

TERRAIN SCAN

Detect Signals Early to Navigate What's Coming Next

PURPOSE

To help leaders and teams **identify emerging changes early**, before they become disruptions—so they can think, decide, and act ahead of the curve rather than reacting too late. Most organizations are designed to measure what has already happened. The Terrain Scan shifts focus outward—toward what is **changing**, not just what has changed.

WHEN TO USE THIS

Use the Terrain Scan when:

- You are operating in **uncertain or rapidly changing environments**
- Your team is overly focused on **internal performance vs. external shifts**
- You want to improve **strategic awareness and foresight**
- You are planning for the **next 6–18 months**
- You are seeing signals but aren't sure how to interpret them

WHAT THIS SOLVES

Without a Terrain Scan, leaders tend to:

- React **after** change becomes obvious
- Over-rely on **historical data and KPIs**
- Miss weak signals that later become major disruptions
- Confuse **activity with awareness**

The Terrain Scan builds a repeatable discipline to:

- Detect signals early
- Identify patterns
- Assign meaning
- Take small, informed action

CORE CONCEPT

You can't control the terrain—but you can decide how early you see it. The Terrain Scan shifts leadership from:

- Reactive → Proactive
- Certain → Curious
- Fixed plans → Adaptive thinking



Most leaders stop at SEE. High-performing teams move through all four.

COMMON PITFALLS

- Treating this like a **status update meeting**
- Over-analyzing and waiting for certainty
- Dismissing signals because they feel “too early”
- Focusing only on your own industry
- Not translating insight into action

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

You know the Terrain Scan is working when:

- Your team starts saying: “*We saw this coming*”
- Conversations shift from **reactive to anticipatory**
- Decisions are made with **greater awareness of external factors**
- You are adjusting **before competitors do**

CLOSING THOUGHT

Most leaders wait until change is obvious. By then, it's already shaping outcomes. The advantage goes to the leaders who see what others miss—while there's still time to act.

RELATED POWERPLAYS™

Known Knowns PowerPlay™ (#24) — Challenge assumptions and blind spots

Three Outcomes PowerPlay™ — Prepare for multiple futures

White Space PowerPlay™ — Create time to think beyond execution

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Cadence Options

Weekly (15 minutes): Leadership team check-in

Monthly (30-60 minutes): Deeper pattern recognition + implications

Quarterly (1-2 hours): Integrated into strategic planning

HOW IT WORKS (STEP-BY-STEP)

STEP 1: CREATE SPACE TO LOOK UP (10-15 MINUTES)

Schedule a recurring Terrain Scan (weekly or biweekly). **Important:** This is not a report-out. It is a thinking discussion. If you don't create space for this, it will not happen. Execution will always take over. Ask:

- What's changing outside our organization that could impact us?
- What are we noticing in customers, competitors, or adjacent industries?
- What feels different—even if we can't fully explain it yet?

Facilitator Tip: Keep it conversational. No slides. No over-prep.

Facilitator Script (Optional): "Let's take 15 minutes to scan the terrain. This is not about what we know for certain—it's about what we're noticing. What's changing around us that could impact our business?"

STEP 2: CAPTURE SIGNALS (RAW INPUT)

Encourage team members to bring **signals**, not conclusions. Signals can include:

- Articles or headlines
- Customer comments or behavior shifts
- Competitor moves
- Technology developments
- Regulatory discussions
- Internal anomalies that don't "fit"

Rule: A signal does not need to be proven—it just needs to be observed.

STEP 3: LOOK FOR PATTERNS (FROM NOISE TO SIGNAL)

Individually, signals are easy to dismiss. Patterns are what matter. Ask:

- Are we seeing this in multiple places?
- Is this increasing in frequency or intensity?
- Are different signals pointing to the same underlying shift?

Watch for: Clusters of similar signals across different sources.

STEP 4: ASSIGN MEANING (INTERPRETATION)

This is where most teams stop and where real value begins. The advantage comes from interpreting signals early. Ask:

- If this continues, what could it mean for us?
- Where could this impact our strategy, operations, or talent?
- What assumptions might this challenge?

Connect to PowerPlay™: Known Knowns—Are we seeing clearly, or reinforcing what we already believe?

STEP 5: EXPLORE SCENARIOS (PREPARE, DON'T PREDICT)

You start having conversations before there's consensus. Use the **Three Outcomes PowerPlay™**:

- **Optimistic:** What if this creates opportunity?
- **Realistic:** What is most likely?
- **Pessimistic:** What if this disrupts us?

This prevents binary thinking and builds flexibility.

STEP 6: TAKE SMALL, EARLY ACTION

You do not need to overhaul your strategy. You do need to respond.

Examples:

- Run a small experiment
- Adjust a priority
- Assign someone to track a signal
- Start a conversation you weren't having before

Key Principle: Early, small moves create strategic advantage.

Quick Application: The 1-Minute Terrain Scan

If you only do one thing, start here. Ask your team:

- What's changing around us?
- What patterns are we seeing?
- What could it mean?
- What should we do now?