Methodology lies. And it's costing you markets.

In the early 90s, fresh from university, I worked as a salesman for a distribution company in Beirut that had just taken on a German consumer brand. I was a very shy guy back then, and the idea of standing in front of buyers and asking for orders was difficult for me to imagine. So I prepared the only way I knew how: learning the catalog, memorizing the details, anticipating every objection. And once I had overcome the shyness of those first calls, I had my first successes. True, my ego was flattered. But looking back honestly, I didn't owe those early results to my selling skills. I owed them to two things: my readiness to step out of my comfort zone, and the origin of the products I was selling. Made in Germany was less a label than an alibi, for the price, for the decision, for the trust.

When I moved to Germany twenty-one years ago and joined a company in international sales, that alibi was still intact. Appointing distributors in new markets was less a negotiation than a selection process. There were always willing partners. The origin carried weight that no marketing budget could fully replicate.

That world has changed.

Quality has been democratized. Companies from lower-cost countries are no longer competing on price alone, they are competing on substance. The premise that a German product is inherently superior is eroding, market by market, category by category. What was once a structural advantage has become a question that must be answered anew.

Over two decades, I accompanied teams across markets at every stage of development, from first-entry frontiers to mature, competitive landscapes. I had to come to terms that being part of a German company is no guarantee for success in the international markets. Not even when we applied certain marketing methodology that apparently originated from large multinationals. I had to struggle finding and motivating the right teams to be successful. Some efforts succeeded, some did not. Looking back honestly, the sustainable results rarely came from the best methods or the most resources. They came from intervening in the right places.

International markets do not behave like machines, where more input reliably produces more output. They are complex systems, and growing more complex as globalization accelerates. New players are entering markets that were once comfortably segmented. Competitive players. Players already present in markets we consider our own.

If the structural advantages that once carried our business, the Made in Germany premium, a differentiated product, a loyal distributor network, begin to erode, the question becomes unavoidable: how do we steer?

The instinctive answer is to push harder. More investment. More activity. More control. More of a Goliath approach to markets. But in a complex system, force applied in the wrong place produces wasted energy, not movement. What matters is not the volume of the effort. What matters is where it lands. Companies need to think more like David, using the levers that really make a difference.

If you are a company trying to grow internationally, the answer lies in identifying leverage points: the places in your market system where a precisely applied intervention produces disproportionate, lasting change.

What globalization has taken with one hand, it has returned but differently with the other. The same forces that brought new competitors into our markets have also multiplied the instruments available to influence them: artificial intelligence, centralized communication, digital distribution, data-informed market entry, cross-border partnerships that would have been impossible to build a generation ago. The system is harder to navigate, but it offers more handles than it used to.

The question returns: what do you actually do?

When a company is struggling to grow internationally, the most useful first step is rarely a new strategy. It is an honest diagnosis and the judgment of where to intervene. The first step is to understand where you stand: which parts of the system are working, which are strained, and which have been neglected entirely.

The diagnostic framework I use maps international market systems across five categories of leverage points, ordered by their potential impact on lasting change. The framework is not a recipe. It is a map of where to direct your attention. The framework shows you where to look. What you find there, and what you do about it, is where judgment begins.

1. **Mindset.** How the organization thinks about international markets, risk, and its own competitive position. The highest-impact lever, and the most frequently underestimated. I have seen what a "take the money and run" attitude toward international markets does over time: gradual disengagement, declining sales, and eventually an exit that felt inevitable but wasn't. I have also seen what happens when international growth is treated as a genuine strategic priority. The difference in results is not incremental. It is categorical. A few years ago, I took over sales responsibility for Turkey in a company where the business was at its lowest. Both teams, in Germany and in Turkey, had a deeply mistrustful relationship. I made a deliberate choice not to be influenced by what my colleagues told me about the distributor. Instead I listened with genuine curiosity to understand where they were struggling. By understanding their reality first, I could then honestly present our company's expectations in a way they could hear. The result was a transformation in attitude and performance that no process manual could have produced.
2. **Goals.** The ambitions set for international growth, and their realism. What makes a company truly special determines which markets it can win in, not the other way around. I have been lured more than once by the scale of a large market such as India or Saudi Arabia, only to find that our real strategic advantages back then had no room to play there. Resources were spent. Results were thin. In contrast, some markets like Greece or South Korea that looked modest on paper turned out to be the right fit, and delivered results that surprised even us.
3. **Organization & Structure.** International growth changes both the volume and the nature of what a company must do. The organization needs to adapt: acquiring new competencies, shifting responsibilities, sometimes restructuring entirely. I was part of a team navigating the acceleration of digital marketing a decade ago. Our markets were active on social media to very different degrees, some effective, some not. But the real problem was that the brand image was being diluted by incoherent activity worldwide. We needed new competencies to manage this reality and regain control over how the brand showed up. So we shifted resources from traditional sales and back-office roles toward digital marketing. That let us run communication campaigns centrally across markets and bring consistency back to the brand language. It generated growth the old structure never could have. And the team loved it, being in

the steering, growing with their tasks. That is peak performance: a team with the right mindset, sharing the company's goals, self-organizing to reach them.

4. **Rules & Information Flows.** This is where more sophisticated companies concentrate their energy: the business plan, the reporting cycle, the process manual. These matter, but they matter most when the levers above have already been engaged. Take the same example of adapting our structure to the new reality. The new competencies and tools didn't just change how we worked. They opened up entirely new information flows. We suddenly had reports and insights into what was happening on the consumer side: whether a post performed well in a far-away market, how the e-commerce launch of a new product was unfolding in real time. Something previously unthinkable. Now AI is opening further possibilities we are only beginning to understand.
5. **Parameters & Implementation.** The operational measures: KPIs, budgets, pricing, promotional tools. Think of these as the blood tests or training plan of a company. Useful, necessary, but only meaningful if the deeper work has been done first.

Here is the paradox most companies live inside without recognizing it: the levers they reach for most instinctively, parameters and implementation, and somewhat more maturely, rules and information flows, are precisely the ones with the lowest systemic impact. Adjusting a price point, launching a promotion, changing a KPI target. These are not wrong actions. They are simply insufficient ones. They touch the surface of the system without changing its behaviour.

Lasting growth comes from intervening higher up the stack. When the right levers are activated, the actions at the lower levels fall into place naturally. But what prevents consultants from going there? The fact that these levers are abstract, hard to sell. It is much easier to sell a method, facts with numbers, than to venture into areas of perspective change, culture and goals linked to genuine strength. Methodology promises certainty. It is a comfortable illusion.

The diagnostic framework offers a map. What fills the gap between the map and the territory is judgment, and judgment is not a skill you acquire in a training program. It is built slowly, through decisions that seemed sound and failed anyway, and the honest work of understanding why. Through sitting across the table from a distributor in a market you've never visited before and sensing, before a single number is exchanged, whether the partnership will hold.

But there is a condition that makes all of this possible and that business culture rarely names. Judgment requires a degree of inner freedom from your own agenda. The consultant too attached to his framework will find confirmation everywhere. The manager too invested in a market he championed will not see that it has stopped working. The team too proud to exit a failing distributor relationship will keep finding reasons to stay. These are not failures of analysis. They are failures of detachment: the inability to see clearly because what you see contradicts what you want to be true. Genuine perception requires the willingness to let the territory correct the map, even when it is uncomfortable. Especially when it is uncomfortable.

I spent two decades responsible for markets across four continents. Some I knew intimately, others I had to read from a distance, through the people on the ground. The framework gave me the structure. The judgment came from everything the framework couldn't capture: the failures, the surprises, the moments where the obvious answer was wrong and only experience knew why. Methodology can be transferred in a document. Judgment cannot. That is precisely why it is worth more.

My first sales calls in Beirut were helped by the Made in Germany label. But they would have failed had I not been willing to go through the pain of changing myself first. The same is true for every company serious about international growth. The method is the easy part. The judgment to know where you really are, and the courage to act on that reading, is what decides everything.

If you recognized your company in any of this, the first step is a diagnosis. I have built a self-assessment tool that maps where your international business actually stands across the five categories described here. It takes fifteen minutes. It tells you where your real leverage is. You will find it at walid-feghali.com/kompass.