What is the state of your strategic plan?

- Do you keep your strategic plan all to yourself?
- Was it created by you alone or through collaboration with your team?
- Do you keep it on a bookshelf or in a drawer—or worse—a computer file?
- Is it pulled out every now and then and discussed at a small yearly gathering and then filed away?

If so, your strategic plan is probably not effective in helping you to grow and maximize the value of the business.

The obvious question might be, “Then what needs to happen to make the strategic plan effective?”

Effective strategic plans are a product of your teams’ best thinking combined with that of your advisors, your customers and other outside influences.

They become part of the DNA of the company. They are well understood and institutionalized. Everyone knows what they need to do to achieve the plan and how their performance will be measured and rewarded.

**True Story:** As an organization development consultant, I am frequently asked to review strategic plans. One of my favorite strategic planning stories has nothing to do with strategic planning—it has to with the strategic plan itself. On an initial visit to a former client, a family-owned plastic manufacturer in Los Angeles, I asked for a copy of their strategic plan. The president looked up to the ceiling and down to the floor. A friendly frown formed on his brow. He murmured “hmmmm”, smiled and then added he had no idea where it was kept. His assistant returned nearly forty-five minutes later with a beautifully bound red leather document sporting their company name and logo in gold lettering. “Where was it?” I asked—expecting that it was in the hands of a manager, a team leader, or perhaps in the board room. I will never forget her answer: “Oh, I just found it—I forgot that I locked it in one of the file rooms. I was afraid someone would steal the binder.”

I probably don’t need to tell you what my first order of business was with this particular client: we made 120 copies of the strategic plan, scheduled a company-wide meeting to introduce the plan to everyone, and put the binder back in the filing cabinet.

My client was not a terrible leader; in fact he was instrumental in revitalizing an area in the company’s east L.A. neighborhood. He added day-care facilities and language classes to the plant. Frankly, he was ahead of his time taking advantage of employee enrichment programs such as flex-time, after-school tutoring, and corporate community service. He was an effective leader in many ways. He valued his family business and made it a vital source of strength for his employees and community. However, he did all of this hard work by himself. He worked on average more than 60 hours a week. He was a leader who marginalized his own strategic plan by keeping it hidden away. He didn’t realize that the strategic plan would be more effective in moving the business forward if it became a living document that served as a daily playbook for the team.
After the managers and employees “met and embraced” the strategic plan, the organization became less paternalistic, more collaborative, and genuinely empowered. Managers matured in business leadership as they referenced the plan to guide their thought processes for establishing departmental procedures, decision-making processes, and best practices. Employees empowered themselves as they used the plan to collaborate with their managers and team leaders to stay on course during each business day. Ideas poured in to senior management on ways to reduce costs, expand production, or create new markets.

There was another bonus—an unintended, but desired outcome—the heirs (senior management) to the business saw that the company’s well constructed—and well communicated—strategic plan created focus and freed up their time to work on expanding the business, increasing their industry knowledge, and taking much-needed vacations. Managers and employees were now motivated as “owners” of the strategic plan—to guide them through day-to-day operations. The company no longer required the constant vigilance of the solo strategist to flourish.

Quick Tips to Make It Their Strategic Plan Not Yours

1. Create and discuss the plan with every member your leadership team. Solicit input from all employees. Invite candid discussion and debate. Some organizations offer workshops to help employees internalize the information and apply it to their jobs or departments.
2. When you are ready to roll it out, implement with precision. Make sure that goals are understood and that they are measureable. Link your performance management, employee appraisal and reward/recognition processes to the strategic plan goals.
3. Set a financial budget that supports the plan and allocate resources accordingly.
4. Hold quarterly reviews with your leadership team to discuss status on achieving the plan, priorities, risk, next steps, etc
5. Make sure that the strategic plan is dynamic. If there is a major shift in the market or the conditions of the business determine if the plan needs to be modified. Be nimble and move quickly.
6. Celebrate business successes and link them back to the plan. Acknowledge how its direction paid off—and will pay off time and again.

When you follow these tips your entire team will become stakeholders in the strategic plan. It will become the GPS for the business and bring it down the road to growth.

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