A PLAYBOOK FOR BREAK-THROUGH RESULTS

Slow growth, existential disruptions, and risks posed by the status quo can all be great motivators to pursue breakthrough results. But the question is, what does it take to achieve it?

BY **GREGORY TRUEBLOOD** AND **JENNIFER ZIMMER**

For those of us who have witnessed true, meaningful breakthroughs—the kind that can reshape and redefine the trajectory of a company and an entire industry—we understand their profound impact.

As trailblazers in the art of catalyzing breakthrough results for over three decades, Insigniam offers a refined definition. We describe a breakthrough as a measurable outcome that stands out as unprecedented or unlikely based on an organization's history, resources, and the environment in which it operates.

Whether these breakthroughs concern processes, project deliverables, strategies, or corporate culture, their impact is nothing less than transformative; moreover, true breakthroughs are not fleeting phenomena; they're sustainable and continue to deliver results without compromising quality, integrity, or well-being. They result from individuals adopting fresh perspectives and taking novel actions, thus unveiling, and pursuing untapped opportunities.

Although many executives may be acutely aware when a transformation is needed, the actions for achieving a successful breakthrough can sometimes be opaque. The real challenges for global enterprises lie in where to begin—and how—to overcome stagnant growth, anticipate impending disruptions, and avoid the perils of sticking to the status quo.

The spark required to ignite a breakthrough must be fueled by a fundamental shift in thinking that *challenges the conventional view of the future as a product of the past.*

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Start By Revealing the Drift

This is where breakthroughs begin. The initial step is to acknowledge and address the "organizational drift." This refers to the likely future trajectory of performance based on the convergence of a company's established practices, institutional dynamics, and deeply ingrained belief systems with the external environment in which it operates. This drift exerts a force that propels outcomes in a specific, predictable direction, reminiscent of Adam Smith's notion of the "invisible hand" shaping economic behavior.

To illustrate the influence of the drift, imagine strolling alongside a flowing river. Gazing into the water, you observe the ebbs and flows of the current, discerning its speed, origin, and destination. Now, envision tossing a twig into the river; you can forecast where it will end up and where the river's natural course will hinder its progress. Similarly, we can scrutinize the drifts within organizations that dictate mindsets, behaviors, actions, and measurable business results.

To move beyond the drift and into an environment where new futures can be achieved, Insigniam's methodology has identified four critical steps—and their associated actions—required for a breakthrough. This process is designed around essential activities which must happen in succession to achieve success.

Reveal

The first action on the path toward a breakthrough is to reveal and uncover the prevailing and controlling conversations that give rise to how people in the organization act, interact, approach problems, and view the work environment. This means confronting what is considered real (e.g., assumptions and beliefs).

One example from our work was when the new CEO and the CHRO of a Fortune 500 multi-national foods manufacturer partnered with Insigniam to design an engagement that would elevate leadership within the organization so that the company could respond to the current demands for nutritional products in the United States.

The leadership teams needed to bring a sense of urgency to their deliverables and level

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up their leadership prowess and commitment to realize a pathway for action and success for the organization. However, before they could do this, they needed to reveal the prevailing context for how leaders experienced the work and themselves in it. They would need to establish a new leadership cultural framework that other leaders would embody in the company. This would require the executive leadership and the leadership teams to develop and align on their purpose, ways of working, who they promised to be, and how they promised to show up for the company.

Through a series of conversations, Insigniam interviewed executive and extended leadership teams to reveal the prevailing context for the organization's leaders and how they showed up every day.

The teams engaged in a discussion to develop leadership behaviors that each would embody to support the leadership framework of the organization. The executive leadership team led the charge in re-designing the leadership behaviors they would live in and what they would look like in action as a commitment.

To implement what was revealed, the extended leadership teams modeled their behaviors after the executive leadership team with clearly defined ways of being and working that demonstrate their commitment to owning the culture and growing the company.

> ### The Breakthrough
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> The executive and extended leadership teams identified and owned where they did not embody the leadership behaviors of the organization. Each of the teams created a new future to live in that was in service of the patients that needed their nutritional products. The teams were then on a path to designing a new future for the organization that positions them in the market as the go-to for medical nutritional products.

2 Unhook
The second step pertains to how an organization and its people must detach from prevailing conversations by recognizing them as just one possible set of conversations. This means understanding that much of what is considered real is just a collection of interpretations and facts. Enterprises can open new possibilities to emerge by unhooking people from prevailing conversations.

Consider the challenge faced by one of the largest medical device companies in the world, which was working to develop a groundbreaking surgical device. If successful, it would create an entirely new market for the company and bring innovative surgical procedures to patients worldwide who currently don't have access to this technology. The company was also in a race to beat a large competitor in the market.

After year eight of the project—four years past the original promise date—the norm was that deadlines get pushed because no one related to them as real. The team had lost faith in themselves, the timeline, and the project plan–they no longer believed in their ability to deliver.

In this case, Insigniam worked with cross-functional teams to deliver a breakthrough project that seemed impossible: provide the product to market within one year.

Yet, to achieve such an ambitious goal, team members needed to unhook from many of the behaviors and practices that had eroded trust amongst internal and external stakeholders. Repairing that fractured confidence was of paramount importance for the success of the project and the future of the company.

Critical actions such as creating clear pathways for cross-functional communication and ways to fast-track priority requests and decision-making would be critical. To implement these actions, project managers and quality leaders developed a process that motivated the entire organization to complete a multitude of tasks on schedule ahead of any submissions to the FDA.

By embedding new ways of working, teams were aligned with the actions needed to move the project forward, as well as a shared sense of accountability and responsibility—a result of working from the facts and as one team committed to an outcome.

> ### The Breakthrough
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> The company's groundbreaking piece of surgical equipment was successfully submitted for approval to market three days ahead of the promised delivery date. Furthermore, these cross-functional teams taught themselves new ways of working and achieved something that wasn't possible in the previous eight years. As a result, the product opened doors to an entirely new business vertical for the company—and outcomes for patients.

3 Invent
The third action needed to achieve a breakthrough requires individuals to invent and design a new set of conversations—rooted in an inspired future—to drive new and potent actions and results. At this point, conversations move from being circumstance-based to being commitment-based.

One relevant example from our client work was when a major U.S.-based hospital healthcare system—known globally for unrivaled patient care and outcomes—was not viewed as a leader in actual physician leadership development. The leadership development opportunities within the organization were largely brought about by chance, on-the-job training to fill gaps in already recognized leaders, or offered because of who someone knew and the resources they could connect them to.

Many of the previous programs that had fostered leadership development across the organization, even beyond physicians, were cut over the years. Yet, with their vision set on the future, it became clear to the organization that with a formalized structure embedded throughout the organization developing physicians as leaders, the health system would be able to realize the bold vision they had set out for their future.

Insigniam was engaged to help ensure that the leadership development program not only built first-class leaders but did so in a way that fit the organization's uniqueness.

Conversations with cross-functional groups at all levels revealed many roadblocks to leadership development and where the

organization might have opportunities it was not currently acting on—or even seeing.

By confronting many of these background conversations, a variety of conversations emerged on what worked well, what should be eliminated, and what needed to be added to ensure success—with several common themes arising across a majority of the interviews.

With these truths uncovered, the client assembled a collaborative team that used design thinking principles to create and invent a mix of prototypes that were then reviewed with the governing body that would give the initial "yea" or "nay" on whether the leadership development structure would go forward to be implemented throughout the organization.

> ### The Breakthrough
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> This framework and accompanying platform were presented to several governing bodies—all of whom were aligned with the proposal. This was a major win in the traditional, consensus driven culture of the organization. The leadership team recognized that this prototype—rooted in commitment-based conversations—was a distinct departure from their traditional leadership development. Moreover, the new approach reflected the timeless values the health system prided itself on, which were at the core of the development platform.

4 Implement
The final stage—implementation—arises when organizations can operate from a base of new conversations, and individuals can design the appropriate structures and practices to turn a breakthrough goal into a breakthrough result.

Naturally, threats can arise at any stage—such as a global pandemic that shifts an entire workforce to virtual environments. For one of the largest manufacturers of automotive tires, this was a reality.

Throughout the company's history, partnerships were forged, and customers were served through face-to-face interactions.

Don't risk ceding the future to competitors when the actions needed for a breakthrough can propel your enterprise to a level beyond your wildest dreams.

This was the time-tested approach at the company, where professionals had honed their skills and operational strategies through years of in-person meetings. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic came a seismic shift. With it, the company's well-trodden path to success suddenly vanished.

Alongside the disappearance of customary business practices, the ability to convene with colleagues in person evaporated. The very act of brainstorming and providing direct support to one another became a challenge. As the world grappled with the new reality, people had to adapt, finding innovative ways to foster internal and external connections. The structures they had long relied upon had crumbled, leaving them to navigate uncharted waters.

Our work with the client was driven by a desire to increase and maintain engagement with internal and external customers in a virtual world. Additionally, the company sought to grow great customer relationships, be agile in this new environment, and discover and embrace new purposes for their work. This required wholly new ways of operating as a team.

After aligning on an inspiring possibility for their future, project teams were created to plan a pathway to achieve their intended results. Impressively, their plans were so well conceived that the president of the operations group arranged for them to present the objectives and pathways during a quarterly meeting attended by executives.

Two activities made an observable difference in people increasing their level of participation and deepening their connection with each other. The first was an employee-centric program designed to spotlight and share what inspires individuals about their work—which itself became an incubator for inspiration during a time of great existential stress for employees.

Secondly, it was identified that one of the international teams had previously felt disempowered to participate in more extensive group conversations and engagement because of differing cultural norms. By providing these teams with a safe platform to share, they created a new reality for themselves where they were encouraged and supported to be more assertive and speak up in the larger group.

Ultimately, this powerful cohesion resulted in new ways of working and a consistent increase in employee engagement, which created new strategies pathways for serving customers in a virtual environment.

The Breakthrough

By creating and aligning on a new possibility for the future of their business—one that inspires employees—teams launched two breakthrough objectives that helped deepen relationships beyond international borders.

Ultimately, this powerful cohesion resulted in new ways of working and a consistent increase in employee engagement, which in turn, created an environment for teams to devise and invent new strategies and pathways for serving customers in a virtual environment.

A Playbook For Action

The actions required to achieve a breakthrough must be supported by a fundamental shift in thinking that challenges the conventional view of the future as a product of the past. In our journey through the breakthrough process, the future acts as the backdrop against which the people within an enterprise discern what's feasible and beyond reach. It has a profound influence on their thoughts, actions, and behaviors. It delineates a horizon that beckons people to take action.

Creating an enterprise with a compelling future calls for leadership that recognizes an enterprise's power extends beyond its capital and transactions, understanding that harnessing the human factor entails investing time and energy for significant, meaningful conversations. It requires dedication and discipline to master the types of dialogues that construct and inspire an enterprise and the actions to turn goals into reality.

The pivotal question is this: If an observer were to scrutinize your organization, what type of actions would they witness? Don't risk ceding the future to competitors when the actions needed for a breakthrough can propel your enterprise to a level beyond your wildest dreams. **IQ**

Portions of this article are based on materials created by Werner Erhard and on the book *The Three Laws of Performance: Rewriting the Future of Your Organization and Your Life*, by Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan, 2009, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, and are used with permission.

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