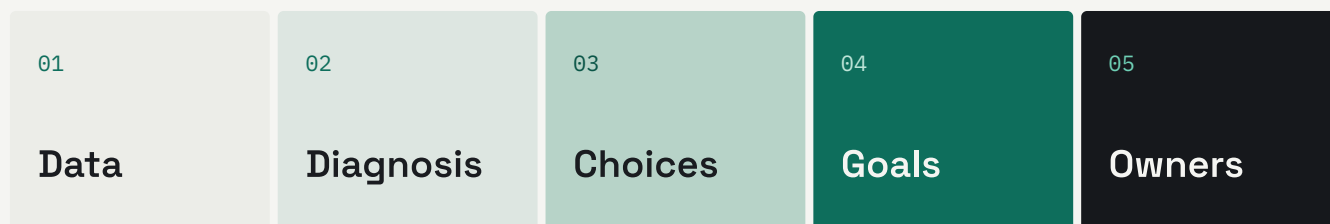
Leave one chair empty and put a real customer's name on it. Before each decision, someone speaks for that chair: if this customer were in the room, what would they be saying? What would they tell you that nobody at the table wants to hear? Leadership rooms drift towards what suits the business; the chair pulls them back to what the customer will pay for.

A 60-slide deck is not a pre-read.

The timed agenda

One day, 5 to 10 people, decisions before dinner.

The sequence matters more than the timings. Adjust blocks to your decisions, keep the order.



Goals set before diagnosis is theatre.

TWO RULES FOR WHOEVER CHAIRS

Writing before talking, every time.

Never open a topic with "so, what does everyone think?", because the first voice anchors the room.

Make the trade visibly.

When a topic explodes past its box: "we can take 30 more minutes here and lose the goals block, or park it with an owner; which?" Don't silently steal the afternoon.

TOP TIP · A RESEARCHER AT THE TABLE

Test new ideas while the room is still in it.

AI can now research, quantify and prove or disprove an idea almost in real time. Give one person at the table that job: when a new option lands at 11:30, the market size, the competitor who tried it and the evidence against it can be on screen before the break. Decisions get made faster, and on facts rather than on whoever argues best.

A typical one-day session mapped out

[PRINT AND PIN UP](#)

TIME	BLOCK	HOW IT RUNS
09:00	Open	Success sentence, decision modes, ground rules. Test the pre-read was read. 15 min, no scene-setting speech
09:15	The mirror	Anonymised pre-work themes and the data walk. Facts first, reactions second, meaning third. No solutions allowed yet
10:00	Diagnosis: where are we really?	Silent brainwriting (everyone writes before anyone speaks), then pairs, then whole room. The senior person speaks last
11:15	BREAK	15 min. Protect it; tired rooms converge on the loudest voice
11:30	Choices: where we play, what we stop	Options on the wall. For each contested option, ask "what would have to be true for this to work?" and list the answers. Every yes needs a funding stop
12:45	LUNCH	45 min, away from the table
13:30	Force rank	Silent dot vote to shortlist, debate the clusters, then decide by the published mode. Rank until it hurts: three priorities, not fourteen
14:30	Pre-mortem	Script on the next page. Run it on the plan you just chose
15:15	BREAK	15 min
15:30	Goals	What does success look like by June, in numbers? Draft objectives and measurable results per priority. Outcomes, not activities
16:15	Owners and cadence	A named owner and date per action, one owner for the plan, the review cadence agreed, the 30-day follow-up booked in diaries now
16:45	Read-back	The decision log read aloud. Fist-to-five confidence vote per decision; ask the twos what would move them to a four
17:00	Close	End on time. Ending early is a flex

The pre-mortem

A pre-mortem finds the risks your plan is carrying while they are still free to fix. People who would never criticise the plan directly will happily explain how it died, because the frame makes candour safe. Say it exactly like this:

“It is 12 months from today. The plan we agreed this morning has failed, badly. Not underperformed: failed. Take five minutes in silence and write down the story of what killed it. Be specific. Nobody reads yours out until everyone has written.”

THEN, IN ORDER

- 01 Five minutes of silent writing. Hold the silence; do not let anyone start early or talk through it.
- 02 Go round the table, one failure story each, no interruptions, no defending. The plan's authors especially do not defend.
- 03 Cluster the causes on the wall. Ask the room: "Which three of these are most likely to actually happen?"
- 04 For each of the three: is this a reason to change the plan, or a risk to manage? Change the plan in the room if it needs it; that is what the day is for.
- 05 Every managed risk gets an owner and an early-warning signal ("how will we know by March?") in the decision log.

WITHOUT EXTERNAL SUPPORT When the failure stories point at the CEO's favourite bet, someone has to let that conversation happen rather than smooth it over. That someone cannot easily be the CEO. If your last planning day produced no uncomfortable minutes, this is the block that was missing.

Capture it live

Nothing gets "written up afterwards". Reconstruction is where commitment dies, so the decision log is written on the wall as the day happens, and read back before anyone leaves. This is the whole template:

Decision log

#	DECISION	OWNER	BY WHEN	CONFIDENCE 1-5
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				

Parking lot

Same discipline: every parked item leaves the room with a name and a next step, or it was never really parked, it was buried.

PARKED ITEM	OWNER	NEXT STEP	BY WHEN

Make it stick

The 24-hour one-pager

Within a day of the room emptying, everyone receives one page, assembled from the wall, not from memory:

The success sentence

Decisions, owners, dates

Top 3 risks + early-warning signals

The cadence

If it takes more than an hour to produce, the capture failed.

The cadence

Agree it in the room: a weekly or fortnightly 30-minute check-on progress against the actions, and a monthly or quarterly look at the goals themselves.

The 30-day follow-up session gets booked before the day ends, while diaries are open and motivation is high; it is where you learn whether the plan survived contact with the business, and adjust it on purpose instead of by drift.

Tell the company

Decide before you leave: what the rest of the organisation hears, from whom, by when. A plan the SLT keeps to itself decays in a fortnight, and the corridor version will be worse than anything you would have written.

30 days until the follow-up. Book it before anyone leaves the room.

Score your day

Ten questions, one point per yes. Answer them honestly two weeks before the day, while the score is still fixable.

- | | | |
|----|--|--------------------------|
| 01 | Can you write the success sentence: the specific decisions the day will make? | ☐ |
| 02 | Has every attendee done written pre-work, unseen by the others? | ☐ |
| 03 | Do you know which of your team hate cold brainstorming and need to prepare to contribute well? | ☐ |
| 04 | Will every key number be seen before the day, not revealed in the room? | ☐ |
| 05 | Is there a published decision mode for each decision? | ☐ |
| 06 | Is someone other than the CEO chairing? | ☐ |
| 07 | Will writing come before talking on every generative topic? | ☐ |
| 08 | Is a pre-mortem on the agenda? | ☐ |
| 09 | Will decisions be captured live on the wall and read back before the close? | ☐ |
| 10 | Is the 30-day follow-up already in diaries? | ☐ |

9-10

Run it yourselves; you will be fine, and this pack is the checklist.

6-8

Fix the misses before the day. Most of them are fixable in an afternoon.

0-5

The day will feel productive and produce a poster. Postpone it or change how it is run.

On bringing in external expertise

You do not need it if

- ✓ you are experienced and skilled at facilitation
- ✓ you don't need to be thinking, watching the team and contributing, all at the same time
- ✓ your team argues openly in front of you
- ✓ someone or multiple-people can be neutral because they have no stake in the decisions
- ✓ you're not in need of new energy, experience and perspectives
- ✓ your last planning day's outputs actually got executed

Plenty of teams fit that; take the pack and go.

That is the situation an outsider is built for: no stake in the outcome, nothing to lose on Monday, and **twenty of these a year against your one.**

20 minutes on how we would run yours.

No charge, and if you do not need us we will say so.

Book a call →