

WORKPLACE STRATEGIES

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Are Employees Part of Your Strategic Plan?

It is a little daunting for many of us to acknowledge that we have moved into the third quarter of 2008. This minor milestone presents an opportunity to revisit strategic planning initiatives and assess half-yearly performance. It is also a chance to reassess the role that employees play in the planning process, particularly if half-yearly results have failed to meet expectations.

The following article discusses the need for strategic planning and for implementation timelines that are reflective of the size of the business. It also suggests that organisations should consider involving all levels of employees in the planning process and provides tips for making the jump from planning to implementation.

Why is Strategic Planning Necessary?

General Eisenhower once commented that in preparation for battle, "plans are useless, but planning is essential". This well-worn quote could be subject to different interpretations, but it appears that the General recognised that the process of planning (and the exercise of thinking about plans) can often be more important than the plan itself.

There can be little doubt that Eisenhower's statement holds true for small to medium enterprises (SMEs), who operate in markets that make long-term planning difficult. It is the nature of the SME market that the participants need to be quick to adapt to changing conditions. The entry of competitors is a good example. SMEs must be able to react to start-ups, particularly when those start-ups arrive with new products or technologies. This need for quick response times often requires changes to strategic planning objectives; as the market shifts, so must the business. As a result, what may have appeared to be a well structured strategic plan in January 2008, now looks outdated and in need of substantial overhaul. As Eisenhower would no doubt agree, while the plan may be 'yesterday's news', the efforts put into the planning process remain crucial to an SME's success.

Large corporates struggle with efforts to change and their strategic plans must be cognisant of this fact. Think about what is required of a freighter to change direction, compared with a yacht. The challenges that bigger business face in reacting to change does not make the process of strategic planning any less important. Larger businesses must look further into the future during the planning processes. While many SMEs are able to implement their vision and mission through planning programs as short as 90 day-cycles, larger organisations may need between three to five years to achieve significant reform. The most successful of corporates take the process further than short-term crystal-ball planning and look past even a five year plan. They engage in 'scenario planning', a process whereby the business attempts to deal with major, uncertain shifts in their environment by planning for a number plausible, yet distinctive, future scenarios. Scenario planning has its roots in military strategy and was reputedly first adopted in the corporate world by Royal Dutch Shell, who successfully used scenario planning to avoid pitfalls suffered by their competitors in the 1970s oil crisis.

What Role Should Employees Have in Planning?

If you follow Eisenhower's direction and focus more on the process of planning rather than the plan itself, the mid-year review of strategic plans will also include an assessment of which stakeholders should be included in the planning initiatives.

Organisations traditionally limit strategic planning meetings to those at line management level and above, or for some organisations, simply the inner circle of senior executives. Few companies seek to widen the net when it comes to who participates in planning processes and 'coal-face' employees rarely get a change to contribute.

The unwillingness to involve staff in planning efforts remains perplexing. There can be little doubt that employees at the 'front-line' see opportunities for cost savings or business development that go unnoticed by managers, yet historically many companies have been better at suppressing employee ideas than promoting them. A glance at an always-empty employee suggestion box could indicate an environment that does not properly capitalise on the gains that can be achieved from involving employees in the future direction of the business.

The benefits of employee participation in planning processes must be appreciated on two distinct levels, what can be termed 'input benefits' and 'output benefits'. Input benefits relate to the positive contribution employees can make to the formulation of the strategic plan. Think perhaps of a sales consultant who identifies new products of interest to their employer's client base, leading to strategic plans that position the business as a leading innovator within their industry. Output benefits relate to the fact that employees who have been actively involved in planning initiatives tend to have a far greater commitment to the successful execution of strategic plans than employees who are merely informed of the plans and remain disengaged from their successful implementation.

Turning Planning into Reality

A half-year assessment of strategic plans should, of course, involve an analysis of whether the organisation has successfully made the jump from planning to implementation. Ask yourself these questions:

- Where is your strategic plan? Is it located somewhere for ease of reference, or has it quite literally been relegated to the bottom draw?
- How many of the objectives have been met thus far?
- Is anyone 'driving the plan' within your business, or have daily operational issues taken precedence?
- How often have you considered the objectives of the plan when making management-level decisions in 2008?
- What parts of the plan have been successful? What parts have not yet eventuated?
- Have recent factors, either external or internal, caused a need to re-evaluate the plan?
- Have your employees shown a commitment to implementing the plan? If not, why not?

If some of your answers to the questions cause concern, take comfort in knowing it is not too late to get the plan back on track. But you must act now. Here are some tips:

- Declare the planning process 're-open' and re-convene the planning group to assess half-yearly success.
- Consider widening the planning group; could employees hold the key as to why planning objectives have not been met?
- Review your implementation efforts; was the strategic plan widely understood in your organisation?
- Assess the big decisions made thus far in 2008 – did they come about by reference to the strategic plan or have you neglected to consider the plan when making major operational decision?

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Workplace Strategies assists organisations with planning by facilitating group sessions to formulate the strategic plan and by acting as an outsourced 'implementation champion' to drive the process from planning to implementation.

Workplace Strategies also provides employers with mechanisms for optimizing their employment relationships by holding (facilitated) group sessions with employees. These sessions can have a variety of purposes including for strategic planning, to search for ways to alleviate internal operational inefficiencies, to cure dysfunctional workforces or to bring about the smooth implementation of workplace change.

For more information see:

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