# Product - Preparing for the Perfect Product Launch

Closing the Doing-Thinking Gap

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Companies celebrate their “can-do” culture. Later on, after the errors show up, we all wish we had been more rigorous in scouting out the territory before we sprinted down the execution path.

The theory also exposed an intriguing paradox: The variables that allow an entity to rise to a level of dominance in a certain context tend to trap it later, preventing it from competing successfully in a future context.

What, I asked myself, were the patterns and attributes I was missing, the ones embedded in my good and bad lists? It seemed to me that we, as a company, had unwittingly fallen into a common trap. We expected things to go well simply because they usually did. We were not alert enough to the things that could now go wrong with our original approach or to what would be required for us to continue to dominate in the future. Because our innovation process worked 90% of the time, we were not prepared for the 10% of the time when it could falter.

When people told me that the one thing they could use more of was time, what they were really saying was that they needed more time to think.

In rushing into a business plan before all the facts were in, we had created hypotheses and started seeking to confirm them, rather than first discovering what the correct idea should be.

I started to sense that we needed to inject a new, deeper discipline into our development work at its very first stage. I now knew what I wanted to attack. We would have to change from a merely “doing” culture to a “think-before-doing” culture. Here’s what we did.

Thinking About Health Care

Critical thinking, Steelcase style, has four phases. In the first phase of a project or product development, long before we ever set about getting the right answer, we think deeply about the problem or opportunity we’re after. In the second phase, we develop a point of view—a specific approach to the problem. In the third phase, we work out the launch strategy, and in the final phase, we implement the strategy.

In the all-important think phase, team members first consider a specific company project or problem individually. They read as much as possible about the topic so that they become educated about its essence. Then they must make sure they ask the right questions about the matter. A great deal of time is spent on this; as Tim Brown, CEO of our subsidiary firm Ideo is wont to say, “Most innovation comes from being able to ask the right questions.” Team members also talk to experts, leveraging a vast network of connections to speak with the smartest people in the world about the related issues. Throughout, they document the depth and breadth of their research to assemble information into a sensible whole. Documentation is critical; the kinesthetic work cements their thinking and creates tangible evidence of their efforts, which is important to people proud of their ability to get things done.

Team members immersed themselves in such basic questions as: What are the current and long-term trends in clinical practice? Who makes and influences buying decisions in the health care industry? What would the competition be if we moved into this new market? We could have followed common practice by hiring an outside industry expert to aid us in answering such questions. But an outsider would not have helped us generate the kind of insights we required. We needed to find our own patterns and develop a very deep internal understanding so we could form a cohesive, uniquely Steelcase, point of view. Only by immersing ourselves in all the available knowledge about health care settings could we begin to see subtle patterns that could help the company develop a breakthrough product.

Relieved from nearly all other daily responsibilities, each team member entered the think phase with the stance of a naive beginner (a concept borrowed from The Ten Faces of Innovation by Ideo design guru Tom Kelley).

The object was not to come in as an advocate of a given position or to defend a preconceived notion based on anyone’s experience or expertise. Instead, each person had to learn everything possible about the practicalities and problems of patient-site health care delivery. This required team members to do what a good investigative journalist does— read articles, books, research reports, analysts’ reports, and so on, dividing research areas according to their skill sets, interests, and networks.

After team members had absorbed the literature, they began networking with experts to see whether they could confirm the patterns they were beginning to see in the way medical professionals and patients interacted.

In February 2005, with the patterns confirmed, the team felt secure in its knowledge and confident in its conclusion: We could indeed design a differentiated offering for the health care market. Now the team was ready for the next step.

The Road to Execution

As the think phase came to a close, the team was ready to embark on the three remaining phases.

Point of view. Roger Enrico, former CEO of PepsiCo, once declared that “Leadership is having a point of view.” To me, a point of view is a conviction and a concrete mission. The point of view is not only more believable after a thorough think phase, but the chosen option is less controversial. The point of view also assures critical closure of debate.

In the point-of-view phase, the health care–development team held collegial discussions about the options for approaching this new market that were generated in the think phase. They wanted to make sure everyone had thoroughly considered and understood all the possible variables involved. Their goal in formulating a point of view was not to reach consensus; the team didn’t want to dilute what it had learned. Consensus is often about finding middle ground because people want to feel good about their colleagues and maintain friendly relations. This doesn’t necessarily lead to the best decision, which was what this team was after. In the end, what they decided was this: We would move deeper into the health care market by launching a new health care brand.

Housed in a separate business unit, the brand would draw on technology and products we already had, as well as new products we would manufacture and new customizing services we would provide. Once

Once the team had developed the point of view, the next task was to present it to senior management. Two rules in this phase, designed to prevent second-guessing and ongoing debate, assisted the team in its work. The first rule is that a single person has to be selected to represent the point of view of the team to senior management.

Once set, the point of view cannot be changed unless significant new evidence indicates that it should shift.

Plan to implement. In this stage, in which the team planned the business launch, members clarified and refined the mission statement so that all the people involved could understand how it applied to them. The team then put together a business plan and a time line of deliverables.

Before launching the new health care brand, everyone who would be involved practiced the rollout. No one needs to be sold on the benefits of practice, but few organizations ever create the conditions that allow for it. By building practice into our formal process, we make sure everyone is given the time and resources they need to do it and do it thoroughly.

Practice, in this case, meant training everyone from the line workers who had to adapt their production protocols to the sales force and order management people to the board members who would be asked about the product line once it went public.

Taking the time to teach

implementation is the epitome of respect in our organization. When implementation is poor, people are taken by surprise. But by making practice integral to our plan-toimplement phase, we have created a unifying, aligning experience that builds trust in the organization, and trust speeds innovation and execution. Implement.

Learning from Mistakes

The critical-thinking process—which I now teach to a different group of managers each month in an hour-long course at our corporate university—is not just for people involved in new product development. (For more on Steelcase’s critical-thinking course, see the sidebar “The Rules.”) It helps managers, in any kind of project in which they must work with others, reach decisions and come to an informed agreement. The course does not render us mistake proof; rather, it enables us to learn as we go and avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

At Steelcase, people are beginning to understand the difference between getting things done and getting things done right. By bringing thinking and doing into proper balance, we feel much better prepared to meet the future.