

Fearless Thinkers, Episode 9
"Strategies that work: Bridging the gap from strategy to real execution," with Katy Young and Jeroen Kraaijenbrink

Masami: Welcome to Fearless Thinkers, the BTS podcast. My name is Masami Cookson and our host is Rick Cheatham, Head of Marketing at BTS. On today's show, Rick talks about making strategy actionable with Katy and Jeroen.

Katy Young is a Senior Vice President and Partner at BTS. Throughout her career, she has partnered with the world's largest organizations across industries to enable strategy execution. Katy specializes in working with SaaS organizations to enable digital transformation and continued hypergrowth. Katy is a published author and active thought leader on the BTS blog.

Jeroen Kraaijenbrink is an accomplished strategy, educator, speaker, writer, and consultant with over two decades of experience in both academia and business. He works with people and organizations to discover, formulate, and execute their future plans by providing innovative tools for forward-thinking strategy creation. Jeroen draws on cognitive psychology, humanism, martial arts, and numerous other sources for this work. Jeroen has a PhD in industrial management, teaches strategy at the University of Amsterdam Business School and has worked with organizations across industries to improve their strategies.

So, Rick, can you give us a preview of what's ahead?

Rick: Absolutely, Masami. It's crazy. After listening to the credentials of our guests – makes me feel like I really should have maybe worked a little harder in my life, because they're two very, very accomplished individuals. We kind of started with the interesting premise that people and organizations invest so much time in strategy, but more often than not, strategies stall or fail. We actually have so much to get to today, so I say we just jump right in.

Masami: Sounds great.

Rick: Jeroen, Katy, thank you so much for joining us today.

Katy Young: Thanks for having us.

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink: Great to be here.

Rick: Great. And Jeroen, it's a real pleasure to have you here as kind of a special guest star, being from outside BTS. What is going on in your world these days?

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink: Something very practical, actually. Just before this meeting, I've been working on my LinkedIn profile and posts to share some of my thoughts with the rest of the world.

Rick: Yeah. It's actually never a waste of time. I actually had a client one time square up with me pretty hard and just be like, Rick, your LinkedIn profile is terrible. You need to realize that it's your business card. So, it sounds like time very well spent.

And Katy, my friend, it is always great to get to speak to you. It's been a few years now since you've moved to Norway. What are some of the things that have been really exciting for you in that transition?

Katy Young: Well, it's been a strange few years for most people, as it turned out – a lot of change not just for me, but for the world.. So, it's been really good. It's been fun to experience our clients' challenges in a very different European context, but understand that the roots of most of them are really quite similar, and even sometimes the same. But all in all, very good. The kids are good, so life is good.

Rick: Awesome. Well, hey, we've got a big topic. The whole concept of making strategy actionable is always, I think, top of mind for people. But so many times, strategies fail or stall. I'm curious at the onset, why you think that is?

Katy Young: Well, I think obviously there's a number of dimensions. First, I think companies don't engage people sufficiently early enough in a strategy. Typically, there's a very kind of old fashioned process of cascading from a few people generating the strategy; sometimes they work with an external firm. And then it's unveiled: there's the grand unveiling, and then we start to try to engage people in the strategy. And the challenge with that is that authorship is ownership. If people don't feel that they have their hands in the strategy at all, particularly leaders, but even anyone in an organization, if they feel like it's just being told to them or put onto them, they don't feel ownership of it.

The second thing I would say is that often the unveiling of the strategy is something quite high level. It sounds good. There's five things or there's seven of these or whatever it might be. But then, when you go a little deeper, it hasn't really been clarified. And then the last thing I would say is, people need to dig into the strategy a little bit and test assumptions – test out different approaches. That ability to test and tinker can really be powerful in helping people engage. And that's

something that often isn't really done.

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink: It almost looks like we've fully coordinated this question and answer, which isn't the case. Because the first two things that you mentioned, Katy – the level of engagement, and also lack of clarity – I think those for me are the top two problems as well. And what I want to add to that point is, also clarity about how the new strategy or the change strategy is different from the past than the present. Because spelling that out is something I rarely see. And that's why people, when they see the new strategy, some might think, this is radically new, no way that we can achieve this. Others in the same company with the same strategy might think, what's the difference?

Katy Young: Absolutely agree. And building on the point you made – I think something we often see when we're on the execution end of things, is that there's a goal to everybody should figure out, well, what am I going to stop doing to be able to execute this new strategy? And people really struggle with that question. Because, typically, it's not really clear enough what is fundamentally different or what the organization is going to stop doing.

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink: Well, because what you're mentioning, I think, is making choices. What I see in a lot of strategies, there are no actual choices.

I want to add one more. Many strategies are not well-enough connected to the company itself. So, there's kind of a missing reality. They're based on optimistic goals, visions, hopes; sometimes wishful thinking, and on all kinds of external analysis. I see a lot of strategies that have kind of moved away from what the company's really good at.

Rick: Wow. You gave us a lot to think about there. It's funny – one of my early mentors, he joked as we were doing a big strategy announcement or cascade, whatever we want to call it – “We just spent the last five months working on this, and we expect everybody to completely understand it in a 90-minute town hall.” And so obviously that's something that's stuck in my head now for almost 30 years, but... I'm curious, bringing more people in early sounds good and right. How does that actually come to life?

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink: Of course, there are ways to literally involve everyone. What I think is important is that you have people from all different places and levels and functions in the company. So, the group can still be relatively small, not five people. The key is to have a diverse as possible

group. Because that is, in the end, what creates a good strategy. Related to that, what I always do and always tell people, is: we don't need to pretend we are all the CEO or the Executive Board. I want people's perspective from their particular role in the company. And my role as a consultant, then, is bringing those perspectives together.

Katy Young: I also think there's probably a lot of people listening to this who said, well, we didn't do that. So, now what? And I think, there's also an element of... It's not too late to engage people and to take a more iterative approach to strategy that allows people who are actually executing it to be able to weigh in and get involved. I worked with a client for many years - had a strategy - who said that what we were doing with him was helping to externalize the C-suite conversation. To at least help them understand here's where we started, here's the assumptions that we made. Here's the inputs, here's the reasoning; and therefore, here's why we landed where we did. And that also is helpful.

Rick: And actually, that's a perfect segue into that topic, because I do think that many times strategies fall down... When new initiatives hit, I still don't know what I'm supposed to do different when I come back to my desk on Tuesday.

Katy Young: Sometimes it's hard to answer that question. And that's part of the reason I think sometimes the strategy is high-level and lofty, because we don't know what we don't know and we haven't figured it out yet and all of that. But I think there's ways to at least start that process and engage that part of the organization. And having that conversation—and getting really tangible about—literally, what would this mean to somebody who is a customer service representative in our call center who's talking to customers every day? How would their job be different? What would we expect them to actually do differently?

Jeroen Kraaijenbrink: The whole idea of strategy that many people have is, strategy should be high level and abstract and generic, by definition. Because when it's concrete and tangible, then it's tactical and operational, and we don't want that. We should focus on the strategy. And one of the causes of this high-level, vague, blurry strategies that we see is a fear to become concrete, detailed, specific, because then it's supposedly tactical or operational. But I think that's exactly what we should try to do.

Rick: And Jeroen, what I think is very interesting about that was your comment around bringing more people in earlier. Because I'm sure that, a lot of times, we've got to keep

the strategy high level because we don't actually have the people that do the work in the room. And so, while we don't have to have a cast of thousands in these things, having different perspectives from different levels – I could see how that would really enable us to get to a different level of detail.

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink: There's no way around it.

Katy Young: To tell people a set of strategy, a set of expectations, and just expect them to go march and go do, is unrealistic, particularly in the context that we're living in, where everything is changing all the time. What helps that is letting people test it out and just get in there and really start to make choices. And we do it in a safe environment, a simulation. But letting them say, well, what if I was to try this, this would make sense to me; given everything I know, I would go about it like this..

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink: Again, I think we agree a lot on this. I want to add a warning to that, because there is this kind of idea that now the world is changing more often; that strategies should become highly adaptive, agile, emergent, whatever we call it. There's a risk as well, because the whole idea of strategy is to give the company some stability for the long term. So, if you iterate too much, if you adapt too much, you lose the entire reason why you were engaging in strategy in the first place.

Katy Young: Yeah, I absolutely agree with that. I think, obviously, change fatigue is a massive topic for a reason. I mean, people can only absorb so much change in terms of the direction that the organization is trying to go in. But I totally agree, it's how that we need to be adaptive about.

Rick: Very cool. Let's spend a couple of minutes then on this concept that – when I say the words, they seem so simple – and that's when we're building a strategy, it's really got to fit who we are as a company and how we work. Would you give us a couple more words on that?

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink: Sure. More than a couple, because this is important to me. Because what you see a lot is that, as soon as we start talking about strategy, we start looking outside. So, we start making all kind of analysis of the market, of society, of technological trends, economic trends, and so on. I think we should start the other way around. And that's the way I work with companies. Start inside out. First, look at: what are your competencies? What are the

assets? What are the unique things that the company has done over the past years?

Because then, you have the kind of stable core that you need to rely on in the future anyway, because you're not going to radically change the core of your company in a couple of years. And you make sure that whatever you come up with thereafter is connected to the core of your company. Second is the tendency to start with the future. It's much more productive to start with the present. Have the people in the room and discuss together: what are the customers? What are the products? What's good and strong about those products? How do they make money? Where do they lose money? And so on.

Katy Young:

Absolutely. I can safely say, from being on the execution end of a lot of strategies, that I've seen too many where people are rolling their eyes from day one – “this is a bunch of BS,” right? “We can't do this. This is not what we're set up for.” So, I absolutely agree. You got to start with what's real.

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink:

The downside of that might be that you only develop incrementally. In my experience, for most of the companies, it's still a strength. Because it's very rarely a radical 180-degree change.

Rick:

I can't help but feel the pain of some of our listeners out there that are going, “All this sounds amazing. However, my company uses a process that is profoundly not this.” What's your best advice for this person that would enable them to potentially create small changes?

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink:

Probably, civil disobedience. “Just do it.” Even though there might be all kind of rules and restrictions, and there is this high-level strategy plan and you're expected to do your job and so on, there's always room for some initiative. There's no one who's forbidding you to put some people in a room and talk about this and make some actions.

Katy Young:

I would also add, some of the things that I mentioned can be done on a small scale. So, this notion of externalizing the conversation and taking people on the journey – that can be done anywhere in the organization. And also then, feed that up when things aren't sufficiently clear to say, “Well, we tried to map this out for our part of the organization, and we need more information or more clarity on the following things.” And in some organizations, that can be treated as complaining, which is a challenge. But a good organization that has more of a learning culture, which I think most organizations are trying to move towards, welcome that. And it can actually make a difference.

Rick: Great advice. Really great advice. If I'm working for an organization that gets angry at me because I tried to help my team figure out how we can actually make a huge difference based on the strategy, it's time to polish the resume, I'm guessing.

But anyway, with that, again, thank you so much for your insights. Thank you for, hopefully, that bit of hope you gave to those that aren't in a position of driving big change in their organizations where they're sitting today. If you would like to know more about ways to make strategy actionable, you'll see in the show notes links to some of both BTS and Jeroen's for best thinking on these topics. And we encourage you to dive deeper.

And Jeroen and Katy, thank you once again for all the time you gave us today.

Katy Young: Thanks so much. It was a pleasure.

Jeroen
Kraaijenbrink: Yeah. Thanks for having us. Bye.

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