

9 McKinsey strategy frameworks + SCP from Harvard: prompts you can run on Monday

I packed ten strategy frameworks, nine from McKinsey and SCP from Harvard, each with the problem it solves, the steps and a prompt you can paste as-is.

Attribution: 9 of these frameworks were created or formalized at McKinsey. SCP (Structure-Conduct-Performance) comes from Edward Mason and Joe Bain at Harvard; consultants later added feedback loops. This page is not affiliated with McKinsey & Company.

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How to use in 4 steps

1. Write your problem in two lines, the way you would tell a friend.
2. Find which framework fits on the map below.
3. Paste that prompt and fill in the context.
4. End by asking for one question that opens the next meeting.

One rule

If the output does not change where money goes, what gets priority, or how someone behaves, it is decoration. Throw it away and pick another framework.

Quick map (problem → framework)

- Strategy on paper and nothing changes → 7S
- Several units fighting for scarce capital → GE-McKinsey
- Today's business eating tomorrow's → Three Horizons
- Need to compete a different way → Business System
- Price or survival in a commodity → Cost Curve
- Marketing does not become customers → Consumer Decision Journey
- Change is stuck → Influence Model
- Is this market worth entering? → SCP
- Buy or be bought → Strategic Control Map
- Future too uncertain for one plan → Portfolio of Initiatives

Original sources (not a social post)

1. 7S: Peters & Waterman, "Structure Is Not Organization" (1980)
2. GE-McKinsey: matrix created by McKinsey for GE in the early 1970s
3. Three Horizons: Baghai, Coley & White, The Alchemy of Growth (1999)
4. Business System: Bales, Chatterjee, Gogel & Puri (McKinsey, 1980); cited by Porter in Competitive Advantage
5. Industry Cost Curve: Ted Hall (McKinsey SF) / Don C. Watters staff paper, 1981; listed in McKinsey Enduring Ideas
6. Consumer Decision Journey: McKinsey research, 2009
7. Influence Model: Lawson & Price, "The Psychology of Change Management", McKinsey Quarterly (2003)
8. SCP: Edward Mason (Harvard, 1930s) and Joe Bain (1950s)
9. Strategic Control Map: Vijay D'Silva, Bob Fallon and Asheet Mehta (McKinsey, 1996)
10. Portfolio of Initiatives: Lowell Bryan (McKinsey); related to Courtney on uncertainty levels

1. McKinsey 7S

When to use: The strategy is approved on the slide, and company behavior did not change.

Steps

1. Ask for scores from 1 to 5 for each S (strategy, structure, systems, shared values, style, staff, skills), from people at different levels.
2. Describe the target for each S so the strategy can actually work.
3. Look at the 21 pairs between the 7 elements and mark green / amber / red.
4. Start with the red links that have the biggest gap.

Prompt (copy and paste)

My strategy is approved on paper but almost nothing changed in how people work.

Context (paste facts, not slogans):

- Decision we already made:

- What still looks the same after 90 days:
- Who gets promoted here in practice:
- Incentives / KPIs that still reward the old way:

Run the McKinsey 7S Model (Peters & Waterman, 1980):

- 1) Score today 1-5 for Strategy, Structure, Systems, Shared values, Style, Staff, Skills. Separate scores from leadership vs people closer to the work when possible.
- 2) Define the target state for each S so the strategy can actually work.
- 3) Check the 21 pairs between the 7 elements. Mark green / amber / red.
- 4) Rank the red links by size of the gap.
- 5) Propose the 3 fixes that would move behavior first (not another slide).
- 6) List common mistakes for this framework and which ones we are already making.

End with ONE question I should ask in the next meeting to force a real decision.

Typical question for the next meeting: What actually gets someone promoted here?

2. GE-McKinsey Matrix

When to use: Several units or product lines are fighting for the same capital.

Steps

1. Choose 4 to 6 factors per axis (market attractiveness and unit strength).
2. Lock the weights (they add to 100%) before any score.
3. Score each factor from 1 to 5 with data, not opinion.
4. Sum: below 2.33 low; 2.33 to 3.67 medium; above 3.67 high.
5. Plot each unit and draw the arrow for where it is heading.

Prompt (copy and paste)

We have several business units / product lines and limited capital. We keep debating where money should go.

Context:

- Units to compare:
- Revenue or contribution of each:
- Factors that matter in our industry for market attractiveness:
- Factors that matter for our ability to win:

Run the GE-McKinsey Matrix:

- 1) Pick 4-6 factors per axis.
- 2) Lock weights that add to 100% BEFORE scoring.
- 3) Score each factor 1-5 with evidence, not vibes.
- 4) Compute the weighted scores. Map low / medium / high using 2.33 and 3.67 cutoffs.
- 5) Plot each unit. Recommend invest / selective invest / harvest or exit.
- 6) Call out dependencies (a "divest" unit that still feeds a "grow" unit).
- 7) List common mistakes we should avoid.

End with ONE question for the next capital meeting.

Typical question for the next meeting: Is this market worth it, and can we win in it?

3. Three Horizons of Growth

When to use: Today's business is eating the budget and time of what comes next.

Steps

1. List every initiative and tag H1, H2, or H3.
2. Add up budget and leadership hours per horizon.
3. Give each horizon a different scorecard.
4. Define what proves the move from H3 → H2 and from H2 → H1.

Prompt (copy and paste)

Today's business is crowding out tomorrow's. Innovation keeps getting cut when the quarter gets tight.

Context:

- Core businesses (today's profit):
- Emerging bets with real customers:
- Research / pilots / small stakes:
- Rough budget and leadership hours for each:

Run Three Horizons of Growth (Baghai, Coley & White, The Alchemy of Growth, 1999):

- 1) Tag every initiative H1 / H2 / H3.
- 2) Count budget and leadership hours per horizon.
- 3) Propose a separate scorecard for each horizon.
- 4) Define graduation criteria from H3→H2 and H2→H1.

- 5) Show where we are starving a horizon, and what to move this quarter.
- 6) List common mistakes (especially treating horizons as a sequence).

End with ONE question for the next planning meeting.

Typical question for the next meeting: What change could make our core irrelevant in 5 years?

4. Business System Framework

When to use: You need to win in a way that is different from the established rival.

Steps

1. Map your 6 steps next to the rival (technology, design, production, marketing, distribution, service), with cost.
2. At each step ask: performance, better way, how the rival does it, who has lower cost.
3. Circle one step where you can choose what nobody else chooses.
4. Test whether that choice strengthens the other steps.
5. Before buying someone, overlay the two systems.

Prompt (copy and paste)

We need a way to compete that is not a pale copy of the market leader.

Context:

- Our offer:
- Top rival:
- Rough cost / activity at each step (technology, product design, manufacturing/ops, marketing, distribution, service):
- Constraints we refuse to break:

Run the Business System Framework (McKinsey, ~1980; later cited by Porter):

- 1) Map our 6 steps next to the rival's, with cost where known.
- 2) At every step answer: how well do we perform, is there a better way, how do competitors do it, who has lower cost.
- 3) Circle ONE step where we could make a choice nobody else makes.
- 4) Test fit: does that choice strengthen the other steps or fight them?
- 5) If acquisition is on the table, overlay the target system and name real synergies vs slide synergies.
- 6) List common mistakes (one clever choice the rest of the system doesn't support).

End with ONE question for the next strategy meeting.

Typical question for the next meeting: Can we sell the outcome instead of the product?

5. Industry Cost Curve

When to use: Commodity or capacity business; you need to forecast price or who exits in a downturn.

Steps

1. List each producer and capacity.
2. Estimate cash cost per unit with the same definition for everyone.
3. Sort from cheapest to most expensive.
4. Overlay 2 or 3 demand scenarios and read the price.

Prompt (copy and paste)

We are in a capacity-heavy / commodity-like market. I need to know where price settles if demand falls, and who exits first.

Context:

- Producers and capacity (plants, mines, fleets, seats, seats-hours, etc.):
- Cash cost definition we will use for everyone:
- Current demand and 2 alternative demand scenarios:
- Our own position on the curve:

Run an Industry Cost Curve:

- 1) List every producer and capacity.
- 2) Estimate cash cost per unit with one consistent definition.
- 3) Sort cheapest to most expensive.
- 4) Overlay 2-3 demand scenarios and read the clearing price.
- 5) Say who is underwater in each scenario, including us.
- 6) Recommend capacity / cost / M&A moves for the next 12 months.
- 7) Flag when this tool is a bad fit (highly differentiated brands).

End with ONE question for the next board or pricing meeting.

Typical question for the next meeting: Where does price settle if demand falls?

6. Consumer Decision Journey

When to use: Marketing spend is rising and the customer base is not keeping up.

Steps

1. Ask recent buyers where you entered the list and which brands entered later.
2. Find the stage where you lose the most people versus the rival.
3. Move budget toward that leak.
4. Separate active and passive loyalists.

Prompt (copy and paste)

Marketing spend is rising and customer growth is not. We keep pouring money into awareness.

Context:

- Category:
- Our brand vs top rivals:
- What we know about consideration / evaluation / purchase / loyalty:
- Current budget split by stage:

Run the Consumer Decision Journey (McKinsey, 2009):

- 1) Reconstruct the journey: initial consideration → active evaluation → purchase → postpurchase → loyalty loop.
- 2) Find the biggest leak vs our top rival.
- 3) Recommend budget moves toward that leak (even if awareness gets less).
- 4) Split loyalists into active vs passive and say what that implies.
- 5) Give 5 research questions for recent buyers we can run this month.
- 6) List common mistakes (especially overfunding awareness).

End with ONE question for the next marketing meeting.

Typical question for the next meeting: Are we on the shortlist before the person starts researching?

7. Influence Model

When to use: The change program is stuck (new system, reorg, culture, integration).

Steps

1. Write what people should be able to say under each of the 4 levers (understand why; structures/incentives; skills; visible examples).
2. Ask for a 1 to 5 score from a sample of people affected.
3. Place planned actions under each lever (one is often empty).
4. Fill the weakest first and resurvey in 90 days.

Prompt (copy and paste)

A change program is stalling. People nodded in the kickoff and kept doing the old work.

Context:

- The change we want:
- What people are still doing instead:
- Current KPIs / bonuses:
- Training already done:
- Who visibly models the new behavior:

Run the Influence Model (Lawson & Price, McKinsey Quarterly, 2003):

- 1) Write the four statements employees should be able to say: why it makes sense; structures/processes/incentives support it; I have the skills and practice; I see leaders and peers doing it.
- 2) Score each 1-5 based on the context above (mark assumptions).
- 3) Map planned actions under each lever and show empty levers.
- 4) Propose the first 3 actions that fill the weakest lever.
- 5) Design a 90-day resurvey.
- 6) List common mistakes (memo-only change, old KPIs left alive).

End with ONE question for the next change steering meeting.

Typical question for the next meeting: Which KPI or bonus still rewards the old behavior?

8. SCP Framework (Harvard)

When to use: You need to judge whether an industry is attractive, or anticipate a shock.

Steps

1. Map structure with numbers (top-4 concentration, barriers, fixed vs variable cost, buyer and supplier power).
2. List the 3 most likely shocks in the next 5 years.
3. Play each forward: rival conduct and effect on margins.
4. Choose the move that shapes structure in your favor.

Prompt (copy and paste)

I need to judge how attractive this industry is, and what happens if a shock hits.

Context:

- Industry:
- Top players and approximate shares:
- Entry barriers:
- Cost structure (fixed vs variable):
- Buyer / supplier power:
- Our current position:

Run Structure-Conduct-Performance (Mason / Bain; later used in strategy with feedback loops):

- 1) Map today's structure with numbers, not adjectives.
- 2) List the 3 shocks most likely in 5 years.
- 3) Play each forward: rival conduct and margin impact.
- 4) Recommend the move that shapes structure in our favor, not only the win-this-year move.
- 5) Separate profits from market power vs profits from being better.
- 6) List common mistakes.

End with ONE question for the next investment or entry meeting.

Typical question for the next meeting: Does our profit come from market position or from being better?

9. Strategic Control Map

When to use: Planning an acquisition, defense against takeover, or position among peers.

Steps

1. Take book value and market cap of 10 to 20 peers in the same sector.
2. Plot on a log scale and cut at peer medians.
3. Add 5 years of trajectory.
4. Decide: who you can buy, who can buy you, what keeps control.

Prompt (copy and paste)

We are thinking about acquisitions, or we are worried about being acquired. I need a clear peer map.

Context:

- Our book value and market cap:
- 10-20 same-industry peers with book value and market cap:
- Any known M&A rumors or constraints:

Run the Strategic Control Map (McKinsey, 1990s):

- 1) Plot peers by size (book value) and performance (market-to-book) on log scales.
- 2) Split at peer medians into the four zones.
- 3) Add trajectory notes if multi-year data exists.
- 4) Say who we could buy, who could buy us, and what move keeps us in control.
- 5) Warn about cross-industry comparisons and asset-light book-value distortions.
- 6) List common mistakes.

End with ONE question for the next board M&A discussion.

Typical question for the next meeting: If our multiple falls 30% tomorrow, who can buy us?

10. Portfolio of Initiatives

When to use: The future is too uncertain for a single five-year plan.

Steps

1. List each initiative with budget, owner, and payoff date.
2. Plot by horizon and how well you know the ground; mark big bet / option / no-regrets.
3. Check balance: big bets only where knowledge is distinctive.

4. Set gates: what earns more capital and what kills the initiative.

Prompt (copy and paste)

The future is too uncertain for one five-year plan. We have too many initiatives fighting for the same budget.

Context:

- Initiatives (budget, owner, expected payoff date):
- How uncertain the environment is (clear enough / a few scenarios / a range / true ambiguity):
- What knowledge is actually distinctive for us:

Run Portfolio of Initiatives (Lowell Bryan / McKinsey approach):

- 1) List every initiative with budget, owner, payoff date.
- 2) Plot by horizon and knowledge of the ground. Tag big bet / option / no-regrets.
- 3) Check balance. Big bets only where our knowledge is distinctive.
- 4) Set review gates: what result earns more capital, what result kills it.
- 5) Propose what to kill, shrink, or fund more this quarter.
- 6) List common mistakes (eternal pilots, Horizon-1 pileup).

End with ONE question for the next portfolio review.

Typical question for the next meeting: What result earns this initiative more capital, and what result kills it?

Take only this to the next meeting

1. The problem in two lines.
2. The framework you chose.
3. The one question the room must answer before leaving.

If nobody can say, at the end of the meeting, what changed in money, priority, or behavior, the framework did not work. You only filled slides.

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