

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# LAUNCH 90-DAY CATALYTIC BREAKTHROUGH PROJECTS

*Build Confidence and Credibility Through Quick Wins*

EVERY YEAR, THOUSANDS of managers make transitions into new jobs. The actions that they and other new leaders take during their first few months have a big impact on their success or failure. In recent years, the pressure on CEOs has intensified dramatically. The average tenure of an S&P 500 CEO has dropped to an all-time low of under five years, down twenty percent from just a decade ago. In 2024 alone, nearly 2,000 CEOs departed their positions, the highest number on record since tracking began in 2002, according to executive outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Even more telling, a record forty-three CEOs left after serving less than three years.

They were ushered out the door because they appeared unable to improve the business's performance. No one these days gets much time to show what they can do. As McKinsey puts it, today's CEOs operate in "an increasingly high-risk environment, expected to tackle more complexity and make bigger swings, with no second

chances.” So, within the first 100 days at most, incoming CEOs and general managers must zero in on ways to increase market share, overtake competitors, and impact profitability (whatever the key tasks may be).

It’s important to note that executive transitions are also times when organizations can be transformed, in part because everybody is expecting a big change. However, the first 100 days are when new leaders are most vulnerable, as they lack detailed knowledge of the new role and haven’t established new working relationships. So, what does it take to make a successful transition?

In the Harvard Business Review, I came across a study conducted a few years ago that offered crucial insight into this question. The study was conducted in cooperation with the Corporate Executive Board’s Learning and Development Roundtable—a group of executives, mainly from large firms, responsible for cultivating leadership talent—who sponsored the research project to identify the key to successful executive transitions. The idea was to search for clues about what distinguished the executives succeeding in their new jobs from those struggling.

One attribute stood out among the high-performing new leaders: a strong focus on results. In fact, most had figured out how to achieve an early success or “quick win”—a new and visible contribution to the most important goals and objectives of the business made within the first few months of taking the job. Those who had achieved a quick win scored on average nearly twenty percent higher than those who hadn’t.

This was an interesting finding, underlining the importance of newly promoted executives’ need to put points on the board fast. A quick win is a strong form of reassurance: a) to the executive’s bosses, who want to believe they have made the right promotion or hiring decision, b) to colleagues on the leadership team seeking to judge whether a real player has joined their ranks, and c) to direct reports deciding whether to place confidence in their new boss.

## PITFALLS FOR LEADERS IN A NEW JOB

The study also highlighted some interesting insights into leaders who struggled in their new jobs, which may be instructive to you.

**1. Getting bogged down in their vision by making elaborate plans and preparations.** An Impossible Future can sound good on paper, but people can easily get bogged down in the discouraging complexity of trying to mount a big change initiative in an organization that may not be ready for it.

**2. Putting too much attention on pie-in-the-sky goals, not enough on doing their Day Job.** I have found that coaching new executives is about helping them maintain a delicate balance between stepping out on a limb for an Impossible Future and making sure they deliver on the basics everyone expects.

**3. Focusing too much on criticism from bosses and colleagues.** New executives may be hired with a going-in mandate that represents change, but then meet criticism when they pursue it. Instead of seeking a path forward, they often lash out, head for the bunkers, or obsess about criticism.

**4. Jumping to conclusions.** New executives in a role, like Head of Marketing or Head of Engineering, often bring preconceptions from previous assignments about what it takes to be successful, which may lead them to jump to conclusions about fundamental causes and solutions. These preconceptions can cause them to filter out contrary information or prevent them from really listening to their team. They may also be prone to lecturing their team with their views rather than drawing people out for input on the real situation.

**5. Getting down in the weeds.** Imagine the insecurity a person might feel in becoming the CEO of a large corporation and finding themselves in a far more complex job than they had imagined. Some chief executives, like Marissa Mayer of Yahoo, have tried to address this insecurity by becoming overly involved in day-to-day operations. Her micromanagement style was often seen as stifling innovation and employee autonomy, creating bottlenecks and frustration throughout the organization. The same thing happens to many executives in a big new assignment.

Clearly, one antidote to many of the leadership ills mentioned above is to focus on catalytic breakthrough projects or quick wins. Why catalytic breakthrough projects? Here are five reasons to pursue them:

- They cut down on overly elaborate planning and preparations,
- They create a focus on breakthrough goals that are neither too big nor too small,
- They prevent jumping to conclusions by engaging the views and perspectives of the team,
- They determine what can be done with existing resources and authority, and
- They create a path forward that will help to get buy-in.

## **CATALYTIC BREAKTHROUGH PROJECTS TO SPEARHEAD A BREAKTHROUGH**

As my coaching work is about helping executives realize an Impossible Future, I often help them jump-start their goals with a 90-day catalytic breakthrough project. The idea here is to launch a small, high-leverage project to spearhead a breakthrough that, if successful, will in turn create the opening for a larger break-

through. For example, I met a young executive in Shanghai from Zara, the Spanish high-fashion retail chain, who was tasked with business development in 12 emerging markets. One 90-day catalytic breakthrough project was to get close to the market in one country and understand customers' habits, tastes, and price points. A second was to open one store in one country that showed immediate signs of being a smashing success.

It is important to connect the catalytic breakthrough project to an Impossible Future, aiming to get some points up on the scoreboard quickly. For example, an oil refinery manager we coached decided to go for a quick win that involved three lost profit opportunities in their oil refinery, having to do with a) speeding up shutdown time for annual repairs, b) increasing energy utilization in running the refinery, and c) less wait time at fueling stations for customers with trucks.

I also coached his boss on a catalytic breakthrough project focused on training 18 managers to become Six Sigma Black Belts, tied to launching a quality revolution in the company. Each Black-belt had to teach others to start Six Sigma projects that would eliminate lost profit opportunities. This was the first time a Six Sigma program (a process closely associated with General Electric) had been tried in the oil industry. This catalytic breakthrough project was a small breakthrough that led to a much larger breakthrough. It directly resulted in training many more Black Belts, initiating hundreds of Six Sigma projects, and saving billions of dollars.

### **WHAT IS A CATALYTIC BREAKTHROUGH PROJECT?**

I use the catalytic breakthrough projects in my coaching work, as mentioned above, to help clients jump-start their Impossible Future rather than get bogged down in elaborate planning and preparation or caught in the discouraging complexity of trying to bring

about major change in an organization. There is also the issue that, in addition to the Impossible Future, my clients usually have a lot on their plates with their Day Job and may find it difficult to make the time for a D-Day-type assault on the beachheads that would make their vision a reality. As Tony Jimenez from Chevron Texaco once suggested to me, the Impossible Future is like a big ball of twine that is all tangled up. All you need to unravel is a place to start, and the catalytic breakthrough project gives you a great way to do that.

### **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “CATALYTIC”?**

The definition of catalytic in chemistry is “a substance, usually used in small amounts relative to the reactants, that modifies and increases the rate of a reaction without being consumed in the process.” In the way we are using it, catalytic means that it is a small project relative to the Impossible Future that, if achieved, alters the likelihood of reaching the Impossible Future while adding power and velocity to the process. Here’s a perfect example of how this works.

Standing in the snowy streets of Paris, having difficulty hailing a taxi, Travis Kalanick and Garrett Camp asked: What if there were a mobile app that let people request a ride by tapping their phone? In 2010, they decided to test the idea with one catalytic breakthrough project to prove the concept could work in their hometown, San Francisco. Kalanick cold-called drivers one by one, only to hear “no” hundreds of times a day for months, but eventually, with just three black cars, they launched Uber as a luxury black-car service. The target market was tech enthusiasts and professionals in the Bay Area, and even though it was more expensive, the service became an instant hit due to the poor quality and availability of traditional taxis in San Francisco.

That focused effort in one city created the opening for the next breakthrough. By 2011, they had figured out their “city playbook”: a general manager would enter a new market, recruit drivers through targeted outreach, build liquidity on both the supply and demand sides, and track daily growth against San Francisco’s pattern.

This city-by-city catalytic approach was the opposite to launching everywhere at once. Seattle came next, then New York (where they micro-targeted neighborhoods like Wall Street and SoHo to ensure supply met demand). Each successful city launch was a small breakthrough that created the template and momentum for the next expansion. Within just one year of that first San Francisco ride, Uber had launched internationally in Paris and by 2014, was operating in over 70 countries.

Had Kalanick tried to launch in 70 countries simultaneously in 2010, Uber would have failed. But by using San Francisco as a catalytic breakthrough project and taking the time to learn the playbook, prove the model, and create the template, that one-city success created the opening for global dominance.

The danger of trying to launch a complete, complex vision all at once is vividly illustrated by Quibi, the short-form mobile video service launched by Hollywood veterans Jeffrey Katzenberg and Meg Whitman in 2020. After raising an astounding \$1.75 billion from blue-chip investors, Quibi launched with all the bells and whistles: dozens of expensive original shows, proprietary technology for vertical and horizontal viewing, A-list talent, and a complete platform. But Quibi never tested its core assumptions with smaller pilot projects.

They didn’t start with one market, one show type, or one customer segment. They launched the entire ambitious vision simultaneously. Six months later, with only 500,000 subscribers instead of their projected 7 million, Quibi shut down.

### **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “BREAKTHROUGH”?**

The word “breakthrough” is defined in the dictionary in four ways, and each is relevant to us here: 1) A productive insight, 2) Making an important discovery, 3) A penetration of a barrier that has prevented progress, and 4) An extraordinary result.

If you think of people like Thomas Edison in his lab working on the invention of the light bulb, Henry Ford working on the first assembly line, or Watson and Crick working on the first DNA double helix model, each of the four elements of the above definition of a breakthrough would apply.

However, there is perhaps one missing element to this definition: most breakthroughs are not discovered while sitting under a tree, as with Isaac Newton dreaming about the law of gravity. Most often, they are discovered in the process of taking action within a live project aimed at an extraordinary result.

A catalytic breakthrough project needs to be aimed at a small but extraordinary and tangible result that, if achieved, will create the opening for an even greater result. A perfect example is Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia, who started Airbnb with a dream of transforming how people travel, and while they started modestly with air mattresses to pay rent, their real catalytic breakthrough project came when they got serious about building a business.

Airbnb’s quantitative co-founder, Nate Blecharczyk, had determined, through data analysis, that the “magic number” for a city to reach takeoff velocity was 300 listings, with 100 of those listings reviewed. Once a city reached that point, bookings would show a step-function increase in growth, and the marketplace would come alive.

This insight gave Airbnb a clear, measurable, catalytic breakthrough goal, and they focused intensely on hitting that magic number in New York City. To get to 300 listings with 100 reviews,

Chesky and Gebbia did things that absolutely didn't scale: they personally met with every host, took professional photographs of listings themselves, held host meetups to build community, and ran referral campaigns and event-based outreach.

Once New York hit the magic number, growth took off organically through word of mouth. That catalytic success in one city created the template for Paris, then London, then city after city around the world. Today, Airbnb has over 7 million listings globally and is valued at over \$75 billion, and it all started from pursuing one small, measurable breakthrough.

Another example is Patrick and John Collison, who had a vision of making it radically simple for businesses to accept payments online and “grow the GDP of the internet.” Their catalytic breakthrough project was remarkably focused. Rather than building a complete payments infrastructure for every business, they built a prototype and landed their first customer within two weeks—a friend who ran a small Y Combinator company called 280 North.

That tiny success became catalytic when they created what Y Combinator founder Paul Graham called the “Collison Installation.” When other Y Combinator founders showed interest in their prototype, called “Stripe,” Patrick and John would say, “Give me your laptop,” and install the app right there on the spot, turning interest into active users immediately. This aggressive but focused approach to their first ten to thirty customers created word of mouth among developers, which created demand for a private beta, which attracted major investors like Peter Thiel and Elon Musk.

Today, Stripe processes over a trillion dollars in payments annually and is valued at \$95 billion. But it started with one customer, one laptop, and founders willing to do things that didn't scale to prove their catalytic breakthrough project worked.

## KEY CRITERIA FOR CATALYTIC BREAKTHROUGH PROJECTS

Each of these conditions is very important and must not be overlooked in formulating a catalytic breakthrough project.

**1. It jumpstarts your Impossible Future.** The idea is to bypass elaborate planning and preparation, or getting discouraged by the complexity of the situation, by mounting a small project and going for a result now.

**2. It is a small, high-leverage project that is aimed at spearheading a breakthrough result that will create an opening for a larger breakthrough.** The idea is to mount a small breakthrough project aimed at an extraordinary and tangible result that, if achieved, will create an opening for a higher order of results. Even catalytic breakthrough projects with limited results often yield powerful insights and important discoveries, or help overcome barriers.

**3. It is aimed at a focused goal that can only be achieved with imaginative thinking and innovative action.** Catalytic breakthrough projects aim for an extraordinary result that has the potential to change everything, not just lead to continuous improvement. For example, I worked with a company that developed a new carbon fiber technology. One of the first steps was to build a pilot plant that demonstrated it could be manufactured in bulk.

**4. It is inclusive:** Who wants to play? One of the things you want to establish in your first hundred days is that you are not a dead hero, but a team player. A catalytic breakthrough project is a good way to involve colleagues and direct reports.

**5. It is a dream with a deadline!** It can be accomplished in under 90 days. It's been pointed out by Robert Schaeffer, author of *The Breakthrough Strategy*, that teams come together around a project when there are razor-sharp goals and success is near and clear.<sup>24</sup>

### **Examples of Catalytic Breakthrough Projects**

- Phase 1 of a big project that's a great first step
- Pilot projects or pilot anything before scaling up
- Experimenting with a new (material) method like Six Sigma in one department
- Collaborating with customers on a product with game-changing potential
- Designing a micro website in advance of the product
- Creating a YouTube video to make your idea go viral
- Entering an emerging market through one retail store
- Giving your top ten high-potential leaders a transformational assignment
- Outsourcing one department: for example, the transactional area of the HR department
- Using one recycled "green material" in your manufacturing process

### **THREE NOTES OF CAUTION**

I have seen some coaches and their clients struggle to take their Impossible Future and formulate a catalytic breakthrough project. So, pay attention to the following:

- The goals of the catalytic breakthrough projects must not be too big, nor too small.
- The project must be framed to achieve a result that will take you to a different place, not just geared toward continuous improvement.

- You need to personally get involved, rather than delegate the catalytic breakthrough projects to your team.

You make big decisions aimed at “doing the impossible” when you are in a position of power and high leverage. You go for small, quick wins aimed at “doing the obvious” when you are part of a leadership coalition or don’t have a proper mandate.

## TARGET SOME CATALYTIC BREAKTHROUGH PROJECTS

Identify 1 to 3 quick wins and score each on a scale of 1 to 20 according to the following criteria:

- **Connection to business results:** Is the quick win targeted to meaningful business outcomes with a clear connection to revenue or cost reduction? If successful, will it attract the attention of managers two levels above?
- **Cost and feasibility:** Can this quick win be achieved with existing resources and authority without distracting the team too much from its daily work?
- **Opportunity to engage:** Will this quick win give me the opportunity to engage with bosses and colleagues at other levels of the organization? Will it give me the opportunity to coach, guide, and seek input from direct reports?
- **Learning opportunity:** Will pursuing this quick win give me an opportunity to learn? Will it help me learn about my team’s aspirations, motivations, strengths, and weaknesses?
- **Shared credit:** Will key members of the team be able to see their fingerprints on the quick win? Will they get credit? Are there plenty of opportunities for them to play?

## SUMMARY

- Energize people and get them focused on cracking important business problems in ways that will have an immediate and dramatic impact by the end of the 100 days.
- Look at your Impossible Future and your Day Job and find a place where you can do a 90-day (30 or 60-day) catalytic breakthrough project that will spearhead a breakthrough.
- Don't get bogged down in elaborate planning and preparation, but do identify a high-opportunity area (and only one) where early wins are probable: marketing, new product development, sales, or costs.
- The idea is to find a place that, if you succeed, takes you to a different place and opens new opportunities for a larger breakthrough.
- Go where there is existing readiness and where you have the authority, resources, and support to make it happen quickly.
- Focus not just on the "what," but also on the "how" quick wins are achieved.
- Create pilot projects that not only produce results but also foster team members thinking and interacting together in line with your vision for how the organization should work.