



Getting to the "Real" Work

As a youngster, I took art lessons, working in oils. (I wasn't very good, but my parents had high hopes!) At the beginning of each new project, we would first sketch our subject's outline and prominent characteristics in charcoal (and sometimes take a sleeve and erase in order to re-sketch to get it right). Then, we would go over the outline using a light wash of a burnt umber or another dark paint color to set the design. Only once those preliminaries were done did the "real" painting start. That's when we got to add what ultimately would be seen by the public – the color, the shadows, and the texture.

Strategic planning is very similar to the artist's preliminaries. It's identifying the subject, working and reworking the sketch until it captures just what the artist's eyes see, and then lending a bit more structure to the framework by recording it as a plan.

But, just as my not-so-great works of art were incomplete at the brown outline stage, the strategic efforts of an organization or an individual do not end when the planning meetings are over. Ah, in actuality, that's when the "real" painting starts.

We complete our three-part series on Strategic Thinking this month by looking at the top five reasons many strategic planning efforts fail. And, as you might guess from my trip down memory lane to my artist days, the reasons all relate to giving short shrift to the *real* work.

I hope this month's edition of **EA Insights** helps you to accomplish more of the results you desire!

All the best,

June

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Strategic Thinking (Part IIB): The Top 10 Reasons Plans Fail

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Quotes

"Great companies have high cultures of accountability[.]"
~Steve Ballmer

"Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world."
~Joel A. Barker

"People will resist change when it's done to them, not with them."
~Ken Blanchard

"Successful people maintain a positive focus in life no matter what is going on around them. They stay focused on their past successes rather than their past failures, and on the next action steps they need to take to get them closer to the fulfillment of their goals rather than all the other distractions that life presents to them."
~Jack Canfield

"Accountability breeds responsibility."
~Stephen Covey

"[Y]ou've got to work. There's got to be a real work ethic that gets you better."
~Terry Crews

"Being busy does not always mean real work. The object of all work is production or

Kudos to you! You bit the bullet and completed a strategic plan for the upcoming year. Now, the big question is whether you will actually see the results anticipated in your plan.

In [Strategic Thinking: The Top 10 Reasons Plans Fail \(Part IIA\)](#), we addressed five of the snags that organizations (and, sometimes, individuals) face in connection with strategic planning. This month, we tackle the top five reasons.

Reason #5: Flawed Communication

Can you imagine a race in which the runners don't know the distance they are to run, there are no obvious course markers, and there may (or may not) be a prize awaiting the winner? Certainly, it would be difficult to train, get motivated for, and run such a race.

Yet, something similar happens in many organizations around strategic planning. Once a plan is developed, communication to the rest of the team is essential. Leadership must convey -- clearly, enthusiastically, and often -- the organization's direction, the strategy for moving forward, and progress in meeting the goals. Without such vital information, running the race is difficult at best.

Reason #4: No Multi-Tiered Planning

Many strategic planning efforts stop at the organizational level. That is, executives gather and devise a strategy that frames objectives and goals from an organization-wide perspective. And, that's an appropriate undertaking for that group. In order to achieve those high-level goals, though, the planning can't stop at that level. When effectively done, planning becomes multi-tiered.

Once the overall plan is in place, specific portions of the plan should be assigned to the organization's departments or teams. After receiving their marching orders, sub-units then develop unit-specific plans for accomplishing their assigned functions in connection with the overall plan.

Reason #3: Absence of Action Steps

This reason is closely associated with the development of unit-specific plans. Many strategy efforts fail because the thinking never becomes granular. Developing action steps (which is best handled at the team or department level) allows such targeted, granular thinking to occur.

Action steps are relatively simple tasks -- a telephone call, drafting and sending a letter, or researching a matter. Even though each step is simple, their collective value is immeasurable to accomplishing the underlying goal.

Reason # 2: Resistance to Necessary Changes

Last year was a rough year for just about everyone. And, it's very unlikely that many foresaw all of the twists and turns the year held. So, when things change, what happens to that brilliantly crafted strategy?

Achieving outcomes is more likely to occur when strategic plans are viewed as living and breathing documents -- not as images set in stone. Now, that doesn't mean that you keep moving the target to ensure that you hit it. However, because unforeseen circumstances do happen (as we so often see), planners should be prepared to regroup periodically throughout the targeted period. These ongoing sessions provide an opportunity to reassess direction, to strategize about the impact of any new situation, and to decide whether the existing approach still works or if appropriate tactical tweaks to the plan may be warranted.

Reason #1: Lack of Accountability

The top reason many strategic plans fail can be summed up in a single word -- *accountability*. Okay, it's really the lack of accountability, but you understood the point.

If planning is to flow into measurable outcomes, something has to happen between those bookends. That missing piece is action. Not *plans* for action...actual activity. Enter the need for accountability.

accomplishment and to either of these ends there must be forethought, system, planning, intelligence, and honest purpose, as well as perspiration. Seeming to do is not doing."
~Thomas A. Edison

"We need, first of all, for there to be accountability, for there to be somebody who is responsible for enforcing standards and holding people's feet to the fire."
~Jennifer Granholm

"The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through."
~Sydney J. Harris

"The man who gets the most satisfactory results is not always the man with the most brilliant single mind, but rather the man who can best coordinate the brains and talents of his associates."
~W. Alton Jones

"I think as a leader, you just take accountability. That's what leadership is. Leadership is taking accountability yourself and holding others to the same standard, regardless of what's going on."
~Jason Kelce

"[W]hen I have all the pieces on the table, that for me is when it feels like the real work begins."
~Jill McCorkle

"Results matter. At the end of the day, no matter how much somebody respects your intellect or your capabilities or how much they like you, in the end it is all about results."
~Nancy McKinstry

Consider accountability in three contexts -- organizational, executive, and staff.

For strategy to result in the desired outcomes, accountability must start at the organization level. Last month's discussion of unrealistic planning provides a good segue into the notion of organizational accountability. An organization first demonstrates accountability when its board or owners develop or ratify plans that are plausible given the financial, human, and other resources they have and are willing to invest in this effort. Accountability continues to be shown when the required resources and support are actually delivered.

Executive or managerial accountability also is a factor in plan success. Plans don't just complete themselves. Rather, every successful strategic effort must have a champion. That's the individual charged with overseeing implementation of the overall plan and possessing the appropriate level of authority to ensure its performance. It's the person who is responsible for monitoring and providing status updates on an ongoing basis and who can allocate resources (or, at a minimum, make a seriously considered recommendation for them) when necessary. It's the person who can cross organizational silos in order to advance the overall mission. And, it's the person who can, and is expected to, take people to task when they fail to follow through on their assignments. Without such an individual, momentum fades, coordination ceases, and outcomes are jeopardized.

Finally, for strategic plans to yield the desired outcomes, accountability must flow to the staff level. Every person has a part to play in completing the goals set out in the plan. Accordingly, it's critical to help staff understand the multi-level nature of accountability. Completion of the overall plan is dependent on the successful performance of each team which, in turn, relies on the effective accomplishment of individual tasks.

In a nutshell, many strategic plans fail because people stop with the easy part -- plan development. Successful planning, however, recognizes that creation of the plan is just the first step. It's only with plan in hand that you can move to the "real" work of ensuring results.

Has this talk about setting solid strategy got you thinking? If so, reach out to us at [Executive Advantage](#) for information about our strategic thinking support services for organizations or individuals. [Contact Executive Advantage today.](#)

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"Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and focused effort."
~Paul J. Meyer

"Collaboration is a key part of the success of any organization, executed through a clearly defined vision and mission and based on transparency and constant communication."
~Dinesh Paliwal

"Action is the foundational key to all success."
~Pablo Picasso

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."
~George Bernard Shaw

"Some confuse motion with action, words with deeds, promises with deliveries, excuses with results."
~Unknown

"A good follow-through is just as important in management as it is in bowling, tennis, or golf. Follow-through is the bridge between good planning and good results"
~Unknown

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