IN CONVERSATION

A goal no one touches again is a resolution

David Neuhaus on six years of OKR, twelve retreat days a year and the one mistake you must never make

Sebastian Morgner · 2026

SocialHub is a fully distributed company: around seventy people in twenty countries, all working from home. Social media managers at some thousand companies and public authorities use its editorial software. For six years the company has planned its business in quarters, with objectives and key results.

Disclosure: MLI has accompanied this process for five years.

You have been working with OKR for six years. What is the decisive part — the framework?

No, the framework hardly matters. Whether OKR or something else: what matters is choosing one and sticking with it until it becomes part of people's DNA. After three months not much happens, to be honest. After twelve, eighteen, twenty-four months it was one of our strongest growth levers. Not because the model is so clever, but because we never put it down again. That is the whole trick.

So: discipline.

Discipline and focus. Our Chief Commercial Officer always says: focus and effort are the secret of everything.

Why else do goals fail?

Because you set yourself something, write an email about it, put it in a presentation — and people read it once. After that, nothing happens.

> *A goal no one touches again is not a goal. It is a resolution.*

The difference only comes when people work on it every week and every quarter because they hold themselves responsible for it. At its core, OKR is a filter for the whole organization. You only have a limited number of things you can prioritize. When I have to decide alone as a team lead, this filter answers the question: what does the company actually want from me right now? Then there is the constant accountability — the check-ins, the reviews, the retros. That is where you see whether what you did really had an effect or whether you were just busy.

You did not start with the whole company.

No, we did the first quarter only in the circle of team leads, to understand for ourselves what we were actually doing. The real gain was a side effect we only recognized much later: it brought everyone to the same level of knowledge. What are our goals, what is the strategy, what is on fire where? Sales, marketing, customer service, customer success, product development, finance — bringing all these perspectives together creates an overall picture in itself. Only then can you set clear goals together.

Why in one place? You are a remote company.

Precisely because of that. Our people sit in twenty countries, and still we bring the leadership circle together. Everyone blocks these three days in their calendar in advance. The physical separation comes with a mental one, and that makes it possible to think differently. It is the only time in the quarter that this group sees each other in full in the same room.

What happens during those three days?

The first day creates clarity: Where do we stand? Where do we want to go? What is happening in the market? All the topics on people's minds come to the table — including the ones two people have talked about and ten others have not. That produces a shared picture of which objectives will move us forward most in the coming months. The next morning we question these objectives once more.

Does that actually change the priorities?

Very often. Sometimes it is new insights, sometimes just a sharper picture. Often the first attempt is a quick shot — revenue growth, something like that. And then you realize: it is really about something entirely different.

What is the most important insight after six years?

Never pause. Even when it gets hard and everyone wants a quarter off. You can reduce the scope if you have to — if one objective with three key results is left in the end, that is fine. But you must never step out of the process. Then the system starts to tip over. Consistency makes the difference over time.

Can you steer an organization in the wrong direction with OKR?

One hundred percent. You can use a hammer to hang a picture or to smash a window.

How do you notice that you have taken a wrong turn?

When we are too busy with ourselves. For us there are really only two tasks: creating value for the customer — and convincing as many buyers as possible of that value. All of it on a secure, high-performance platform. Whoever spends too much time on internal optimization becomes less relevant to the market. At some point the customer notices, too.

Is OKR top-down or bottom-up for you?

I have a pretty clear opinion on that. Direction is never a bottom-up process. It always comes from a few, and it matters to many because it gives orientation. But the how can very well come from the base. There are many people with far more experience in how to do something. Only the where and the why are not grassroots democracy. Otherwise you end up in chaos.

Can OKR help with the AI transformation?

Yes, we use it for exactly that. But first you have to ask yourself a hard question: does it make sense to transform internally at all — or do you start on a greenfield site? Whoever can start without legacy burdens has it easier. For us it ran on two tracks: first we used OKR to increase customer value with AI; what would otherwise have taken us years took quarters. The second track is change inside the organization — all processes analyzed, a ranking created, one or two processes solved per quarter in short sprints.

When is a topic ripe for the OKR process?

What is too unclear cannot become an OKR. OKR is the operational implementation of the strategic roadmap — so it has to be one hundred percent clear how a goal contributes to the whole and by which criteria success is recognized. Otherwise it would not be a strategy. “Something that generates more revenue” is too vague; no one can do anything with it. If there is disagreement in the leadership circle, it cannot become an objective for the next cycle. Then for us it is homework for the next quarter.

What would you tell someone who wants to start now?

A framework like this helps decide whether a company grows or stagnates in the coming years. These times bring so much change that you have to be able to operate flexibly without losing direction. AI accelerates this in every area. It makes a lot of sense to be accompanied by an experienced outsider who brings the external view, challenges the leadership team and points out blind spots. Anyone who has no instrument for adjusting strategically and creating focus will struggle. I would not know how to manage without it.

Tool

Quarterly planning at SocialHub

A rhythm that has not been suspended once in six years.

- **Preparation.** The overarching strategic goal and the three-year roadmap come to the table. The leadership circle prepares what is on fire in each area.
- **Day 1 · Opening the perspective.** Taking stock: Where do we stand? Where do we want to go? Topics are collected and prioritized; draft objectives emerge from the top three.
- **Day 2 · Sharpening and deciding.** The drafts are questioned on principle. At the end, one to three objectives with one to five key results each, every one with an owner. In the evening, a video message goes out to the company.

- **Day 3 · Feedback.** Each team watches the video together and asks questions. The feedback goes back to the leadership circle, and final adjustments are made.
- **The twelve weeks that follow.** Weekly exchange per objective, a monthly check, and at the end of the quarter a review and retro — as preparation for the next retreat.

Why this conversation is here

In four sentences, Neuhaus says what we try to convey in entire programs: that the framework does not matter and consistency is everything.

That is uncomfortable for us. An institute that sells methodological expertise does not like to hear that the method hardly matters. But it matches what we see. Most OKR introductions fail not because of the mechanics but because in the third difficult quarter someone suggests skipping it this time. After that, it rarely comes back.

Two more statements deserve attention.

“Direction is never a bottom-up process.” At a time when participation is treated as a value in itself, this is a clear counter-position — and it passes the negation test, because many companies really do try to find direction by consensus. Neuhaus separates cleanly: the where and the why come from a few, the how from those who know how.

“If there is disagreement in the leadership circle, it cannot become an objective.” That is the toughest rule in the conversation. It prevents unresolved conflicts from traveling into the organization disguised as goals, where they are then fought out at the working level. We see this pattern regularly — and it is the reason goal systems wear down teams that have done nothing wrong.

One qualification belongs here: SocialHub has seventy employees. A leadership circle that fits completely into one room and reaches agreement in three days is not an available option in a corporation with six levels. The rhythm can be transferred; the immediacy cannot.

In the magazine

The full conversation in the magazine

This article is the abridged version of “How to put a strategy into action” from **Tiefgang 1/2026** (in German).

Reading tip from the magazine: John Doerr, *Measure What Matters*. Doerr brought OKR from Intel to Google in 1999 and tells how the tool came about and why, for Andy Grove, it was not about control but about focus. Many case examples, little method theory — the book to read before planning your first cycle.

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