SELF-SCORED DIAGNOSTIC · 12 QUESTIONS · 10 MINUTES

THE MANUFACTURING CEILING DIAGNOSTIC

Which of the three ceilings is capping your business, and what it is costing you a month.

> Manufacturing firms stall at roughly £3m, £10m and £25m for structural reasons, not effort. A ceiling is not a bad quarter. A bad quarter is weather; a ceiling is architecture. The test: if the business worked flat out for twelve months and everything went right, would the current structure produce your committed number? If the honest answer is no, you have a design gap, and no amount of pushing harder on the existing design will close it.

SECTION ONE

HOW TO USE IT

SET ASIDE TEN MINUTES

Twelve statements, scored 1 to 5. Answer on how the business runs on an ordinary Tuesday, not on how it runs in a good week.

PRINT ONE COPY PER DIRECTOR

Managing director, operations, finance, sales. Everyone completes it alone, before anybody compares notes.

SCORE WHAT IS TRUE, NOT WHAT IS PLANNED

If a fix is half built or not yet tested, score the business as it stands today. Intentions inflate the result and hide the constraint.

THEN COMPARE IN ONE SITTING

Put the four sets of block totals side by side. Where you agree is your constraint. Where you disagree is your next conversation.

WHY EACH DIRECTOR COMPLETES IT SEPARATELY

Each function sees a different face of the same wall. Sales sees enquiries that go cold, operations sees a plan that assumes capacity nobody has, finance sees revenue rising while margin sits still. Filled in together, the loudest voice in the room sets the score and you diagnose the wrong ceiling. Filled in separately, the spread between your answers is itself the finding: a four-point gap on one statement usually means the four of you are running on four different versions of what is true.

SECTION TWO

THE TWELVE QUESTIONS

Score each statement 1 to 5. 1 = not true of us. 3 = true some of the time. 5 = exactly true of us today. Add each block of four and write the total in the shaded row.

BLOCK A · STRUCTURE		DOES THE NUMBER FIT THROUGH THE BUSINESS?				
1	Every plan for reaching our committed number relies on the same handful of people doing meaningfully more than they already do.	1	2	3	4	5
2	Nobody below board level is accountable for a number they can genuinely influence.	1	2	3	4	5
3	Sales, operations and finance each work from a different version of what is true.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Strategy gets discussed in the gaps between operational problems and rarely gets resolved.	1	2	3	4	5
	BLOCK A TOTAL / 20					

BLOCK B · MARGIN		DOES PROFIT FOLLOW REVENUE?				
5	Revenue has grown over the last two years and net profit has barely moved with it.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I could not say, with confidence and from data, which of our jobs make money and which do not.	1	2	3	4	5
7	Every new contract arrives with extra working capital, expediting and chasing attached.	1	2	3	4	5
8	Cash feels tighter now than it did when we were half this size, and late payment regularly dictates our week.	1	2	3	4	5
	BLOCK B TOTAL / 20					

BLOCK C · DEPENDENCY		HOW MANY HEADS DOES IT ALL RUN THROUGH?				
9	Quotes, pricing calls or production decisions wait for one person, and that person is usually me.	1	2	3	4	5
10	Critical knowledge across sales, production and finance sits with three or four heads, and none of it is written down.	1	2	3	4	5
11	There is no second person who has run each critical function unsupervised while the usual one was away.	1	2	3	4	5
12	My week goes on refereeing between departments and answering escalations rather than running the business.	1	2	3	4	5
	BLOCK C TOTAL / 20					

SECTION THREE

SCORING AND INTERPRETATION

BLOCK A · STRUCTURE	BLOCK B · MARGIN	BLOCK C · DEPENDENCY
_____ / 20	_____ / 20	_____ / 20

Your highest block is your binding ceiling. Most firms carry traces of all three. Only one is binding right now, and that is the one worth your attention. If two blocks tie, work on the lower ceiling first: Dependency before Margin, Margin before Structure. Ceilings stack, and the earlier one will undo your work on the later one.

BLOCK SCORE	READING	WHAT IT MEANS
4 – 9	CLEAR	This is not what is holding you back. Do not spend your attention here, however irritating it is.
10 – 14	LOADING	The structure is bending but still carrying. Growth of another 20 to 30 per cent turns this into your binding ceiling. Fix it while you have slack.
15 – 20	BINDING	You are sitting under this ceiling now. Effort will not move it, because it is a design limit and not an effort limit.

WHAT IT IS COSTING YOU A MONTH

Work out the line for your binding block only. Rough is fine. The point is an order of magnitude, not a forecast.

IF BLOCK C IS HIGHEST · DEPENDENCY

Quotes or decisions held more than 48 hours last month _____ × average order value £ _____ × your win rate _____ % = £_____ of order intake delayed or lost each month.

IF BLOCK B IS HIGHEST · MARGIN

Revenue growth over the last 12 months £_____ × the net margin points you expected from it but did not earn _____ % ÷ 12 = £_____ of profit a month that the operating model cannot produce.

IF BLOCK A IS HIGHEST · STRUCTURE

Committed number £_____ minus current run rate £_____ ÷ 12 × gross margin _____ % = £_____ a month of capacity nobody is building.

SECTION FOUR

THE THREE CEILINGS, AND THE FIRST MOVE FOR EACH

The revenue figures are landmarks, not thresholds. A contract electronics assembler and a bespoke steel fabricator hit their walls at genuinely different numbers. The shape of the wall is what stays consistent.

CEILING ONE · DEPENDENCY

around £3m

THE BUSINESS STILL RUNS ON YOU

You quote the awkward jobs, take the difficult calls, and know which order genuinely cannot slip. None of it is written down because it has never needed to be. It works brilliantly until the business needs more decisions per day than one person can make.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Decision latency. Quotes sit for four days. People escalate what they could decide, because guessing wrong is worse than waiting. The business gets slower as it gets busier.

FIRST MOVE Take the two or three decision types that eat the most of your week and write down how you actually make them: pricing rules including when to walk away, who authorises an expedite, what good looks like on a quote before it goes out. One page, not a process map. Then hand it over with the authority to get it wrong occasionally, and resist reviewing every output. Alongside it, get a second person into each critical function who has done the job unsupervised. If you have not tested it, you do not have it.

CEILING TWO · MARGIN

around £10m

REVENUE MOVES AND MARGIN DOES NOT

Growth consumes cash before it produces any. Materials bought, labour paid, work in progress on the floor, then an invoice somebody else pays when they feel like it. Grow fast enough and that demand outruns the profit funding it. Full order book, healthy looking P&L, no cash.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

You cannot say which jobs make money, because the data lives in four places: quoting in a spreadsheet, hours on a whiteboard, materials in the accounts, and the truth in a production manager's memory. You suspect two customers are being subsidised, and have done for two years.

FIRST MOVE Start smaller than you think. Take your top twenty jobs and put actual hours against quoted hours, job by job, manually for a quarter if you have to. The pattern that emerges is almost always uncomfortable and immediately actionable. Then run a rolling 13-week cash forecast, updated weekly. Then tighten the terms you have been too polite to enforce: deposits or stage payments on long lead work, credit limits that actually stop an order, and a named person with protected time for chasing money. Expect to say no to work that eats disproportionate working capital for average margin.

CEILING THREE · STRUCTURE

around £25m

YOU NEED LEADERS, NOT JUST MANAGERS

The systems are in, the managers manage, cash is more robust, and the business still feels heavier than it should. You have outgrown coordination: there is too much of it for one person to hold in their head by being in the room.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Functional heads escalate rather than decide. Departments optimise for themselves. Strategy is discussed in the gaps and never resolved. Every attempt to step back ends with you being pulled straight back in.

FIRST MOVE Give each function a small set of measures it can actually move, with real authority attached, and a management rhythm that is genuinely weekly and monthly rather than when there is a chance. Information comes from one source everybody trusts. If your route to the number needs capital equipment or a new site, start the funding conversation far earlier than feels necessary.

SECTION FIVE

WHAT TO DO IN THE NEXT 30 DAYS

01 **WEEK ONE: COMPARE THE FOUR SCORESHEETS.** One hour, all directors, block totals side by side. Agree in writing which single block is binding. Do not debate solutions in this meeting.

02 **WEEK ONE: NAME WHAT THE NUMBER REQUIRES.** Take the committed figure and work backwards. What capacity, what people, what working capital, what systems. Written down properly. Half the time this alone shows the number is not achievable in the timeframe, which is worth knowing now rather than in November.

03 **WEEK TWO: MAKE THE FIRST MOVE ON THAT CEILING ONLY.** Section four gives you the move. There is always something irritating and visible that is not the ceiling. Resist it.

04 **WEEK TWO: GIVE IT TO SOMEONE WHOSE JOB IT IS.** Structural work always loses to today's urgent problem unless somebody owns it with time protected. Name the person and the hours a week they genuinely have.

05 **DAY 30: REVIEW THE COST LINE.** Re-run the monthly cost calculation from section three. If it has not moved, the work did not have protected time, and that is the finding.

WRITE IT HERE BEFORE YOU PUT THIS DOWN

Our binding ceiling is _____

It is costing us, a month _____

The person who owns fixing it is _____

Hours a week they genuinely have _____

If that last line is blank, or the name is yours and the hours are notional, you have just found your real problem.

NEXT STEP

KNOWING WHICH CEILING YOU ARE UNDER IS USEFUL. HAVING A PLAN FOR IT IS MORE USEFUL.

The Strategy SPRINT is a two-day working session on your growth number, your structure and the constraint genuinely holding you back. You leave with a plan for it rather than a longer to-do list.

THE STRATEGY SPRINT

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