

HOW TO NOT DEEP-6 YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN

BY MARK HAEUSSLER

REQUIREMENTS OF FULFILLING ON STRATEGIC PLANNING ARE COORDINATION & COMMUNICATION

Delivering on a strategic plan is hard work. It requires the blending of abstract objectives with effective action. Bridging the hope with reality involves persuading a team as stakeholders in the outcome. At the core of this challenge are a number of factors that can derail this and yield an unsatisfying result. Coordination and communication are critical; after all, strategy and implementation are chosen by two different groups of people, boards and management, who are more separated than together. These two groups rarely *do* anything together, and at best they engage in conversation together. Psychology also plays a role in the success of implementing a strategy; it would be a major oversight to ignore how humans depend on much more than logic. We organize as much for social, survival, and meaning even more than we do to make the number in the lower right hand corner of the income statement.

Starting now and continuing monthly, leaders need to monitor this set of vitals in order for the plans to stay on track. These principles of leadership are found in strategic, high-performing teams:

1. Avoid becoming attached to unrealistic or old strategic visions. Are our visions well-grounded? And not just achievable, but *believed* achievable by management. Are we attached or *committed* to the objective? If the vision is an 'ultimate aspiration', is it drilled down into strategic initiatives which can become operable by management? Do we have the ladder up against the right wall? Pay attention to what needs to be let go, what is familiar (a very dangerous place), or what is trying to mirror an old success.

2. Develop executive consensus and accountability to strategic goals. Have we ensured that stakeholders are owners of the goals? There must be agreement with those who set the strategy and those who will implement the plan. Stakeholders need input and accountabilities to build ownership. Actions of each employee need to be in support of the strategic vision. Set clear expectations of who is accountable for what to be delivered by when. Use the accountability to measure progress and take corrective action, not to punish inadequacy. Feedback must be delivered in such a way to be heard and be actionable toward desired outcome. For the

organization to fulfill on its vision, the board and executive team need to fully embody the vision for the future and be in authenticity between thoughts, words and actions. Consent that is muted easily permeates an organization and is not compelling.

3. Develop highly effective communication and follow through. Do people at all levels and functions understand the goals and their part in them? Reliance on "top-down" directives does not allow for adapting communication or for feedback. Instead goals must be framed in terms that are relevant to stakeholders and outcome-based. And are the people at the top listening to those deep in the organization? Are challenging conversations encouraged in all directions (up, across, and down)? Listen more than talk. Ask questions to drill down the potential in any suggestion.

4. Create management and system processes that support strategic implementation activities. What systems have been used versus what systems are needed for future success? What has been repeated so long that no one even knows why? Are reports or emails distributed to people because they always have been? Are you relying on an old success as a model for a new objective? Attention here includes reward systems, power systems and learning systems needed to move forward.

5. Balanced focus on inputs versus outcomes. More attention and focus on inputs rather than the desired outcome will create disconnection with vision and place focus in the wrong places. Planning, ultimately, is about producing a desired outcome. Listen for conversations that evolve to resources needed, processes, or tactics that do not have a commitment to a specific, observable result.

6. Developing the competencies needed to support the strategic initiatives. Bold ideas require that everyone learn something new, such as how to do new tasks, understanding new concepts, showing up in leadership in a new depth, or how to leverage communication more effectively.

Once an organization can see where they derail, it gives them a clear idea of where they may need to make a shift delivering on the strategic initiatives. This awakening of an organization's strengths and weaknesses in moving strategically is often the hardest part of the engineering in how an organization moves or fails to move. Once the area

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or areas are identified that need different attention, the team can adopt new practices in order to develop new effectiveness. A practice is simply a new way of doing things that is agreed to, and repeated, until a new level of proficiency is developed. Being in a new practice means being self-reflective of how well someone is doing in an endeavor, as well as being open to critical feedback regarding our performance in the new practice.

Below are possible practices a team could commit to in order to avoid falling into one of the traps. Practices can be simple, conventional, and innovative. The key to an effective practice is that it is easy to integrate into daily activities and it is something the team wants to support.

Emphasize Flexibility

- Let go of something. What one initiative could be forsaken? By letting go of one thing, there could be more room for ensuring another initiative is attained.
- Change an abstract initiative such as, being world-class, to something tangible, straightforward, and understandable.
- Create an assessment-rich culture, where people are encouraged and rewarded to speak their mind.

Building Accountability

- Reassess expectations; who is expected to deliver what, and by when?
- Negotiate targeted results with all the key stakeholders rather than directing outcomes.
- Create one or two values the executive team is to follow in order to deliver on the strategic plan. This is different than the corporate values; instead, this is an agreed to behavior system that everyone is working to deliver and welcomes feedback and accountability.

Increasing Communication

- Listen more than speak; listen at least twice as much as you talk.
- Seek out peer and team member discussions on the tough problem areas that are frequently avoided. Assure sufficient time is devoted to thoroughly explore these difficult problem areas.
- Ask at least one question that seeks to simply understand rather than problem solve when someone presents the concern.

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Increasing Process Management

- Ask the newest member on the team what process seems out of place or out of date.
- Offer a course or coaching to someone who is inexperienced at managing processes.
- Simplify, eliminate, or reduce a feedback processes, and see if anyone notices.

Focus Your Resources

- In conversations, pay attention to an over-emphasis on inputs versus outcomes. Most poor performing organizations tend to focus on input components while neglecting the desired outcome. With a renewed commitment to strategic goal achievement, the input is more easily generated.
- Evaluate all of the strategic initiatives to see if they are measured as an observable benefit. If not, change it or delete it
- Reward delivery to the plan, not to compliance.

Developing Competencies

- Ask each one of your direct reports, what is it you would like to learn this year to be more effective?
- If you hear the argument, times are too tight for training and development, push back. Keep in mind that when your staff is expected to deliver at a higher level, they will most likely require additional training, support, and know-how to meet their expanded responsibilities.
- Identify one competency that, if the team could be 20% more effective, would dramatically increase success or increase the ease at which people move toward success. Commit sufficient staff training time to learning that competency.

The art of effectively delivering a strategic plan directly correlates to the quality of communications between individuals. Success in a relationship, or a team, is directly correlated to the quality of communication. If your organization can develop competency in the quality of verbal and written communications, your strategic vision will be more readily accessible and more robust with increased integration and a blending of values, behaviors, and desired financial outcomes. The baseline common factor for success in your organization's strategic planning efforts is the ability, desire, sincerity, and competency to face the issues and communicate effectively.