

THE ONE PAGE STRATEGY

**The easy way to write your
strategy in just one page**



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Introduction

“We don’t have time to make a strategy, we have too much work to do already.”

That is exactly why you need a strategy, even as a team. A strategy is how you decide which are the most important things to do first and do well, and which things can be dropped, delayed or done just-good-enough. It is how you go from a team drowning in work and still not delivering enough value to a sustainable team delivering more value than people expect consistently.

Besides, to set OKRs, you need to select the 1-3 most important Objectives to focus on, but deciding what these should be is not actually the work of setting OKRs, it’s the work of creating a strategy.

That said, don’t let the word “strategy” put you off.

It’s one of the most abused words in business, and people debate about what it means endlessly.

I’m sure you’ve seen those strategy decks with hundreds of PowerPoint slides with pillars and onions and statements and data galore – and yet after seeing them, you’re more confused than before, you wonder what to do next, and you’re worn out. You couldn’t communicate a strategy like that to another person over a coffee if your promotion depended on it.

Instead of worrying about how to define strategy, let’s just help you develop something that will give readers clarity about what’s really going on, help them know what to do next, and motivate them to action.

Whether we *call* it a “strategy” or a “guide” or something else is irrelevant.

But first, what is the strategy about?

The Strategy is about your Customers

If you lead a company, business unit, or product, your strategy is about how you win customers in your market. If you manage a functional team, your customers may be internal to your business, and the strategy is about how you provide value to them.

You need the customer perspective so you can make meaningful decisions about which customers and which problems to focus on (and which not), how you will win their business versus the alternatives, and therefore what you need to do, what capabilities you need to build, what targets you need to set, and what problems you need to solve to be uniquely placed to be the best choice for those customers.

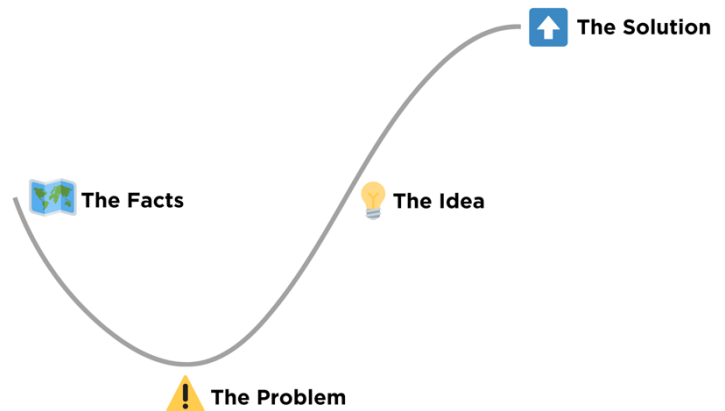
Don’t make the mistake of writing a strategy that is all about how you work internally, without reference to customers. It’s more comfortable, lower risk, so it’s very tempting, but it cannot be a strategy, it can only be a plan (which is very useful, but comes after the strategy).

The One Page Strategy Document

My preferred way to do this is what I call a **one-page strategy**¹. It's a short document that answers the questions you need to answer, that you can use to align with your team, management and stakeholders on what your strategy is.

It's structured in four sections (titles can help) which form a mini narrative, like a story arc with an emotional journey²:

1. The Facts: "Here's how it is."
2. The Problem: "Oh No!"
3. The Idea: "Breakthrough!"
4. The Solution: "Here's what we'll do."



The great thing about this approach is that it's easy for other people to read it and give their reactions. They can disagree with any one part, and the implications for the rest quickly become clear.

That's because each part depends on the one before.

If you don't agree on The Facts, you're not likely to agree on The Problem. If you disagree on The Problem, The Idea won't make sense. And if you have a different Idea, the Solution will be completely different.

But once you get all four parts agreed and aligned, it makes a coherent strategy that you can base your OKRs on – and you can share it over a coffee without even needing the document.

Get Writing

Open a new document in your preferred writing tool. You're going to write one paragraph, two sentences and five bullet points – half a page to a page in total (shorter is better!). If you can, ask your team to complete this same exercise individually so you can collect their ideas as well.

Keep it factual and neutrally worded. Avoid jargon, acronyms and judgement words or subjective describing words like "best", "fast", "slow", "innovative", "effective", "bad", "important" and so on – they tend to hide implicit assumptions and turn your writing into mere opinion. The work of removing them will cause you to do the thinking that makes your strategy clear. By removing them, you allow others to form their own opinions (which is what you want!).

¹ I base this on the excellent book "No Bullsh*t Strategy" by Alex M H Smith, but also informed by "Good Strategy/Bad Strategy" and "The Crux" by Richard Rumelt, "Playing to Win" by A G Lafley and Roger Martin, as well as this great article by Roger Martin on strategies for managing functions: <https://hbr.org/2019/07/the-one-thing-you-need-to-know-about-managing-functions>

² This narrative concept is adapted from Alex M H Smith's work, simplified a bit for this context.

The Facts

Write a one paragraph summary of the current state. Try to avoid bullet points, as you'll miss the narrative flow and logical connections that make it clear to the reader.

No need to say everything. You're writing for people who are familiar with your work, not a general audience, so no need to explain background context they already know unless it's critically important to highlight it.

Start with your customers. What are they trying to do, what problems are they facing, what do they value, what alternatives do they have, and what's good or not good about them? You can then add what makes your work challenging and what causes you problems in delivering value to your customers. You might mention a backlog of work, technical debt, staffing challenges, or the fifteen different things you're responsible for.

You can also mention wins, but this isn't a document for blowing your trumpet. Mention the wins only if they inform your strategy going forward. For example, if you're winning a particular customer segment from your competitors, this would likely be an important piece of context for your strategy. Likewise if you ran a customer support team and had recently finished a project that reduced inbound tickets by 50%.

If you're the kind of person who needs stricter guides, aim for a maximum of five sentences and 200 words. If you write more (and we all do the first time), spend the time figuring out what is important and then edit it down

The goal of this section is to give readers a common understanding of the context in which you're setting your strategy. A strategy can only be judged in the context it's set in – that is, a great strategy for one company or team may be terrible for another which is superficially similar – so you must agree on the context.

The selection of pertinent facts is critical, so ask colleagues to review and share their views. The debate about what is and isn't important, or whether a fact is correctly stated will likely enlighten both you and them and help you develop both a better strategy, and more buy-in for it.

The Problem

Write a sentence describing the key challenge your customers want solving in the coming 3-18 months.

This may be something directly from *The Facts*, or it may be a root cause for one or more of them, or it may be something new.

In many cases, the obvious problem is a lack of revenue, profit, or growth, or "a solution that works". But this isn't really the problem you need to solve – go deeper. What is it that is holding them back? What doesn't work?

For example, in a SaaS business you might diagnose the core problem that your customers need a solution that integrates with their existing software stack, and all options available (including yours) do not. A meal delivery service may only meet the needs of single person households, while the bulk of unserved customers are starting families, and their meal needs are different.

By writing this down, you are taking a position. You could be wrong: something else may be *The Problem*. Other people may disagree with you on what *The Problem* is. But *The Problem* is what will drive your strategy – so if there's disagreement on it, you want to know.

If a reader disagrees with this, they need to articulate what they believe *The Problem* is instead, and you can discuss how to prioritise and what the root causes are and so on. You may then need to do some analysis to figure out what the real cause is.

The Idea

Write a sentence describing an idea, a belief, an insight, or an assumption that will guide how you want to address *The Problem*.

You could write this in a form like "We believe that doing <X> will address *The Problem*".

You're trying to outline the fundamental assumption, insight, or belief that you have that informs how you're going to approach your strategy. This one sentence should capture the essence of your strategy, because it's from here that all the solutions flow.

For example, "we believe that by integrating with both SAP and Salesforce, the majority of unserved customers will choose us", or "we believe that by introducing an optional kids' meal, we will win in the growing family market."

Again, the reader could disagree with this, but they then need to provide a different belief upon which to base a strategy.

The Solution

Write down in up to five bullet points the main things, in sequence, that *The Idea* implies you need to do. You can write this in a paragraph if you prefer but keep it action-focused and logically structured.

Focus on the major changes to what you're currently doing, decisions about approach, prioritisation, or trade-offs, that will enable you to address *The Problem* based on *The Idea*. Don't go into detail and don't try to be complete. This is not a project plan, and you are not trying to capture all the other things you need to do as well, just the key decisions for this specific issue.

You might cover resolving open questions (are SAP and Salesforce sufficient, and which APIs do customers need?), the specific things you'll do (build the Salesforce integration, test with pilot customers, and then get listed on Salesforce AppExchange store, then do same with SAP and SAP Store), and what you'll cease to do so you can focus on these (we'll cease development of our self-service migration tools to focus on integration).

At this point, there could be general agreement about the direction, but some divergence on the details. If this were the case, you'd have to iterate on the exact approach, and the trade-offs involved – but at least you're aligned on the overall principle and are now solving a smaller problem.

Alternatively, you may be re-writing this based on changes to *The Facts*, *The Problem*, or *The Idea*.

Review, Revise, and Align

If your team or peers have also done this exercise, spend some time to read each other's documents, and discuss to align on the key points, going through each of the four parts in order. Do this first in pairs, then in groups of four, and then all together³, so everyone gets heard, you can benefit from a wider set of insights. This will also generate buy-in.

If applicable, also review with your manager and stakeholders, going through each of the four parts in order again. Ideally, they will agree with your strategy, and you'll win their support. If not, you'll uncover their perspective, prioritisation, and ideas – and perhaps some new constraints. This may prompt additional analysis work to make your case more robust or explore some assumptions, but it is usually wise to take their input into account and adapt your approach to align with them.

Ask for their reasoning because you're going to need to share that with your team, so everyone is on the same page. This is a great way to get senior leaders to coach you. Try to learn as much as you can about how they see things (they usually have a broader perspective) and how they make decisions (ask them this explicitly). Then use this insight to coach your own team.

Aligned is Better Than Perfect

A strategy that is not perfect, but which most people are aligned on and will work together towards is better than a "perfect" strategy that everyone disagrees about.

Consider the analogy of rowing a boat, and strategy is the direction you're rowing in. If you're all rowing in the same wrong direction, you can discover that you are going in the wrong direction by making good observations about the changes you see, and course-correct with a new direction (strategy) based on this evidence. If instead, you all row in different directions, you will go nowhere, nothing will change, and nobody will learn anything. Each person will continue to believe that they have the right direction, and the problem is that the others are wrong.

First row in the same direction, then figure out the right direction to row in⁴.

³ This is based on the 1-2-4-all method from Liberating Structures: <https://www.liberatingstructures.com/1-1-2-4-all/>

⁴ Amazon captures this in the Leadership Principle "Have Backbone; Disagree and Commit". This principle encourages people to have an informed yet respectful debate (having backbone), but then once a decision is determined, to commit wholly to it (disagree and commit).

Examples

I've written two example one-page strategies below. They are a little longer than is ideal, as I'm writing with full context for readers who don't have any context on the team in question.

The purpose of the examples is not to showcase great strategy, but to demonstrate the value of communicating strategy in this form. When reading, note your reactions, and think about what you would do to test or execute the strategy in practice. The purpose of the documents is to drive decision-making.

Example Company Strategy

This example is for a fictional SaaS Business that helps retailers with inventory management.

The Facts

Our current customers are major retail chains, representing around 25% of the retail market but requiring complex integrations and extensive onboarding support. While these clients generate high contract value, their long sales cycles and demand for bespoke features limit our ability to scale. Further, we are facing strong competition from competitors with deep integrations with their ERP systems, which we cannot match.

Meanwhile, smaller retail chains (5–50 locations) and independent brick-and-mortar shops make up 60% of the retail market but are underserved by existing inventory management solutions. These smaller retailers face frequent stockouts or overstocking due to manual tracking or using basic tools that fail to provide actionable insights. Existing competitors either overserve with costly enterprise solutions or underserve with one-size-fits-all software that lacks customization for retail workflows.

The Problem

Smaller retail chains and independent shops lack affordable, easy-to-use inventory management software tailored to their needs. This leads to poor stock management, lost revenue, and wasted time—problems they urgently want to solve.

Internally, our resource-heavy sales model and support infrastructure are not optimized for serving smaller accounts at scale, though our product has been proven to work for them.

The Idea

We believe that by creating a self-service inventory management platform with intuitive setup and affordable pricing, we can capture this underserved market segment and establish a scalable, high-volume revenue stream.

The Solution

5. **Adopt a Tiered Pricing Model:** Introduce an entry-level plan for small chains and independents, scaling up based on the number of locations and SKUs.

6. **Shift Marketing Focus:** Test new positioning to target independent shop owners and small retail operators, emphasizing ease of use, affordability, and ROI.
7. **Stop Custom Development:** Pause custom feature development for enterprise clients to focus resources on the new self-service platform and its roll-out.
8. **Automate Onboarding:** Develop a guided, self-service onboarding process with in-app tutorials and easy integrations for common POS systems.
9. **Modularise our Platform:** Redesign our product with a simplified feature set for smaller retailers, focusing on core capabilities like real-time stock tracking, low-stock alerts, and order predictions, turning advanced features into optional extras.

Example Team Strategy

This is loosely based on a real situation in the Partner Onboarding team a real SaaS company. Until my client wrote down and worked through each part of this document, they were locked in debate about this seemingly intractable problem.

I've inserted some discussion inline below to represent the sorts of debates that happened as we went through this process, and a few notes on the results after having aligned on this process.

The Facts

We have 38 partners in our onboarding backlog, up from 23 this time last year, and project around 50 in our backlog by this time next year if nothing changes. We take an average of 18 months to onboard each partner (this varies between 3 months up to 35 months and still not complete) and have onboarded average of 1.3 partners per month for the past 12 months. 19 partners are threatening to cancel their contracts, citing their impatience with the onboarding process.

Most of the delays are due to partner-specific features that we are contractually obligated to provide and are in the development queue, and yet in many cases the original requestor of those features has left the partner's organisation, and we cannot clarify the requirements, which leads to further delays. We have stopped adding these custom requirements to new contracts but are unable to onboard those new partners, as they are at the end of our queue.

In this case, the onboarding team had also lost 7 experienced team members over the past 12 months and only replaced 3 with junior hires.

The Problem

Most of these contractual obligations are no longer valid, and we would not agree to them if we were negotiating these contracts now; and if we didn't have them, we would not have an onboarding backlog.

The reduced capacity and experience of the onboarding team was the main alternative Problem that was suggested, but investigation showed that the backlog was progressing no quicker when they had a larger, more experienced team and therefore this was not The Problem.

The Idea

We believe that if we renegotiate these partner contracts to exclude custom requirements, we can accelerate onboarding for that partner dramatically – and offering this accelerated onboarding would encourage them to renegotiate favourably with very little negative impact to our business.

The sales manager had initially suggested that increasing the capacity of the onboarding team would be sufficient to meet the existing contractual obligations and would not require renegotiating contracts (which was work his team would need to do, and involved some difficult conversations with disgruntled clients), but after they agreed on the Facts and the Problem, they then agreed that this wasn't the right Idea.

The Solution

Therefore, we need to:

1. **Renegotiate Partnership Contracts.** Initiate renegotiations with partners who have custom requirements to get them to agree to a standard integration. If custom requirements are unavoidable, they can be specified in a separate agreement.
2. **Delay Partners with Legacy Contracts.** Deprioritise this work so we can complete onboarding of partners with standard integrations first – and accept that we may lose some more partners due to additional delays this way.
3. **Split the Onboarding team in Two.** Set up a dedicated team for implementing custom requirements so the core onboarding team can integrate partners with standard integrations more rapidly.
4. **Market our Fast Onboarding.** Use the speed of onboarding for partners with standard integrations as case studies to persuade the other partners to renegotiate too.

Most of the discussion was about where to get the resources for the separate customisation work, but the team soon realised that with more efficient standard onboarding, the onboarding team could be leaner, freeing up resources for custom work.

Point 4 became quite powerful after the team was able to integrate a partner every two weeks for most of the quarter. Other partners complained that they were being onboarded slower, and the team was able to offer them the same service if they changed their requirements.
