
Our reach should exceed our grasp, or what's a heaven for – Let's make strategic planning, strategic

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The slightly altered Robert Browning quote, above, is where I like to start the strategic planning journey. Browning urges us to dream big, to be expansive. Most strategic planning is simply too small in its ambition.

“You can’t shrink your way to greatness” – I love Tom Peters – and in his aphorism he urges us to plan for growth, to be relevant. I am not sure if Peters said “grow or die” but it sounds like something he would say and others should heed. All too often, however, I see organisations use strategic planning as an avenue to cost cutting.

Arguably the finest strategic planning ever undertaken was Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, the best statement ever spoken on purpose and vision. Lincoln uttered 272 words; that’s all he said at Gettysburg. It took four minutes and set the tone and direction for North America for the next century. That’s what strategic planning should strive for – to articulate a vision and purpose that sets the tone and direction for your organisation deep into the future. Strategic planning should do this in the following ways:

- Create a progressive, expansive vision for the future
- Build consensus and coalitions by including and tasking people to create the espoused future
- Inspire action and drive behaviour in pursuit of the vision of the future

Why do we do this? To quote Peter Drucker, **“The best way to predict the future is to create it”**. We all know the future will inexorably unfurl ahead of us, so we may as well try and shape it. This means being deliberate and purposeful rather than reactive and passive. Strategic planning should be about shaping our future. To paraphrase Lynda Gratton:

- If we do nothing we get a default future
- If we plan and take action we get what is known as a crafted future

A crafted future is all about being deliberate and purposeful. It’s self-determining.

Why is strategic planning so difficult? Well, for many organisations, articulating their ‘purpose’ is not something they ever turn their attention to. But understanding ‘why’ your organisation exists rather than ‘what’ your organisation does is critical if you want to truly engage your stakeholders and build sustainable relationships and performance. Many of you will have watched Simon Sinek’s TED talk, *How Great Leaders Inspire Action*. As Sinek advocates, “People don’t buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it.”



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This approach creates meaning and meaning drives behaviour – your own, your staff, your customers and all your stakeholders. This is what you want from a strategic plan.

Driving behaviour is crucial because it is not enough to just ‘lift’ people. A good strategic plan will also inspire people to take action. Therefore, the strategic plan must include processes for placing the vision into sustainable action – there must be a call to action. If not, the plan is just a series of aspirational slogans. Ultimately the strategic plan is only as good as the behaviour that it drives.

As Tom Peters says, somewhat tongue in cheek, get the execution right and it really doesn’t matter what the strategy is. Peters likes to talk about General Omar Bradley who led the Allied Forces during the D-Day Invasion of WWII. Bradley said, “Amateurs talk about strategy, professionals talk about logistics.”

Bradley knew just how critical the execution of a plan is. Unfortunately, most organisations don’t and that is why strategic plans rarely deliver the returns they hope for. Bradley understood what was important – the mission (or purpose) and then the logistics to realise it.

But let’s be clear, executing the plan, putting in place the logistics, realising the mission or achieving the vision, all depend on people. Tom Peters says that 65% of an organisation’s success depends on its people – how capable (enabled) they are and how passionate (engaged, aligned, motivated) they are to deliver your value proposition.

This is why Peters believes the number 1 mid-to-long-term growth strategy (or profit maximising strategy) available to any organisation is investment in its people – quite simply 65% of your success depends on it.

How important is this; well in the US Military, the person responsible for training and development is a 3-Star General. Compare this to most organisations where the function of developing people is placed in the hands of a junior manager or administrative co-ordinator. This does not seem sufficient. In fact, in those organisations that are flourishing, every staff member has a plan for becoming more capable and enabled to deliver on the organisation’s value proposition. This should be our benchmark.

But perhaps before any strategic planning happens you need to truly understand your organisational culture. Culture is not some nebulous concept – it is how you do things, what’s acceptable & what’s not. As the former IBM Chairman, Gerstner, once said, “Culture is your collective capacity to create value.” Your culture is the foundation that supports everything you do.

So it might be that your strategy defines your direction but your culture delivers your strategy. And here we return to your people – ultimately, how they work will define your success.



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