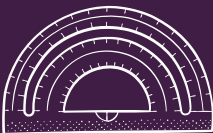Turning organizational energy into results that matter

FOCAL POINT |
EXPERIMENT…EARLY AND OFTEN

NAGGING HYPOTHESES CAN ADD UP TO LOTS OF LEARNING AND NEW WINS

Experimentation holds the power to make a bit of a game with work's day-to-day, apply tools in new ways, and learn something. It's a well-supported way to isolate variables. It's a mentality bent on increasing your chances of success by crossing off some of your more inspired ideas along the way. Experimentation can take multiple forms, operate on a continuum ranging from mild flashes of personal interest to grander aspirations of discovering entirely new business models and markets. With a little bit of planning and letting the data do the talking, anyone can get started. Your results may surprise you and may even facilitate a fortuitous stumble upon better ways of managing your business, pleasing your customers, and energizing your employees.

Experimentation is both journey and destination. The on-going journey takes place in the incessant ask of, "Could it be otherwise?" "What would happen if…?" Questions, perhaps, already being posed by your innovative, inquisitive employees. It's a destination in the sense that testing your hypothesis leads to a result—encouraging you to keep said hypothesis, reformulate it, or leave it be.
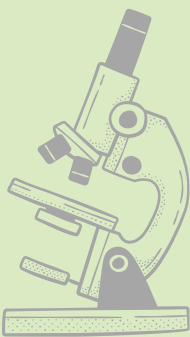
Think about what's entailed when conducting an experiment. Stepping outside the status quo. Challenging, albeit tentatively, long-held convictions. Structuring a methodology and an experimental design around some aspect of life that interests you. Isolating variables leading to results holding promise for your organization or your personal interests. Experimentation channels initiative and intellectual curiosity, even if it ends in tears, and it takes conjecture's influence away by letting the results define value and next steps.

As operational consultants working to build new capabilities with clients, experimentation is the tool always at-the-ready. It's instrumental to making sure we design, develop, and implement practical solutions paying off with quantified results. Some witticisms (or consultant speak, if you prefer) used to characterize the consultant's penchant for experimentation include…"rapid prototyping", "proving a concept", "back-of-the-napkin modeling", "role playing", "testing a hunch", or "giving it a dry run". Experimentation boils down to learning something novel about your world, your people, your business, and perhaps, even yourself.

MINIMALIST SCIENTIFIC METHOD

1. Ask a question.

2. Begin background research.

3. Formulate a hypothesis.

4. Test hypothesis by conducting an experiment. Troubleshoot experiment's procedure if not working—retest.

5. Analyze data and come to a conclusion. Answer "Do my results align with my hypothesis?"

6. If results don't align, reformulate hypothesis and experiment again.

7. Communicate results both + and - to other interested parties (colleagues, relatives, friends, dogs, and cats).

A FEW PAY-OFFS

Near-Term:
· Employees energized by the novel
· Data-driven confirmation of suspicions
· Fostering open-mindedness
· Sense of play at work
· Philosophical acceptance of failure as a normal course on the pathway to success

Long-Term:
· Business innovation
· New products and services
· Untapped markets
· Galvanized team creativity
· Organizational learning
· Employee engagement and retention
· Happier customers
· Wisdom

FOCAL POINT |
EXPERIMENT...EARLY AND OFTEN

A few suggested experiments:

MARKETING TESTS

Marketing collateral, social media posts, and internal communication content provide a compelling forum to tweak your messaging and let your audiences decide what resonates with them the most. This experiment could be as simple as changing the headline of an outbound marketing email for a sample set or as elaborate as providing alternate landing pages or application interfaces for some users (A/B Testing). Once you have your hypothesis in mind and isolate the variables, decide what you will take as evidence for success. What level of statistical significance is needed to continue testing with a larger population? What needs to be observed before spending more time & resources by moving forward? Your hypothesis may have customer impact implications or ethical questions to consider when designing your test, too. Nonetheless, this exercise can provide interesting results Sometimes, being proven wrong is even enjoyable. It's the joy of learning taking hold.
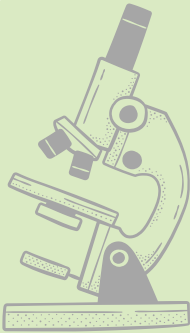
Potential Benefits | Data-driven decisions with less guesswork and conjecture

NEW TOOLS

Perhaps, getting the benefit of a software–as–a–service (SaaS) trial period helps answer which new applications suit your organization's needs best. In an effort to get you enamored with a particular software application's features and encouraging you to buy, most cloud-based application purveyors have a live demonstration or, better yet, a free trial period allowing a few select members to kick the tires before the investment and large-scale roll-out across users. Use this 21st century test drive to your own advantage. Gather a team to understand user requirements, outline risks and benefits for the organization, and test the software you have in mind. Maybe, the test team finds a tool they don't want to live without or maybe, they realize the current set-up works just fine.

Potential Benefits | Get a feel for new tech tools without ripping out any plumbing - realize the software is intriguing, elegant, but not necessary

NEW PRODUCTS & SERVICES

If you don't already have an innovation or new product development function set up, assemble a small, cross-functional, enthusiastic team together to brainstorm new products and services. Get your customers' feedback involved with assembling a list of viable, new offerings they would be interested in seeing come to life. Score these ideas, develop the most promising options, and then get your customers involved with testing the new products or services and moving new products closer to market. By witnessing a promising idea take shape as a new offering, your team sees their ideas come to life and lives the tribulations of getting a product or service to market with an expected return on the investment. Good learning experience had by all.

Potential Benefits | Increased revenue through customer insights and engaged, creative employees

NEW CUSTOMER MARKETS

Find a way to explore areas of interest and new markets for your company without full commitment of capital expenditures, time, and resources. Depending on your business, this may entail a data analytics team modeling various go-to-market scenarios. Or, your dip into a new pool may involve a temporary test market such as a pop-up shop, partnering with a 3rd party home delivery service, or creating a market-specific website with inbound lead generation avenues. Perhaps, your team is in a position to enter new markets through a joint venture or a partnership. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Rather, roll one of those precious eggs down an experimental pathway that suits your hypothesis and your risk tolerance.

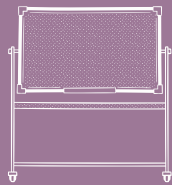**Potential Benefits | Increased revenue with lower risks**

FOCAL POINT |
EXPERIMENT...EARLY AND OFTEN

ORG STRUCTURE

Perhaps, you hold the power and the risk tolerance to move a promising employee or two into another position they've expressed interest in pursuing, but don't really have the background screaming "excellent fit". Why not structure a way to find out and learn-by-doing? For example, Operations folks, Accountants, or even Project Managers may have an interest in Sales but not the prior background to encourage them to apply. Rather than typecasting promising employees solely on current position, structure a way to test their aptitude and interests. Pair up the Project Manager with a current Account Executive, allow them to see the challenges first hand in a team selling scenario. Or even structure a temporary test sales position for the person, provide the necessary training, agree on a runway timeline, decide on evidence of a mutually-beneficial fit, and give them a chance. Support your team while experimenting with better ways of supporting the business. Allow people to prove themselves and learn about their own aptitudes.
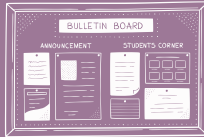
Potential Benefits | **Higher morale and chance to find a new star in a Dark Horse's attire**

COMMUNICATION STYLES

This experiment takes some self-awareness and emotional intelligence on your part (we have confidence in you). Perhaps, your natural default personality type is clanging up against a colleague or manager. You need to find a way to get more alignment. Maybe, you are an "Expressive" personality type that is energized by more personable conversations touching upon a multitude of topics within one conversation. Alas, your manager is a more introverted "Analytical" type that thrives on pithy, cohesive, and fact-based discussions. Research personality type studies and try to adjust your own natural style to mesh with your audience better. Try restraining your "Expressive" instincts to speak, allow some silence, and get to the point with facts and figures. (Your "Analytical" manager also should try being more gregarious, too; however, you cannot control this experiment outside of your own behavior). Applying an alternate communication style may allow you both to meet in the middle. Most people have more chameleon in them than they realize.

Potential Benefits | **Increased communication and collaboration**

SCHEDULES AND LOCALES

Sure, your schedule has to line up with customers, employees, and partners - but does it really have to start at the same time every day? Perhaps, it's time to test some work schedule options to see when you get your best work done. Or, tweak your employee schedules to find productivity gains, allow the team to spend more time with family, or even just inject a bit of novelty into the work week. If your firm has always adhered to in-person collaborations, the experiment may involve putting together a prototype model of working remotely. Or, perhaps, the test is to conduct one meeting, sales presentation, or training session remotely and see if it can work for your team. You may be surprised what the team can get accomplished when the schedule is more fluid, more self-directing, or the locations are more diverse. If it doesn't provide better results, you can always go back to the normal work schedules and locations.

Potential Benefits | **Increased productivity, work-life balance, and team motivation**

TEST THE "K" IN KPI

Ever get the sinking feeling nobody is looking at the cacophony of current reports? Maybe, it's time to test how much your team relies on certain metrics and actually applies the reports to manage the business. If you suspect your team has too many reports and are overwhelmed with key performance indicators, then take a carefully selected report and/or KPIs away temporarily. See if anybody misses them. If your hypothesis is the team would be better supported with additional KPIs or a novel report, then get a few experts together to clean the data, establish baselines, develop the flow, and provide data visualization needed to test your theory. This can start out very modestly, such as tracking in Excel or a low-tech charting exercise on a whiteboard. If the additions prove to be valuable, you can incorporate them into your data hierarchy, ongoing dashboard reporting and automation flow later.

Potential Benefits | **More time back, better team performance reviews, and new insights**