

Giving strategy some momentum

Ask ten people to define strategy and, almost inevitably, you will be presented with 11 answers – each of them different. This is unfortunate in today's fast-paced world where the right strategy, properly executed, may be the difference between failure and success.

The most succinct description of strategy at a meta-level answers three questions:

- Where are you now?
- Where do you want to go?
- How will you get there?

However, all too often, organisational responses to these vital questions are dry, anodyne papers that emerge from laboured strategic planning processes and gather dust on the desks of the senior team for a year or so. Then, with disdain and mediocrity, the cycle is repeated.

What a strategy *should* do, by contrast, is create a firm call to action in a collaborative way and in a clear direction. Good strategy can provide the organisation with steerage to address fast-paced change including many new and emerging trends, such as:

- instant, “blog-speed” competitor response;
- empowered consumers armed with choice and information; and,
- power brands, which can use trust to span industry boundaries.

Accepting the importance of good strategy, what characteristics does it have? Good strategy must first contain the essential ingredients of appropriate content set in the right context. Content tells us what is important and context tells us why.

A healthy balance of content and context addresses the commercial realities of markets, customers and competitors, but importantly, it explains the management reasons why this particular focus is endorsed.

Thereafter, good strategy creation comes alive and focuses on principles, behaviour

and deeds. These elements provide responses on how to realise the strategy but are often overlooked by strategists and leaders alike. Crucially, they supply the means to ignite action and build organisational momentum. Achieving strategic momentum is fundamental and boldly displaces the business mantra of seeking buy-in. Obtaining buy-in is effectively a pipe dream because it assumes that the strategy is 100 per cent accurate, is communicated with 100 per cent effectiveness and is implemented with 100 per cent efficiency. Momentum, however, suggests the

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essence of the strategy is communicated and that the organisation is supplied with the guiding tools of principles, behaviour and deeds to implement it effectively.

Principles are overarching statements that describe how things are done. A proper principle will look a bit like the adage: “Everything in moderation, nothing in excess.”

My favourite example of principles at work was a customer service issue. The CEO and I recognised that immediate action was needed to refocus the customer service effort. We gave finance and technology teams strategies about call costs and service-level agreements. But to the customer service team we supplied only one principle: “Our service is like oxygen and a customer dies after three minutes without it.”

One phrase enabled an entire division to change its working style. Can your organisation's strategy do this?

Behaviour is the next characteristic in creating strategic momentum. Innocent's

playful health and Pret A Manger's passion about food are great examples of expressing behaviours to suit strategies. After all, you can't dictate a company's culture, but you can nurture behaviours that underpin the culture you want.

The final, yet perhaps most critical, characteristic of strategic momentum is deeds. A good strategy outlines deeds that strategists and business leaders must live up to and that will deliver success. Deeds are visible and repeatable manifestations of strategic backing by key players. Deeds are, in effect, the strategy in action.

Without a statement of deeds for the organisation to observe in the actions of others and without a management team visibly making progress along those lines,

there is no way to benchmark how quickly the organisation is ingesting the strategy. If people cannot see others getting involved, they will be reluctant to participate. A strategy without participation is of no value to anyone, except possibly the competition!

So how is this type of strategy created? It is important to have the means in place to regularly test and challenge the strategy as a complement to existing processes. Every organisation needs a few impassioned people who are empowered to challenge the current view. Their role is to ensure the issues that are usually taken as given are subjected to deeper investigation.

The end result is definitely worth it – a rich strategic direction, a set of appropriate implementation tools, significant organisational momentum and the inbuilt flexibility to embrace strategic changes when required.

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