# Key Principles for Creating Real Organizational Breakthroughs

What comes to mind when someone uses the word breakthrough? Has the word breakthrough become a cliché? Do you think breakthroughs, when they occur, are based on happenstance?

If the word breakthrough carries this kind of baggage for you, please take a moment to suspend your skepticism and learn how to create breakthroughs. According to our research and experience, breakthroughs are not a matter of luck. Breakthroughs can be deliberately created. Companies can create a culture where self-limiting beliefs can be overcome and breakthroughs can become a reality.

Let's start with distinguishing a real breakthrough. To qualify as a real breakthrough it must have an extraordinary and unprecedented result. A real breakthrough does not have an historic precedent. Since it does not have an historic precedent, it cannot be planned based on past methods or practices. A strategic breakthrough looks like this:
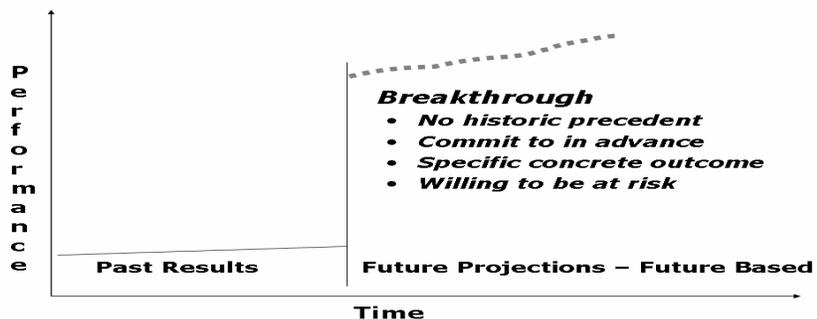
When you look at breakthroughs this way, planning based on the past is always an extrapolation giving a past based, incremental future. This is business as usual planning and it produces ordinary, business as usual results. Executing what worked in the past will never produce unprecedented, extraordinary results.

So, when everything you know given your past experience says, "that can't be done," how do you create a breakthrough? How do you let go of the past long enough to create the possibility of bringing a significant, unprecedented result into existence? Our history is ripe with stories of individuals overcoming self limitations or the limitations imposed by others to achieve extraordinary results. As Henry Ford said, "If you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you're right." Fortunately, breakthroughs are not magic; there are ten key principles underlying the process of creating real breakthroughs a team can learn.

The first principle is probably completely contrary to the way you learned to plan a project and make project commitments. While you start with the project goals, you plan based on your past experience to layout the project timeline. You plan from the past to create the future. In other words, you create a past-based future. If you don't like the results you can

"tune" the plan, but that typically produces only incremental improvements. Sound familiar? So, if someone needs to create a new product that typically takes 18 months, a past based plan process with "tuning" might shave off 5% to 10% or one to two months. The commitment based on this plan then is 16 to 17 months. That would not be considered a breakthrough. This process can be seen as plan first and then you create commitment based on your established plan.

The first principle of creating a breakthrough is you have to commit to the breakthrough in advance of planning it. You have to commit to the breakthrough knowing you do not know how to achieve this breakthrough. So, what about doing the project in 9 months? If you could do that, that would be considered a breakthrough. Anyone would agree that would be an unprecedented result. Well, that's great but how do you create the breakthrough?   This is the hardest part of the process. The possibility has to come into existence by an act of declaration. You have to commit first and then plan from the future back to create or invent a structure to fulfill the commitment.

Unlike the business as usual process of plan first and then commit, this is the breakthrough process of commit first and then plan. Risky, you say; you're right. Unrealistic you say; we don't think so. Many people and companies have been able to create a breakthrough-oriented culture. IBM documented extraordinary results by educating their teams in the specific breakthrough technology inferred in this brief overview.

Okay, what is the difference between committing first and then planning, versus making a plan and then committing? Everything! By committing first you create a major breakdown. What is a breakdown? It is a gap between where you want to go and where you are. While you want to bring forth the declared breakthrough, you do not know how to do it from where you are now. You cannot look to your past to find the way. You have to create and invent new possibilities, new approaches, new methods, and keep inventing until you resolve the breakdown. You see breakthroughs are created by deliberately creating the breakdown by committing to an unrealistic, but deemed possible, goal. Breakdowns only occur in the context of a commitment. A breakdown is a demand for action. The bigger the commitment, the bigger the breakdown and the bigger the demand for creativity and innovation.

In order to create a breakthrough, you deliberately create a breakdown by committing to a result you do not know how to achieve. You create a "gap" between your commitment and your current situation. The gap can be looked at as an "energetic gap" pulling the best creativity and innovation from the team to close the gap with new, previously unthought-of approaches. In order to create this pull, you have to make the commitment first, create the breakdown and then plan from the commitment back. The team has to stay in the conversation of possibility until they invent a structure for fulfillment they believe will produce the breakthrough.

Let's look at the approach more simply:

- You have to declare the possibility of a breakthrough result.

- You have to authentically commit to the possibility before planning it.

- You have to act consistent with that commitment.

- Out of your commitment you have to effectively resolve each breakdown you encounter.

- The first breakdown you have to resolve is how to accomplish the breakthrough.

- In the face of ongoing breakdowns, the team has to recommit to the result and invent possibilities to resolve the breakdowns. Breakthroughs are achieved by well-met breakdowns.

The first principle is the hardest to embody. The other nine principles are easier to grasp.

2. The organization needs to be educated in the key breakthrough distinctions with a special focus on the distinctions: commitment, responsibility, accountability and language. The organizational culture has to shift in order to see risk and commitment in a new light.

3. Team commitments have to be authentic commitments made freely without coercion. Commitments have to be unequivocal and unconditional. The act of choosing gives the commitment power to pull for creative action in the face of breakdowns.

4. The commitment has to be to a specific measurable result. The result has to be clear and unambiguous and capable of focusing everyone's commitment to the result.

5. While each member of the team has individual accountabilities, each is also fully responsible for producing the breakthrough. Building 100% responsibility into the mindset of the team creates tremendous power. Everyone is standing for each other's success and the achievement of the breakthrough.

6. The breakthrough project has to be highly valuable to the organization. There is no such thing as a pilot breakthrough project undertaken for practice.

7. The team has to be acknowledged for their courage in taking the risks required to commit to unprecedented breakthrough results. The team has to know they are fully supported by the organization.

8. The integrity and accountability of the team has to be supported by excellent coaching. The role of the coach is to give the team new openings for action to close the gap between the team's current reality and the breakthrough result.

9. The team should be rewarded commensurate with their results. While achievement is its own incentive, a concrete reward becomes the tangible expression of "thank you, a job well done."

10. And finally, the accomplishment of the team has to be acknowledged and celebrated. The organization has to acknowledge the extraordinary achievement of the team, and they have to learn from their accomplishments.

This approach works for all types of projects. Projects focused on strategic or operational breakthroughs are just as apropos as projects focused on product developments. While the complexity may vary, the principles remain the same. The quicker the technology for generating breakthroughs is installed, the quicker breakthroughs will be seen as possible, and once breakthroughs are seen as possible, the quicker breakthroughs will occur.