

TOP TEN TIPS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING – and 5 CRITERIA

'Strategy' is a word that seems to be used very often at work, without really being truly 'strategic'! That may be because a robust, winning strategy can often be very hard to create. Here are some helpful thoughts to help you..

TIP 1 – Strategy Implementation is a lot harder than Strategy Development!

Some Boards work really hard to develop excellent strategies and then wonder why they fail. Successful execution usually requires acceptance and belief from *all* those who have to implement the strategy, not just its creators!

- Consider sharing your strategic deliberations with *everyone* involved in its implementation, invite their participation as appropriate - and at least their comments?

TIP 2 – Make it YOUR strategy!

External facilitators and advisers can add considerable value to developing winning strategies, through their objectivity, impartiality and willingness to challenge with integrity. But in the end, they can only facilitate.

- If the strategy is going to work, it must be *your* strategy, not your facilitator's. If *anyone* doesn't like it, they must be encouraged to say so!

TIP 3 – Take your time!

Creating a winning strategy takes time, requires research and development, and almost always iteration. Winning strategies are hardly ever 'created in a day'.

- Encourage your team to be patient, explore many options and withhold early judgment.

TIP 4 – Factor in the 'People' element!

Bright boards, with a keen operational focus and a firm eye on financial and market outcomes, often need reminding that they need to factor into their strategic thinking the 'softer' elements of strategy development to be successful. Not just the impact on employees, but other stakeholders such as shareholders, customers and suppliers of course (as 'people' as well as organisations), and the local community.

- Don't be shy about this. 'People' can be really good at sabotaging any strategy, if you don't consider and engage them!

TIP 5 – ... but don't forget the Action Plan!

Notwithstanding Tip 4 above, strategy development can only happen with time-bound actions and agreed responsibilities.

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- Because many busy people hate to volunteer a thought or idea if they think they are going to be landed with the responsibility for developing it, why not consider drawing up the Action Plan at the *end* of your planning session, rather than as you proceed? This will also help you make sure that the necessary actions are evenly and reasonably distributed.

TIP 6 – Focus on *Corporate* needs first!

It is only natural for individuals to consider the impact of colleagues' suggestions on themselves first, rather than the organisation's best interests – and still wonder whether others' suggestions may be based on *their* own personal interests, desires and aspirations too!

- In leading your organisation's strategy development, *demand* that everyone participating puts their own personal interests to one side, at least for the moment.

TIP 7 – Lift your eyes up from today's detail!

Members of functionally organised, operational and executive Boards are often most used to dealing with immediate issues. 'Dreaming and scheming' about how the world *might* look, in time still to come, does not always come naturally to many.

- So make sure your strategy development team is *encouraged* to look ahead, to lift their eyes above their immediate horizons, and to 'look around corners'.

TIP 8 – Break the Mould!

Winning strategies rarely involve 'doing what we always did' (because then, you 'always get what you always got!'). This isn't to say you shouldn't 'stick to the knitting' (thank you Tom Peters!). Rather, ask whether the way you 'knit', where you 'knit' and what you 'knit' is still appropriate, even whom you 'knit for and who should do the 'knitting'? (You may also even ask why you 'knit!')

- Note that a winning strategy often means doing things differently? (As does all improvement!) So encourage your colleagues to think outside the 'well-established'. If your Chairman or other senior influencers may not like this, or hold 'self-evident' truths that may possibly be worth an updated challenge, show them this document!

TIP 9 – Speak your mind!

Let 'group-think' be anathema to you? Encourage your 'rebels' and folk from 'left-field', the deep thinkers and the slow thinkers, *all* to have their say. First, almost certainly they will have something to contribute. Secondly, you won't ever know the truth of this if you don't encourage them!

- Think how easy it is to close down a comment you don't welcome, even by saying nothing! An arched eyebrow? A pregnant pause? A worried frown? Or even a light quip? A sarcastic remark? As your team's leader, don't forget you have a leadership role here!

TIP 10 – Apply 'Chatham House' Rules!

This means that not only may everyone speak their mind, they must! But what is said must allowably be kept private, 'in the room' and never elsewhere for future reference or attack.

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- Successful strategy development requires trust and respect, that each and every contribution is allowable (and probably valuable) - however unpalatable - and that it is inherently intended in good faith.

When you have agreed your emerging strategy, here are **5 criteria** for judging its strength. If it doesn't yet meet all of the following criteria, it will be well worth making sure that it does!

- First, is it sustainable?
How future-proof is your strategy? If it isn't sustainable for at least the next few years or so, you have probably created some great short-term tactics – but not a winning strategy.
- Second, is it flexible?
Can it be adapted and developed as circumstances and situations change, as inevitably they will? Do you even have a Plan B, in case Plan A doesn't work out?
- Third, is it transparent?
It needs to be as clear as possible for everyone who needs to understand it, and most especially those who have to implement it!
- Fourth, is it convincing?
Will those who have to implement the strategy 'own' it? – they will need to.
- Fifth, is it comprehensive?
Does it cover the *whole* organisation, and *all* that you do and wish to do? Strategies developed in smaller departmental silos, where one part of an organisation doesn't talk to others, rarely work out well.

Finally, here is one extra tip for you. Don't forget that strategy development is almost always iterative. Once you have completed your strategic deliberations, that doesn't mean to say the job is finished! Not only might you want to go back over your brand new strategy, to make sure that all the relevant components are coherent and inter-lock. You will also need to re-examine and update your strategy at regular intervals.

I wish you all good fortune!



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