



Focus on the critical few ... rather than the trivial many

Too many growth companies are overwhelmed by lengthy plans and the distraction of the trivial many. Their CEOs find themselves drowning in detail, solving the *crise du jour* but unable to focus on those few things that would make growth happen. Cast as heroes, they play brilliantly, but dismally fail the audition from actor to director.

Great CEOs identify and pursue the *critical few*. They make hard choices, adopt an unreasonable stubbornness and ensure each team member is clear and accountable. They leave no fudge room.

The *critical few* approach creates a plot to direct and motivate your team's efforts. It gets the right people doing the right things at the right time. If one of your *critical few* is new customer acquisition - every team member (product, sales, marketing, finance, HR) has targets and actions to help acquire new customers - not just the sales team.



INSIGHT IN BRIEF

CEOs in growing companies should take time away from day-to-day tasks.

Time and effort invested in figuring out and getting their team aligned around the *critical few* might make growth happen faster.

The *critical few* are those priorities which if addressed result in a step change in growth. They are core company issues and need all stakeholders to contribute. If

they are not resolved, growth won't happen, or at best, much slower than it should.

1. What are the *critical few*?

Growth companies, with limited resources, have to choose where to focus. The *critical few* are those priorities which if addressed result in a step change in growth. They are core company issues and need all stakeholders to contribute. If they are not resolved, growth won't happen, or at best, much slower than it should.

For example, an early stage company's *critical few* may include winning first customers. A later stage company's may include deepening leadership capability. Other examples of *critical few* are - finding product-market fit, or introduction of a sales driven culture.

2. How to identify your *critical few*

Companies find it difficult to distill down to a *critical few* issues. The result? Conflicting objectives, strategies and action plans. A strategy without clarity on the *critical few* is no better than the paper it is written on - it is lifeless.

Look to uncover what is limiting growth in your company. Seek patterns where others only see events and forces to react to. Take a step back and think hard about your *critical few*.

So, you have asked the question "What are the three most important issues we must address to make a step change in growth?". Your team has responded enthusiastically. But there is one small problem - you now have a list of 20 issues. How do you narrow this down, and get the team aligned on your *critical few*?

Critical few is an ongoing and dynamic process, rather than a one-time annual event. Some will have a functional rather than company perspective. Experience, personal circumstance, and disposition will affect their outlook. Some may advocate revenue growth whilst others may demand profitability. Agree selection criteria to assess *critical few* suggestions and encourage debate to deepen understanding and commitment.

3. Making the *critical few* happen

Assuming you have agreed and documented your *critical few*, now translate them into concrete action plans. Think about what you need to do to make progress. What have you learnt from trying before? What behaviours need to change? Who needs to do what? What would success look like?

Delivering on the *critical few* has implications across the entire business. Agree targets for each area (financial, customer facing, product and people) and initiatives to meet these targets, like the example below in Figure 1, where 'winning new customers' is one of their *critical few*.

INSIGHT IN ACTION

1. Start discussions with your team on *critical few* at your next management meeting.

2. Facilitate a process which brainstorms, debates and gets alignment on your *critical few*. Agree a number of criteria for selection of your *critical few* (e.g. impact on revenue growth or cash) and assess each suggestion against these criteria.

3. Document your *critical few* and build an action plan to drive momentum, deepen commitment and ensure accountability.

Critical few		Targets	Initiatives
Win new customers	Finance	Double revenue from @2.5m to @5m	Secure additional funding €2m. Revise sales compensation plans.
	Customer	Double customer base from 20 to 40 over 3 years through entering German market.	Sign committed sales partnerships in 4 key regions in Germany.
	Product	Be recognised as leading product in our niche by German thought leaders.	Invest in German demo system that shows we are best on ease of use.
	People	One of founder team to move to Germany within 3 months.	Restructure internal management roles & recruit 2 German based channel managers with proven sales track record.

This approach provides you with an action plan for executing the *critical few* priorities that will drive growth. Targets and initiatives are sequenced and transparent.

Implementing the *critical few* requires change. New attitudes, behaviours and roles may be needed. Use determination, 'bloodymindedness' and a relentless focus to motivate and align your team. Use the *critical few* to move from actor to director and make growth happen.

Select Strategies is a boutique consulting practice, which helps companies make growth happen. In our series, *Growth Insights*, Paul O'Dea and Emer O'Donnell draw on experience from client engagements to look at issues which accelerate or inhibit company growth.

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