HOW TO... BRIEF.

Change Strategies on Fundamentals

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01 SUMMARY

HOW TO...
BRIEF.

The proprietary briefing process is work, but it is worth it [p. 5]:
While advertisers have improved in supplying information to their agencies, the agencies are given fewer incentives to invest time and resources in their own internal briefing process. This poses a risk of bias when planning a project.

Mind the trap: "The Law of Triviality" Bias [p. 7]:
When discussing complex client briefs, we tend to focus on familiar tasks and neglect important, complicated topics. Therefore, creating an internal (creative) brief for the project can help prioritize impactful tasks and align the team.

Overcoming the challenge with "The Arched Brief" template [p. 10]:
Our goal is to organize the most relevant project information into a cohesive structure that provides a stable pathway to solve the client's problem. The briefing template follows the structure of an arch, to visualizes how it consists only of essential and connected parts.

Change Strategies on briefing processes [p. 18]:

1. Applying your own briefing framework promotes project ownership.

2. AI is great for augmenting the briefing process, not for automating it.

3. The template of a brief is often overvalued, focus on the problem solving part.

02 INTRO: IS THE BRIEF EVEN RELEVANT?

Why we brief:

SET UP FOR SUCCESS

When I started out in advertising a good decade ago, writing the creative brief was considered an art form. Today, I often see people viewing it as a tedious task.

The advertising world has evolved significantly, that includes how clients introduce their brand and campaign projects to their agency. They now provide more comprehensive information, with meticulously formulated tasks and objectives.
So why even bother writing a creative brief – or any type of brief for that matter? Why not just save some time and work directly off the client's brief?

Skipping our own briefing process puts us on a slippery slope.

Another notable trend is the increasing complexity of projects. This means that the clients' briefs are usually not very brief (pun intended). This is not only due to the fact that there is more data from more channels available, but also the number of tasks and campaign goals has increased.
In my experience, if we do not organize the vast amounts of information from the client into a structure that is specifically customized for our cross-functional teams, we will always sacrifice (at least some) execution efficiency.

Alternatively, a well-written creative brief provides the foundation for comprehensive team collaboration and the creation of exceptional work.

I know, some people will disagree with me. They may argue that their extensive experience and expertise allows them to quickly filter through even the lengthiest client briefs. An "additional" creative brief would be a waste of time.
And herein lies a bias that could cause teams to slip and slide.

03 THE BIASED PROJECT APPROACH

LAW OF TRIVIALITY

Parkinson's "Law of triviality" (aka "bike-shedding")

When discussing an issue, team members tend to give disproportionate weight to trivial matters. When within their circle of competence, people feel compelled to contribute.

Management consultant Cyril Northcote Parkinson used this story to illustrate a common bias in project planning:
A financial committee has to decide on three investment proposals: a nuclear power plant, a bike shed and a coffee machine for the office.
The committee members are intimidated by the complicated power plant proposal and avoid discussing it at length. The much simpler (and less important) projects are passionately fought over, since everyone has a clear opinion on the matter.
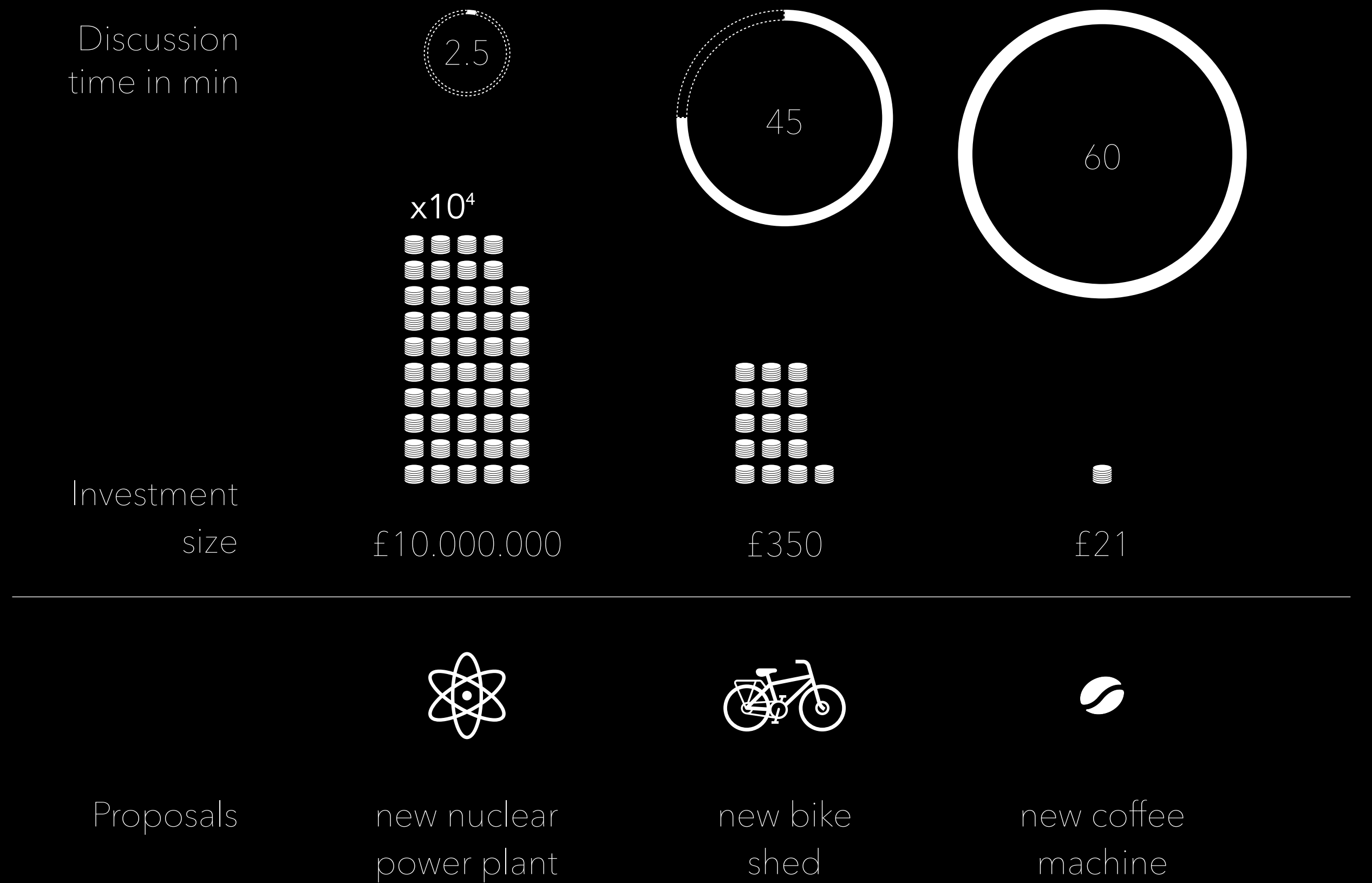
Implications: When discussing a complex client brief, we will naturally be drawn to the familiar tasks and neglect (important) odd or complicated topics.
We are prone to "bike-shedding".

Antidote: A (creative) brief can prioritize impactful tasks and aligns the team accordingly.

Discussion time in min	2.5	45	60
Investment size	×10⁴ £10.000.000	£350	£21
Proposals	new nuclear power plant	new bike shed	new coffee machine

DEFY THE BIAS,
DO THE WORK

Are you surprised that task prioritization is the main focus when creating a creative brief? Perhaps it seems counterintuitive to some, who may think that sparking the most creative ideas is the key goal. While idea generation is undoubtedly important, it is often not the biggest challenge faced by teams.

What makes a creative process really painful is when you have a good idea, but ongoing corrections in direction hinder you from fully executing it as a complete concept. This is when ambitious timings suddenly turn into pressing deadlines, while team motivation takes a hit — quite an unfortunate combination.
And there is a good chance that this is happening (at least in part), because familiar tasks were prioritized over important tasks.

So, what to do instead? How do we arrive at a good brief?

We organize all relevant data inside a stable problem-solving framework.

This process is not trivial, but it is not rocket science either. It is a bit like solving a puzzle. It can be fun. And when we have everything organized, we end up with one framework that will provide one solution to the client's problem, pointing us reliably in one direction. And only when we have this foundation in place, we build different creative approaches and concepts on top of it.
This only works, when we identified the key elements to our problem's solution and put all the supporting data and facts into all the correct places.

This way, we convert a long and complex client brief that comes with a multitude of individual tasks and objectives, into one overarching briefing structure.
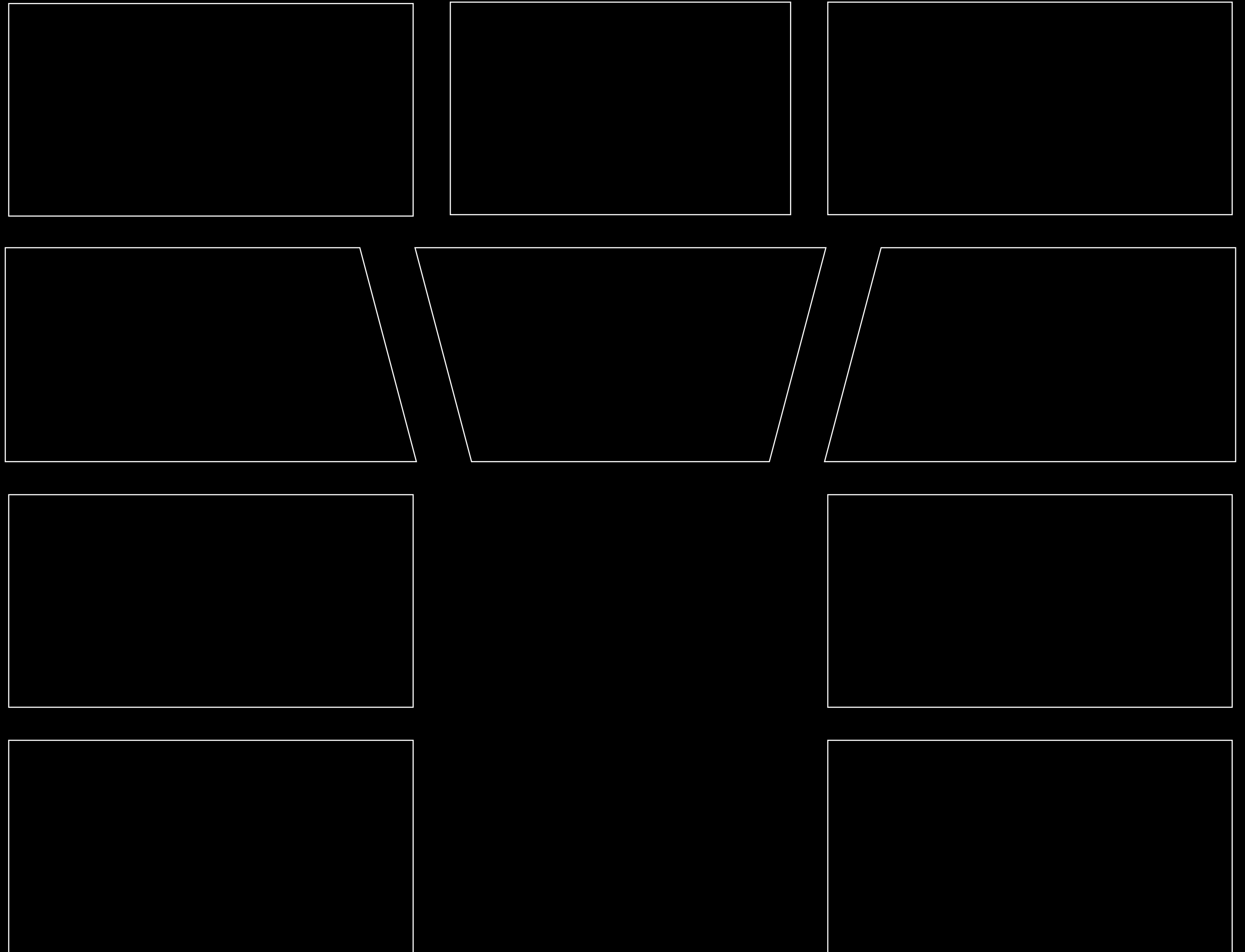
04 "THE ARCHED BRIEF" TEMPLATE

Overall structure of the brief

THE ARCH

An elegant way to overcome an obstacle is to span it with an arch. Its architecture allows us to reach where we need to go, while using a highly efficient structure. Every single element of the arch is critical and supports the structure as a whole.

"The Arched Brief" aims at organizing the most relevant project information into a structure that — as a whole — provides a stable pathway to reach the solution to the client's problem.

△ CHANGE STRATEGIES

Disclaimer:
In this document, visualizing the parts of the brief in form of an arch has mostly explanatory purposes.
Make sure to set up your briefing template to fit your project and to value content and readability over design.

Status quo	Goal	Tasks

Part 1: Direction

PATHWAY

The upper row represents our path to success:
When we have a clear understanding of our current position and the specifics of where we need to arrive, we should have a good idea which tasks need to be completed to get us there.
The three elements must be tightly intertwined.

We need to ensure that the path is solid – it cannot change.
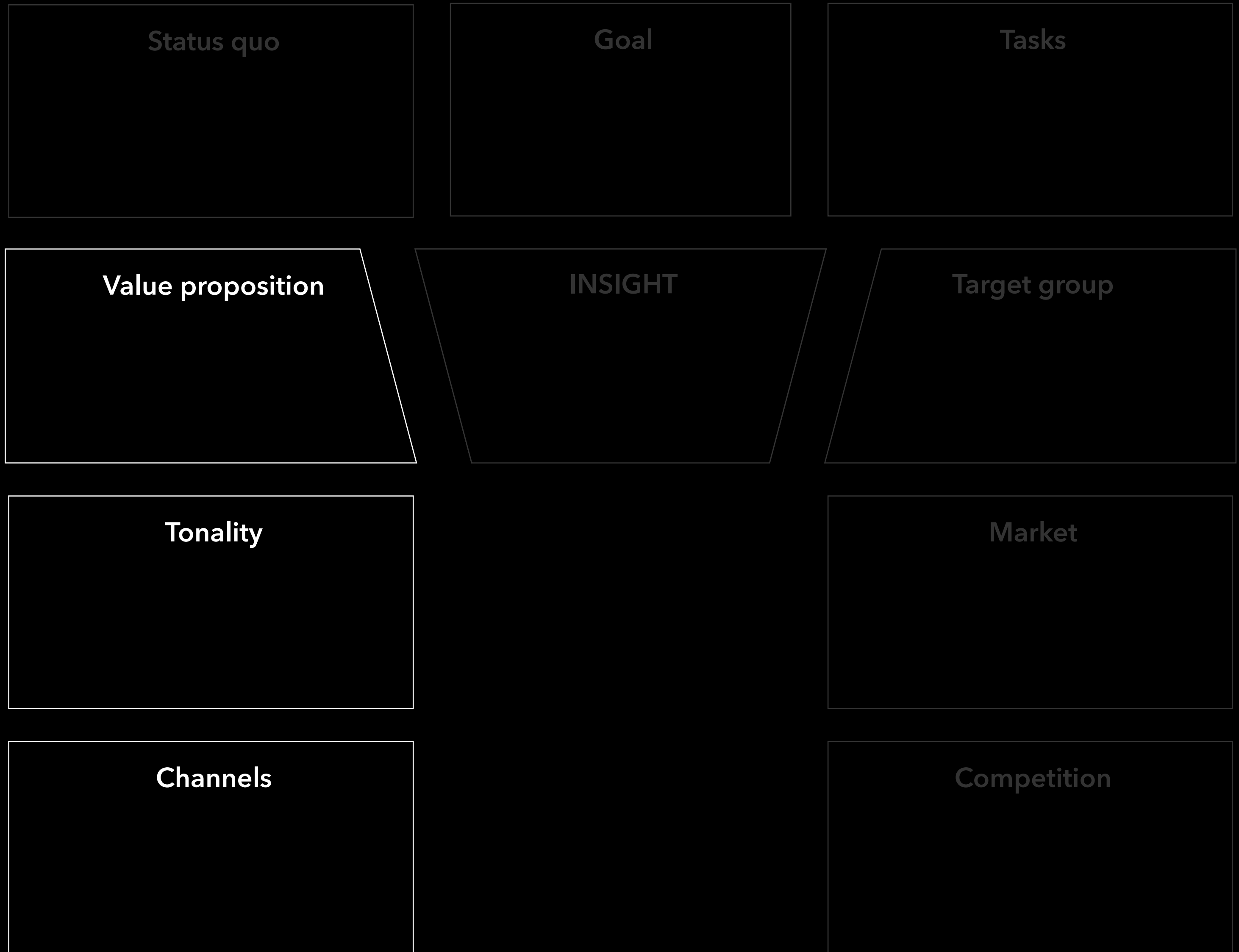As long as we stay on the path, we can win.

Value proposition	INSIGHT	Target group

Tonality		Market

Channels		Competition
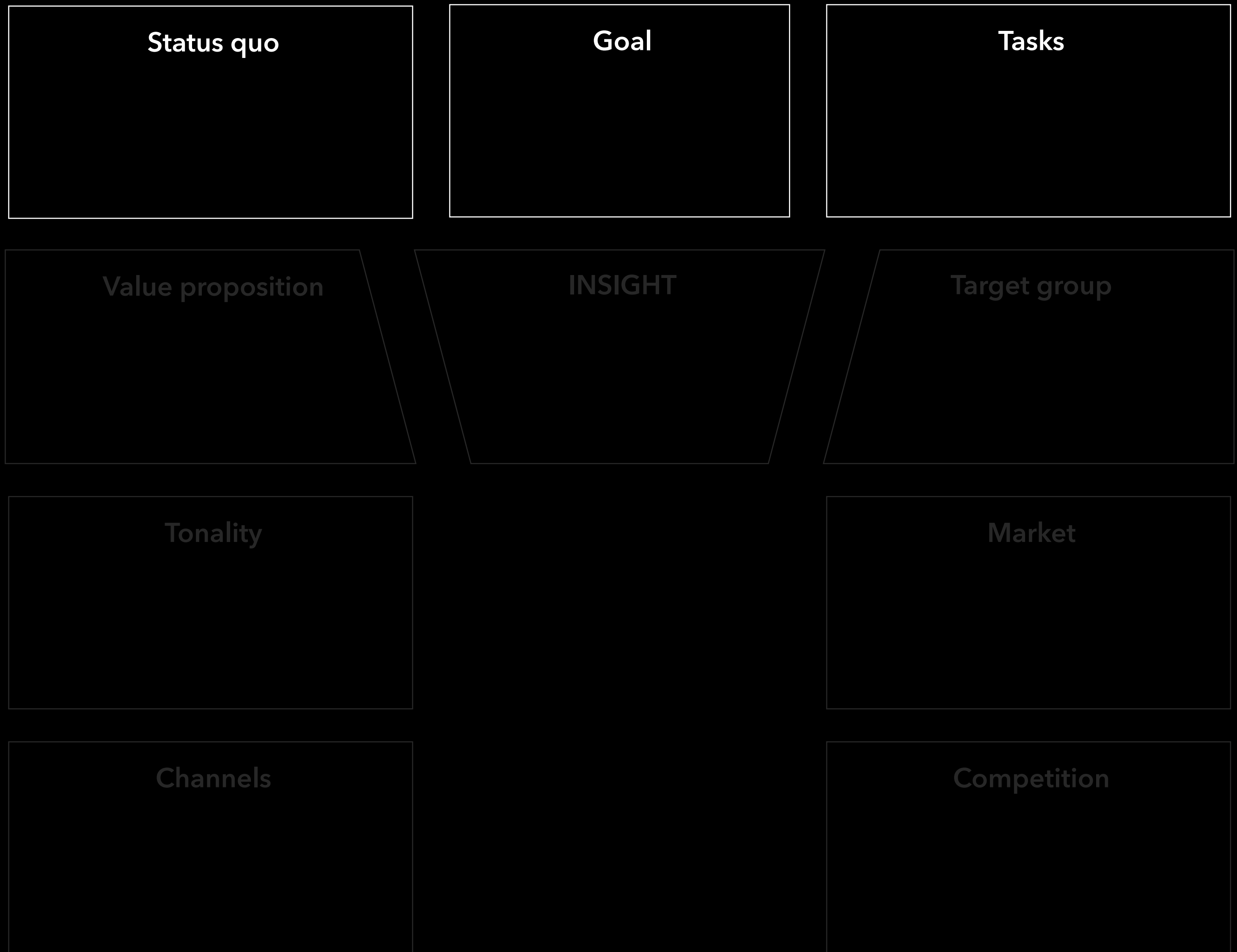
LEFT COLUMN

The left column represents our assets and is one of the two main supports to achieve the project goal. Here we explain everything that enables us to get the job done. We have full or at least some control over our assets and can adjust them to increase performance.

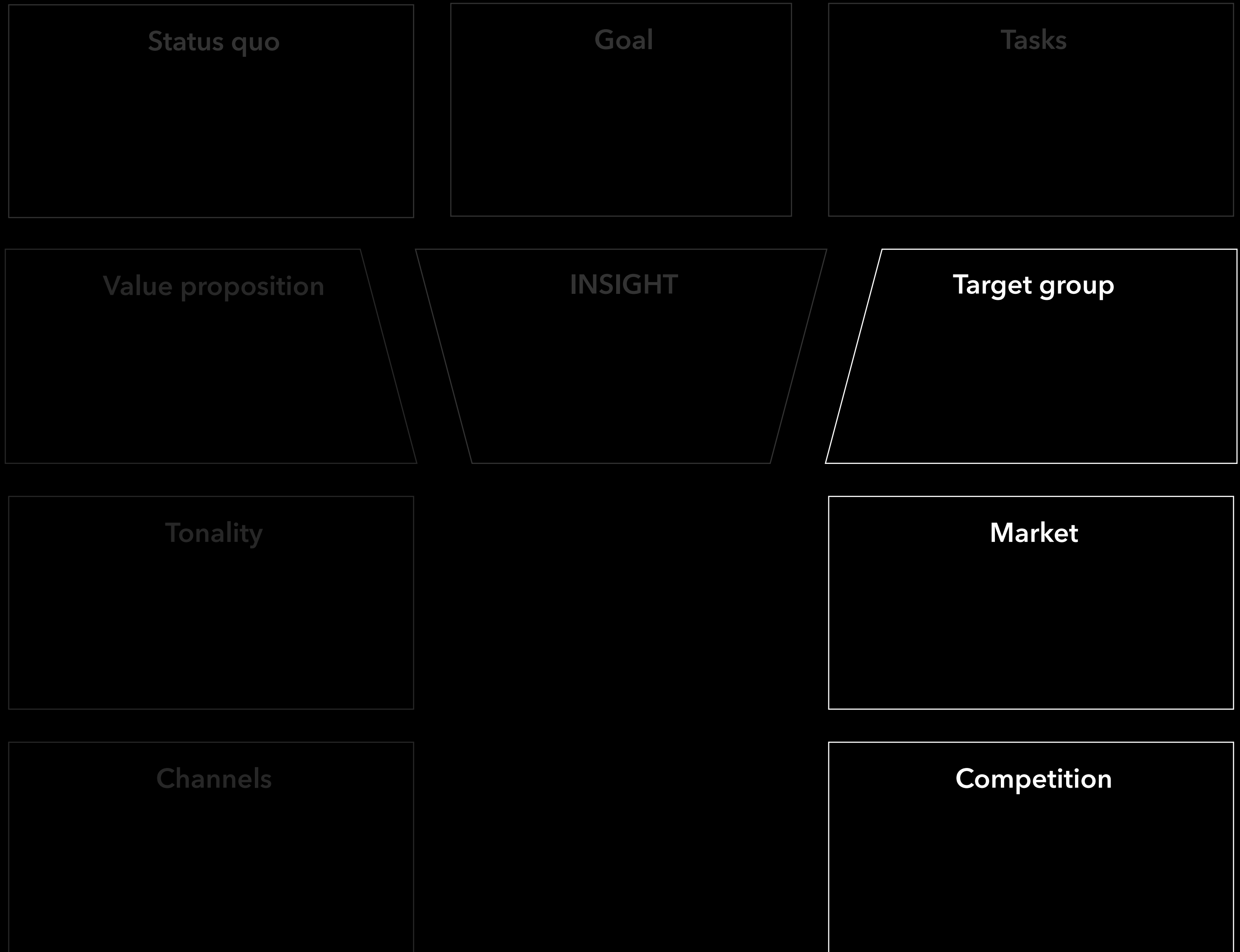For effectiveness, the left column needs to be exactly in sync with the right column.

Status quo	Goal	Tasks

Value proposition

INSIGHT

Target group

Tonality

Market

Channels

Competition

△ CHANGE STRATEGIES

RIGHT COLUMN

The right column represents our environment. We cannot control it, but possibly influence or benefit from it. It is the second main support to our arch. Here, we present opportunities, openings, niches and any other goal-supporting development (no need to focus on adversity too much, unless it helps).

For effectiveness, the right column needs to be exactly in sync with the left column.

Status quo	Goal	Tasks

Value proposition	INSIGHT	**Target group**

Tonality		**Market**

Channels		**Competition**

Part 4: Perspective

KEYSTONE

The keystone completes the arch.
This is usually the consumer insight, but not always. It could also be a category insight or product insight or any other insight that, given the circumstances, provides us with an edge.

The insight lets us take a new perspective at the world. This new view or angle allows us to leverage our assets, to thrive in our environment and to fully support our path to project success.

Status quo	Goal	Tasks

Value proposition	INSIGHT	Target group

Tonality		Market

Channels		Competition

Brand Logo	Timing

Intro

Stats / Diagram	Image Target Group
Image Product	**Image Competition**

OUTLINING INFO

This part can be configured in many different ways and is certainly not obligatory. But I always find it helpful to give some context and some visuals.

And I have the feeling that, when I put the project deadlines on, I get more people to actually print out the brief and have it on their desk. :D

△ CHANGE STRATEGIES

Brand Logo	Timing

Intro

Target group

Stats / Diagram	Image Target Group

Market

Image Product	Image Competition

Competition

Status quo	Goal	Tasks

Value proposition	INSIGHT	Target group

Tonality		Market

Channels		Competition

"THE ARCHED BRIEF" TEMPLATE
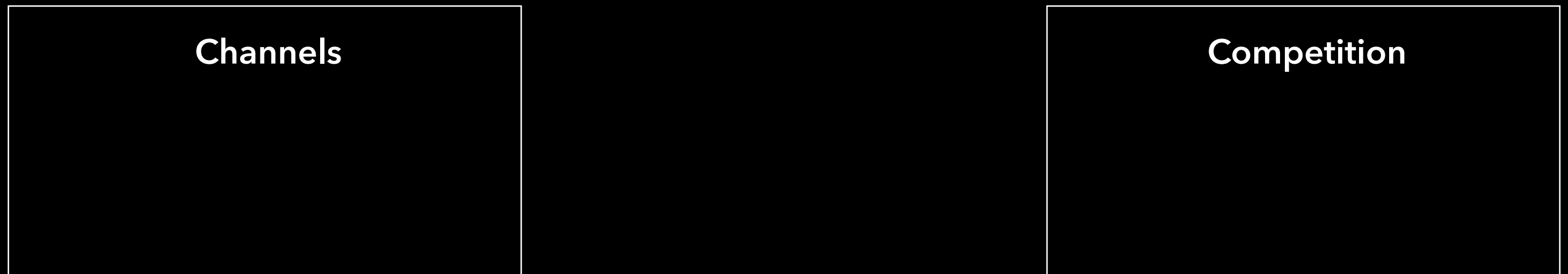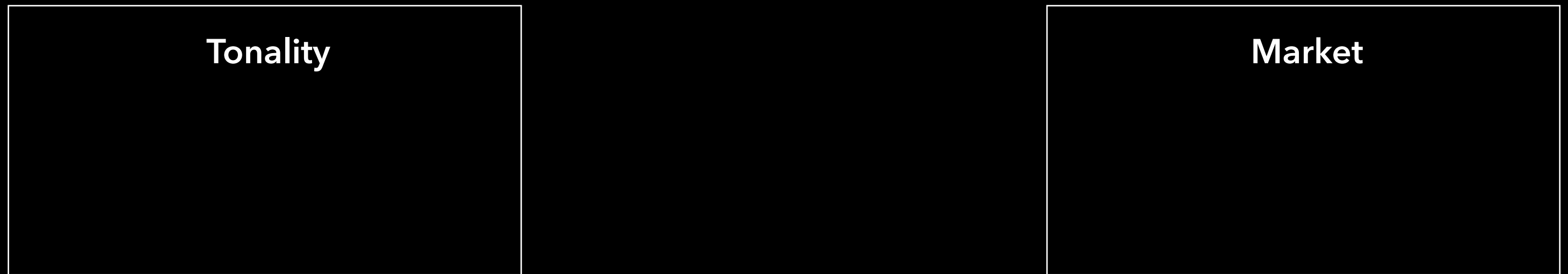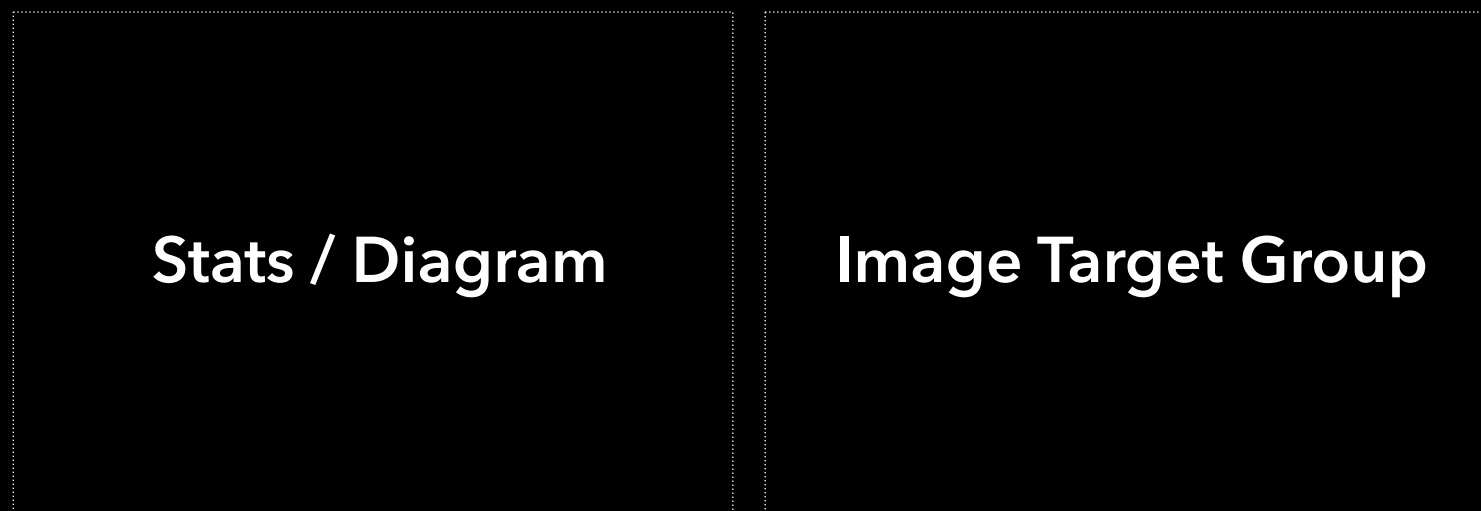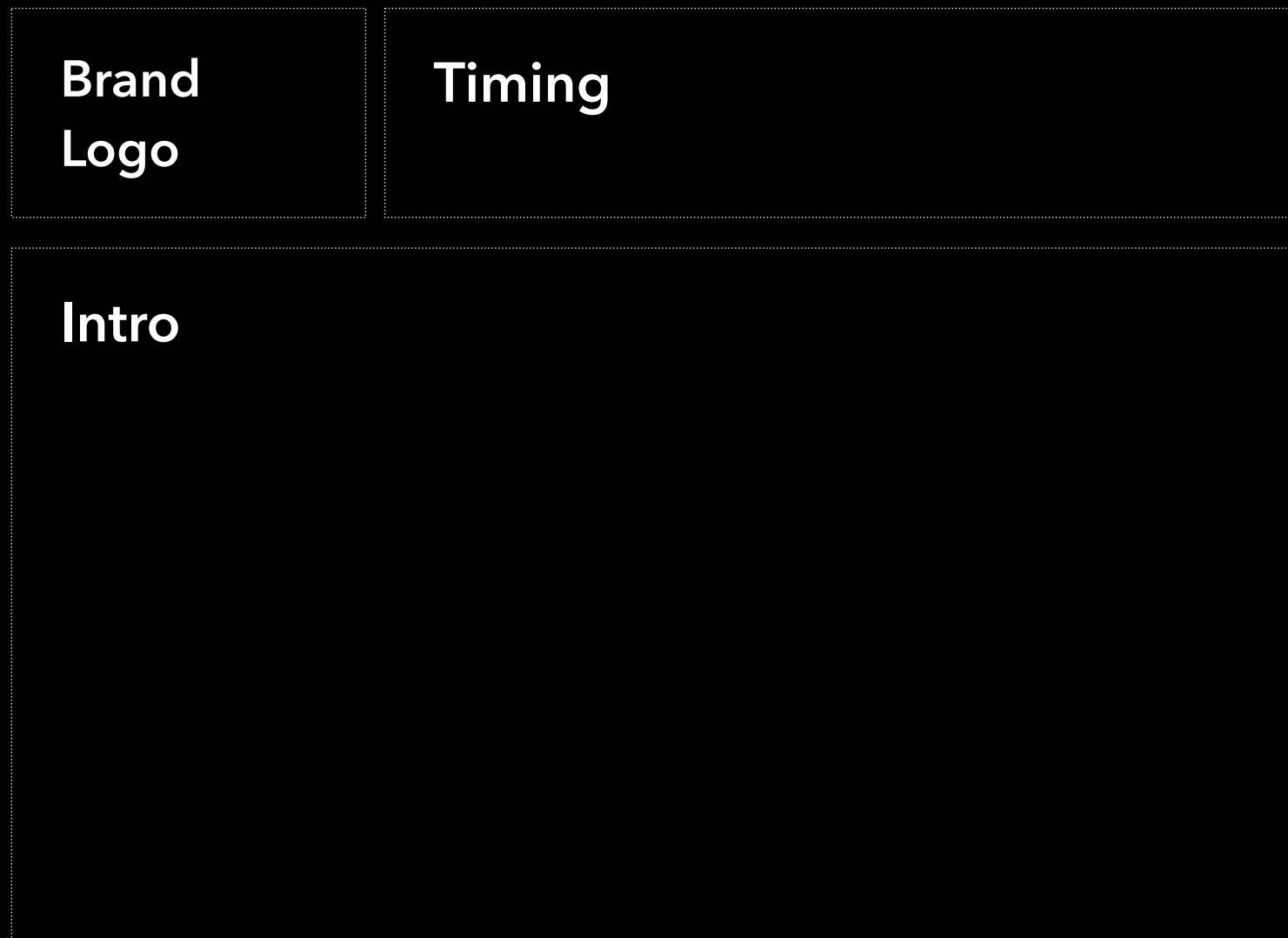
05   CHANGE STRATEGIES ON BRIEFINGS

THE BRIEF IS AN OPPORTUNITY

When I, as a strategist, start on a new assignment, I receive a briefing from the client, which may include a direct conversation or input from a project lead. I read all the information provided, as well as conduct preliminary research.

At this point, I have the option to step back and develop my (creative) brief.
Or not.
Very often, I am not required to do so. I am required to get the assignment done, not a briefing document.

So why on earth, would I spend the little time I have on a briefing process, when most of the information is already there?

We take ownership of the project.

Consuming the information provided by the client, is a good start. We gather the main facts, conduct some additional research, and compile everything relevant into our strategy deck. This can be sufficient for a solid case.

However, breaking down the client's information and interpreting it within our own framework enables us to develop our own story. Or better: a story we own.

Writing our own brief compels us to evaluate all the data. We learn, if we really understood everything we read. We learn, how (or if) tasks and objectives are related. We learn about missing or inconclusive information. And we eventually learn, if we are actually capable of explaining the project to another person.

Having done this exercise, we have arrived on a deeper project-level. We are able to talk about our upcoming challenges with confidence, we can onboard new team members more quickly, we establish strategic guardrails…
AND we outline a major portion on how to tackle our strategy assignment.

DO NOT JUST LET THE AI DO IT

For obvious reasons… or at least do not let her do all of it.
Here is what ChatGPT3 thinks about her own briefing writing abilities.*

Fabian: *Do you think you are good at writing a complete creative brief for an ad campaign?*

[…] it's recommended that a human with expertise in advertising and marketing ultimately reviews and approves any creative brief generated by a language model like myself.

She is so modest. But she also did not say "no". :D

ChatGPT is a valuable assistant, but for now lacks creativity and social skills.

I think ChatGPT is great. She helped me so much with this document. But I guess the hardest part for AI in advertising and marketing is that our work is so deeply human. That accounts, on the one hand, for the consumers that we need to understand in all their emotional and irrational ways.
But on the other hand, our work also involves so much close interaction with our colleagues and clients. And to me, it really makes a difference who I write a brief for because we will need to make the project work as a team.

AI is great for augmenting the briefing process, but not so much for automating it.

△ CHANGE STRATEGIES

*Source: chat.openai.com/chat

IGNORE BRIEFING TEMPLATES

So yes, all in all, I am a true believer in coming up with our own briefings and especially with the creative brief. And I do not see this becoming irrelevant in the short term future.

But, what I actually think *is* overvalued, is *"the ideal briefing template"*. In my opinion, all briefing templates are imperfect. Just like every other theoretical model that tries to radically simplify the infinite complexities of this world.

Every project is unique and includes more than just the client's requirements, tasks and objectives – it involves a whole team of humans, who put their hearts and souls into their work. And to make the project work for us – as a team – that is the problem we are solving for.

Solving the problem trumps fitting the template, every time.

And what about "The Arched Brief" template? Do I think it is good?

I think it illustrates really well how to approach a project for a successful outcome. But that is on a high level. I intentionally did not explain the template's individual building blocks in detail, because they are so dependent on each assignment.

It is the mechanics behind this template, that are important: to thoughtfully evaluate the data, to identify the path to success, to be able to explain why we can really make it happen… and to present it in a format that the people around us understand and makes them feel inspired.

I love this job. ☺

THANK YOU!

About Change Strategies and Fabian Menzel

• BRAND STRATEGY • CAMPAIGN PLANNING • MARKETING CONSULTING

Since 2010, Fabian has worked with some of the most successful national and international brands from all industries.
Change Strategies is based in Germany, but Fabian manages all his accounts remotely.

CHANGE