

THE 12-MONTH TRAP

Why capable organisations still struggle to think beyond the short term – **and how the best build practised strategic capability**

After reading this report, you will be able to recognise where strategic thinking breaks down in your organisation – and understand the first practical step to building strategic capability deliberately.





**50% of CEOs
say they are not
confident their
organisation will
survive the next
decade on its
current trajectory**

(Source: PwC Global CEO Survey 2023; McKinsey Global Institute, State of Organizations 2023)



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A FRUSTRATION LEADERS INCREASINGLY RECOGNISE

You would expect capable people, sensible strategies, and regular leadership investment to create forward momentum.

Often, they don't.

Many organisations struggle to think – or act – much beyond the next quarter or financial year. This pattern shows up across professional services, regulated industries, and knowledge-intensive organisations alike. Senior leaders describe a strikingly similar experience.

There is a strategy document.

Intent appears broadly clear on paper.

Activity is constant.

And yet familiar patterns persist:

- priorities keep shifting
- decisions slow down or escalate unnecessarily
- teams feel busy rather than purposeful
- the same conversations resurface year after year

In many organisations, this shows up physically.

Multiple strategy decks sit in shared drives.

Each year produces a refreshed version.

Few people could confidently explain how this year's strategy meaningfully differs from last year's.

Quietly, many leaders arrive at the same conclusion:

“We should be further ahead than this – and I don't understand what's broken.”

The 12-Month Trap describes the pattern where organisations repeatedly reset strategy annually, but default to short-term decision-making under pressure – leading to shifting priorities, slow or escalated decisions, and the same unresolved issues resurfacing year after year.

The output is not the absence of strategy.

It is the accumulation of versions – without the accumulation of muscle.

This report explores why that pattern is so persistent – and what distinguishes organisations that consistently move forward strategically from those that remain stuck in it.

INDUSTRY REALITY CHECK

“Strategy only works if behaviour also changes”

Across leadership teams, this sentence lands with uncomfortable accuracy.

Someone who wants to lose weight may have a plan. Results only come when behaviour changes: different choices, repeated over time.

The issue is rarely ambition, effort or intelligence.

It is the widening gap between **strategic intent** and **everyday decision-making**, especially under pressure.

When time is scarce and stakes are high, what matters most is not what leaders know – but what they do.



THE PARADOX OF BIG THINKING AND LITTLE PRACTICE

Over the past decade, leadership development and strategy work have become major investment categories.

Globally, organisations spend tens of billions each year on leadership programmes, coaching and transformation initiatives, and strategy frameworks, tools, and methodologies.

Yet day-to-day **strategic capability remains stubbornly low – and practised infrequently.**

Across industries, leaders report the same symptoms. Strategy struggles to translate into execution. Decision making defaults to short term thinking. Urgency dominates attention. Long term intent is crowded out by immediate demands.

Investment is high. Confidence is low.

Research consistently shows why.

Studies across sectors suggest that **a large proportion of strategic plans fail** not because the strategy was flawed, but because it failed to translate into everyday decisions and behaviour.

(REF: Kaplan & Norton; Brightline Initiative / Project Management Institute)

Across industries, **around 70% of transformation programmes fail to achieve their stated objectives**, pointing to a systemic execution and capability problem, not isolated leadership shortcomings.

(REF: McKinsey & Company; Boston Consulting Group)

THE COMPOUNDING COST OF THE 12-MONTH TRAP

When organisations remain stuck here, the cost rarely appears on a single line of the P&L.

It accumulates quietly: slower decisions, repeated escalation, duplicated effort, and senior leader time absorbed by rework rather than direction.

Research into organisational decision effectiveness shows that large organisations can **waste thousands of hours of senior leadership time each year** due to unclear decision rights and repeated revisiting of the same issues. A failure to translate intent into action.

(REF: McKinsey & Company, decision-making effectiveness research)

Over time, this creates **decision debt**: unresolved trade-offs carried forward, ambiguity pushed into the future, and complexity absorbed by people rather than systems.

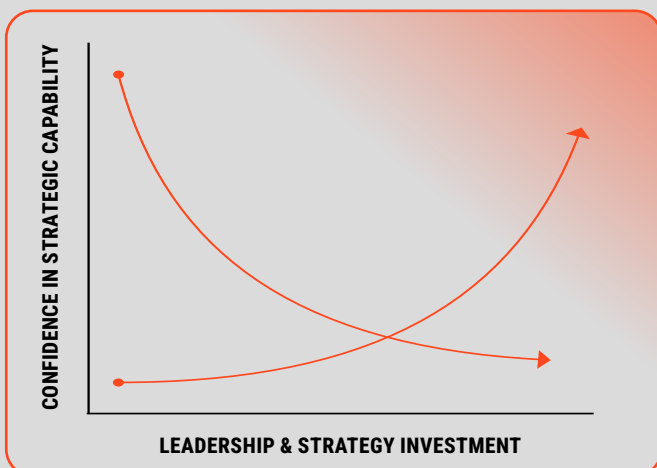
The longer this debt is left unaddressed, the more expensive it becomes – financially, cognitively, culturally, and strategically.

Delaying action is not neutral.

It is a strategic choice – and decision debt carries interest that compounds.

This is not fear-based messaging.

It is a signal: **capability is not keeping pace with complexity.**



THE REAL ISSUE: STRATEGY ISN'T FAILING – PRACTICE IS

Across organisations of different sizes and sectors, a consistent pattern emerges.

Most do not have a strategy problem.

They have a practice problem.

In the moments that count, people default to reaction rather than judgement.

Often the strategy itself is sound. The direction makes sense.

The leadership team broadly agrees.

And yet decisions become reactive.

What breaks down is not agreement – but what happens after the strategy is set.

Leadership development research mirrors this. Even well-designed programmes often fail to change organisational behaviour when participants lack the time, reinforcement, and real-world practice under pressure.

(REF: Harvard Business Review; Centre for Creative Leadership)

Under pressure, time horizons collapse. Decisions narrow. Activity replaces outcomes. Short-term urgency wins.

This is not a failure of intelligence or intent.

It is a failure to build **practised strategic capability** – at scale.

Without deliberate practice embedded into everyday work, even strong strategies are slowly pulled back into a twelve-month operating cycle.

In this sense, the 12-Month Trap is not the root cause – it is the visible symptom of a deeper capability gap.

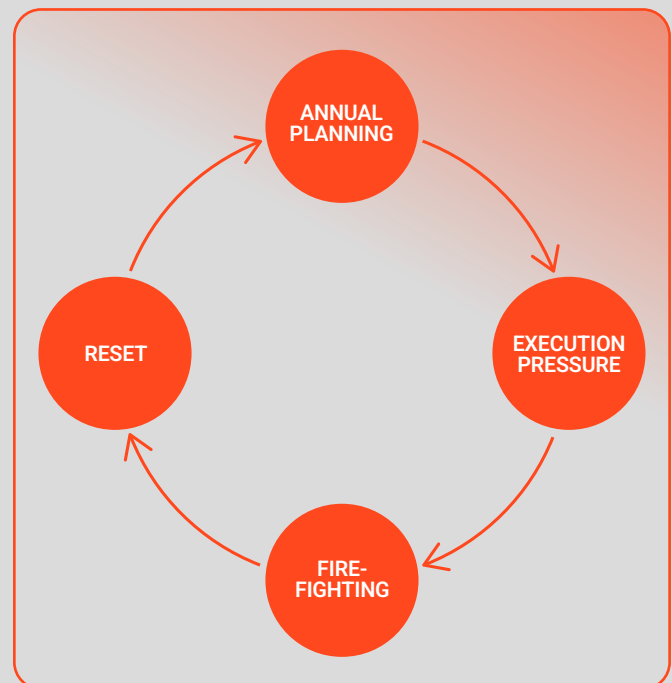
WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

In this sense, the 12-Month Trap is not the root cause – it is the visible symptom of a deeper capability gap.

Across organisations, the same loop repeats:

Annual planning > execution pressure > firefighting > reset

Without deliberate practice, strategy becomes episodic.



STRATEGY AS A PRACTISED HUMAN CAPABILITY (NOT KNOWLEDGE)

A CEO reviewing an early version of this work put it simply:

“This isn’t about education. It’s about training. About muscle.”

Most organisations write strategy annually. Very few train strategic muscle weekly. The distinction matters.

Someone wanting to run a marathon cannot just read about running. Someone wanting to get fit cannot rely on understanding nutrition alone.

They train. They repeat. They repeat under real conditions.

Strategic thinking works the same way.

People do not become more strategic by knowing more frameworks. They become more strategic by **practising strategic judgement**, repeatedly, on real work, with feedback.

This matters even more in uncertain environments.

Data can inform decisions – but it cannot replace judgement. **Strategy requires choosing a direction before certainty exists and adjusting as conditions change.**

This is consistent with the World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs analysis, which identifies analytical thinking, resilience, adaptability, leadership and social influence as the most critical capabilities differentiating growing roles from declining ones through 2030.

(Ref: World Economic Forum, The Future of Jobs Report 2025)

As technological disruption, AI uncertainty, and complexity increase, the value of practised human judgement rises - not falls.

Research shows that organisations that systematically build strategic and organisational capability achieve materially stronger performance over time.

(REF: McKinsey Global Institute; MIT Sloan Management Review)

WHAT PRACTISED STRATEGIC CAPABILITY LOOKS LIKE

In organisations where capability is embedded, people consistently demonstrate the ability to:

- recognise what truly matters (and what doesn’t)
- think in outcomes, not just activity
- make decisions without perfect information
- balance short-term delivery with long-term direction
- communicate intent clearly enough that others can act
- learn from what didn’t work - without blame

Not occasionally. Not only in workshops. But consistently, under pressure.

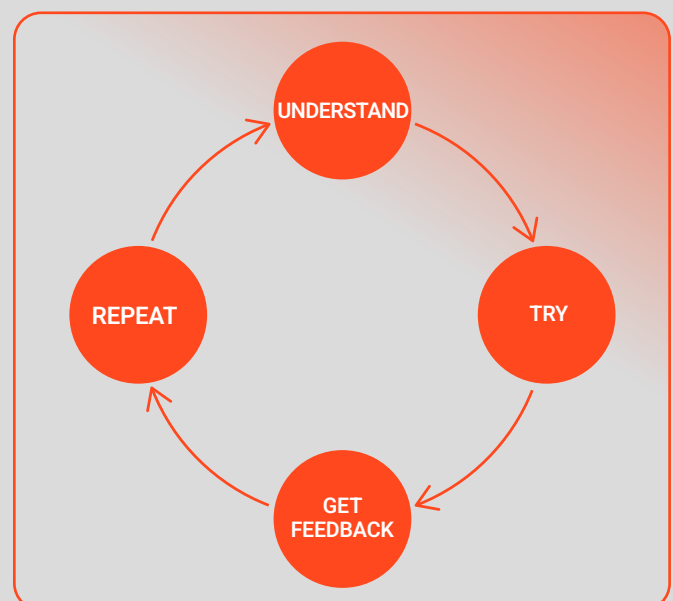
THE PRACTICE LOOP THAT BUILDS STRATEGIC MUSCLE

Capability develops through a simple, repeatable cycle:

Understand > Try > Get Feedback > Repeat

Over time, this builds judgement, confidence, and shared language.

Strategy stops being theoretical – and starts shaping behaviour.



WHAT HIGH-PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS DO DIFFERENTLY

Sustained performance is rarely the result of heroic leaders or perfect plans.

High performing organisations build systems that **train and sustain strategic behaviour.**

Across firms such as Google, Procter & Gamble, LEGO Group and Apple, a consistent pattern appears.

Strategy is treated less as a document - and more as a **daily practice.**

Consider LEGO Group's recovery in the early 2000s. The strategy did not change overnight because of a new framework. It changed because leaders tightened decision discipline: fewer product lines, clearer priorities, stronger commercial trade-offs, and a return to core identity.

The shift was not intellectual. It was behavioural.

Repeated decisions aligned to a sharper strategic intent.

That discipline, sustained over time, rebuilt performance.

Research shows that organisations with mature decision practices **make decisions significantly faster without sacrificing quality**, particularly in complex and uncertain environments.

(REF: McKinsey & Company, decision-making research)

This creates a defining advantage as **time horizons shorten and pressure increases.**



FIVE OBSERVABLE SHIFTS SHOW UP REPEATEDLY.

SHIFT 1:

FROM REACTIVITY TO REGULATION

Leaders are expected to regulate attention and emotion under pressure.

Example: leaders pause before escalation and ask “what actually matters here?” rather than reacting to urgency.

SHIFT 2:

FROM CERTAINTY TO JUDGEMENT

Sound judgement is rewarded over false confidence.

Example: teams make calls with imperfect information – and adjust quickly without blame.

SHIFT 3:

FROM ANNUAL PLANNING TO EXTENDED HORIZONS

Thinking beyond twelve months becomes routine.

Example: leadership conversations regularly extend 3–5 years out, not only to the next reporting cycle.

SHIFT 4:

FROM INTENT TO INFLUENCE

Strategy shapes behaviour because leaders can mobilise others.

Example: intent is translated into clear choices others can act on – not just slides others can admire.

SHIFT 5:

FROM EPISODIC TO EMBEDDED PRACTICE

Strategic thinking is trained through cadence and rhythm, not one-off events.

Example: strategic review becomes part of the operating rhythm, not reserved for offsites.



HOW STRATEGIC CAPABILITY ACTUALLY FORMS

These shifts form through **repeated exposure to real decisions**.

The cost of failing to build this capability internally is high.

Research shows that a **significant proportion of externally hired leaders underperform within their first 18 months**, often due to misalignment with organisational systems and culture.

(REF: *Harvard Business Review; Leadership IQ*)

In one technology organisation attempting to embed OKRs over twelve months, early patterns were familiar:

- objectives framed as projects
- key results measuring effort, not impact
- leaders waiting for certainty
- strategy diluted beyond the senior team

Progress didn't come from a single session.

It came through the quarterly rhythm:

- setting objectives
- reviewing honestly
- spotting output-based thinking
- tightening outcomes
- building confidence in trade-offs

By the third and fourth cycles:

- priorities sharpened
- decisions sped up
- communication improved
- accountability shifted towards outcomes
- performance rose visibly

There is often a defining moment:

"When people realise last quarter's 'outcomes' weren't outcomes at all, everything changes"

That shift is not education.

It is **trained judgement**.

The strategy had not changed.

The decisions had.



CLOSING THE STRATEGIC CAPABILITY GAP

Strategic capability is not a document, a role, or a single leader's responsibility.

It is a **shared, practised human capability**.

Left unaddressed, the patterns described in this report intensify – especially as complexity increases and time horizons shorten.

Organisations that close the capability gap act before decision debt hardens into culture.

They invest earlier rather than later.

They build capability across levels, not just at the top.

They treat strategy as something people do, not attend.

The most effective next step is rarely another strategy day.

It is **diagnosis** - making the invisible visible.

Do this now

Choose one recurring decision your organisation struggles with.

For the next 30 days:

- surface the assumptions
- make trade-offs explicit
- use the same strategic questions each time

You'll quickly see whether strategy is being used – or merely referenced.

Most leaders can see the pattern once it is named.

The harder question is how to shift it – deliberately, consistently, and across levels.

THE LEADERSHIP MOVE

At Mandarin, this work comes together through **The Strategic Capability Shift™** - a structured approach to building organisation-wide practised strategic capability.

It begins with a **Strategic Capability Assessment**, designed to:

- surface dominant decision patterns
- reveal where thinking becomes reactive
- create shared language for development

Complete the Strategic Capability Assessment (3-5 minutes).

For leaders who take strategic capability seriously, this is not a development option.

It is a **leadership choice** - and the starting point for building practised strategic capability at scale.

Strategic capability is learnable.

When organisations build it deliberately, outcomes change.

GET YOUR STRATEGIC CAPABILITY SCORE

[Explore our Flagship Accelerator Programme](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlie Curson is the founder of Mandarin, a strategic advisory and capability-building firm that helps leaders, teams and organisations build practised strategic capability - how people think, decide, lead and act under pressure.

Charlie is the author of international bestseller **Be More Strategic** and works with CEOs, senior leadership teams and HR leaders across sectors to close the gap between strategic intent and everyday decisions.



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