

B L A C K F O X S T R A T E G Y

# The CEOs Guide to Better Strategy

*(Without Starting Over)*

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*New Science. Ancient Wisdom. Better Business.*



## The Plan You Have Isn't the Problem

Let me start with something most strategy consultants won't tell you: your plan is probably fine.

Not perfect. Not finished. But fine. You and your leadership team put real thought into it. You identified goals that matter. You set targets that make sense. And you're working hard to deliver on them.

So why does it feel like something's missing?

Because something *is* missing. Not in what your plan says—in what it was never designed to look for.

The vast majority of strategic plans are built on a framework that treats the organization as a machine: define the destination, map the route, assign the drivers, measure the miles. It's logical. It's familiar. And it misses the living, breathing complexity of how organizations actually work.

*Ninety percent of organizations fail to execute their strategies successfully. Not because the people are incompetent or the goals are wrong—but because the process that produced the plan has a structural gap between vision and priorities.*

That statistic has been stubbornly consistent for decades. And the reasons given for failure haven't changed much either: poor communication, weak metrics, failure to tie strategy to operations. Those are all real. But they're symptoms, not root causes. The root cause sits upstream, in how the plan was designed in the first place.

This guide isn't about tearing your plan apart. It's about revealing what's already there, naming what isn't, and giving you a system for closing the gap—without starting over.

If you've taken the **Strategy Design Diagnostic**, you already have an honest picture of where your strategy's foundation is strong and where it's exposed. This guide is the logical next step—what to do with what you found. If you haven't taken the Diagnostic, that's okay. What follows works on its own. But the two together are significantly more powerful than either one alone.



## The Lens: Essential Strategy in Five Minutes

You don't need the full origin story to use this. You need just enough to understand the tool you're about to apply.

The Essential Strategy Formula is built on a premise that holds true regardless of your industry, size, or complexity: every organization needs three things to succeed long-term, and when any of them is missing or out of proportion, the strategy suffers—no matter how good it looks on paper.

Those three things are Purpose, Growth, and Evolution. Held together by a fourth discipline: Equilibrium.

### Purpose

Purpose is not your mission statement. It's not a tagline on a wall or a page in your strategic plan. Purpose is the lived experience of *why* this organization exists—felt by the people inside it and recognized by those it serves. The rule that governs it: ***Purpose must be internally compelling and externally valuable in its contribution.***

Most organizations get the external piece right—they can articulate what they deliver and to whom. Where they fall short is on the internal side. The employees doing the work either can't articulate the purpose in their own words, or worse, they can articulate the official version but don't believe it. When purpose is hollow internally, everything downstream drifts. Strategy becomes a set of targets disconnected from meaning.

### Growth

Growth is the dimension that gets the most attention—and the most imbalance. Revenue targets, market expansion, new product lines, headcount increases. These are the metrics boards ask about and compensation is tied to. But ***Growth is intentional, matched by adaptive learning and expansion of capabilities to sustain both speed and scale.***

That second half is where most plans fall short. External growth that outpaces internal capacity doesn't create a thriving organization. It creates one running on adrenaline—accumulating revenue while depleting the people and systems that produce it. Growth without internal depth isn't growth. It's accumulation.

### Evolution

***Evolution actively anticipates the changing needs and wants of all those who serve and who are served by the organization.*** This is the dimension most plans leave out entirely. Not because leaders don't care about the future, but because traditional planning processes weren't designed to look for it.



An organization with no Evolution imperatives is one that has no deliberate mechanism for adapting to a changing world. It may be growing, but it's growing into a future it hasn't prepared for. Digital transformation, industry repositioning, business model innovation, workforce evolution—these aren't future considerations. They're present-tense strategic requirements.

## Equilibrium

The fourth rule: ***Purpose, Growth, and Evolution are interconnected and exist in a state of dynamic Equilibrium.*** Equilibrium is not balance in the work-life sense. It's the strategic discipline of keeping the first three dimensions in productive tension so that pursuing one doesn't collapse the others.

Growth without evolution creates an organization that scales what's already becoming obsolete. Evolution without grounded purpose creates constant reinvention with no through line. Purpose without growth creates a beautiful idea that never reaches its potential. Equilibrium is the integrating mechanism—the discipline that makes the whole thing work.

*Essential Strategy isn't asking you to adopt a new planning model. It's asking you to look at your existing plan through a more complete set of questions.*

That's the lens. Now let's put it to work.

## The Exercise: Map What You Already Have

This is the part that changes things. Not in theory—in practice. What follows is a structured exercise you can do with your leadership team in a focused session. No consultants required. No new methodology to learn. Just a different set of questions applied to the plan you already have.

### Step One: Pull Your Strategic Imperatives

Open your strategic plan. Pull out the top-level imperatives—whatever your plan calls them. Goals. Priorities. Pillars. Strategic initiatives. The five to ten big things your organization has said matter most. Write them on a whiteboard, a shared document, sticky notes on a wall—whatever works for your team. Get them visible.

Don't edit them. Don't debate them yet. Just get them on the table exactly as they exist today.



## Step Two: Map Each One to Purpose, Growth, or Evolution

Now, for each imperative, ask a simple question: is this fundamentally about Purpose, Growth, or Evolution?

**A Purpose imperative** speaks to why the organization exists, what it contributes, and how it creates internal alignment around a shared cause. Initiatives tied to mission clarity, stakeholder value, cultural identity, community impact, or employee experience typically land here. Ask: does this imperative serve our reason for existing—both for the people inside the organization and those we serve?

**A Growth imperative** is about expanding capacity—revenue, market share, capabilities, talent, infrastructure. But it also includes the internal muscle-building required to sustain that expansion: adaptive learning, operational scalability, process maturity, and deepening of core competencies. Ask: does this imperative expand what we can do or deliver—and does it build the internal capacity to sustain that expansion?

**An Evolution imperative** addresses the organization's ability to adapt and stay relevant. Digital transformation, industry repositioning, business model innovation, workforce development for future needs, and long-term sustainability initiatives live here. Ask: does this imperative prepare us for a world that's different from the one we planned for?

Some imperatives will map cleanly to one dimension. Others will bridge two—and that's expected. Purpose, Growth, and Evolution are interconnected. A workforce development initiative, for example, might serve both Growth (building internal capacity) and Evolution (preparing for a changing talent landscape). The mapping doesn't need to be perfect. It needs to be revealing.

## Step Three: See What the Map Reveals

This is where the real value shows up.

When you map existing strategic imperatives to Purpose, Growth, and Evolution, patterns emerge. In my experience working across organizations of every size and type, most discover their plan is heavily weighted toward Growth. Revenue targets, market expansion, new product lines, capital investment. That's not surprising. Growth is where the pressure lives. It's what boards ask about, what investors measure, and what leadership compensation is tied to.

But the gaps are where the strategic risk hides.

**An organization with no Evolution imperatives** is one that has no deliberate mechanism for adapting to a changing world. It may be growing, but it's growing into a future it hasn't prepared for.

**An organization with no internal Purpose imperative**—nothing that speaks to what it means to thrive from within—is running a strategy that depends entirely on external outcomes. Growth without purpose is a house built on sand.



**An organization where Growth dominates** at the expense of the other two is an organization running on adrenaline. It may be hitting its numbers today, but it's quietly depleting the capacity, culture, and relevance it needs to hit them tomorrow.

These imbalances are not something you'll see on a traditional strategic plan. They're not something the board will catch in a quarterly review. But they are exactly the kind of structural risk that determines whether your strategy thrives or slowly unravels.

*Strategy doesn't fail in one dramatic moment. It fails in the accumulation of imbalances that nobody named.*

## Step Four: Name the Equilibrium Question

With your map in front of you, ask the integrating question: are Purpose, Growth, and Evolution in dynamic tension with each other—or is one dimension dominating at the expense of the others?

This is the question that transforms a list of goals into a strategy. It's the difference between a plan that checks boxes and one that holds together under pressure.

Every strategic decision your team makes from this point forward can be tested through this lens. Does this serve our purpose? Does our capacity match our ambition? Are we evolving to meet what's coming? Is this in balance with the rest of our priorities? Four questions. One discipline.

You now have something most organizations never develop: visibility into the structural design of your strategy. You can see what's there, what's missing, and where the weight is pulling you off course.

The next question is: how far and how fast should you go in closing those gaps?

## The Boundaries: Setting Risk Appetite That Means Something

Before you start filling the gaps your mapping exercise revealed, there's a conversation your leadership team needs to have—one that most organizations skip entirely or bury in a compliance document where it does nothing useful.

That conversation is about risk appetite. And it's not what you think.



Risk appetite is not a risk management exercise. It's not a matrix. It's not something your risk officer owns. Risk appetite is a leadership decision—the strategic conversation that defines how far, how fast, and how much your organization is willing to commit in pursuit of its priorities.

Without it, organizations gradually accept incremental increases in exposure. Each decision feels rational in isolation. But the cumulative effect quietly overshoots every limit that was never set. It's the boiling frog problem applied to strategy: you don't notice how far you've drifted until something breaks.

The Essential Strategy Risk Appetite Framework—ESRA—ties risk appetite directly to the PGEE foundation through four questions. Each one is grounded in the strategic dimensions you just mapped. Each one creates a defined boundary that protects what matters most about your strategy.

## The Four Questions

**For Purpose: How much do we invest before the cost is too great?** This question considers the impact to resources and reputation. Achieving a higher purpose often requires investment that creates tension with revenue-generation efforts. The boundary you set here defines the balance between fulfilling your stated mission and the resources required to sustain it. The measures are grounded in capital and operating outlays.

**For Growth: How fast can we get there without sacrificing existing value?** This focuses on core competencies, capabilities, and market position. Growth at a pace that exceeds your organization's internal capacity to sustain it isn't strategic—it's reckless. The boundary you set here defines the speed-to-value threshold. Measures are grounded in performance: G&A ratios, budget adherence, client satisfaction, and operational capacity.

**For Evolution: To what extent are we willing to change?** This addresses impact to culture and industry position. Every evolution initiative asks people to do things differently, and every organization has a limit to how much change it can absorb without fracturing. The boundary you set here defines the extent of change the organization can sustain. Measures are grounded in the organization's position: employee feedback, industry competitiveness, and adaptive readiness.

**For Equilibrium: What threats have the potential to disrupt the critical path?** This is the question that brings it all together. With Purpose, Growth, and Evolution imperatives now defined and bounded, you step back to identify the keystone risks—from across the entire enterprise—that have the real potential to derail the most important strategic outcomes. The measures here are leading key risk indicators rather than the lagging performance indicators organizations typically rely on.

*Risk appetite isn't about how much risk you can tolerate. It's about defining the boundaries that protect the strategy you've chosen.*



Here's what changes when this conversation actually happens: strategic decisions get faster because the boundaries are already defined. Resource allocation gets clearer because you've named what you're willing to spend and where the line is. And the leadership team stops debating risk in the abstract because they have a shared framework for evaluating it in real time.

You don't need a risk department to have this conversation. You need your leadership team, the PGEE map you created in the previous section, and the willingness to name limits you've likely been operating without. The four questions create the structure. Your team's honesty creates the value.

## The Target: What a Quantum Intelligent Organization Looks Like

You've mapped your plan. You've seen the gaps. You've defined your boundaries. Now the question becomes: what are you building toward?

Not just better numbers or smoother execution. Something more fundamental—the organizational capabilities that determine whether your strategy can sustain itself through complexity, disruption, and the inevitable surprises that no plan can predict.

Six attributes define the Quantum Intelligent Organization. They aren't abstract ideals. They're observable, measurable capabilities—and they map directly to the PGEE dimensions you've been working with throughout this guide.

### Aspiration and Alignment: The Purpose Attributes

**Aspiration** is how you define your cause—the reason the organization exists. Not the version on the website. The version that is so compelling it speaks to clients, customers, partners, stakeholders, employees, and bystanders alike. An organization with strong Aspiration has a gravitational center that people orient toward without being told to.

**Alignment** tests how well your people, assets, and resources are actually deployed to support progress toward that cause. Aspiration without Alignment is inspiration without execution—beautiful words that don't connect to the work. When Alignment is strong, every function can articulate how what they do serves the larger purpose. When it's weak, the strategy says one thing and the organization does another.

Together, these two attributes tell you whether your Purpose dimension is real or performative. A high Aspiration score with a low Alignment score is one of the most common and most dangerous patterns—it means the organization believes in its purpose but hasn't built the systems to deliver on it.



## Intelligence and Decisiveness: The Growth Attributes

**Intelligence** is the depth and breadth of data and analysis relevant to capabilities, resource allocation, and market drivers. Not just having data—having the right data, interpreted well, flowing to the right people at the right time. An organization with strong Intelligence knows what it knows, knows what it doesn't know, and has systems for closing the gap.

**Decisiveness** is tied to the timeliness and effectiveness of strategic decisions made based on that analysis. Intelligence without Decisiveness is analysis paralysis. Decisiveness without Intelligence is recklessness. When both are strong, the organization can move at the speed the market demands without sacrificing the rigor the strategy requires.

These two attributes tell you whether your Growth dimension has muscle or just momentum. An organization that's growing fast with low Intelligence and Decisiveness scores is one that's running on instinct and luck—which works until it doesn't.

## Navigation and Adaptation: The Evolution Attributes

**Navigation** recognizes that no matter how well you plan, there is no predicting the future. Once the plan is launched, how well you monitor its performance—and how attentively you watch the horizon—is critical to success. Navigation is the discipline of sensing what's changing before the dashboard confirms it.

**Adaptation** is the ability to anticipate, communicate, and effectively manage change consistent with and in alignment with vision. It's not just the willingness to change—it's the organizational capacity to do so without losing coherence. Organizations with strong Adaptation don't panic when the plan needs to shift. They've built the muscle to sense, adjust, and respond while keeping purpose intact.

Together, Navigation and Adaptation tell you whether your Evolution dimension is active or absent. Most organizations discover that they're operating with weak scores in both—reacting to change rather than anticipating it, adapting reactively rather than building the capacity for strategic agility.

## The Diagnostic Question

With these six attributes in front of you, ask yourself and your team: which of these is strongest in our organization right now? Which is weakest? Where is the gap between what we aspire to and how we actually operate?

The honest answers to those questions, layered onto the PGEE mapping you've already done and the risk appetite boundaries you've defined, create a remarkably clear picture of where your strategy is strong, where it's vulnerable, and where focused investment will have the highest leverage.

*The plan is the artifact. The discipline is the asset. These six attributes are how you measure whether the discipline is taking hold.*



## Strategy Is a Living Discipline

Let me name what you've just done, because it's more than most organizations ever attempt.

You've looked at your existing strategy through a lens designed to reveal what traditional planning processes miss. You've mapped your imperatives to Purpose, Growth, and Evolution and seen the patterns—where the plan is strong, where it's lopsided, and where entire dimensions may be missing. You've confronted the risk appetite question and now have a framework for defining the boundaries that protect your strategy from incremental drift. And you've seen the six attributes that distinguish organizations that thrive from those that merely perform.

None of this required you to throw out what you have. That's the point.

The plan you built isn't the problem. The plan you built is the starting material. What you've added here is the structural awareness to make it more complete, more honest, and more resilient to the complexity your organization operates in every day.

*What you can see, you can address. What you can't, runs the show without your permission.*

One final thought. The exercise in this guide is designed to be something you can do with your leadership team. It's designed to give you genuine value whether you ever work with another strategist or not. That's intentional. The leaders who see their organizations most clearly are the leaders who build the strongest strategies. Full stop.

But I'll be direct: there's a difference between seeing the gaps and closing them. The mapping exercise, the risk appetite conversation, the attribute assessment—these give you sight. Building the implementation architecture, developing the team dynamics that serve as strategy's connective tissue, and sustaining the discipline of adaptive strategic performance over time—that's a different kind of work. It's the work I've spent thirty-plus years doing. And if what you found in these pages confirmed what you've been sensing—or revealed something you hadn't seen—I'd welcome the conversation.



### Ready to go deeper?

The Strategy Design Diagnostic is a free self-assessment that gives you a scored baseline across all four dimensions—the perfect companion to the mapping exercise in this guide.

Strategy in Motion is a sustained strategic partnership that keeps Purpose, Growth, Evolution, and Equilibrium in active, adaptive alignment—with the coaching and team development infrastructure to make it stick.

If you're a CEO or executive director navigating real organizational complexity and you want a strategic partner who thinks in systems, not templates—**I'd welcome the conversation.**

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