Maturity Models Grade Your Company

Idea In Short

Use maturity models to convert symptoms into diagnosis. Define level criteria before assessing, target the levels worth reaching rather than fives everywhere, blend consultant judgment with stakeholder self-assessment and treat the resulting grid as the opening move of opportunity identification, not the conclusion.

Finding the Broken Things

Management consultants hunt for ugly problems and broken things to fix, because uncovering difficult problems and fixing them is the entire business model. The surprise is how often clients cannot explain what is actually wrong or what they want done. They describe symptoms, flat revenues, dropping margins or increased receivables, rather than root causes. The burden of scoping therefore falls on the consultant, and the profession has built diagnostic tools for exactly this: SWOT analysis, benchmarks, the McKinsey 7S framework, pricing waterfalls, financial analysis, growth matrices, surveys, workshops and simple checklists.1 Extending the analogy of consultants as business doctors, these tools are the x-ray, thermometer and blood test of the physical exam. They are not treatment, just the diagnostics that find the sickness.

What a Maturity Model Is

Among the most common diagnostic tools, the maturity model gauges a client's capability across a set of areas and points out where improvement matters. The format is disarmingly simple, resembling a report card or a spreadsheet grid. Functions or capabilities run down the left side and maturity levels run across the top, so a supply chain planning group might score level three, which for that particular client is roughly where it wants to be. The lineage traces to formal frameworks such as the Capability Maturity Model developed for software processes, and the logic generalizes across every industry.2 Simple appearance, substantial content, and a set of recurring questions that deserve straight answers.

Should Everything Target Level Five?

Probably not. Reaching the highest maturity everywhere is usually prohibitively expensive or outright impossible. Consider the difficulty of becoming simultaneously as efficient as Southwest, as customer-driven as Nordstrom and as innovative as Apple. The smarter play chooses the areas where the company genuinely needs to excel and picks its battles, letting other capabilities rest at good-enough levels. A maturity model that targets fives across the board is not a strategy. It is a wish list with a consulting logo.

Where the Criteria Come From

The criteria are set ahead of time, with a written description for every box in the grid, so planning at level one means something different from planning at level four. Assembling those definitions is laborious, and skipping the labor destroys the tool, because without clear definitions the bucketing of performance carries no meaning. Published examples, such as the privacy maturity model issued by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, show the definitional depth required.3

Is it all subjective opinion, then? Yes and no. Subjective elements and room for interpretation exist, as when a definition demands adequate and qualified privacy resources and leaves open whether that means a doctorate-holding chief risk officer or two interns with online training. Three disciplines push back. Many maturity models are industry-specific, making them detailed and relevant. Good ones rest on benchmark or survey data, giving the definitions quantitative backing. And consultants survey a broad group, executives, senior managers and line workers alike, so results represent the organization rather than enshrining one CEO's self-image as gospel.

Who Grades, and What Comes Next

Either side can hold the pen. The consulting team can assess maturity from interviews, data analysis and competitor comparison, then present the result, and a well-tuned assessment lands about 80 percent right. Alternatively the client can decide, through advance online polls or scorecards completed mid-workshop. Both approaches work, and the hardest part is always the same: describing the maturity levels coherently and succinctly, because without that the exercise gets really boring, really quickly.

Is it also a marketing tool? Of course, because the approach works. Slick online self-assessment tools double as lead generation while collecting baseline data on company size, geography and performance that enriches every future comparison. Formats vary too, with some firms preferring stair-step visuals to grids. What never varies is the next step: prioritize the opportunities. Maturity models open a larger opportunity identification process, converting graded gaps into sequenced initiatives, and published supply chain examples show that pipeline clearly.

Common Failure Modes

Maturity models fail in predictable ways worth naming. Grade inflation tops the list, since stakeholders scoring their own functions drift upward unless anchored by written criteria and outside comparison. Assessment theater follows, where the grid gets produced, admired and shelved without ever feeding a prioritized plan, converting diagnosis into decoration. Category bloat ruins others, as sponsors add pet capabilities until the model measures forty things badly instead of ten things well. The subtler failure is treating the model as static, because capabilities decay and markets move, so a grid older than eighteen months describes a company that no longer exists. Each failure has the same antidote: tie the model to decisions with owners, dates and money attached.

The Hidden Value Is the Structure

The most insightful part of a maturity model is not the detailed descriptions but the high-level structure, the buckets of capabilities chosen for evaluation. Consulting firms invest heavily in selecting categories that are both relevant and mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive [MECE]. That structure frames the discussion and generates the right questions, which is half of a consultant's job. A client who walks away remembering nothing but the capability taxonomy still walks away smarter about their own business, and that is the quiet genius of the report card format.

- 1SWOT Analysis
- 2Capability Maturity Model
- 3AICPA

Summary

Maturity models act as the consultant's x-ray, grading capabilities against predefined criteria. Aim for the right level rather than the maximum, ground definitions in benchmarks, survey broadly and move directly to prioritization. The hidden value is the MECE capability structure itself.