



PLANNING TO WIN

Arm employees for success with strategic thinking. By Steven J. Stowell and Stephanie S. Mead

In business, the job of strategic thinking has largely been relegated to senior leaders. And too often, people have been paid to function in the moment rather than prepare for the future.

But today's competitive world is one where all employees should be anticipating opportunities and threats, and managing strategies within their own scope of responsibilities. Just like the long-term success of the business, each individual's success is dependent on her ability to execute tactics and perform in the moment, as well as execute plans for all of tomorrow's accomplishments.

Strategic thinking alone isn't worth much if you don't follow through on

your ideas. The biggest obstacle between thinking about what you want and actually getting it is taking action.

As the ancient saying advises, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," so it goes with mobilizing your strategy. Use these suggestions to gain traction around your personal strategies and initiatives.

Principle 1: overcome fear of failure

Most people falsely assume that a lack of time is the biggest stumbling block to doing something that is truly strategic. In reality, fear of failure and of making mistakes is the first real impediment to progress. If you think that you are not going to make some mistakes, don't bother trying to be strategic. When developing formulas for future success, mistakes and setbacks should be part of the equation because they are inevitable.

It is likely that many of your short-term failures will help you learn the lessons needed to achieve the long-term benefits of your strategic campaign. These situations or tactical failures will enable you to make adjustments and create the resilience needed for the journey. The key is to leverage failure and treat it as a stepping stone rather than a show stopper. To do this, most people have to bridle their intense desire to be perfect or to be successful at every turn.

When NASA selects astronauts, the focus is on candidates who not only have experience and technical qualifications, but who also have significant experience with failure and have demonstrated the ability to recover after setbacks.

NASA leaders apparently believe that a person who failed but then got up and tried again is better suited for the work than someone who has not yet

mastered the ability to fail effectively. Be adaptable and flexible because failure leads to new opportunities and innovations. It certainly is not an ending point.

Principle 2: take incremental steps

Sometimes just the idea of doing something strategic seems daunting. To counteract the intimidation, break the strategic initiative down into incremental parts and concentrate your energy in these areas.

The best thing you can do is attack the high-priority or the high-payoff elements of the strategic initiative. It is very easy to get excited about the new directions in which you are taking yourself or your team, and you may be tempted to undertake too many actions.

It is far better to select a few strategies that you can legitimately sustain rather than tackling a lot of activities that are poorly supported due to insufficient time, energy, or money. Military strategists understand this better than anyone—you don't want to pick a fight you can't win. Instead, approach each task you have selected with overwhelming force and concentrated effort to win decisively.

Principle 3: make a commitment

A worthy strategic target should be internalized to the point where you don't have to think about its value and merits. It should become a part of you and what you are about. Your commitment to it means that you are neither afraid to talk about your strategic ideas and plans, nor apprehensive of second guessing by others who are less courageous or visionary.

Once you have made a decision to do something and you really believe in it, amazing things can happen. When others around you begin to sense your intentions, you create a magnet for good things, and people become aware of your resolve.

A sense of commitment does not guarantee that everything will come together perfectly, but it does mean that you are resolute and determined to succeed through the long haul.

Principle 4: pick up speed

A successful track coach once told us that you can't teach speed. In some situations, that is probably true, but in our interviews and workshops, we have observed that strategic people know when to take their foot off the analytical brake pedal and accelerate toward the target.

This doesn't mean that you need to recklessly accelerate through every part of your action plan. It does however mean that you can selectively prioritize the high-leverage strategic activities that you can afford to do now.

The idea is to move out rapidly in these areas and put some important aspects of your plan of action in gear. The worst thing you can do is sit back and wait for the ideal moment to launch the quest. Fast action demonstrates to others who may be waiting or second guessing that you are ready to make a difference.

Principle 5: be responsive

As you mobilize your strategy, you will regularly use your knowledge, experience, and information to identify when opportunities and threats arise. It is easy to get so caught up in and committed to the specific plan that you lose the flexibility to make small or even large adjustments along the road. Be ready to adapt and respond so you aren't delayed by road blocks. Improvise and be creative in response to the variety of circumstances you encounter.

You can also collaborate with others and create synergies with key allies. By continuously measuring and monitoring your progress with quantitative or qualitative data, you will know right away if you are on track or if you need to make some adjustments to your methods or target.

Principle 6: demonstrate resolve

As you begin your strategic odyssey, you must have the internal discipline and fortitude to stay cool and persist over time. It is easy to get overly ambitious and bite off more than you can chew. Size up the specific task or activity, and realistically allocate your resources and resolve to sustain the entire implementation process.

Once you chart your course, it is then time to finish the task. Without question you will experience trials and reversals along the way to your solution or target. A strategic target is never achieved unless there is drive and follow-through.

Principle 7: instill teamwork

The battle of Waterloo began when the French engaged four attacks against the British army. The intent was to weaken the center so the French could break through. However, the attacks by the French failed because there was a lack of coordinated teamwork between the French infantry and cavalry. With most strategic endeavors, both the coordinated effort and the assistance of others are required to fully carry out your strategy.

If successful execution requires team members and partners, you will want to gain commitment to manage resistance from these central players and build a common understanding of your strategic vision. Value your allies and partners. Set them up for success so that they, too, can deliver success for you.

When it comes right down to it, strategy only works when it is implemented. Mobilization is simply putting the plan in play piece by piece. Successful strategists have their minds locked in, are determined, and are ready to apply discipline to their routines to make room in their lives for strategy. They reflect the attitude that they would rather perish on the strategic battlefield than continue to plod away in the world of the routine.

Don't let mobilizing toward a strategic target fool you or let the future scare you. The future isn't as far away as you think. Let these ideas help you as you chart your voyage.

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