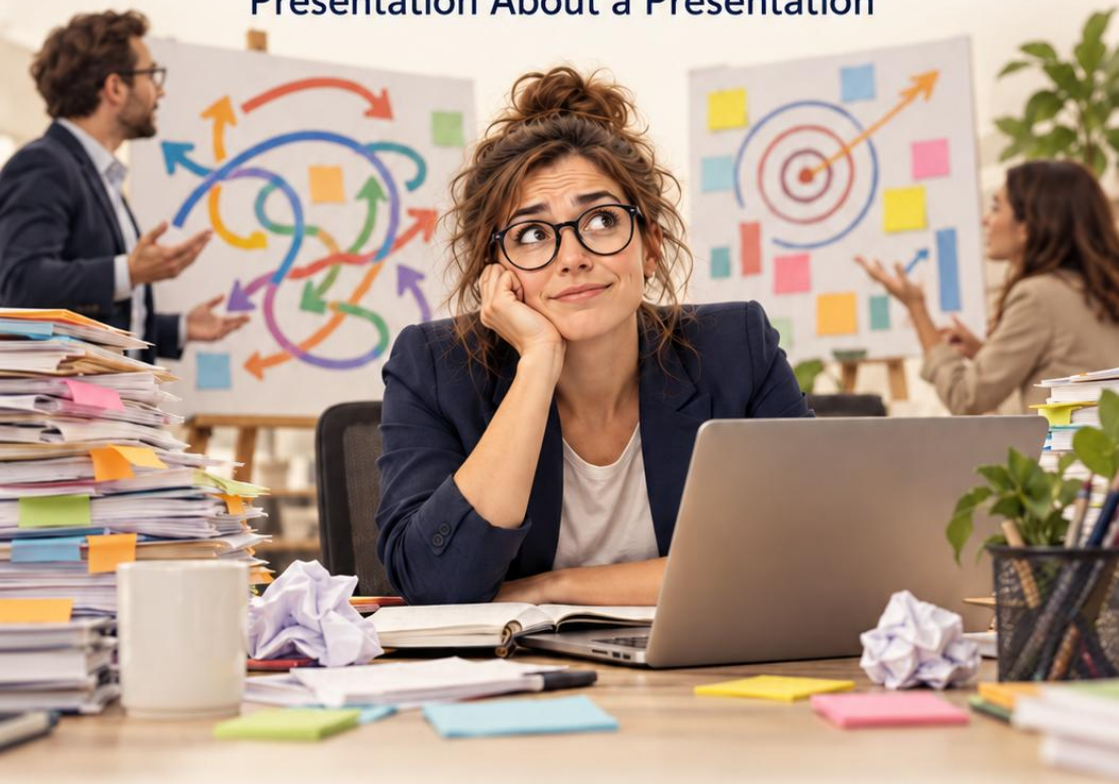
Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

Everyone Says "Strategy," but I Just Want to Know What We're Doing on Monday

How to Turn Big Goals into Decisions, Priorities, and Concrete Actions Without Creating Yet Another Presentation About a Presentation



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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INTRO

At 9:11 on Monday morning, a customer service supervisor at a meal-kit delivery company faces a surprisingly complicated decision. A customer has received a box containing ingredients for three dinners, except the chicken for Tuesday's recipe is missing. The customer wants a replacement delivery. The warehouse says sending one will cost more than the missing ingredient. Finance has instructed everyone to reduce avoidable expenses. Customer service has been told to improve satisfaction scores. And on Friday afternoon, the CEO proudly announced the company's new strategic commitment to delivering an effortless customer experience. The supervisor looks at the complaint, considers the available options, and wonders whether the person who invented the phrase "effortless customer experience" has ever tried to organize a refrigerated delivery containing precisely one chicken breast.

Nobody in this imaginary company is necessarily incompetent. The CEO may genuinely care about customers. Finance has a legitimate responsibility to protect profitability. The warehouse must manage transportation costs, while customer service needs to resolve complaints. Each department has a reasonable objective. Unfortunately, nobody has explained what should happen when those objectives collide. Should the supervisor authorize the expensive replacement? Offer a refund? Provide store credit? Make an exception for customers with a history of complaints? The strategy sounds admirable, but it offers remarkably little assistance with the decision sitting on the supervisor's screen. Somewhere between the executive

announcement and Monday's workload, the company's grand ambition has lost its instructions.

That gap is what this book is about. Organizations are often remarkably good at describing the future they want and considerably less successful at deciding what to do about it. They announce transformation programs, identify strategic pillars, agree on priorities, and produce documents containing impressive combinations of words such as alignment, optimization, acceleration, and sustainable excellence. None of these words is automatically meaningless. The trouble begins when people use them instead of making choices. A team can spend weeks discussing improved collaboration without deciding who has authority to settle a disagreement. A business can commit to exceptional quality while rewarding employees exclusively for speed. Everyone can enthusiastically support a strategy that nobody knows how to execute.

Consider how easily a sensible ambition can turn into confusion. A company decides to become more innovative. One department interprets this as developing new products. Another begins purchasing technology. A third organizes brainstorming sessions, complete with colorful sticky notes and an impressive quantity of biscuits. Meanwhile, the operations team continues struggling with a recurring problem that could be solved by changing one outdated procedure. All four groups believe they are supporting innovation. Perhaps some of them are. But unless the organization identifies what innovation is supposed to accomplish, where it matters most, and which opportunities deserve resources, the word becomes an exceptionally attractive container for unrelated activities.

Strategy should help an organization make choices. It should provide enough direction to explain why one opportunity receives attention while another waits, why a particular compromise is acceptable, and why some apparently worthwhile ideas do not belong on the current agenda. This doesn't mean predicting every situation or issuing detailed instructions for every employee. Such an organization would need approximately seventeen levels of approval before anyone could replace a broken office chair. It means establishing a direction clear enough to guide decisions when circumstances become inconvenient. A strategy that works only when everything goes according to plan is not particularly useful, because circumstances have never demonstrated much enthusiasm for following our plans.

Of course, translating ambition into action is difficult for reasons that have nothing to do with intellectual ability. Time is limited. Budgets are constrained. Employees have responsibilities that existed long before the latest initiative arrived. Departments depend on one another, managers disagree, customers change their minds, and important information is frequently incomplete. Sometimes the person responsible for achieving a result cannot approve the resources required to deliver it. Sometimes everyone knows what needs to change, but the existing performance measures reward doing exactly the opposite. These are practical obstacles, not character defects. Telling people to be more committed rarely removes them.

The fashionable response is often to add another layer of management activity. Progress is monitored more frequently. New reporting templates appear. Meetings acquire follow-up meetings, which eventually develop their

own agendas and dedicated folders. Before long, a considerable amount of work is being done to demonstrate that work is being done. Reporting can be valuable, and coordination is essential when several teams depend on one another. But a report cannot settle an unresolved trade-off merely by displaying it in a reassuring shade of green. Nor does a beautifully organized task list establish whether the tasks are worth doing. Information becomes useful when somebody can use it to understand a problem, make a decision, or change an action.

There is another difficulty that deserves attention: people naturally prefer certainty, especially when they are expected to deliver results. Leaders want commitments. Teams want stable instructions. Customers want reliable dates. Yet strategy deals with a future that remains partly unknown. A sensible decision may fail because an assumption turns out to be wrong. A carefully prepared project may encounter a restriction nobody anticipated. The answer isn't to abandon planning or to manufacture confidence with increasingly precise spreadsheets. It is to distinguish what we know from what we assume, recognize important risks, and create opportunities to adjust before small mistakes become expensive obligations. Sound judgment does not require pretending to possess a crystal ball.

You will find practical ways of approaching these difficulties throughout this book. We will examine how a broad objective becomes a meaningful choice, how that choice shapes priorities, and how priorities turn into work that someone can actually complete. We will look at the uncomfortable relationship between resources and ambition, the difference between genuine progress and impressive activity, and the reasons organizational changes sometimes

disappear shortly after their celebratory launch. We will also consider the situations in which you have little authority, incomplete information, or a manager who expects considerably more than the available resources can deliver. The aim is not to collect management terminology. It is to develop judgment you can use when a real decision refuses to fit neatly into a presentation.

You don't need to be a chief executive to benefit from that judgment. Perhaps you manage an entire business, supervise a small team, coordinate projects across departments, or simply receive instructions from people who seem convinced that every request can be completed immediately. Your influence will differ, but the underlying questions remain useful. What result are we trying to achieve? What stands in the way? Which choices are actually available? Who can authorize them? And what should happen next? Sometimes you will have the authority to make the decision yourself. Sometimes your most valuable contribution will be explaining a conflict clearly enough that the appropriate person can resolve it.

Let's return briefly to our unfortunate chicken breast. The supervisor doesn't need a revolutionary customer experience framework to understand the immediate problem. What would help is knowing the company's intended balance between service, cost, and customer retention, together with the authority to resolve ordinary complaints within sensible boundaries. The organization might decide that certain cases justify replacement deliveries while others call for refunds or alternative remedies. Different businesses could reasonably make different choices. What matters is that employees understand the logic, customers receive accurate promises,

and unusual cases have a clear path to resolution. The answer should emerge from an intentional business decision rather than whichever department sends the most forceful email.

None of this guarantees perfect outcomes. You will still encounter failed experiments, awkward conversations, unreasonable deadlines, and days when the most carefully considered plan lasts approximately fourteen minutes. Strategic thinking will not remove uncertainty or make every colleague agree with you. It can, however, help you spend less time guessing, notice contradictions earlier, and explain why a particular action deserves attention. It can also make work considerably less absurd, although eliminating organizational absurdity entirely would probably destroy a substantial portion of the management consulting industry.

Ultimately, the test of strategy is surprisingly ordinary. When the speeches are over, the leadership team has left the room, and everyone returns to their responsibilities, does the agreed direction help anyone make a better decision? Can people identify what matters, understand what they are allowed to do, and recognize when circumstances require a different approach?

If the answer is yes, strategy has begun to earn its place in the working week.

If the answer is no, there may be no need for another presentation.

There may simply be a very important question nobody has answered yet.

What, exactly, are we doing on Monday?

Chapter 1 - Strategy Attended the Meeting. Why Didn't It Show Up for Work?

At 10:35 on a Wednesday morning, the programming director of a small cinema chain receives a question that should be easy to answer. One of the cinemas has an available screen on Saturday evening. The manager wants to know whether to schedule another showing of a popular blockbuster or reserve the slot for a documentary festival featuring local filmmakers. The blockbuster is likely to sell more tickets immediately. The festival could strengthen relationships with the surrounding community, attract a different audience, and support the company's recently announced ambition to become "the cultural heartbeat of every neighborhood we serve." Both options have reasonable arguments in their favor. Unfortunately, the strategic document contains plenty of information about cultural heartbeats and absolutely nothing about choosing between competing opportunities. The director considers asking the leadership team for guidance, but the earliest available meeting is next Thursday. By then, Saturday will have developed the inconvenient habit of becoming last Saturday.

This is a remarkably common form of organizational confusion. A company announces a direction that sounds clear until somebody tries to use it. Employees understand the ambition, agree with its general purpose, and may even feel enthusiastic about contributing. The trouble appears when two perfectly sensible activities compete for the same resources. Finance wants predictable revenue. Marketing

wants audience growth. Local managers want flexibility to respond to demand. The executive team wants stronger community relationships. None of these objectives is automatically wrong, yet the organization has failed to explain how they should influence actual choices. The result is a strategy that works beautifully as a statement of intent but becomes strangely silent whenever a decision has consequences.

People often mistake this silence for a communication problem. Perhaps the strategy needs another presentation, a shorter summary, or a memorable slogan. Someone suggests turning its main principles into posters. Someone else recommends a leadership workshop, preferably somewhere with excellent catering and no interruptions from the business being managed. Communication can certainly be improved, but repeating an unresolved idea does not make it more useful. If nobody has decided what community engagement means when it competes with immediate revenue, no amount of enthusiastic explanation will settle the cinema director's dilemma. The missing ingredient is a choice, not a better font.

When everyone agrees, check what they actually agreed to

Broad strategic language has an attractive quality: almost nobody needs to disagree with it. Who would publicly oppose customer satisfaction, innovation, operational excellence, or sustainable growth? Even the most skeptical employee is unlikely to interrupt an executive presentation to demand that the company become less competitive and slightly more disappointing. Agreement arrives quickly because general ambitions leave people free to imagine different ways of achieving them. The sales director hears

"customer focus" and thinks about offering faster quotations. The operations director imagines reducing defects. Finance pictures more profitable customer relationships. All three leave the room feeling aligned, although they have agreed on considerably less than they believe.

Real alignment becomes visible when people face the same trade-off and reach compatible conclusions. In our cinema example, one manager might interpret the community strategy as a commitment to local filmmakers, while another sees it as providing affordable entertainment for the widest possible audience. Both interpretations are plausible. The disagreement becomes meaningful when a choice involves giving up ticket revenue, allocating staff, or limiting commercial screenings. A useful strategic direction must therefore explain enough about the intended audience, the organization's distinctive contribution, and its financial boundaries to guide those choices. It does not need to predict every film booking. It needs to help managers understand why one booking would be more appropriate than another.

One revealing question is whether the strategy has ever caused the organization to decline an attractive opportunity. If the answer is no, there may be a problem. A direction that supports every available option cannot help determine where limited attention belongs. Of course, refusing opportunities is not a virtue in itself. There is no prize for saying no to profitable work merely to demonstrate impressive strategic discipline. The point is that meaningful choices have consequences. If a cinema chain claims to prioritize neighborhood programming, there should be situations where that commitment influences screen

allocation, staffing, marketing expenditure, or investment. Otherwise, the declaration may be an attractive description of values rather than a functioning guide to decisions.

Another warning sign is the sudden arrival of additional work without corresponding adjustments to existing commitments. An organization announces a new initiative, assigns enthusiastic project owners, and announces that implementation begins immediately. The employees involved continue performing their previous responsibilities because nobody has authorized them to stop. After several weeks, progress is disappointingly slow. Leadership concludes that execution requires more accountability. Employees conclude that management has discovered a fascinating new way to add work without adding hours. Both sides become frustrated, although the underlying problem was visible from the beginning: the new direction never altered the organization's allocation of capacity.

The practical consequences are often subtle. People start making local decisions that protect their own responsibilities, because those are the consequences they can actually see. A department head continues funding an existing program rather than transferring staff to a new initiative. A team leader selects work that improves the measures used in performance reviews. A project coordinator gives attention to whichever senior manager asks most forcefully. These choices need not involve selfishness or resistance. They can be perfectly understandable responses to conflicting instructions. When strategy does not guide the difficult choices, informal rules emerge to fill the gap. Unfortunately, those rules are rarely designed to serve the organization as a whole.

Follow one decision all the way down

Instead of asking employees to recite the strategy, investigate a recent decision that should have been influenced by it. Choose something concrete: an investment approved, a project postponed, a customer request declined, or a scarce resource assigned to one activity rather than another. Find out what information people used and why the organization chose that option. The aim is not to discover whether somebody mentioned the correct strategic vocabulary during a meeting. It is to understand whether the declared direction genuinely affected the reasoning. A decision may have been sensible for other reasons, but that distinction matters. Otherwise, every favorable outcome can be credited to strategy after the event.

Suppose the cinema chain recently spent a substantial amount upgrading the sound system in its largest venue. That investment could support the community strategy if the venue hosts festivals, discussions, and specialist screenings requiring better equipment. It could also be justified primarily by the commercial performance of premium screenings. Neither explanation is inherently unacceptable. The useful question is what problem the investment was intended to solve, what alternatives were considered, and how the organization expected to benefit. If the justification changes according to whichever executive is asking, the apparent strategic connection may be little more than retrospective storytelling.

The same examination should include decisions the organization avoided. Perhaps several cinema managers requested guidance about reserving seats for community groups, but no one could agree on the financial implications. They continued using their own approaches. One offered free tickets, another discounted them, and a third rejected

the requests. Each manager acted with reasonable intentions, yet customers experienced different policies under the same brand. An unresolved decision was quietly distributed across the organization without anyone explicitly authorizing the differences. This is how missing strategic choices become operational inconsistency. It can happen even when everyone genuinely believes they are doing the right thing.

To make the investigation useful, distinguish three possible failures. Sometimes the organization has never made the relevant choice. Sometimes leadership has made it but failed to explain its implications. And sometimes employees understand the decision but cannot carry it out because they lack authority, resources, or workable procedures. These problems require different responses. A missing choice needs a decision. An unclear choice needs explanation. An impossible instruction needs changed conditions, not another communication campaign. Confusing these failures is expensive because it encourages organizations to solve everything using their favorite tool, whether that happens to be training, reporting, restructuring, or a meeting with an unusually ambitious agenda.

The strategy test nobody needs to study for

Imagine asking three people involved in cinema programming a simple question: "What would we choose differently this month because of our community strategy?" Their answers would reveal more than a test of whether they remember the official slogan. One might describe giving local documentaries a predictable monthly slot. Another might explain why the company selected partnerships with schools rather than launching an expensive national advertising campaign. A third might identify a decision to

maintain accessible ticket prices for particular events while accepting lower margins. The answers need not be identical, but they should reflect a recognizable pattern of reasoning. That pattern is where strategic alignment begins to become useful.

If the answers contradict one another, resist the temptation to label people as uncommitted. Ask how each person arrived at their interpretation. Perhaps the operations team received instructions emphasizing cost reductions while programming received a message prioritizing cultural participation. Maybe the strategic direction is genuinely incomplete. It is also possible that different venues face different circumstances and should make different choices within agreed boundaries. Consistency does not require identical decisions everywhere. It requires a shared understanding of what matters and enough discretion to respond intelligently to local conditions. A cinema in a small university town may need a different schedule from a venue serving a suburban shopping district.

This distinction protects strategy from becoming micromanagement. A senior executive does not need to approve each Saturday screening to provide meaningful direction. Leadership could establish an expectation that venues reserve a defined portion of programming capacity for locally relevant events, while allowing managers to select suitable films according to audience demand and financial conditions. Whether that particular approach is appropriate depends on the business, but it illustrates the difference between setting strategic boundaries and controlling every action. The former helps people make decisions. The latter creates a queue of permission requests that may eventually require its own strategic improvement initiative.

For employees without decision-making authority, the test still has value. If you are asked to execute two activities that appear to conflict, describe the choice rather than assuming that the person giving instructions has already reconciled it. You might say, "We can prepare the local festival this week, but doing so will delay the promotional campaign for the weekend blockbuster. Which outcome should take precedence?" This question presents consequences and invites the appropriate person to decide. It does not guarantee a helpful answer, especially in organizations where authority is unclear. But it is more useful than silently choosing an option and hoping the other responsibility will somehow complete itself.

There is also an important boundary to this approach. Not every unsuccessful project demonstrates that the strategy was absent or meaningless. Organizations can make coherent decisions and still encounter disappointing results. A festival may attract fewer visitors than expected. A commercial screening may sell out because of circumstances no one predicted. Outcomes matter, but the quality of a decision should also be examined in light of the information and assumptions available when it was made. Otherwise, the company may reward lucky guesses and punish reasonable judgments, gradually teaching managers to protect themselves rather than make thoughtful choices.

Our cinema director eventually needs a clear answer about Saturday. The company might select the documentary festival because it advances an intentionally chosen audience strategy within acceptable financial limits. It might schedule the blockbuster because the venue must protect revenue during a difficult period, while arranging community programming at another time. Either decision could be

defensible. What matters is whether the choice follows reasoning the organization understands, rather than the personal preferences of whoever happens to answer the telephone.

Strategy should not require a dramatic announcement every time it influences a decision. In a well-functioning organization, its effects are often quiet. People know which opportunities fit, what compromises they can make, and when a question exceeds their authority. They can explain why a particular activity matters without delivering a lecture on the organization's vision. When that happens, strategy has finally moved out of the conference room and into the business.

And that is a considerable achievement for something that, until recently, appeared to spend most of its working hours inside PowerPoint.

Chapter 2 - A Goal Is Not a Strategy, and a Wish List Is Not a Plan

The founder of a subscription audiobook service has a problem. Thousands of people sign up for a free trial, enthusiastically browse the library, and then disappear before becoming paying subscribers. At the quarterly planning meeting, the leadership team agrees that customer retention must improve. The marketing director suggests increasing advertising. The content manager wants to acquire more bestselling titles. The product team proposes redesigning the app, while customer support recommends sending additional reminders before trials expire. Everyone has arrived with ideas, enthusiasm, and something resembling a business case. Within an hour, the conference room contains enough proposed initiatives to keep the company busy until the next ice age. The founder writes "Increase retention through customer-centric innovation" across the top of the whiteboard. Nobody objects. The strategy is apparently complete, provided we define strategy as a sentence that makes every department feel included.

The confusion begins because several fundamentally different things have been treated as interchangeable. A goal describes an outcome we want to achieve. A strategy explains the choices we believe will produce that outcome and why those choices make sense. Priorities establish where limited resources will be concentrated. A plan organizes the work required to carry out those choices, while individual tasks describe actions someone can complete. Each element has a purpose, but none can automatically substitute for another. "Increase

subscriptions" is an ambition. "Launch a new advertising campaign" is a proposed activity. "Become the most customer-focused listening platform" is an attractive declaration. Without a reasoned connection between the customer's problem, the company's choices, and the intended result, we have assembled a collection of business-sounding sentences rather than a useful direction.

Suppose the service currently converts thirty percent of trial users into paying subscribers and wants to reach forty percent within two quarters. This hypothetical target is clear enough to measure and gives the company something specific to work toward. Yet it provides no explanation of why seventy percent currently leave or which intervention would offer the best opportunity for improvement. The founder could demand forty-five percent instead, hoping that a more ambitious number will generate stronger motivation. Unfortunately, increasing the size of a target does not reveal how to reach it. You can write a spectacular finishing time on your running shoes, but they are unlikely to appreciate the instructions.

The diagnosis hiding beneath the ambition

Before choosing among the proposed initiatives, the team needs to understand what happens during the trial. Perhaps subscribers leave because the library lacks attractive titles. Perhaps they dislike the price or find the application difficult to use. Some may never have intended to pay, regardless of the experience. Others may discover a competitor they prefer. These possibilities suggest different solutions, and each could explain part of the result. Treating every lost subscriber as evidence that marketing needs to work harder would be a convenient diagnosis for everyone except

marketing. It would also risk spending money on attracting more people into an experience that fails to retain them.

Imagine that the company examines anonymous usage patterns and conducts a modest number of voluntary conversations with former trial users. The information suggests that many new subscribers spend considerable time browsing but never begin listening to a complete book. Several explain that the enormous catalog feels overwhelming, while others cannot easily find titles matching their interests. These observations are not proof that discoverability causes most cancellations. The sample may be unrepresentative, and other factors could contribute. They do, however, provide a plausible explanation worth examining further. The team now has something more useful than a vague desire to increase retention: a specific difficulty experienced by customers during an important part of their journey.

A strategy could therefore concentrate on helping trial users discover and enjoy a suitable first audiobook quickly, rather than primarily expanding the catalog or increasing advertising expenditure. That is a meaningful choice because it directs attention toward a particular problem and leaves other attractive opportunities waiting. The product team might simplify initial recommendations. The content specialists could curate collections designed around recognizable listening interests. Marketing could improve the explanation of what new users can expect during their trial. The company would be placing a bet on the idea that an early satisfying listening experience makes people more likely to continue using the service. It is an assumption to test, not a promise that cheerful onboarding screens will solve the entire business.