

ASHRIDGE
EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

HULT

How to reduce the risk of strategic stumbles

Including results of surveys of Heads of Strategy

Agenda

- **Introduction to stumblers**
- **Ways to reduce the risk of stumbling**
- **Strawman proposal**
- **Summary and round-the-table**

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Many large companies stumble in performance at high cost for shareholders and CEOs

- **We defined “Stumblers”**
 - Companies with at least 25% drop in share price relative to the local index
 - In last 1 or 2 years before a CEO, in post for at least 2 years, left under a cloud
- **We evaluated 268 companies over a 10 year period**
 - All those in the top 100 in Europe or the US between 2006 and 2016
- **1 in 5 companies stumbled**
 - 55 stumbles in the 10 year period
- **1 in 8 CEOs stumbled**
 - 55 of 476 CEOs who left their post after serving for at least 2 years
- **More stumbles in Europe than the US**
 - 37 stumbles in Europe versus 18 in US
 - 21% of CEOs stumbled in Europe versus 15% in US
 - Shorter CEO period in office in Europe
 - European companies smaller
 - Smaller companies stumble more often
- **A total cost of about \$1 trillion in lost value**
 - 40% average TSR underperformance in stumbling CEOs last 2 years in office
- **Case studies of stumblers supplemented by two questionnaires**
 - Corporate planning processes (2017)
 - Techniques used to manage strategic risks (2018)

Our research suggests many stumbles are potentially avoidable

- **Stumbles have multiple, compounding causes**
- **But majority are due to failed growth strategies**
 - Flawed management of the associated risks
 - Mostly top team and Board at fault
- **Many stumbles look avoidable**
 - Attention to early warning signals
 - Better strategy process techniques tailored to the situation
 - Changes in top management team
- **But some stumbles uncontrollable**
 - Driven by extreme events

The case studies show stumbles have multiple, compounding causes: typical patterns

1. A difficult, complex challenge

Competitors, market developments or shareholders put company under pressure to change

A turbulent environment and a complex portfolio make it hard to clearly identify and prioritise key issues

...or a sharp focus on a few key issues leaves the company ignoring other issues

2. An ambitious strategy is chosen

An ambitious, “sexy” strategy is chosen

The strategy involves taking on significant, unfamiliar risks: innovation, acquisitions, etc.

...and may require managing conflicting objectives: cost reduction and safety improvements, etc.

A bias to growth, over confidence and lack of well developed alternatives mean risks, including the risk of compliance failure, are downplayed

3. The organization is not set up for success

Ambitious strategies prove hard to organize and execute

Organisation is having to learn difficult new tricks and vulnerabilities are exposed

Adverse environmental risks often compound implementation difficulties

4. Key people are poorly qualified and/or biased

Board, CEO, top team, distributed leadership lack the expertise to develop and deliver the new strategy. For example the existing team is not suited to a new strategy challenge; the company can't build bench strength as fast as it is growing

Team starts with potential for bias e.g., a previously successful formula, a successful and long-standing CEO

Problems are not addressed until after the stumble

Tesco is an example of a stumble with these typical patterns

1. A difficult, complex challenge

In mid term for Terry Leahy, Tesco running out of clear UK superstore growth opportunities

Sustained high growth requires riskier bets on further UK superstore growth and diversification

Strategic investment decisions complicated by difficulty of evaluating cannibalisation (e-commerce and superstores) and synergy issues (financial services and stores, UK and Int'l)

2. An ambitious strategy is chosen

The company follows a growth strategy resulting in rapid, increasing and multiple diversifications

- Further investment in UK superstores
- New channels in UK: e-commerce, metro
- New products and services: financial services, petrol, restaurants
- Acquisitions in Europe, Asia
- Organic growth of new venture in USA

Heavy cash requirements as UK profitability declines

Becomes increasingly difficult to fund but halo effect from strong past record and continued EPS growth enabled by borrowing

3. The organization is not set up for success

Management structure becoming increasingly complex: seventeen person top executive team under Clarke.

Complex matrix of categories, formats, countries, and functions such as property and digital

Internal focus on revenues and margins, not on declining ROCE. Black box SPVs for superstore investments complicate evaluation of returns

Mix of different metiers: strain of taking financial services in-house after buying out RBS

UK buying negotiations out of control and end year bonuses used to smooth/boost results

4. Key people are poorly qualified and/or biased

Executive team all with strong background, but Board not at all well placed to challenge strategy.

- Under Leahy as CEO, many executives on Board and no NEDs with industry experience
- Under his successor, Clarke, fewer executives on Board but still no NEDs with industry experience

...the biggest problems occur when choosing risks to take

	Frequency of the four problems in case studies			
	1. A difficult, complex challenge	2. An ambitious strategy is chosen	3. The organization is not set up for success	4. Key people are poorly qualified
Core problem	26%	45%	18%	37%
Some concerns	31%	39%	35%	16%
No obvious concerns	43%	16%	47%	47%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

A separate survey highlighted the role of the CEO and Executive team as the most important driver of performance

Results from 2017 survey on Corporate Planning Processes; Average ranking of factors in terms of their importance for increasing the changes of strong corporate performance (8 = Highest priority, 1 = Lowest priority)



Source: Survey on Corporate Planning Processes, 2017

Bias to growth was of high concern to survey participants

Q.19 Managers often have a bias to making growth investments even when past returns on similar investments have been poor?

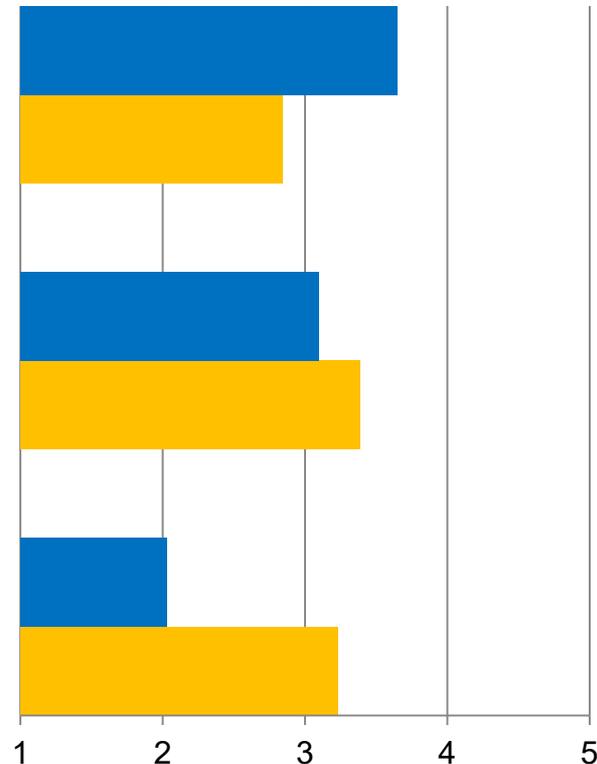
Q20. Our company's planning and decision-making processes sets up to guard against a bias to making growth investments.

Q22. Managers (particularly top managers) are often overconfident and do not sufficiently consider the risks of different strategy options?

Q23. To guard against overconfidence, our strategic planning process forces explicit consideration of the risks of different strategic options.

Q25. Managers often take the requirements to meet legal, regulatory, health and safety and other binding constraints too lightly.

Q26. To prevent legal, regulatory and other binding constraints being taken too lightly, our strategic planning process forces explicit consideration of how to meet them.



Overall, a primary contributor to stumbles is poor decision making, resulting from a mix of biases and poor top team qualifications for a new strategy

Source: Survey on Corporate Planning Processes, 2017

Source: 2017 Questionnaire on Strategy process

Discussion

- **Which of you have experienced a stumble or a near stumble**
- **Does the typical problem (e.g. Tesco) sound familiar or did your (near) stumble follow a different logic?**

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A strong core strategy process is a starting point

1. Define strategic risks

Identify the issues with the biggest potential impact on company value

- BU, portfolio and other corporate issues
- Achieve returns and meet constraints
- Planning, execution and environmental risks

Define critical assumptions and issues that are urgent and important to address

- Sketch scenarios, assess triggers and probabilities

Consider management capabilities and likely biases

2. Choose risks to take

Address critical issues by developing strategic options that

- Generate strong financial returns and meet important constraints
- Match company and management capabilities to ensure competitive advantage in risk-taking

Evaluate the risk/return trade-off of each option

- Requires an implementation plan for each option sufficient to evaluate the execution risks

Commit to an overall strategy (and take big urgent decisions)

3. Organize to manage risks

Set up to take decisions and get things done

- Organisation structure
- Processes
- In/outsourcing
- Responsibilities and rewards for employees, suppliers and business partners
- Culture and values

4. Staff to manage risks

Ensure there are people to fill the roles that have the qualifications to do the job well

- Board, CEO, Top executive team, Distributed leaders

Don't choose a strategy unless confident you have the people to implement it effectively

Reinforce core strategy process with additional measures

- 1. High level diagnostics, to suggest areas of highest risk**
 - *Markers* to spot a risky “strategic context”
 - *Emperor’s Clothes Test* to ensure top team has capabilities to address them
- 2. Strategy techniques that focus on identifying and managing major downside risks, to reinforce core strategy process when strategic context is risky**
 - E.g., scenario analysis, challenge sessions
- 3. Changes in the profile of the senior team, to boost capabilities to manage risks**
 - CEO, Senior Executives, Board
 - And, potentially organization wide

“Markers” can provide early warning signals that the context is likely to increase overall risk levels

Markers indicating likely problems

1. Define strategic risks

Complex business portfolio and/or multiple challenges

Poor information on financial performance or compliance

Sizeable non-core or «question-mark» activities

Long history of trouble free success

Mission critical innovation or repositioning

2. Choose strategic risks to take

Core business ex growth but investing heavily to grow anyway (e.g. big acquisitions)

High financial leverage/high new equity requirement

Substantial «non-core» or «question-mark» activities

Rapid organic growth

Operating returns in sharp conflict with compliance

Conflict of personal and company interests in top team

Board/CEO tied to a historically successful strategy

3. Organize to manage strategic risks

Major organisation change initiated

Non-routine tasks with high potential for value destruction

Mission critical innovation

Matrix organization is key to performance

Large, outsourced one-off construction/execution projects

Major changes in key capabilities required at middle management levels

The Emperor's Clothes test helps explore whether the right team is in place to manage those risks

- **Well qualified CEO and top executive team**
 - CEO with strong background and track record to address the current key strategic challenge
 - Other members of the top management team chosen to close any gaps in the CEO's qualifications
 - Strategy chosen to reduce risks related to CEO and top team qualifications (e.g. outsource where not advantaged, prefer businesses in the heartland for your capabilities)
- **Appropriate Board composition**
 - Sufficient industry experience among NEDs
 - Sufficient other experience relevant to key strategic challenge among NEDs
 - Sufficiently independent of executive management
 - Not too many directors for good debate

Operationalise by structured question set that prevents fudging

Is the CEO suited for the job?

- **Substantial business experience in company's key industry and industry segments?**
 - Experience with key customer groups, products, technologies, processes, countries?
- **Substantial line management experience?**
 - Business Head or Sales, Production, R&D, Marketing
 - Not Finance, Legal, HR etc
- **Education and functional background to deal with the toughest strategic challenges the company needs to crack?**
 - If the tough challenges, as they often do, relate to innovation and repositioning, usually R&D/Technical and/or Marketing background required
 - BU Head will usually qualify on Marketing but not R&D/Technical

Do the top executive team and the strategy help patch any holes?

- **Other members of the top management team chosen to patch any holes in the CEO's qualifications**
 - Top team with “extra strength” where CEO has weaknesses?
- **Strategy chosen to reduce risks related to CEO and top team qualifications**
 - Outsource/acquire activities where CEO and top team not advantaged?
 - Prefer businesses in the heartland for your CEO and top team capabilities?

Is the Board suited for the job?

- **At least three NEDs with substantial industry experience in an executive role?**
- **No executive directors on the Board other than CEO and Finance Director (and former CEOs on Board only for a short transition period)?**
- **Not more than twelve people on the Board?**

Today's primary focus is on strategy techniques that, mostly, do not require changing the team

- **Markers and the Emperor's clothes test can suggest areas where actions should be taken to improve the management of strategic risks**
- **One potential action is to introduce or reinforce one or more strategy "techniques"**
 - Tools, initiatives, processes, group activities that are aimed at improving the definition/choice/organize/staff 4 step process
 - Can be introduced without major changes in governance, the executive team or the major strategic and other processes already in place
 - Capable of significant nudges in the right direction...
 - ...although unlikely to deal with extreme situations e.g., where the senior team are already committed to a particular option

Summary of key points on techniques

- **A variety of techniques available to address a mix of problems**
 - Data, analysis and expertise; debate and challenge; governance; target setting and monitoring
 - Better information and analysis; reduce impact of biases; more able top people
- **Information problems easier to address than bias and ability problems**
 - Increasing debate and challenge or questioning top people's ability not common and, when done, often not seen as successful
 - Target setting and monitoring used and valuable both in improving information and reducing impact of biases
 - But can't monitor and control one-off big bets
- **Benefits to tailoring the techniques used to fit the specific problem**
 - Consider focus, value-added, resistance

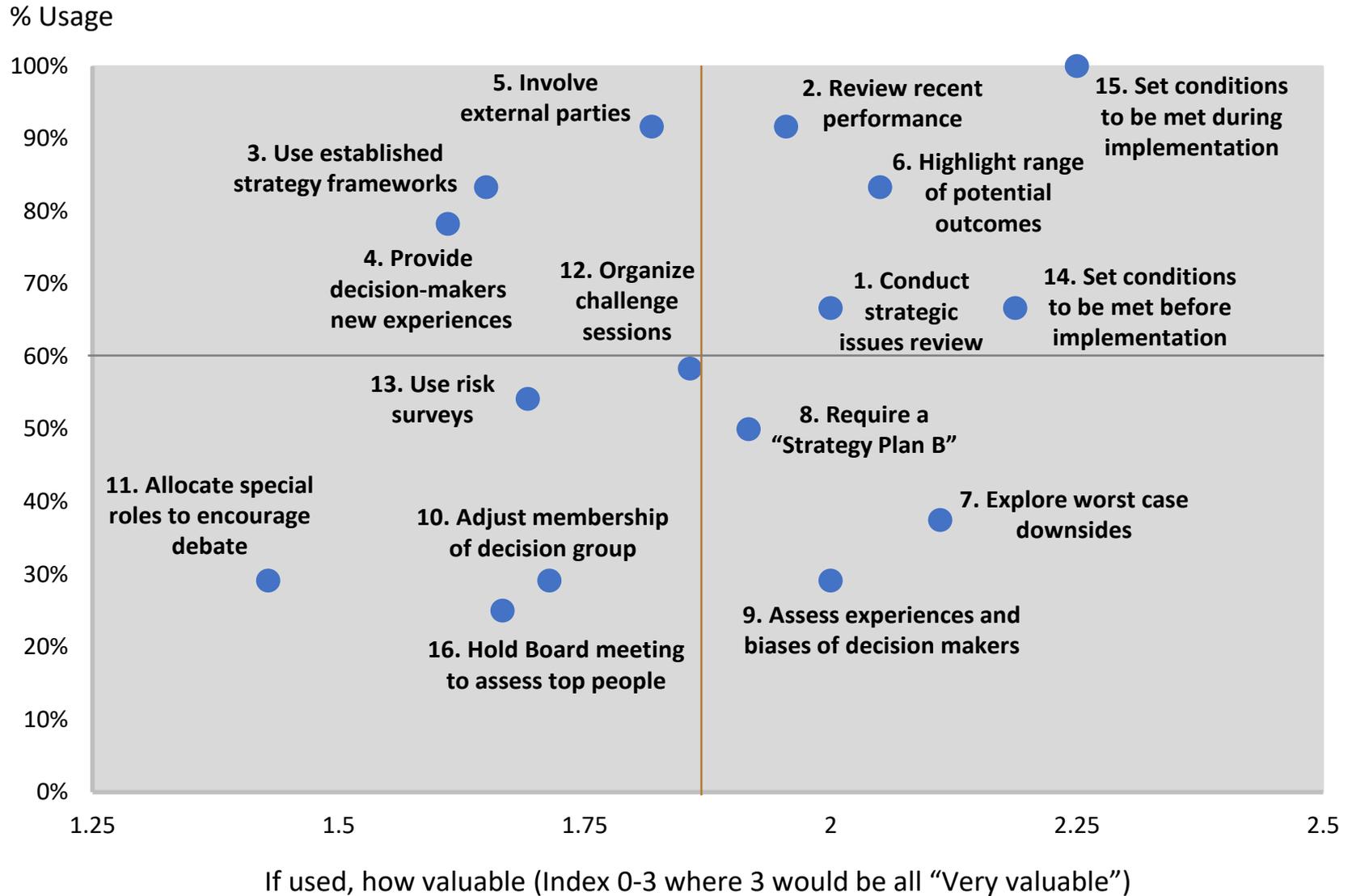
Questionnaire asked about usage and value of sixteen representative techniques (I)

- 1. Conduct a “strategic issues review” to identify and assess strategic risks that may not be picked up in other aspects of strategic planning**
- 2. Review recent performance prior to making major decisions to reduce the risk of over-optimism and other biases**
- 3. Use established strategy frameworks to highlight key issues, e.g., SWOT, PEST, the BCG growth-share matrix, Michael Porter’s 5 forces, or the ASMC “Parenting” framework**
- 4. Provide decision-makers with new experiences relevant to the decision e.g., Board or top executive team visits to China if considering a China investment, or visits to companies that have recently undergone a successful digital transformation if investing in digital transformation**
- 5. Involve external experts or stakeholders e.g., consultants, investment bankers, proactive discussions with dissident major shareholders**
- 6. Use techniques which highlight the range of potential outcomes for a given option e.g., sensitivity analysis of key assumptions, scenario analysis, role plays, business gaming, war-gaming, simulations**
- 7. Use techniques which identify potential downside risks or weaknesses e.g., add 50% to the downside case of key assumptions, “Pre-mortem” (hold a discussion where the group imagines that the strategy has failed and the way in which it failed), or “Red teaming” (have a team role-play as a competitor trying to undermine the proposed strategy)**
- 8. Encourage consideration of lower risk options by developing a lower risk “Strategy Plan B”**

Questionnaire asked about usage and value of sixteen representative techniques (II)

9. **Assess decision-makers' past experiences and likely consequential biases prior to making major decisions**
10. **Adjust membership of the decision group to counterbalance the effect of biases e.g., add people with different experience or interests, appoint the head of a different business unit to chair or facilitate the group**
11. **Encourage more challenging and creative debate by allocating roles e.g., allocate roles to individuals in the decision group using a De Bono's "hats" or a devil's advocate approach; appoint a facilitator**
12. **Allocate time in the process for "challenge sessions" e.g., focused on key assumptions and downsides, re-framing the issues or brainstorming new options**
13. **Conduct internal or external surveys to solicit information about the risks associated with particular options e.g., private discussions about key concerns with members of the decision group, surveys about strategic options sent to middle management or customers**
14. **Set formal conditions that must be met before implementation can proceed e.g., an experienced leadership team and an implementation plan be in place, a new store format must achieve certain sales before rolling out**
15. **Set formal conditions that must be met during the roll out of implementation e.g., return targets on early investments, market share targets**
16. **Hold a regular board session dedicated to assessing whether new people are required on the board and in the top executive team, because of the nature of the current key strategic risks and challenges**

Usage and perceived value of techniques varies widely



“Set formal conditions that must be met during roll out” rated most popular and valued technique

”Growth Playbook” example

- Start by defining the strategy e.g., customer problem, why our solution is unique, key actions required e.g., organisational changes, supply chain initiatives
- Translate into discrete steps of incremental commitment e.g.,
 - Staggered capex and organisational changes
 - Pilots
 - Evolving sequence of ”minimum viable products” tested through customer interviews
- Set measurable targets e.g.,
 - Strategic Scorecard; Actions, Milestones
 - Financial Scorecard; Orders, Sales, Gross margins for entry into a new market or business
- Define gates through which each investment has to pass before approval for next stage

Comments

- Hard numbers analytical technique but addresses problematic biases e.g., bias to growth
- Simple, concrete and aligned with normal control systems;
 - “The more you can quantify it the better”
- Nevertheless, some limitations:
 - Of limited effectiveness for major, investments that cannot be sub-divided into discrete steps e.g., major M&A
 - A major investment may be required in financial and salesforce systems to get valid data e.g., incremental performance versus baseline
 - Incentives may reward other factors e.g., hitting short term budget, workforce satisfaction, etc.
 - Gaming of the system e.g., At a film studio; boosting audience numbers for a film in a test market by using unreasonably high levels of local advertising

In “Think Again” we clustered techniques into four categories with different mixes of benefits

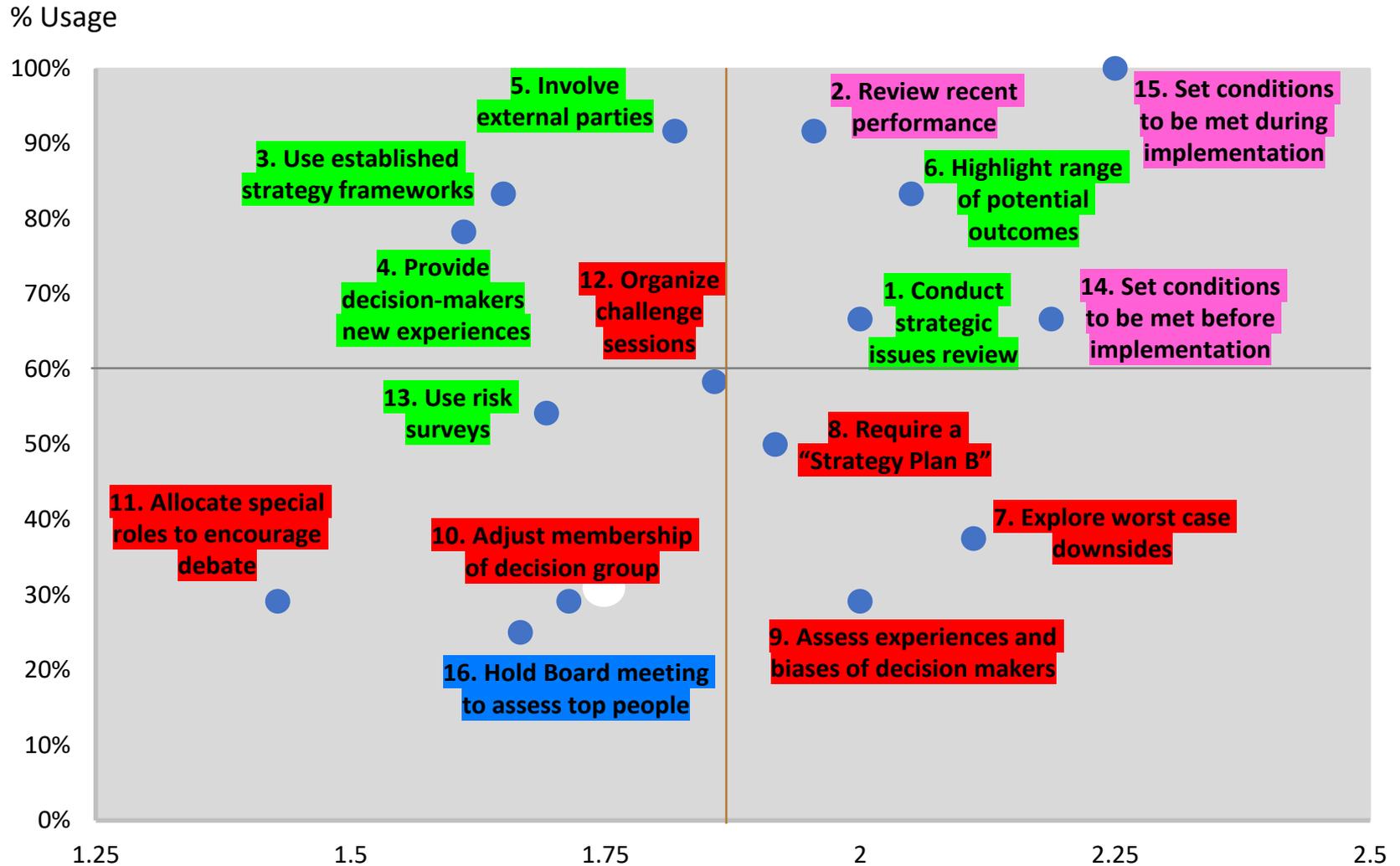
Benefit Category	Better information and analysis	Reduce impact of biases	More able top people
1. Data, analysis and expertise	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓
2. Debate and challenge		✓ ✓ ✓	
3. Governance		✓	✓ ✓
4. Target setting and monitoring	✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓	

Information problems easier to address than bias and ability problems?

- **Adding data, analysis and external expertise is common**
 - But limited value in addressing bias or top people's ability
- **Increasing debate and challenge or questioning top people's ability less common and often not seen as successful**
 - Different skills required to improve debate and challenge?
 - Challenging top people's ability hard to do?
- **Target setting and monitoring used and valuable both in improving information and reducing impact of biases**
 - Tie decision-makers to the mast before they are tempted
 - But can't monitor and control one-off big bets

See next slide for data !

■ Data, Analysis, Expertise ■ Debate, Challenge
■ Governance ■ Target setting and monitoring



If used, how valuable (Index 0-3 where 3 would be all "Very valuable")

Strategy team career background a possible constraint on use of debate and challenge techniques

- **Strategy team most often with analytical background**
 - Experienced in techniques providing more data and analysis?
- **Less prior experience in psychology, sociology**
 - Lack know-how with techniques to challenge biases?

Some company cultures more open to strategic risk management than others

- **“Risk managers”**
 - A wide range of techniques used to prepare well and consider potentially damaging biases
 - Supportive and conservative CEO, culture of challenge, often strong head of strategy
- **“The Jungle”**
 - Challenge difficult, techniques to address biases face strong resistance
 - Ad hoc and/or “guerilla tactics” used to influence decision making if possible

Example of the spectrum of company cultures

- **“In a previous role I didn’t have much power and I couldn’t directly challenge key executives, so I used some of these techniques to build consensus within the senior team that there were risks that needed to be looked at further:**
 - Reviewing past investments to learn about what typically goes wrong
 - Using strategy frameworks like the cash cow matrix to frame the situation and highlight areas of risk
 - Conducting external and sometimes internal surveys or interviews to identify areas of weaknesses
- **When I moved to being Head of Strategy at a new company, the CEO was conservative and keen to make sure we didn’t stumble (Risk manager). I did a lot of work on risks – but it was a mix of informal discussions and some staff work – so I didn’t often need to use the techniques, except within my own team or to help my own thinking”**

Techniques can be adapted to deliver different benefits

Wargaming example

- A leader in their domestic market faced entry into domestic market by new competitor
- Round one: Strategy group used scenarios and informal wargaming to identify that impact could be significant
 - “Rational” behavior by incumbents would minimize impact; however, strong pressure on certain competitors to defend market share with “irrational” strategies
 - Executive team assumed rational behavior and thus minimal impact
- Round two: Two day offsite with Executive team used to run a 5 round wargame
 - Engaging experience for Executives
 - Enhanced by presentation of several extreme scenarios (based on strategy function analysis)
 - Potential for irrational behavior forcefully driven home
 - Result; launch of several initiatives to deal with new entrant

Comments

- Example of using a technique (Wargaming) in two very different ways:
 - Round one: Improve information and quality of analysis through staff work
 - Round two; Reduce impact of biases on decisions; “We didn’t learn anything new from the offsite – but we took the Executive on a journey”
- Example of the common dual use of certain techniques e.g.,
 - Use consultants to improve information and analysis
 - Use consultants to challenge biases with fewer personal battles within the executive team

Barriers to successful use of techniques suggest some questions to ask before getting started

- **Focus**
 - + Focus is on risks from competitor activity
 - Very limited time wasted on other risks
- **Value-added**
 - + Significant benefits from changes in senior team understanding and challenge to biases; potential for follow up by strategy team and others
 - Significant use of senior time
- **Resistance**
 - + Strategy function driving the process (limited power)
 - No resisters
 - Positive experience from offsite (e.g., avoiding any senior executive making stupid decisions during the wargame)

Example of using the questions in a two day Wargaming workshop

- | | Scoring (+, 0, -) |
|---|--------------------------|
| • Focus | |
| + Focus is on risks from competitor activity | +++ |
| - Very limited time wasted on other risks | 0 |
| • Value-added | |
| + Significant benefits from changes in senior team understanding and challenge to biases; potential for follow up by strategy team and others | +++ |
| - Significant use of senior time | -- |
| • Resistance | |
| + Strategy function driving the process (limited power) | + |
| - No resisters | 0 |
| - Positive experience from offsite (e.g., avoiding any senior executive making stupid decisions during the wargame) | 0 |

Interviews suggest a number of tactics to boost focus and value-added and reduce resistance

- **Focus**
 - Introduce only when technique is of clear relevance; “I couldn’t have suggested using this technique a year ago but now everyone sees the importance of understanding this risk
- **Value added**
 - Combine engaging activity to engage with biases and in depth information and analysis
 - Use to improve the business case (not just knock it down)
- **Resistance**
 - Adapt tools to focus on critical biases e.g., pre-designed wargaming offsite
 - Position new techniques as enhancement/extension to techniques already in use
 - Hold informal discussions with key actors to test and build the case for new techniques
 - Conduct early issues analysis to establish need for further attention to risks; “...before people adopt particular positions”
 - Apply techniques informally e.g., as a thought experiment, in conversation with members of the senior team
 - Apply techniques within the strategy team and bring the results into senior team discussions
 - Let others come up with the idea of introducing a technique by asking e.g., “What would we need to know to understand the downside and whether we could manage it”
 - Use the authority of the CEO (judiciously)

Discussion

- **Are there any techniques that you find particularly valuable and which, on average, other respondents did not?**
- **What ways do you have of overcoming barriers to successful use of techniques?**
- **Any comments on the markers and Emperor's Clothes test?**

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Is there a best practice?

- **Research suggests techniques to use depend on situation**
- **Nevertheless, worth seeking a widely applicable basic toolkit to reduce the risk of a stumble**
 - *Focus* on key issues with minimal time wasted
 - *Value-added* to other processes and activities already managing strategic risk
 - With a reasonable chance of overcoming *resistance*
- **We offer a strawman as the basis for pooling ideas**
- **And a comparison to PE approach to further stimulate thought**

PE approach to strategic risk management

interesting even if much not easily transferable

PE Partners	PLC Board
Selection: strong focus on strategy and industry experience	Selection: often greater focus on diversity and finance background
Proactive role in whole strategy process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selected PE partners personally form “red team” to assess risks • Personally hire expert advice • Systematically set up risk metrics (e.g. customer advocacy score), tolerances, and warning lights 	Often more reactive role in strategy process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More delegated to and at discretion of executive team Exception in Switzerland where Board is more proactive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger legal responsibility for setting strategy
Change executives if challenge changes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Has she done this before?” 	Change executives if poor performance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Three strikes and you’re out!”
High, performance-aligned incentives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Skin in the game” 	Modest, often largely fixed incentives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Independent”

Strawman strategic risk management process

- **Integrate risk management in annual Board review of strategic issues and assumptions (T1+)**
 - Ensure awareness of the significance of stumbles (e.g. using article draft)
 - Review “Risk markers” (incl. T3) and carry out “Emperor’s clothes test” (T16)
 - Use wide range of inputs to challenge and update key assumptions and surface key issues (T4,T5)
 - Serves to set agenda for corporate strategy planning and top level HRM
- **...and in intensive strategy review for major individual threats or opportunities emerging**
 - Employ risk “process gates” in both strategy development and implementation
 - Lay out issues and options: identify risks and what it will take to evaluate them (T2, T6)
 - Create strategy plan: rigorous analysis of risks (T7, T13, T5)
 - Before starting implementation: conditions met (T14)
 - During implementation: establish staircase/roadmap and monitor and control (T15)
 - Where success cannot be controlled by stage gates, require low-risk “strategy plan B” (T8)
 - E.g. for big bets such as major acquisitions
 - Integrate behavioural strategy into strategic decision-making (T9,10,11,12)
 - Include skills in behavioural strategy in strategy team (in-house or external partner)
- **Overall process ownership with Board**
 - Chairman and non-execs in the lead on Emperor’s clothes test
 - Process management with Head of Strategy
 - Comply or explain principle

Discussion

- **In groups, come up with a revised strawman proposal that could reasonably be implemented for situations with a high level of strategic risk**

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Discussion

- **Feedback from group discussions on strategic risk management process**
- **Reflections on what further research would be useful**