



FREE STRATEGY GUIDE

# What do great analytics teams do differently?

How we build high-impact analytics strategies

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## INTRODUCTION

# Most analytics teams are doing the wrong work.

Not because they lack talent. Not because they chose the wrong tools. But because at some point the focus shifted away from the questions that matter to the business and toward the things that are easy to measure and easy to build.

The result is familiar to anyone who has led an analytics function: dashboards that no one acts on, roadmaps that don't survive contact with leadership, and a team that should be driving strategy but ends up fielding ad hoc requests and maintaining spreadsheets.

This guide is about why that happens and what it looks like when it doesn't. It is not a step-by-step instruction manual. It is a window into the way the best analytics teams think — and the decisions they make before they build anything.

I spent years at McKinsey's analytics arm, QuantumBlack, and in AI-focused private equity, working with analytics teams across North America, Europe and APAC. The pattern I saw in the teams that succeeded was remarkably consistent. So was the pattern in the ones that didn't.

What follows is that pattern.

## THE CORE PROBLEM

## The analytics industry is set up to fail you.

Vendors get rich selling tools that are easy to build and easy to pitch. They don't need you to succeed. They need you to buy and renew. The result is a fragmented ecosystem where analytics teams are forced to stitch together a Frankenstein stack and call it infrastructure.

But the tool problem is a symptom. The deeper problem is strategic.

*Most analytics roadmaps are built around what is easy to measure, not what actually moves the business.*

When a roadmap is built that way, everything downstream is misaligned. You hire for the wrong skills. You build the wrong models. You present to leadership and they nod politely and don't change anything, because what you've built doesn't connect to the decisions they're actually trying to make.

The teams that break out of this pattern share one trait: they do the strategic work before the analytical work. They understand the business first. Everything else follows from that.

## THE EIGHT STEPS

## What separates analytics that transforms a business from analytics that gets tolerated.

There are eight steps that define the outcome of an analytics function. Most teams skip or rush at least four of them. Each one skipped compounds the misalignment downstream.

Here is what each step is really about and what it looks like when teams get it wrong.

**STEP 1**

## Understand the business before you touch the data.

The most common mistake in analytics strategy is starting with the data you have rather than the business you're trying to serve. Teams inventory their datasets, look for patterns, and build things. Then they wonder why leadership doesn't act on what they deliver.

*Most analytics teams have never formally mapped their business model. They assume they know it. They're usually half right.*

The teams that earn strategic credibility start somewhere different. They build a clear, shared picture of how the business actually makes money. What it sells, to whom, how it acquires customers, where it loses them, and where the real economic levers are. When this foundation is missing, every analytics decision is made on assumptions. Some of those assumptions are wrong.

**STEP 2**

## Map the decisions that drive performance, not the data that's available.

Analytics exists to improve decisions. That sounds obvious but most analytics teams have never explicitly listed the decisions their business makes. The decisions that, if made better, would actually move performance. Instead, they start with data. They build reports around what they can measure. The decisions those reports were meant to support become an afterthought.

**The tell**

*If your team can't name the five decisions your analytics function most directly supports, your roadmap is built on the wrong foundation.*

The analytics teams that leadership trusts have done this mapping explicitly. They know which decisions happen daily, which happen quarterly, and which are so high-stakes that being wrong once costs millions. Their roadmap is sequenced around those decisions.

**STEP 3**

## Get strategic context, or build a roadmap for last year's priorities.

Business strategy changes. The analytics roadmap that was perfectly aligned twelve months ago may be pointing at problems the business has already moved past or problems that have become dramatically more urgent. Most analytics leaders learn about strategic shifts second-hand, late, and incompletely.

*The analytics teams that stay relevant treat strategic alignment as a recurring process, not a one-time input.*

They have regular access to the people setting direction. They understand not just what the business is doing now, but where it is trying to go and what it most needs to learn to get there. Their roadmap reflects that. And when the strategy shifts, they shift with it.

**STEP 4****Generate specific opportunities, not a list of things to build.**

Most analytics roadmaps are a list of deliverables: dashboard, model, report, pipeline. They describe outputs. They don't describe what those outputs are supposed to change. A deliverable-focused roadmap gets judged on whether the thing gets built. An opportunity-focused roadmap gets judged on whether the business performed better because of it.

**What great looks like**

*"We will build a churn model" becomes "We will identify customers likely to churn in 90 days so the retention team can intervene – reducing annual churn by an estimated 8%."*

When opportunities are framed around outcomes, two things happen. First, leadership understands what they're funding. Second, the analytics team has a clear definition of success that doesn't depend on anyone's subjective assessment of quality.

**STEP 5****Score for business value before you commit capacity.**

Analytics teams have more potential work than capacity to deliver it. This is permanent, not temporary. Default prioritisation looks like: the loudest stakeholder wins, the most recent request gets attention, and the projects most visible to leadership move fastest regardless of actual impact.

*Prioritisation without strategic context is just organised guesswork.*

The teams that consistently deliver impact have a shared, transparent method for scoring opportunities against business value. Not a complex scoring system but a clear one. One that connects directly to the strategic priorities identified earlier in the process.

**STEP 6****Know what data you actually have before you promise what you can build.**

There is a particular kind of analytics failure that happens after the roadmap is signed off. The opportunity looked compelling. Leadership was excited. Work began. And then someone discovered that the data needed either doesn't exist, is unusable, or belongs to a system that will take eight months to integrate. This is not a data engineering problem. It's a strategy problem.

A data map that paints a clear picture of what exists, where it lives, and how it connects to the opportunities on the roadmap is the thing that prevents this. It's not glamorous work. But teams that skip it pay for it.

**STEP 7****Assess what you can actually build, not what you'd like to build.**

Strategic value and feasibility are two different questions. A high-value opportunity built on data you don't have, with capabilities your team doesn't possess, is not a high-value opportunity. It's an ambition. Most analytics roadmaps are too optimistic about feasibility because the assessment happens informally and the optimism of the opportunity makes challenges easy to discount.

**The uncomfortable question**

*Of the work on your roadmap right now, how much could your team actually deliver in the next six months given your current data, tooling, and skills?*

The teams that build credibility with leadership consistently deliver what they commit to. That requires a sober assessment of what is genuinely buildable and the discipline to sequence work so that early wins build the capability and trust needed for more ambitious projects later.

**STEP 8**

## Build a roadmap that leadership can fund and your team can deliver.

Most roadmaps are lists. They have no sequencing logic. They don't show leadership which investments unlock which capabilities. They don't give the team a clear picture of what success looks like at each stage.

*A roadmap is not a list of things to build. It is an argument for how analytics will change the business.*

The roadmaps that get funded and executed share one property: every item on them has a clear answer to why it's there, why now, and what it enables next. Nothing is on the list because someone thought it would be interesting. Everything connects to the strategic priorities established at the start of the process.

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU**

## The process is knowable. Executing it alone is hard.

The eight steps in this guide are not secrets. Most experienced analytics leaders have encountered them in some form. The challenge isn't knowing they exist.

The challenge is doing them well, in the right order, with the right stakeholders in the room, in an organisation that has its own politics, priorities, and constraints. And doing it without the benefit of having seen what good looks like across dozens of organisations in different industries.

Most teams attempt a version of this process informally. The cost of getting it wrong is a roadmap that doesn't reflect the business and months of team capacity spent building things that don't get used.

We offer this as a facilitated engagement. Four to six working sessions where we guide your team through the process, ask the questions that surface the real constraints, and produce the artefacts: the opportunity matrix, the data map, the phased roadmap. The goal is a strategy your leadership will fund and your team can deliver.

If you want to talk about whether that's right for your team, the best place to start is a discovery call.

### Apply for a free discovery call

In 30 minutes we'll help you identify where your analytics strategy has the biggest gaps and whether a TrueState 360 engagement is the right next step.

No sales pitch. No commitment.

[truestate.io/discovery](https://truestate.io/discovery)