

Strategic Consequences Workshop

Leaders have an intention in mind when they design a new policy or launch a new product. Often, they plan for their intended consequences, with little or no regard for any unintended consequences. New products, services, or policies may indeed deliver all the intended consequences, but often they deliver unintended consequences too. Unintended consequences can exist because you have a particular blind spot or were simply too focused on planning for the positives.

Consequence “scanning” is an agile practice, originally conceived by now-defunct UK technology think tank *doteveryone*⁴³, that allows teams to consider the potential unintended consequences of their actions. Its roots are in product design and the practice of consequence scanning is something that has been adopted and adapted by agile product teams.

I’ve borrowed from *doteveryone*’s guidance for product teams but adapted the idea to use in a strategic business context. Often in business strategy, we seek to prove our hypotheses without worrying too much about their unimagined consequences. I know that strategic consequence scanning can be instrumental in helping us see ‘what else’ and to understand the implications of our strategy and to mitigate risks. Strategic Consequence Scanning, then, offers organizations an opportunity to ensure their future strategy reflects organizational values and culture.

Participants

Your team needs to represent the diverse views of your organization plus your customers and anyone else your organization impacts. If your team is simply your departmental or leadership team, change it up, as you won't get the same answers and will leave yourself open to risk. See my blind spot checklist for guidance.

Focus

The workshop should be organized around 3 key questions.

1. What are the expected positive consequences of your strategy?

⁴³ <https://doteveryone.org.uk>

A BETTER VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

2. What are the potential negative unintended consequences of your strategy?
3. What are the potential unintended negative consequences you want to mitigate?

Workshop Design

1. Strategy Recap

First recap the strategy and the hypothesis it was based on to bring all participants up to speed. This should be presented simply so that all participants can easily grasp it. Not all participants will have the same level of familiarity.

2. Intended Consequences

Allow a period of consideration time (10 - 20 minutes or so) to allow all participants to individually consider what the intended consequences are. Ask them to write consequences on sticky notes. Then ask participants to share their ideas and then to group similar ideas together (5 - 10 minutes). Then allow another period of consideration in which participants get another opportunity to add new ideas based on what has been shared already (10 minutes).

3. Unintended Consequences

Perform the same steps as for the intended consequences. You may wish to allow more time for unintended consequences.

4. Organize Consequences

The next step is to organize your ideas. Create a grid with the headings High, Medium and Low. You may choose here to focus on risk, or opportunity, or another vector. You decide. In my experience of identifying unintended consequences, it has been helpful to focus on the risks these potential unintended consequences pose. Ask the team to organize the ideas in terms of high, medium and low risk. If you are concerned with risk, you may then choose only high and medium risk to focus on.

5. Defining Actions

Next, you need to decide where to put your focus and which you will act on. For each idea in your high or medium (risk) category, you need to define what you will do about it. For each, ask participants to define actions.

6. Assigning Responsibility

You may find that most of your unintended consequences are innocuous. Or you may find that some offer significant positive opportunities for your organization. On the other hand, you may find that some newly identified unintended consequences would seriously impede your proposed strategy. If you've identified risks or opportunities, you need to assign actions to people or teams. This last phase gives you an opportunity to do that.

7. Wrap-up and Next Steps

Make sure you confirm the top consequences, their actions, and who's responsible. A good next step will be to set a firm date for a review of the actions.