



Look Both Ways Before You Plan: Strategic Thinking Guide

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Strategic Planning

Every year organizations embark on the ritual strategic planning session to identify goals and the steps to achieve them. All too often these planning sessions end up reflecting yet another iteration of “doing what we have always been doing.” This works from the standpoint of “if it isn’t broke don’t fix it mindset,” but doesn’t create opportunities for thinking out of the box and strategizing new pathways to achieve high performance results. Successful strategic thinking requires looking backward and forward at the same time, often requiring letting go of what you know, to allow room for what you don’t know. “What if” scenario planning, brainstorming sessions and future focused research provide the foundation for creative, out of the box thinking and strategy. One can only imagine the discussion inside the offices of Southwest Airlines when they made the strategic decision to hedge the price of fuel by locking in their fuel price back in 2004. They did not have a crystal ball but used careful future-focused strategic analysis. What were all the other airlines thinking?

Strategic Thinking

The good news is more and more companies are realizing the value of strategic thinking. Voices of innovation and change can be heard echoing in the halls of companies like GE and Proctor & Gamble. In an August 2005 Business Week article author Bruce Nussbaum suggested “the knowledge economy, as we know it, is being eclipsed by something new-call it the creativity economy.” (How To Build Innovative Companies, page 62) The outsourcing of high-end service jobs, and manufacturing has shifted focus to how are companies to compete in today’s global marketplace? According to this

Business Week article a new core competence called “creativity” is required to elevate an organization’s ability to successfully compete.

As a management consultant, specializing in strategic thinking, I have long witnessed leaders grappling with the tactical requirements to get the job done and finding the time to think strategically. Tactical soldiers are born every minute in the hierarchical, results focused organizations surviving today. This is not because organizations and the people working in them do not want to think strategically but because they can’t find the time and don’t know how! As decision-making is being shifted further down the organizational food chain, leaders not sitting in the ivory towers with all-the-time-in-the-world- to- strategize are required to think differently, to improve processes creatively and to get the job done!

Making the Shift

What is required to make the shift from a tactical mindset to a strategic thinker?

Although there is no one magic bullet there are five key steps to begin moving into the strategic thinking, innovation conversations.

Be tactical in your strategic thinking

Build strategic thinking into your daily actions and mindset. Ask people to think out of the box. In your staff meetings develop a set of questions that push people to think differently- what if we didn’t do it that way

Believe there is more than one right answer

Everyone has worked with leaders who believe they have the only answer. People are bred to follow orders and get the job done. You have these folk’s heads not just their hands why not use them? Bring your folks together for strategic thinking sessions.

Take Risks

Rome was not built in a day and neither will your strategic thinking skills. Try different things to build your strategic thinking muscle. Make it OK for people to make mistakes. In the August Business Week article, Jeff Immelt the CEO of GE, said, “do things that aren’t just going to [produce results] this quarter.” (Business Week, August 2005 Page 68)

Build small wins with your innovative strategic thinking.

Get closer to your customers both externally and internally. Ask questions, listen, and teach your people to listen.

Learn from your mistakes

Create an environment where mistakes are learning opportunities not professional failures. It took Thomas Edison 1000 trials light bulbs to create the light bulb. Imagine if his boss said you have made three strikes and you’re out? Leverage mistakes into learning opportunities.

Celebrate Successes

Celebrate people who think innovatively! Don’t knock down new ideas and follow-through on those ideas that have a chance to win.

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