

HOW TO **AVOID** **INNOVATION THEATER** IN THE FIRST 90 DAYS

Turning Activity into Evidence

WHERE THIS IS USED

- Venture Studio programs
- Corporate Incubators
- Accelerators (corporate or government-backed)
- CVC opportunity formation (pre-investment)
- AI Studio exploration and agent discovery
- Foundry-as-a-Service engagements

AUDIENCE

- CEOs
- Chiefs of Strategy
- Heads of Innovation
- Corporate venture sponsors
- Venture operators accountable for early outcomes

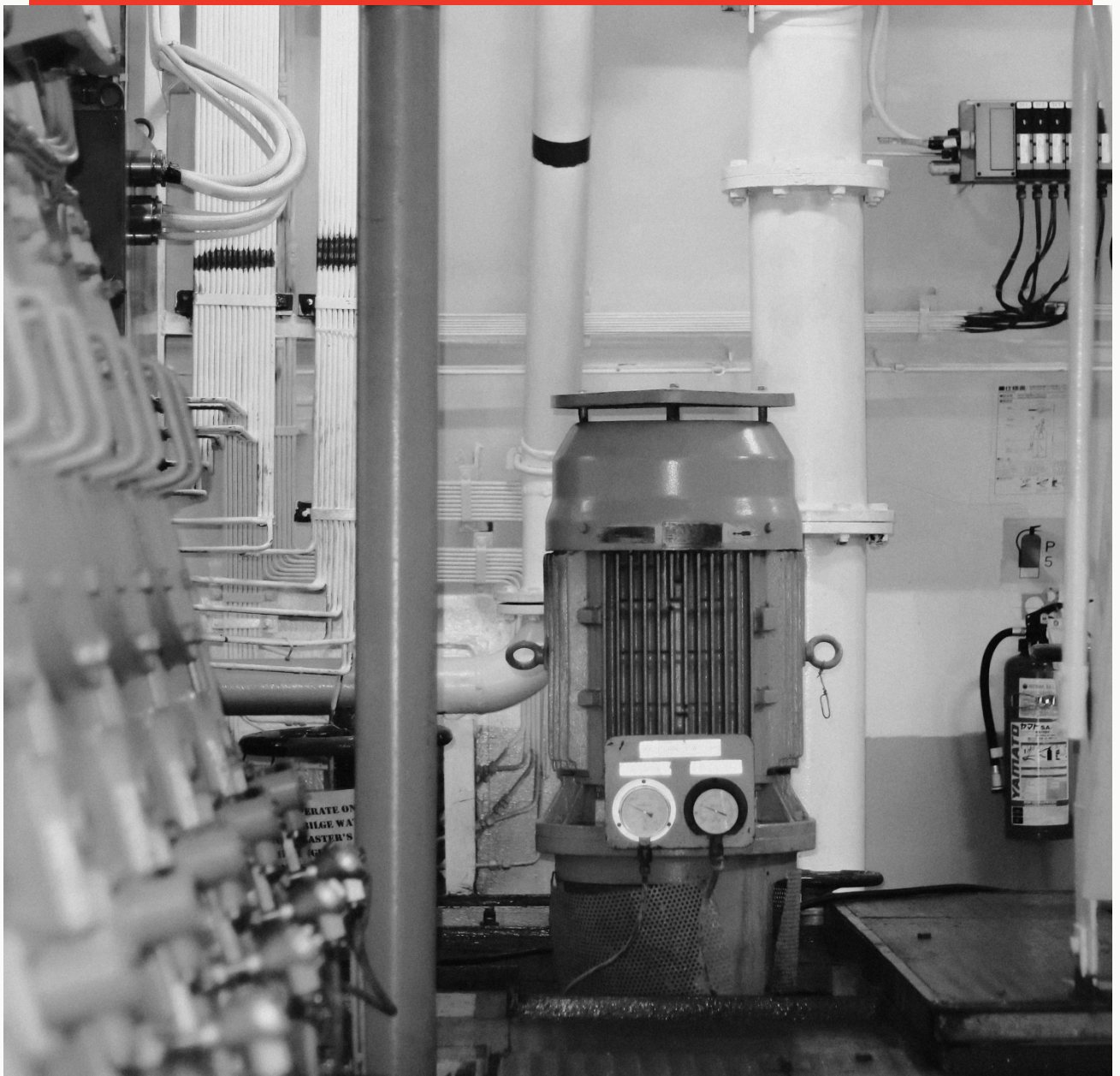
PHASE

Phase One: Pre-build / Pre-funding / Pre-team

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first 90 days of venture work often feel productive but produce little that supports real decisions. Workshops run, decks are created, pilots are discussed—but conviction does not increase.

This guide explains how TURN8 avoids **innovation theater** in Discovery & Thesis Phase by shifting focus from visible activity to decision-quality evidence. The objective is not to reduce activity, but to ensure that every action either sharpens the problem, tests an assumption, or forces a decision.



THE CORE PROBLEM

Innovation theater happens when **motion replaces progress**.

Common signals include:

- Full calendars with few decisions
- Polished narratives without evidence
- Momentum driven by enthusiasm rather than learning

In many organizations, especially large GCC corporates, this is reinforced by:



Cultural preference
for visible effort



Pressure to demonstrate
engagement

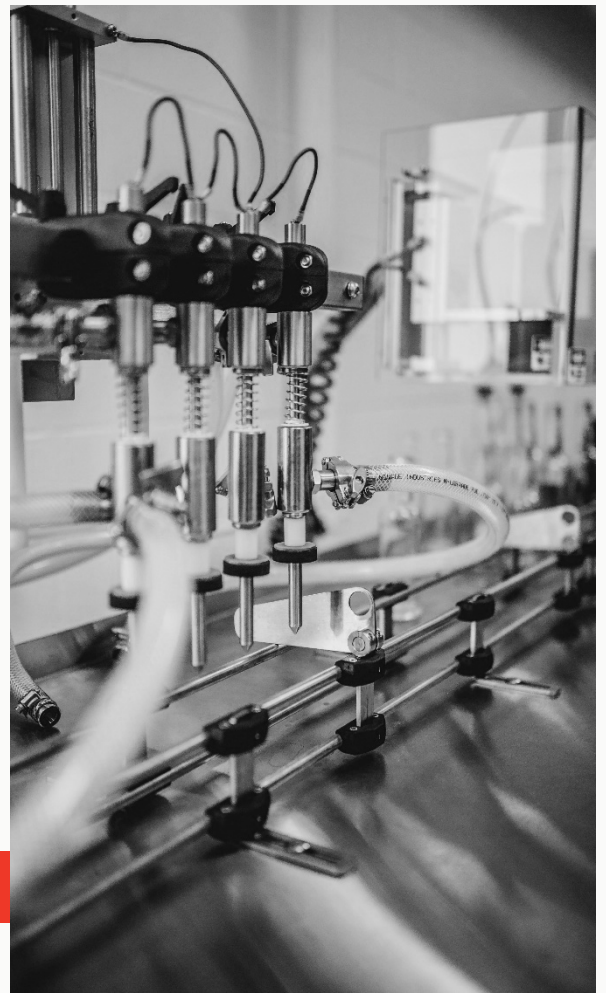


Ambiguity about what
“good progress” looks
like early on

The real issue is this:

**When activity is not
explicitly tied to decisions,
it becomes self-justifying.**

Discovery & Thesis Phase exists to
reduce uncertainty.
Any activity that does not do that is noise.



PREREQUISITES

WHAT MUST BE IN PLACE?

- Defined venture challenge statements
- Clear opportunity areas
- Phase-One governance with go / hold / stop outcomes

ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS INDICATORS

- Willingness to question visible progress
- Acceptance that stopping is a positive outcome
- Comfort with lean artifacts over polished outputs

RED FLAGS (DO NOT PROCEED IF PRESENT)

- Progress is measured by number of sessions or slides
- Stakeholders equate effort with success
- Teams are rewarded for activity rather than learning



If these red flags exist, **innovation theater is already underway.**



STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS

STEP 1 DEFINE WHAT “REAL PROGRESS” MEANS

🎯 ACTION

Explicitly define progress in Phase One as **reduction of uncertainty**, not output.

Examples of real progress:

- A critical assumption is disproven
- A customer behavior is validated
- An opportunity is explicitly stopped

⚠️ COMMON MISTAKES

- Treating alignment as progress
- Celebrating activity without outcomes

📺 WHY IT MATTERS

What gets defined as progress gets optimized.

✅ DECISION CHECKPOINT

Did uncertainty decrease since the last review?

📅 TIME ESTIMATE

30 minutes

STEP 2 TIE EVERY ACTIVITY TO A DECISION

🎯 ACTION

Require that every activity answer one question:

“What decision will this inform?”

If the answer is unclear, do not proceed.

⚠️ COMMON MISTAKES

- Running sessions “to explore”
- Deferring decisions indefinitely

📺 WHY IT MATTERS

Activities without decision linkage drift into theater.

✅ DECISION CHECKPOINT

Are the decision and owner explicitly named?

📅 TIME ESTIMATE

Ongoing

STEP 3 LIMIT ARTIFACTS AGGRESSIVELY

🎯 ACTION

Constrain outputs to what is necessary to make decisions.

Preferred artifacts:

- One-page summaries
- Evidence tables
- Assumption logs

Avoid:

- Polished decks
- Vision videos
- Branding exercises

⚠️ COMMON MISTAKES

- Over-communicating to signal progress
- Producing artifacts for visibility

📺 WHY IT MATTERS

Polish increases emotional attachment and resistance to stopping.

✅ DECISION CHECKPOINT

Does this artifact reduce uncertainty?

📅 TIME ESTIMATE

Ongoing

STEP 4 ENFORCE TIME-BOXING RELENTLESSLY

🎯 ACTION

Time-box all Phase-One work with fixed decision dates.

⚠️ COMMON MISTAKES

- Extending timelines to “be sure”
- Allowing scope creep between reviews

📺 WHY IT MATTERS

Time pressure forces focus and honesty.

✅ DECISION CHECKPOINT

Is the decision date fixed regardless of readiness?

📅 TIME ESTIMATE

15 minutes to set;
enforced continuously

STEP 5 NORMALIZE STOP DECISIONS PUBLICLY

🎯 ACTION

Treat stopped initiatives as successful outcomes of Phase One.

Explicitly document:

- What was learned
- Why stopping was correct
- What capacity was freed

⚠️ COMMON MISTAKES

- Quietly shelving initiatives
- Reframing stops as pauses indefinitely

📺 WHY IT MATTERS

If stopping is stigmatized, theater becomes inevitable.

✅ DECISION CHECKPOINT

Are stops visible and accepted?

📅 TIME ESTIMATE

Ongoing



DECISION FRAMEWORKS

INNOVATION THEATER DIAGNOSTIC

If two or more are true, theater is likely:

1.

Activity is increasing but decisions are not

2.

Artifacts are becoming more polished over time

3.

Stops are rare or avoided

4.

Progress is hard to define precisely

When detected, reset scope immediately.



RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS



PEOPLE

- Executive sponsor reinforcing discipline
- Venture operator enforcing decision linkage
- Minimal stakeholder involvement



BUDGET

- Minimal
- Spend only on learning activities



TOOLS

- Simple evidence and decision logs
- AI may assist summarization, not storytelling



COMMON FAILURE MODES

FAILURE MODE: BUSYNESS AS COVER

Early signal

Constant activity
with little clarity



Correction

Pause work and force
decision definition



FAILURE MODE: OUTPUT INFLATION

Early signal

Increasing polish
of deliverables



Correction

Strip artifacts back
to essentials



FAILURE MODE: STOPS BECOME TABOO

Early signal

Everything “continues”



Correction

Publicly model
stop decisions



SUCCESS METRICS



LEADING INDICATORS

- Decisions outnumber presentations
- Stop decisions occur regularly
- Validation cycles stay short



LAGGING INDICATORS

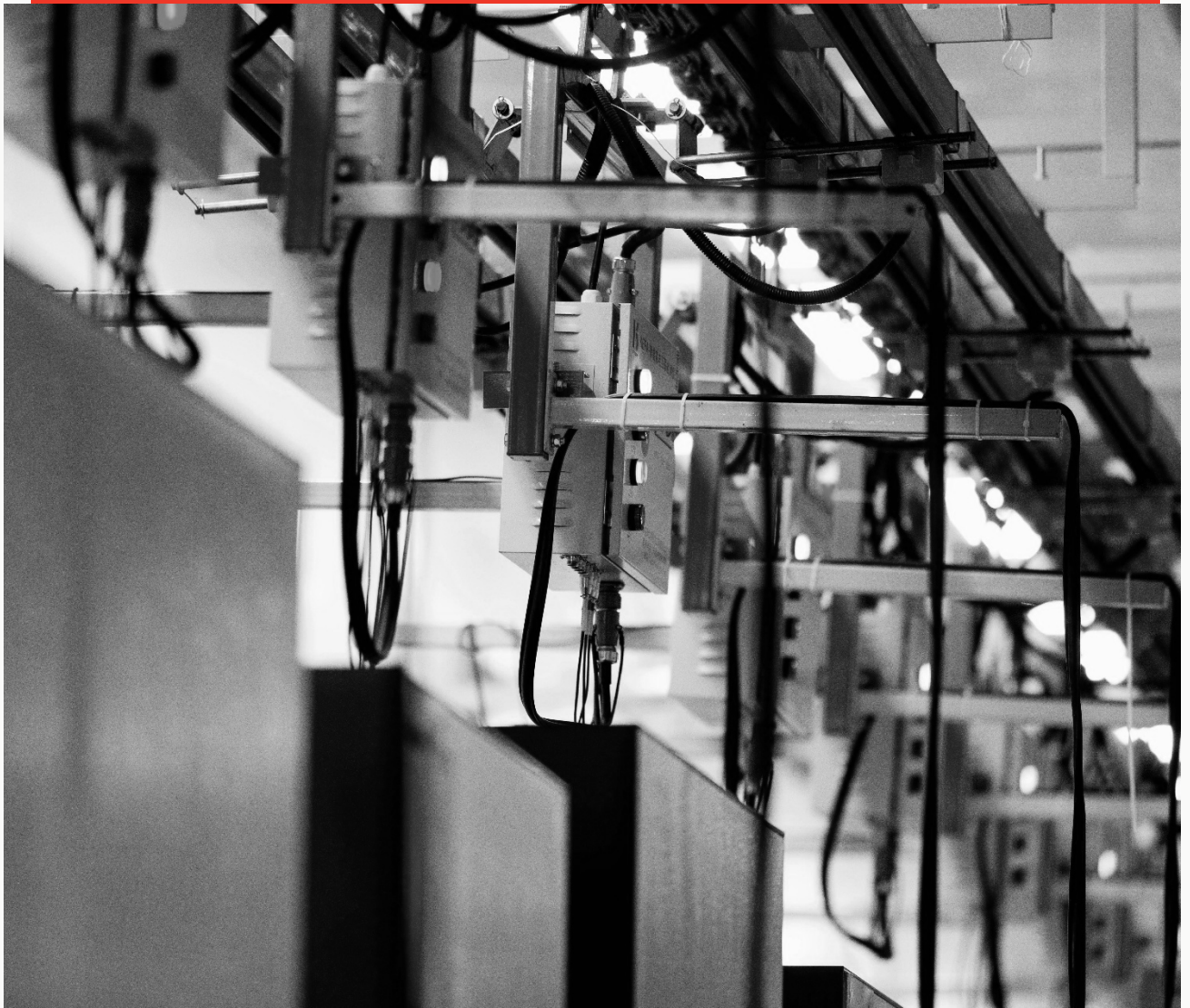
- Lower Phase-One cost
- Faster throughput
- Higher confidence at escalation



EXAMPLE USE CASES

This approach is typically applied when:

- Early venture programs feel busy but inconclusive
- Leadership questions ROI of innovation efforts
- Multiple initiatives drift without resolution
- AI exploration produces demos but no decisions
- Accelerators prioritize showcase over learning



NEXT STEPS

After the first 90 days:

1.

Review which activities produced decisions

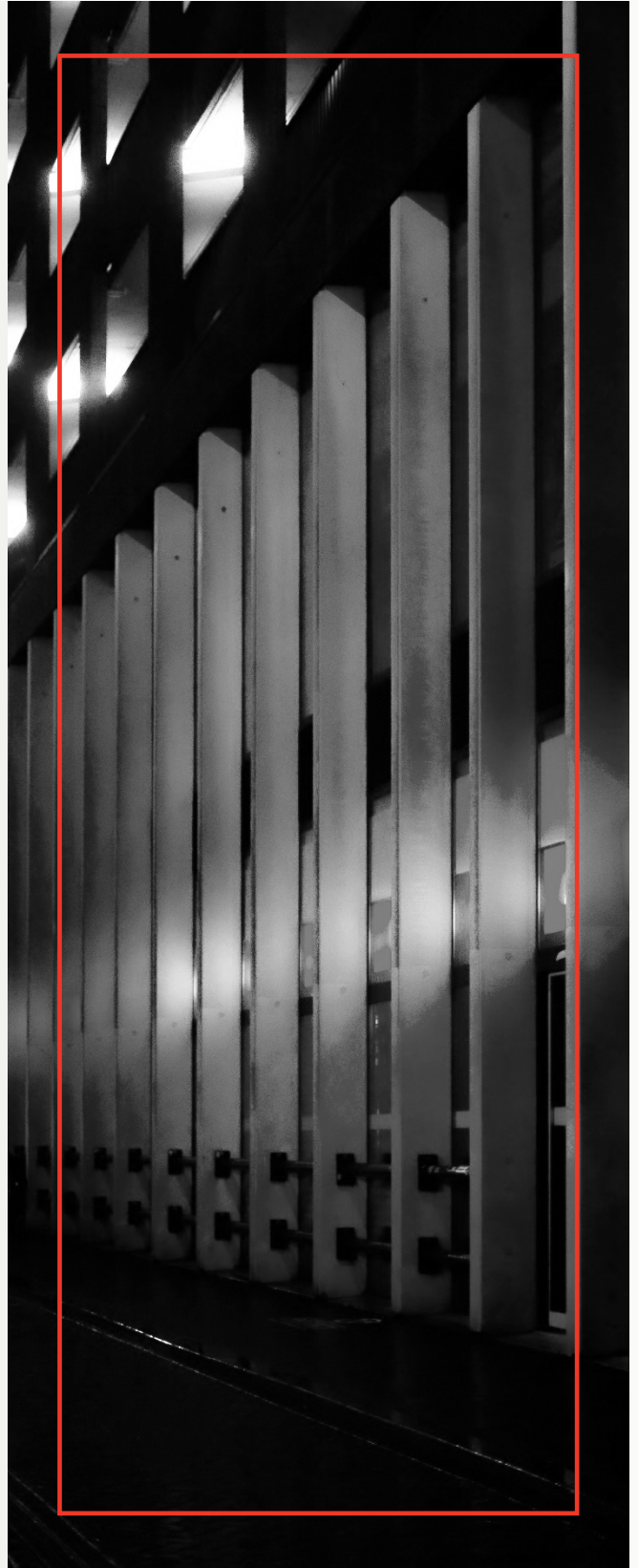
2.

Eliminate patterns that led to theater

3.

Reinforce governance and validation discipline

If Phase One feels comfortable, it is not working.



CHECKLIST (CHEAT SHEET)

A. PROGRESS DEFINITION

- ☐ Progress is defined as uncertainty reduction
- ☐ Decisions, not outputs, define success

B. ACTIVITY DISCIPLINE

- ☐ Every activity is tied to a decision
- ☐ Decision owner is named before work starts

C. ARTIFACT CONTROL

- ☐ Outputs are lean and functional
- ☐ No unnecessary polish or branding

D. TIME DISCIPLINE

- ☐ Work is time-boxed
- ☐ Decision dates are fixed

E. STOP NORMALIZATION

- ☐ Stops are documented and visible
- ☐ Stopping is treated as success

FINAL CHECK

- ☐ Decisions are frequent
- ☐ Theater feels uncomfortable

If work feels impressive but unclear → Reset immediately

