



---

**EUROPARTNERSHIP WHITE PAPER**

---

**Instant Strategy Saver**

---

**How do you maintain momentum and strategic goals in an uncertain environment?**

**How do you manage as the business and competitive environment changes around you?**

## CONTENTS:

### INSTANT STRATEGY SAVER

Summary

Strategic Conversations in the context of an “Instant Strategy Saver”

Getting started with a strategic conversation

What are the key elements and steps of the process?

What is the role of the Board, Executive or Senior Management?

Will you describe some tangible decisions resulting from strategic conversations?

When can organisations use strategic conversations?

What are the pitfalls to keep in mind?

You referred to other tools needed to complete the journey, what are some of these?

Where did the name “Strategic Conversations” come from?

Does strategy arrived at through “Strategic Conversations” succeed more often than traditional planning approaches?

So remind me again briefly, “what is in it for me?”

**Europartnership’s “Performance Management Toolbox” Series examines approaches and tools that can be deployed when implementing change and improvement programmes. Our aim is to bring together leading practice from around the World in an easy to read set of articles.**

## INSTANT STRATEGY SAVER

### Summary

How do you maintain your strategic focus on long term objectives in an uncertain environment? Europartnership has evolved a proven strategy setting approach – known as “strategic conversations” – for rapid deployment in a rapidly changing business and competitive environment. We can support you in establishing the context; identifying and quantifying the change factors; and identifying and quantifying options with a quantified level of confidence.

Internally, this means quantifying the impact on: outcomes; people, processes and resources. This is set out with the implications; timescales; risks; critical success factors; and the key performance indicators to track progress.

Externally, this means quantifying the impact of: market behaviour (price and volume); competitor behaviour; capital and funding organisation behaviour; technology development; and currency movement.

For seasoned managers of change, this will reinforce good practice and will help you win over less experienced or ‘change averse’ colleagues. You will find a structured model and some practical outcomes that you can draw upon.

For those facing change without the experience of previous times of rapid change and uncertainty, you will find reassurance that we hope will encourage you to go forward armed, forewarned and with confidence.

### Strategic Conversations in the context of an “Instant Strategy Saver”

Let’s examine an approach that allows you to look at your options in the round. It is based on a proven and successful strategy setting methodology labelled “strategic conversations”. It will establish the context within which choices to be made with quantified confidence levels. This means working explicitly on: the potential outcomes; people, process and resource implications; timescales; risks; critical success factors; and the key performance indicators to track progress.

The essential point of “strategic conversations” is its systematic and structured approach to decision making.

In the light of today’s rapidly changing business environment, Europartnership have adapted the approach for rapid deployment and results.

Once mastered, however, the technique can be applied to many situations and, hopefully, to a more considered and stable strategy setting context in the years to come.

To give just a small flavour of how it has been used:

- To choose which one of competing future technologies to include in a development portfolio – the decision led to developing a product that today we know as ‘Broadband’

- To decide whether a small enterprise should go for growth and market leadership, or remain high-return, low-risk niche player – the decision was to stick and set specific criteria for an exit scenario
- To prioritise within an ambitious political manifesto for an incoming County Council Executive – the decisions were with a consensus and are currently being implemented

### ***Getting started with a strategic conversation***

First, identify the people who know the most about the topic. They are going to be members of a working team for around 3 months. It needn't be the most senior executives – choose content experts. You need the people who are in the business day in and day out, who know what's going on, and for whom a decision will have a clear impact.

In terms of size, the team shouldn't be too big. Not more than 10 people. Use experienced facilitators to support the programme. The team brings experience and evidence – the facilitators keep to the programme to time and collate research, interviews, analysis and presentation material.

### ***What are the key elements and steps of the process?***

The process is built around a series of structured steps. We typically hold 3 team meetings held at six week intervals, each lasting two days. Workshops cover more than one step.

In the rapid deployment this will be condensed to 3 team meetings of one (long) day each held at weekly intervals. The amount of inter-workshop "homework" has been commensurately reduced - and the emphasis shifted to external rather than internal resources to undertake this work.

The first session usually focuses on defining the context. For instance, with a marketing programme – the size and important trends, including competitive or benchmarking analysis.

The second session focuses on questions like: what is our current course and position? Where is our current performance taking us? What are the key levers and drivers that we should consider? For instance, in a Local Government setting – are we going to meet the nationally set targets? If not, how big is the gap we need to address?

In session 3 we start to prioritise and identify options or scenarios. What if we did X? What are the impacts on each of our different stakeholders and our business? We often come up with four or five different scenarios to evaluate. We need at this point to be clear on what goals are important to us and what genuine constraints exist.

In the fourth session, we work on quantifying the scenarios and options. This means thinking in financial, political and all relevant practical outcome terms. The team needs to be prepared to rigorously debate whether we believe in scenario A, B or C...or some combination.

By the fifth and closing session, we're summarising recommendations for decision making.

The deliverables for the programme include the results of the scenario evaluations clearly quantified in outcomes and timescales; a resource based outline plan for the chosen scenario(s); performance indicators that inform management that the chosen strategy is on track – and early warning when assumptions are drifting for remedial action / re-visit of the scenario.

Each session has clearly stated milestones and outputs. There are deliverables for each session, and between sessions homework assignments for participants.

### ***What is the role of the Board, Executive or Senior Management?***

At the end of the process, we take senior management together with the team and lock them in a room. They can't leave without making a set of critical decisions. It's senior management who are ultimately accountable for delivering to their stakeholders – and they who can judge the options against the corporate goals and requirements.

Before the meeting, each participant will have read any background material. In the meeting itself, we present a set of scenarios in terms of the outcomes and implications. Each scenario has a set of conditions, whether environmental, technological, political, or something else. Options are discussed and the content experts in the room are quizzed. There is always a lively and interactive debate – and when an agreement is finally reached it is, more often than not, on the basis of real consensus.

### ***Will you describe some tangible decisions resulting from strategic conversations?***

A global technology company describes a strategic conversation outcome: 'We discovered that we had four separate development programs eating up a lot of money, which in the end would have delivered basically the same thing, but with different architectures. We decided to consolidate our development efforts, expand our range and increase marketing communications budgets. As a result, we significantly increased our market share and [we] are now the world's leading supplier [of this product]. This process has also helped build much better collaboration and teaming across divisions.'

A County Council portfolio holder (senior elected politician): 'It has been a vitally important aid to us in concentrating our minds to the urgency and enormity of our task. From a personal point of view, it has given me more clarity of the timetable I need to follow to achieve our objectives, and some of the pitfalls along the way. None of us who attended the programme were left in any doubt of the job in hand.'

### ***When can organisations use strategic conversations?***

It's useful for:

- organisations with multiple divisions that are all impacted by the same technology
- those addressing the same customer segment (private or public sector)
- those subject to the same trends (private and public sector)
- those having different camps forming around a key strategic issue. One camp says we should turn left, another says right, and a third says go straight – yet the need is to reach consensus in a logical way.

***What are the pitfalls to keep in mind?***

Don't use strategic conversations lightly. It's intensive and it takes up a lot of senior-level time; for instance, the sponsor has to budget five or six hours in to review material and attend a meeting. Team members must dedicate at least five or six full days to attend the working sessions.

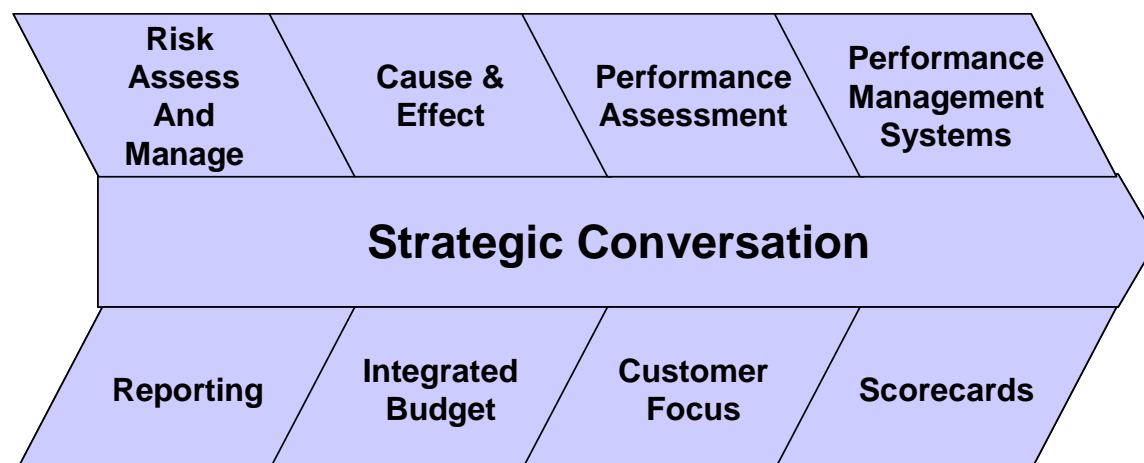
This has to be chief executive sponsored effort in order to get the best people to participate.

It is also a mistake to present too much information to the decision making board. Learn to put together a briefing document to read before the meeting. In the meeting itself, present only the highlights. The board will ask questions - and it quickly becomes obvious who is faking it and who is not. All team participants have to know the issues and the underlying data, so they have something relevant to say on the day.

***You referred to other tools needed to complete the journey, what are some of these?***

Many will be recognisable. Indeed, we would always recommend using a standard and proven technique whenever possible. Tools such as SWOT, fishbone diagrams, and structured brainstorming are used in almost every case,

Other tools have evolved to suit the approach: "Turn the Curve" for option generation and "Strategic Impact Grids" as powerful way of presenting those options in order to aid choice. But these tools can be learned and become part of the organisation's standard performance management toolbox.

***How flexible is the approach?***

As flexible as needs to be, without compromise to the end game. This is one of the aspects where the experience of the facilitator counts. Knowing when a 'light touch' is appropriate, or to call time on a milestone, or when to challenge the team harder is very much part of the role. Over time, however, we have learned what the 'must do' elements are – and if this means working to a conclusion before calling a session complete, that is what happens. As the programme builds successively through the steps, an incomplete closure at a milestone would jeopardise the end result. Participants pick this up early in the programme and,

because they have a vested interest in the outcome of the process, recognise the need and respond accordingly.

***Where did the name “Strategic Conversations” come from?***

One organisation that had used the approach for a couple of years to support strategic planning came up with the name, and it has stuck. Every organisation is free to label it so that it gains maximum engagement within its own culture.

***Does strategy arrived at through “Strategic Conversations” succeed more often than traditional planning approaches?***

Yes, although if we believe conventional wisdom that 85% of strategy doesn't get implemented, that may not be difficult to achieve. Seriously, there is a solidly researched theoretical base for the approach. Success, as always, lies in a combination of factors – and frankly, we would be reluctant to guide an organisation through the process without being assured that the factors are all in place.

In essence, it is developing strategy within a context or framework that is looking forward, as opposed to building on the basis of historical performance. The context will identify and quantify the effect of more internal and external levers - or performance drivers – than traditional methods.

Add to this the active engagement and participation of interested parties – all of whom have had chance to work through the detail of what is proposed. This means that we see more personal commitment to implementation and delivery.

Finally, the identification and quantification of outcomes, inputs and performance drivers means that the chosen and 'signed off' strategy comes with a ready made roadmap that lends itself to performance monitoring – with early warning of elements that are 'off track' (whether within your control or not). In flight remedial action follows more swiftly and surely, using the knowledge built up of the environment and how it is likely to react to the new course action.

***So remind me again briefly, “what is in it for me?”***

- Focus on the outcomes and not activity
- Strategy scenarios and options that have been appropriately worked through
- Consensus from decision makers and those who commit to deliver
- Understanding of the implications for people, processes and budgets
- Risks assessed, quantified and monitored
- KPIs that include those giving early warning of significant shifts in the business environment
- Move away from the “85% of organisations that don't deliver their strategy”

ABOUT EUROPARTNERHIP



Europartnership is a management consultancy that offers high quality services to clients designed to improve organisational performance.

This includes the provision of consulting services; software; facilitation; and training in performance management and strategy development.

Europartnership's skilled staff and consultants deliver ethical consulting services and work in partnership with clients to deliver continuous improvement programmes.

Our unique proposition and added value is that we work with organisations and, in so doing, transfer our knowledge and skills. Our aim is always:

“to equip organisations to improve performance”

**For more information contact  
Neil Shuttleworth at Europartnership on  
01323 479 588  
or visit our website at:  
<http://www.europartnership.com>**