

Ten stories from my work

Ten situations from my client work, anonymized to sector level. The sector stays only because a story without it would help no one. Find the one closest to yours.

1 · FINANCIAL SERVICES

A financial services company in a new moment

Half the executive team replaced, and a growth target on top.

The company had just replaced half of its executive committee. The new CEO had one goal: grow market share. To get there, the structure and the processes had to change, and the team did not yet know each other.

I started with the future. They looked at what the business needs now, what it needs next, and what it needs later. This gave the new committee one shared picture and a reason to agree on the changes.

Then I worked with them on how they decide. Some decisions have a right answer that experts can find. Others have no answer until you try something small and watch what happens. They learned to tell the two apart, and to stop treating every problem as a choice between two options, or a menu of three.

Along the way I helped them see old habits. Risk assessment still followed outdated practice, and they updated it within the limits of a regulated industry. Control at handovers between teams cost a lot of energy and added steps nobody needed.

Decisions became faster and fit the situation better. The unnecessary steps were removed. In two years the company moved into the top group of its market.

2 • ENERGY

An energy company with falling profits

Profits falling, and the cause looks obvious.

Profits at an energy company were dropping. The owner, an advisor and the general manager were in the room. They were sure of the cause: weak market demand and the high cost of supply.

Before changing anything big, I helped them run small tests that cost little and could be undone. One of them showed something nobody had expected. Retail sales lifted profit far more than the problem, as they had defined it, would ever have allowed.

We also found hidden costs inside the company, high enough to cut its ability to adapt. I redesigned how the work flows with them, which removed the bottlenecks and lowered the cost of operating.

The company started a new retail business and two smaller ones beside it. Profit has grown steadily since, and delays in execution caused by internal bottlenecks became much less likely.

3 • STATE AGENCY

A state agency under rising demand

Demand rising fast, people and skills short.

A state agency faced a fast rise in operational demand from the government. It did not have enough people or the right capabilities to meet it. The president and the heads of the departments were in the room.

I started by looking at how people in the agency really connect and work together, and I mapped the biggest risks that the new demand created. Then I designed a set of small changes that fit together, each with a way to get feedback and a way to watch the risks. I advised the president and two or three key colleagues on how to put the changes in place, step by step.

The first sign of success was the end of work done twice or three times. Next came one-week work cycles, started from the field level, to solve the most urgent requests. They worked very well. In the end the agency could handle three or four small changes at once in different parts of the organization.

4 • NGO

An NGO facing a funding squeeze

Funding squeezed, reporting eating the operational work.

An established NGO had less funding, restricted and unrestricted, and less room to operate. Staff had moved into reporting work, which cut operational capacity, and competition kept rising with no clear answer. The whole management team was in the room, including functional heads and office heads.

I moved the focus from fundraising to the changes the whole operating model needed, working with almost all of their stakeholders. I helped them assemble a crisis management team and proposed a step-by-step process that gave them room to breathe, during the crisis and after it. Then I set a pace of one change at a time and drove the changes with them, hands on.

First came a quick release of operational capacity, with less fatigue and even less burnout. Then they explored how to differentiate at different levels. This led to a clear new vision and partnership proposals. They settled on a first small version of their new offer and went back to fundraising.

5 • MEDICAL SERVICES

A medical services group out of permanent firefighting

Owners in conflict, permanent firefighting, staff short.

The owners and managing partners of a group of medical services businesses had goals that conflicted, roles that were unclear, and no clear position in the market. They were short of nurses, doctors and other staff. Several crises at once were handled as daily firefighting.

I assessed the wide range of risks and the types of decisions they had to make to grow in a sustainable way. Over several months of discussion, two maps of their situation were merged into one final map. Once they formally approved the findings, I helped them design an integrated action plan to move the whole situation in the direction they wanted. Then I gave constant feedback and advice on how they moved and what changed along the way.

First, they agreed on their objectives and approved them formally. Conflict dropped and so did the energy burned, in people, in resources and in leadership headaches. They left the firefighter mode completely. Then they spread decision rights to every level of the organization, so they responded faster and with more flexibility. Only after that did they recruit several key people, which finally opened the staffing trap.

6 • PRODUCTION

A family production company looking for new markets

Big foreign clients slipping away, costs rising at home.

A medium-sized production company was losing new big clients abroad and feeling cost pressure at home. The owner and his son, the general manager, ran it together.

I started with a review of the decisions that had led to this point, inside the company and along its value chain. Then I worked backwards from the near future they wanted, which we set after several market analyses, local and international, formal and informal. Together we set the key parameters of a new way of deciding that the father and son would share. The work with the son was the way in, as part of preparing the next generation of the business.

They then tried different ways of stimulating the market, to widen the area where they could succeed. The result was two new product lines, new international agreements and contracts, and repeat orders.

7 • RETAIL

A retail subsidiary after a stalled transformation

A headquarters transformation that changed nothing.

A retail subsidiary of a large corporation had been through a big transformation program run top down by headquarters. Nothing changed, and not one proposal from the subsidiary was considered. Several vertical leaders and the CFO were deeply dissatisfied.

I gathered the proposals they had made, and the new ideas they came up with, and broke each into its parts. Then they and I remixed the parts into micro-projects, built for overall impact. This took a full quarter. Nothing moved faster, even with pressure from headquarters. For the projects they chose, I helped create the conditions to succeed, paced them in an alternative calendar and set approval checkpoints along the way. Once those were running, they moved on to the next batch the same way. I worked under an advisory contract throughout.

Within two years, the transformation that had stalled was done.

An IT company after losing its biggest customer

The biggest customer lost, two new markets stalled.

Two co-owners and three executives of an IT company were under heavy pressure. They had lost their biggest customer, two market entries had stalled, and product development was slower and more expensive than planned.

I advised them to put a few hard constraints in place, with options to keep them stable and options to remove them easily. Then I gathered stories from employees and close partners to see the whole picture, and from those stories they built several escape routes. I advised them on the stepping stones and the scenarios, kept their options open, and gave them room to work together. There was also a conflict between the two owners. It was settled by realigning their interests and moving one of them out of day-to-day execution.

Within one year they won the client back. They closed two markets that proved unavailable or too expensive to enter, and they opened another one, closer to home.

A consultancy area where everything became political

Growth slowed, and everything around it political.

A senior vice president who ran an area of a consultancy, and several business line partners, faced a hard situation. Results depended on a few big accounts, the business lines competed for the same clients, and growth had slowed. Everything around it was political.

I asked only for permission to work through their teams. Behind the scenes I designed each step. In front of them, the work was complex facilitation and advice, and all along I kept scanning the near future for what was coming. First I got to know the teams and their informal networks, and I collected stories about the present situation. Then I did the same with the leaders and showed them how different the two sides of the same story were. Over a long series of workshops, meetings and small events, I nudged the two descriptions closer, using two or three very simple rules: use less energy and fewer resources, and keep every valid option on the table.

After more rounds like this, they agreed on a few key topics and started to move forward with new ideas and strategies.

A business services firm with three founders

Three founders, three separate businesses, no agreement on strategy.

Three founding partners (law, accounting and M&A) and their CEO ran a business services firm. The three services worked as separate businesses, clients did not buy across them, and the founders did not agree on strategy.

I worked mainly as advisor to the CEO and kept the founders informed all along. A large bonus for the heads of the practices, meant to reward cross-selling, had not been touched in two years. I relabeled it and split it into 20 to 30 small portfolio-style investments. Finding the right subject for each one, and making it stable, was the hard part. Over an agreed six-month trial, I moved seven or eight low-risk tests through them, in two rounds.

They found two stepping stones toward cross-selling and put them to use, and the market responded well. On those results a second round of sales began, with minimal cross-functional pricing, and clients accepted some of the offers.

What the first months bring. Each story shows some of the ten things you see in the first months of a mandate, listed at mihaistanescu.ro/en/services. The first conversation is free: thirty minutes, in complete discretion.