

A BOOK ON A MISSION

Transform time-sucking, energy-depleting meetings into productive, strategic conversations that create engagement, alignment, and real MOMENTS OF IMPACT.



“Moments of Impact shows how design can transform our strategic conversations, too.”

Scott Cook,
Co-founder Intuit

STARTER KIT TEASER

*Adopted from Moments of Impact: How to Design Strategic Conversations that Accelerate Change
by Chris Ertel and Lisa Kay Solomon, Simon & Schuster 2014*

MOMENTS *of* IMPACT



STARTER KIT

TOOLS TO HELP YOU DESIGN
YOUR NEXT STRATEGIC CONVERSATION

Chris Ertel and Lisa Kay Solomon

DESIGNED BY MINE™



THE
STRATEGIC CONVERSATION
COMPASS

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the *Moments of Impact* Starter Kit, a collection of tools and tips—based on the book—that will help you start designing strategic conversations.

Strategic conversations are creative and collaborative problem-solving sessions designed to address an adaptive challenge. Most organizational challenges are technical ones of applying established skills to well-defined problems, such as trying to find ways to raise revenues or cut costs by another 5 percent. Standard meetings work fine for these challenges. By contrast, adaptive challenges are messy, ambiguous, and open-ended. They require a different approach.

What adaptive challenge is your organization facing right now? The rise of a tough new competitor? The slow unraveling of a long-successful business model? The emergence of a disruptive new technology that presents both opportunities and threats? Surprising innovations coming from faraway markets?

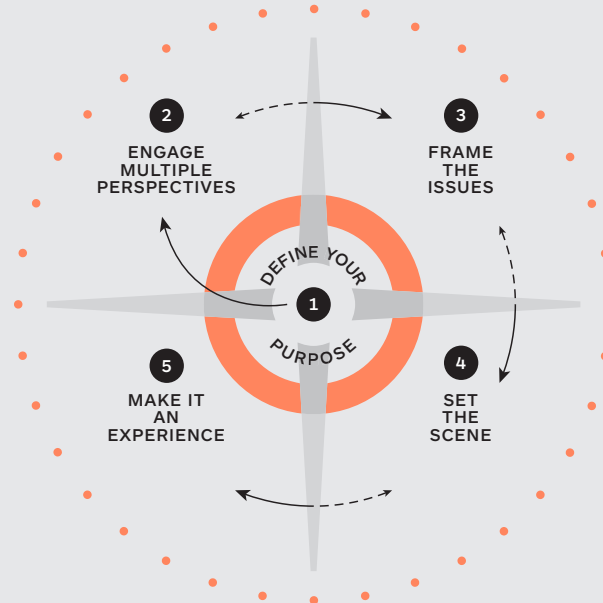
In these volatile times, it would be odd if your organization weren't in the grips of at least one adaptive challenge. For a host of reasons, challenges like these are increasing in both frequency and intensity. Organizations have no choice but to deal with them head-on—or risk being left behind.

Superhero executives can't solve adaptive challenges by themselves. Addressing them requires collaboration from people with different

perspectives from across the organization—and often beyond. And it requires an approach that's different from standard meetings and brainstorming sessions—our usual tools for collaboration.

Moments of Impact argues that strategic conversations are the best way to tackle adaptive challenges. But it's one thing to read about a process—and another to do it yourself. That's why we've included this Starter Kit.

Like the book, this kit is organized around five core principles. When you prepare for your next session, we suggest following them in the order shown in the diagram, keeping in mind that there will be a fair amount of back-and-forth among the steps.



THE CORE PRINCIPLES AS PROCESS

THREE WAYS TO USE THIS KIT

As a virtual coach

If you've got a big strategic conversation coming up and don't have time to read the whole book, you can quickly find many helpful ideas that will increase your odds of success. When you have time to read the book, you'll get a deeper understanding of the content and an intuitive feel for how to put these ideas into action.

As a checklist and handy reference

In *The Checklist Manifesto*, surgeon Atul Gawande makes the case that today's challenges are so complex that busy professionals can't possibly remember everything they know when they need it most. That's why pilots use checklists before they take off and doctors use them to improve the quality and consistency of health care. Even if you're a black belt at designing strategic conversations or have read this whole book, it can be hard to recall key points in the heat of the moment. We've put them together in one place, so you can scan them quickly and reabsorb their lessons.

As a shared playbook for teams

By providing a shared framework, process, and language, this kit will enable teams of people at different skill levels to design better strategic conversations—and to learn from one another along the way.



CORE PRINCIPLES AND KEY PRACTICES

1

DEFINE YOUR PURPOSE

Seize your moment

Pick one purpose

Go slow to go fast

2

ENGAGE MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Assemble a dream team

Create a common platform

Ignite a controlled burn

3

FRAME THE ISSUES

Stretch (don't break) mind-sets

Think inside *different* boxes

Choose a few key frames

4

SET THE SCENE

Make your space

Get visual

Do sweat the small stuff

5

MAKE IT AN EXPERIENCE

Discover, don't tell

Engage the whole person

Create a narrative arc

MAKING YOUR MOMENT: A KIT OF FOUR PARTS

Each section of this kit provides an overview of one of our five core principles, plus specific ways to get started:

ASK THIS

Diagnostic questions to answer before starting.

DO THIS

Must-do actions, organized around the three “key practices” that support each principle.

TRY THIS

Tips and tools to consider, suitable for some situations more than others.

READ THIS

The most helpful resources (mostly books) on topics related to each principle.

In this Starter Kit, we’ve worked hard to be selective rather than comprehensive. Since every strategic conversation is customized to context, we’ve honed in on the most general principles and practices that should apply to any situation. (Most points are covered in more detail in the corresponding chapters of the book.)

We hope that this Starter Kit will prove an invaluable resource for you. As you try out these ideas, please shoot us feedback on what’s worked well and what you’ve learned along the way—so that we can learn from you, too!

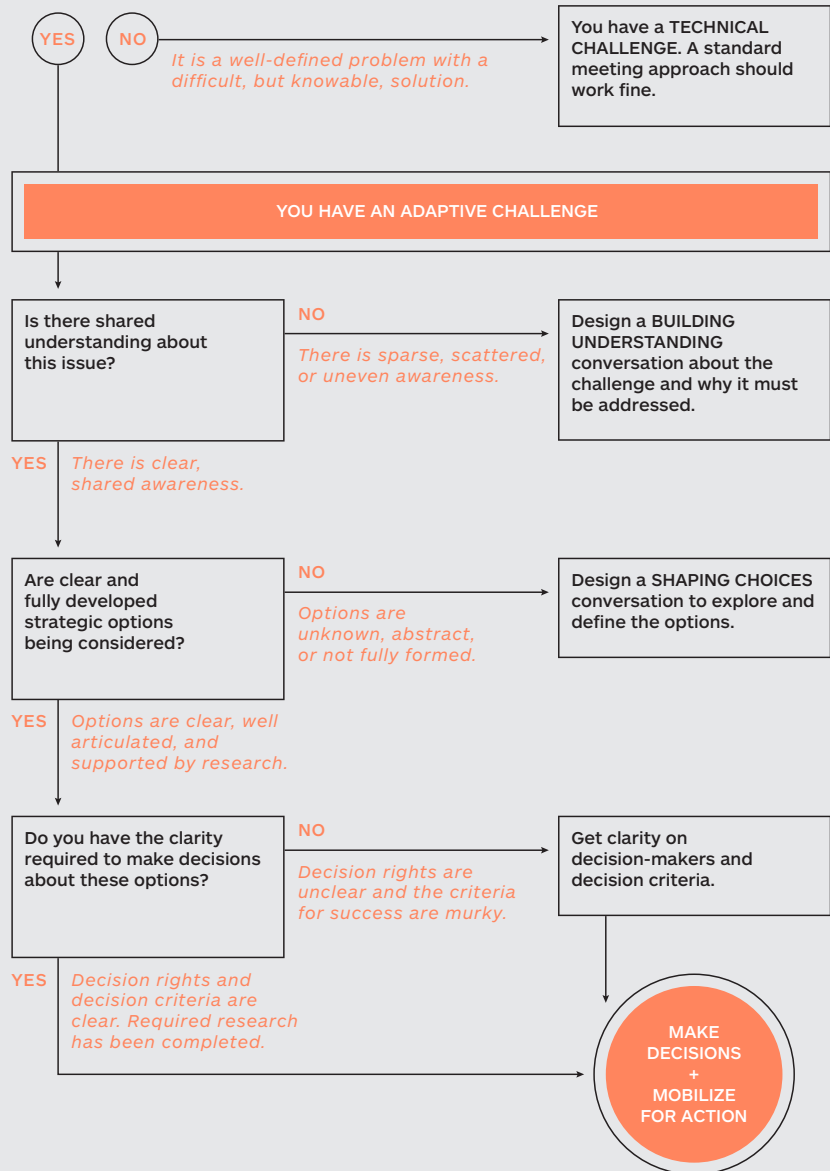
BEFORE YOU BEGIN

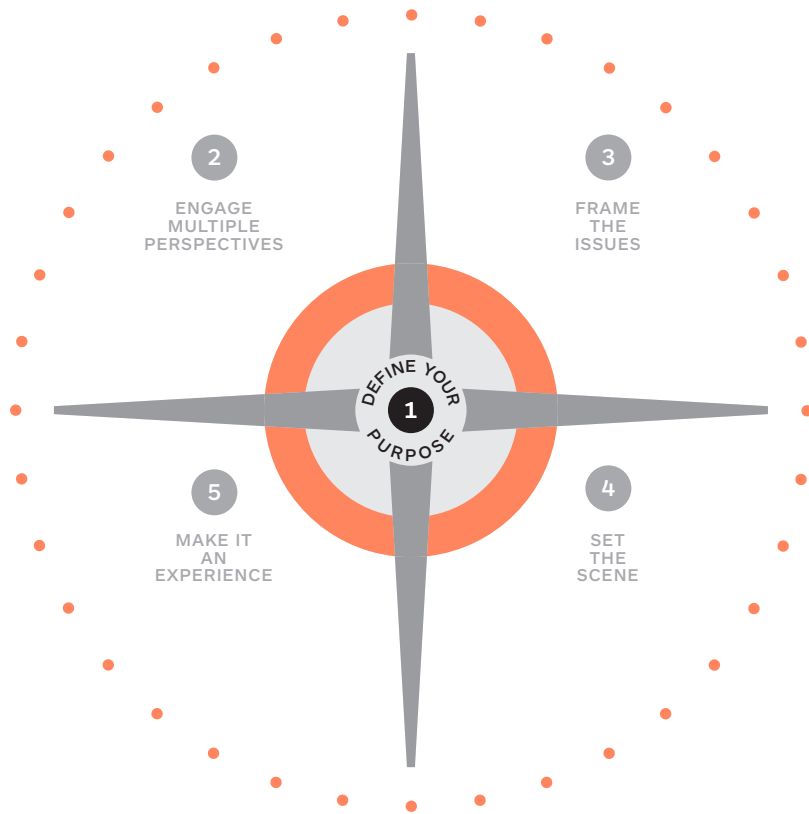


ASK THIS

WHAT KIND OF STRATEGIC CONVERSATION DO YOU NEED?

DO YOU HAVE A MESSY, OPEN-ENDED, ILL-DEFINED STRATEGIC CHALLENGE WITH POTENTIALLY BIG CONSEQUENCES?





1

DEFINE YOUR PURPOSE

Most strategic conversations run for a day or two. But adaptive challenges can rarely be “solved” this quickly—even with intense effort. They’re too complex.

Resolving an adaptive challenge requires a sustained effort over time—usually a few months or longer. This process comprises many activities, including informal discussions, research, planning sessions, formal review meetings, market experiments—and strategic conversations.

Strategic conversations often have an outsize impact on the success or failure of this larger process. The goal of any one session is to generate insights and energy that will create forward momentum. That’s what makes for a true moment of impact—rather than an “okay” meeting or fun one-off event. When designing a strategic conversation, you need to understand where and how it fits into this larger process.

You also need to define the purpose of your session clearly. While there are infinite reasons to bring a group together, strategic conversations have only three purposes: Building Understanding, Shaping Choices, or Making Decisions.

To be effective, your strategic conversation must focus on one—and only one—of these goals. Once you decide which kind of session you’re organizing, the design process becomes much clearer—and your odds of success increase significantly.

**ASK THIS**

Which kind of strategic conversation do you need?

If your group doesn't know much about—or has divergent opinions on—the strategic issues on the table, you need to run a Building Understanding session. If they have tons of knowledge but are spinning their wheels, it's time for a Shaping Choices session. Only when you've done both of these well can you think about organizing a Making Decisions session.

Who has the ultimate decision rights?

For most routine organizational issues, decision rights are clear. With adaptive challenges, they can be maddeningly vague. That's because adaptive challenges typically cut across different parts of an organization and have no one "owner." To the extent possible, try to clarify before a session who will be responsible for making what kinds of decisions afterward. Otherwise there's a risk that no decisions will get made.

Who has lead responsibility for driving progress?

After a session is over, responsibility for maintaining momentum on an adaptive challenge can also be murky—for many of the same reasons that decision rights are unclear. Try to sort this out well before you enter the room.

What lessons can you learn from prior moments of impact?

Has your group had any aha moments in the past—the kind that spark new insight and alignment? Find out as much as you can about these moments. Study them. They're sure to yield important lessons that you can put to use in your session.

**DO THIS****KEY
PRACTICE
1****SEIZE YOUR MOMENT**

Approach every strategic conversation as an opportunity to improve—or even transform—your organization’s response to an adaptive challenge.

Start with a real question.

Great strategic conversations start with a question that’s clear, relevant to your organization’s future success, and that people are committed to doing something about. While it’s fine to organize a session around an interesting topic or general issue, that’s an executive-education or professional-development session—not a strategic conversation.

Establish boundary conditions.

Strategic conversations tend to stir up a lot of muck, not all of it relevant to the challenge at hand. Since many people see these sessions as an opportunity to take their hobbyhorses and pet peeves out for a ride, it’s important to be clear about what issues are *not* on the table before you enter the room.

Reimagine victory.

The definition of victory is different for a strategic conversation than for a standard meeting. The goal of most meetings is to make decisions on next steps. The goal of a strategic conversation is to create alignment and generate new insights that can propel your organization forward. If you accomplish this, next steps are actually the easy part.

Plan for success.

Visualize your best-case scenario before heading into a strategic conversation. Ask yourself, “If this session goes really well, what kinds of actions can I imagine people taking soon after?” Sketch out a few initial plans on how you’ll follow up on these actions. Taking this question seriously will make success more likely to happen—and you’ll be better prepared when it does.

PICK ONE PURPOSE

There are only three reasons to have a strategic conversation: Building Understanding, Shaping Choices, or Making Decisions. Make sure you pick one—and only one—for your session.

WHEN BUILDING UNDERSTANDING

Pose a clear challenge—don't “tee up” issues.

It's hard to make progress on a big, broad topic like “the future of book publishing.” When approaching a Building Understanding session, it's best to give participants a clear challenge that will focus their attention and energy—such as coming up with innovative offerings, business models, or new insights into how readers' needs are changing.

Define the landing point.

One of the most difficult parts of a Building Understanding session is having a clear vision of how it will end—and how that ending will drive further progress. Before you walk into the room, you need to be clear about what kind of output you want—even though you can't know for sure what the content of that output will be. In the future-of-publishing example, you might define the landing point as three to five insights about the emerging needs of readers that can be used to develop new strategic options.

WHEN SHAPING CHOICES

Work with fully realized options.

“We should buy company X” is an idea, not a fully realized option. Turning it into one at a Shaping Choices session requires telling a compelling story about how the other company's offerings and capabilities could combine with yours to create real advantage. The best way to craft fully realized options is to use a rigorous framework or process—such as the Business Model Generation Canvas (shown on page 47)—to ensure that your story is coherent and complete.

Develop a manageable number of options.

In Shaping Choices sessions, it's usually best to work toward three to five well-developed options. Most people can't hold more than five options in their heads at the same time—that's too much complexity to manage. And working with just two options can lead to a polarized debate.

Focus on assumptions, not positions.

Take a hard look at the assumptions behind each option. Try asking, "What would we have to believe for each option to be successful?" This simple tactic usually shifts the discussion from personalities and positions to a frank assessment of the conditions required for success.

Treat the status quo as an explicit option.

People will gravitate toward the status quo if no other choice is made—even if few of them like it. When Shaping Choices, it's important to include the status quo path as an explicit option, subject to the same tests as possible new directions. This simple tactic will often encourage people to find a better choice.

GO SLOW TO GO FAST

Resolving adaptive challenges takes time, which is always in short supply. To succeed, you'll have to inspire your group to stick with it.

Manage expectations early and often.

Participants often have unrealistic expectations of what can be done at a strategic conversation—such as wanting to get to agreement on a strategy in just one day. You need to share your definition of victory for the session before people walk into the room. And be prepared to remind them of it several times during the session.

Resist attempts to rush downstream.

It's virtually guaranteed that participants will urge you to push the process further along than what makes sense. At a Building Understanding session, someone will likely try to go deeper into Shaping Choices territory. At a Shaping Choices session, you'll get pressure to start Making Decisions. Don't do it! Not only will you choke off the potential for critical insights, but once you move too far downstream, you might not have the option to move backward later.

Celebrate your “ahas.”

You rarely know when lightning will strike at a strategic conversation—so be prepared to call it out forcefully when it does. Generating a sense of progress is critical to building the confidence and patience required to “go slow to go fast.” When the group arrives at a major insight, make sure everyone knows it.

**TRY THIS****Get out of the office.**

As writer John le Carré once wrote, “A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world.” Most of us spend too much time inside our organizations and not enough time looking around us. When designing a Building Understanding session, ask yourself what field trips you might include in your program that would give participants direct experience with the issues you’ll be working on. If that’s not practical, think about how to open the windows and doors and bring the outside world into your session.

Scan the periphery.

In his classic work *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, Clayton Christensen points out that important changes usually appear first at the fringes of markets and organizations. Look around for early signs of change in different markets and units. You might find new ideas in surprising places.

Test-drive your options through different future environments.

We make important strategic choices based on today’s data, but the results of these choices play out in the future. It’s always helpful to stress-test your options across different environments—whether it’s through simulations, scenario-planning exercises, or just putting each option through several rounds of asking “What if?”

Simulate the “new normal” inside your organization.

It’s one thing to see a new strategy or set of policies on paper, and quite another to experience them in real life. Try creating a visceral sense of what it would feel like to operate under each direction. In choosing between a few strategic directions, the board of a large nonprofit reviewed the résumés of a short list of mock candidates for CEO and debated which one would be the best fit in each case.

Ask these five questions.

In their book *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works*, Roger Martin and A.G. Lafley describe a process for shaping and evaluating strategic choices built around five cascading questions, which together compel participants to develop sound options while also discussing the assumptions behind them:

1. *What is our winning aspiration?*
2. *Where will we play (e.g., what customers will we serve)?*
3. *How will we win (e.g., how will we deliver a unique value proposition to the market)?*
4. *What capabilities must be in place?*
5. *What management systems are required?*

**READ THIS**

CHIP HEATH AND DAN HEATH, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* (Crown Business, 2010). The Heath brothers combine in-depth research with engaging stories to illuminate key principles for making change happen in any context.

RONALD HEIFETZ AND MARTIN LINSKY, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2002). An excellent guide to how effective leaders work through adaptive challenges, ripe with implications for strategic conversations.

JOHN KOTTER, *Leading Change* (Harvard Business Review Press, 1996). The classic step-by-step primer on how to manage an organizational change process.

A.G. LAFLEY AND ROGER L. MARTIN, *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2013). An indispensable guide for how to think about shaping and evaluating strategic options.

HENRY MINTZBERG, “The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning,” *Harvard Business Review*, January–February 1994, 107–14. This classic piece makes the case for the emergent approach to developing strategy—and explains why strategic planning doesn’t work for really big issues.

JOHN MULLINS AND RANDY KOMISAR, *Getting to Plan B: Breaking Through to a Better Business Model* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2009). Venture capitalists know that entrepreneurs’ Plan A strategies almost never work. This book is about how to pivot and find your Plan B.

ALEXANDER OSTERWALDER AND YVES PIGNEUR, *Business Model Generation: A Handbook for Visionaries, Game Changers, and Challengers* (Wiley, 2010). Nothing beats the BMG Canvas for working through new business model options.

BARRY SCHWARTZ, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (Ecco, 2003). People usually say they want more choices, but their behavior reveals that they want fewer. This work is loaded with lessons from social science research on how to think about shaping choices.

ROBERT SIMONS, *Seven Strategy Questions: A Simple Approach for Better Execution* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2010). A Harvard Business School professor lays out seven questions that need to be addressed in any strategy process.

Moments of IMPACT

How to Design Strategic Conversations that Accelerate Change

GET TO
**BREAK-
THROUGH**
SOLUTIONS



CRACK
THE CODE FOR
STRATEGIC
CONVERSATIONS



INCLUDES
60 PAGE
STARTER KIT

“If you’d like to short-circuit the meeting loop and energize your team’s ability to solve real problems and create new visions, then Moments of Impact is the book you need.”

Daniel H. Pink, author of *To Sell is Human* and *Drive*



“What if conversations at work actually mattered? Moments of Impact shows how they can, offering an actionable model for driving change and sparking creativity.”

Adam Grant, Wharton professor and author of *Give and Take*

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about the authors



Chris Ertel has been designing strategic conversations for seventeen years as an advisor to senior executives of Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and large nonprofits. A PhD-trained social scientist, he lives in Berkeley, California, with his wife and daughter.



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