

THESE SIX SUCCESS FACTORS
WILL STRENGTHEN YOUR PLANNING EFFORTS
BY WARDING OFF THE SIX ENEMIES
OF STRATEGIC SUCCESS.



Steps to Strategic Success

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BY ROGER KAUFMAN

Strategic thinking and strategic planning require more than good intentions. Mindsets, approaches, and systems must be aligned for the success of the organization and its members.

Six barriers, or enemies, can impede successful strategic thinking and planning—even if only one of the six is present. Fortunately, six critical success factors can help organizations overcome the enemies. The success factors are simple and straightforward, and they can measurably improve a company's strategic planning and thinking capabilities.

1. Focus on results

The first enemy of strategic planning is a focus on methods, means, resources, and activities.

Most businesspeople are doers. They pride themselves on getting things done and making things happen. Solution-oriented planners—purely process people—begin planning with a solution in mind. They automatically focus on how to do jobs before they ask if they have targeted the right jobs in the first place.

Solution-oriented planners start by selecting means and methods, while assuming that the objectives are cor-

rect and useful. Such an approach usually wastes time and money. It's similar to automating the production line in a slide-rule factory or teaching total quality management to employees who make asbestos insulation.

Critical Success Factor 1. What's the remedy for Planning Enemy 1? Not surprisingly, it's Critical Success Factor 1—differentiating between ends and means, or focusing on *what*, not *how*.

A focus on *what* is essential to being strategic. Everything else in successful planning hinges on distinguishing ends from means. Ends are results to be delivered. Means are resources and methods for delivering results. But it doesn't make sense to start with the means before identifying the ends and ensuring that they are worth pursuing. Means-focused planning encourages us to develop and apply some very neat solutions. Unfortunately, they don't tend to solve any known problems.

Objectives should target ends. Results—what we must accomplish—should take center-stage in strategic thinking and planning. The only sensible way to select a means, a solution, a resource, or a method is by basing the decision on the results and payoffs we want to deliver.

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objective you develop, ask yourself, "If I accomplished this, what result and payoff would I get?"

An answer that identifies an end will target a result, consequence, or payoff. If that's the case, you're already on the right track. An answer that focuses on a means will target resources (such as money, people, equipment, or facilities) or methods (such as training, developing, planning, managing total quality, or benchmarking).

Suppose your objective is as follows: "to develop training for using computers in report writing." In this case, it does not target a result. The tip-off is the word, "training." Like most words ending in "ing," it is a means, not an end.

The next step is to ask yourself whether you differentiate between ends and means. Once you have the distinction clear in your mind, ask yourself what results you would get if you did develop and deliver a training course on using computers in report writing.

Push on the means (training) in order to define the ends you want. In this example, you might realize that what you really want is for technical personnel to prepare, without secretarial assistance, camera-ready copy of reports, which would be accepted at least 95 percent of the time by their supervisors.

That would transform your intention to the following: "By June 1, at

least 95 percent of the engineers, without secretarial support, will prepare properly formatted and supervisor-accepted reports." That statement targets the ends, not just the means of training.

How often do we jump right into a means (HRD, training, planning, communicating, or meeting) without clearly defining the results and payoffs to be delivered? A focus on ends will stop the first enemy—the selection of solutions that don't go with the problems. Selecting such solutions keeps us from exploring other opportunities that might be available.

2. Think on three levels

You've accepted the validity of Critical Success Factor 1. You know that you should be focusing on results rather than processes. Now the second enemy surfaces: the failure to realize that there are different—and equally important—levels of results.

When planning, the urge is to zero in on results exclusively at the level at which we are working. We assume that those results are the only important ones.

For example, as trainers, we write measurable objectives for specific job performance; we label them "learning outcomes." As corporate planners, we write missions for our entire organization; we label those "corporate outcomes." As new-breed planners concerned with societal respon-

Six Enemies of Strategic Planning—and Six Ways To Face Them

1. A focus on means rather than ends. Overcome this enemy by turning it on its head. Look at the *what*, not the *how*.

2. The failure to recognize the three different levels of results: micro (individual), macro (organizational), and mega (societal). Overcome this enemy by understanding the distinctions among the three levels and linking them together.

3. Written objectives that give a destination without supplying precise criteria for knowing when you have arrived. Overcome this enemy by preparing objectives that include measures of success.

4. Needs that are defined as gaps in resources or methods (means). Overcome this enemy by defining needs as gaps in results (ends), rather than rushing into premature solutions to ill-defined problems.

5. A mission that is practical, real-world, do-able, and achievable, without being focused on a vision. Overcome this enemy by defining an ideal vision.

6. Reliance on plans that are comfortable and acceptable. Overcome this enemy by pushing out of comfort zones and looking at where you should be, not just where you feel comfortable.

sibilities (such as safeguarding health or preserving the ecosystem), we prepare objectives and dub them "societal outcomes."

Referring to every variety of result by the same label is convenient and simple. It's also deceptive. It fogs the reality that accomplishments (or problems) at the societal level are made up of a series of carefully orchestrated and integrated results at lower organizational levels. "Little means" (or little resources and processes) deliver little ends. Those little ends are gathered together with other little ends to form means to larger ends. Those in turn combine to give us even larger ends.

In other words, larger ends are made up of a series of related smaller ends and means.

Let's look at an example. If we are with a mental health operation, some of the "little means" might include assessing a client's physical and psychological condition upon entry (a means). That action results in delivery of a correct client profile (an end). Another "little means" might be counseling, which may result in a client who deals with his or her phobia (an end).

Neither of these important but individual means and ends combinations is sufficient for a declaration of victory over mental health problems, but both are instrumental. The little means and ends are combined to become a means to a larger end: discharge from the mental program. But discharge—a larger end—alone is not enough for a responsible agency. Discharge simply becomes a means to an even larger end: the client's self-sufficiency in the worlds of today and tomorrow. Three levels of means and ends—all linked—are required for individual, organizational, and societal success.

Understanding the three levels allows us to orchestrate results as we move from societal outcomes, through organizational outputs, to individual products. Together, these effects form a results chain: Societal (mega) consequences are made up of organizational (macro) contributions, and these in turn are composed of individual (micro) contributions. Every organization should answer three levels of questions in

order to address the three levels of results:

▶ **Mega level.** Do you care about the impact and contribution your organization makes to society? (Planning focus is on outcomes.)

▶ **Macro level.** Do you care about the quality of what your organization delivers to external clients? (Planning focus is on outputs.)

▶ **Micro level.** Do you care about the quality of what your organization delivers to internal clients? (Planning focus is on products.)

Critical Success Factor 2. The critical success factor for disarming the second planning enemy is the use of all three interrelated levels of results (mega, macro, and micro).

When we couple the different levels of results, we help ensure that the ends and means at each level will integrate to provide positive and important payoffs for societies and clients. A successful organization is made up of interacting parts with a common purpose. Critical Success Factor 2 will encourage and create that synergy.

Here's how this success factor works. Imagine you are a dietitian in a health-care facility. You have to create a menu each day so that the cooks know what to prepare. Remember, as you learned when dealing with the first enemy, that cooking is a means, as are the ingredients you might use. Here are the three levels of results you could link:

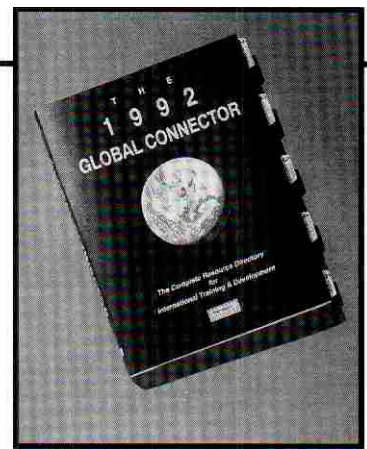
▶ A daily menu is a micro-level result.

▶ A nutritious diet is a macro-level result.

▶ People's health and physical well-being is a mega-level result.

We can identify and relate the three levels of results by asking ourselves the following question: "When I get this result, which level will it affect?" To do that, you can consider which of the three questions your result will answer.

For example, if the result will improve competence and performance at the building-block level (as would a high-quality circuit board or a report that is accepted by a supervisor), then it answers the question about the quality of what the organization delivers to internal clients. That puts the result at the micro level.



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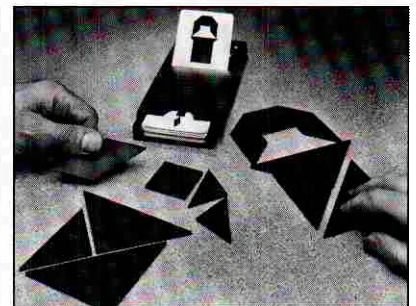
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Next, ask whether the result will contribute to answering the macro-level question, about the quality of what is delivered to external clients. At the mega level, look at the impact and contribution the organization makes to society.

If the result does not link with all three levels, it is likely to have little or no organizational value. Results

that don't make contributions at the micro, macro, and mega levels should probably be discontinued.

3. Supply a finish line

Organizations are fond of inspirational "mission statements." Consider the following:

- ▶ We love to drive and it shows.
- ▶ Better living through electricity.

▶ The best delivery system in the delivery system business.

▶ Quality—first, last, and always.

Such statements provide intent but supply no finish line, no signposts, and no markers for deciding what must be accomplished to get from here to there. How do you plan the steps to get you from the status quo to "excellence in automotive maintenance," or to "total quality is goal one," when no tangible results are stated?

If you want to get someplace, you had better know exactly where that someplace is. The third planning enemy, which can keep you from getting there, is written objectives that only state where you are headed without also supplying precise criteria for knowing when you have arrived.

Critical Success Factor 3. The third critical success factor is the preparation of objectives—including mission objectives—that include measures of how you will know when you have arrived at your stated destination.

All objectives should include the following elements:

- ▶ what result is to be accomplished
- ▶ who or what will demonstrate the accomplishment
- ▶ under what conditions the accomplishment will be observed
- ▶ what measurable criteria will be used to determine accomplishment.

Don't include how-to-do-its in an objective. Many people have been taught how (a means) to write objectives. But most are not very good at it (the ends don't measure up). One flaw in current objective-writing practice is that the statement of how an objective will be met is often given before the targeted results are defined. Such an objective might begin something like this: "Using computer-assisted instruction, the training department will..." Selecting "how" before you know "what" is wasteful. It also violates Critical Success Factor 1.

Even mission objectives—statements of where your organization is headed and how it will know when it has arrived—should employ Critical Success Factor 3. A useful declaration of organizational purpose is one that is specific about where the company is headed and how it

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will know that it has arrived.

Like any other objective, a mission objective provides direction and destination. A useful recipe starts with a mission statement and adds measurable criteria. The result is a mission objective.

"Quality in everything we do" is motivational, but it doesn't say how we will measure quality and what will be included in "everything." Add some criteria for success (such as "Our organization will win a Baldrige Award within two years; will have repeat sales to at least 99 percent of our customers; and will contribute to a clean environment, winning a Department of Environmental Affairs 'good citizen award' next year and every year.")

4. Know that needs are nouns

Planning Enemy 4 is an incorrect definition of our needs. This enemy defines a need as a gap in (or lack of) resources or methods (means), rather than a gap in results (ends).

Advertisers scream at us, telling us of the things we "need." We "need" to purchase an imported car (you name the brand). We "need" a certain toothpaste. We "need" to take a vacation to Bangladesh.

People are constantly telling us what we "need" to do. We, in turn, prescribe to others ("You need to use my training methods," or "You need to get me coffee").

When we use "need" as a verb, we limit ourselves in two ways:

- ▶ We foreclose on our options by selecting means before defining desired ends. We don't give ourselves the opportunity to be creative about ways to meet the needs.
- ▶ We rush into selecting means, resources, and how-to methods—before knowing our desired ends.

Critical Success Factor 4. The English language is very accommodating. It allows us to be precise when we want to be; it also lets us waffle when that better suits us. But words are important. When planning, if we want to identify worthy ends in order to connect them with effective means, then we should use "need" to define a gap in results, not a lack in means or resources.

And that is the fourth critical success factor: defining need as a gap

One Organization's Vision

A large health and human services organization came up with the following ideal vision:

"We will build a new and positive direction for our state and a bright world for our people. Our government will work by giving direction and support for self-healing and by rewarding self-sufficiency. Communities, families, and people in difficulty will rehabilitate themselves. People will take charge of their lives.

"The cycle of intergenerational welfare dependency will be broken; shattered families will mend. Families will be responsible for their children. Crime and social dysfunction will be prevented and our streets will be safe to walk. Our economy will grow, and every citizen will contribute to his or her own well-being and that of others. Disease will disappear and air and water will support all life.

"The department's mission, in the immediate and long-term, will be nothing less than providing individuals, families, and communities the assistance necessary to achieve this vision."

between current and desired results, not a lack of resources.

When we care more about results than means—more about what than how—then we define success in terms of accomplishments and contributions, not effort and expenditures. When assessing needs, we define the gaps between our current results and payoffs and our desired ones. To use "need" as a verb is to prescribe solutions (such as training, or even strategic planning) that might not meet the needs and close the gaps in results.

5. Aim high

The fifth enemy of strategic planning is a perspective that focuses on a mission that is practical, real-world, do-able, and achievable, and avoids first identifying a dream or ideal vision.

Many planners protest that people will deride them for being impracti-

cal if they focus on ideal visions.

"We all know there isn't enough money, and never will be," they insist. "We can't get employees to worry about anything more than their paychecks. Executives won't think beyond their bonuses. Besides, a two-year planning horizon is already too far. Let's not get misty-eyed and Utopian."

Using such rationalizations might be an attempt to remain firmly within one's comfort zone. It may be a way to avoid setting our sights on distant visions in fear that some fool—and there always will be at least one—will try to hold planners and executives accountable if we don't get there. But all of us will live the rest of our lives in the future. Why not plan to make it a successful one?

The let's-be-practical argument also ignores the fact that an ideal vision is not the same as a mission objective. The ideal vision only sets the ultimate direction toward which all strategic and tactical planning will head.

If the ideal vision—the preferred distant future—is not set, we won't even know which way to head. We'll limit ourselves to what we hope to get done based on today's perceived realities. A person's reach exceeds his or her grasp; an ideal vision should stretch our intentions beyond today's (often unacceptable) realities.

Critical Success Factor 5. Plans have to have an ideal destination. If we base our planning only on today's realities, we won't even think to develop new realities. We also will be locked into today's solutions—which may or may not be acceptable. People should override their fears and apprehensions and become free to envision new vistas. Use an ideal vision as the underlying basis for planning.

We can never reach an ideal, but it gives us the direction for our first steps. We don't promise to get to the ideal vision. We identify it as our guiding star and relate our interim strategic objectives, in stepladder fashion, toward it.

Martin Luther King, Jr., had a dream. Walt Disney said that if we can dream it, we can achieve it. Without a distant dream—an ideal

vision—we limit ourselves to the here and now, or possibly to self-fulfilling prophecies of minor gains and the lowest common denominator. World competitiveness, real quality of life, and environmental and personal safety cannot be achieved without an ideal vision. See the box, "One Organization's Vision," for an example.

Ideal visions have much in common. That's because they speak to a preferred future, or a "perfect world" (as Peter Senge calls it in *The Fifth Discipline*, Doubleday-Currency, 1990). The ideal vision of a multinational pharmaceutical firm will be quite similar to that of a school district. Both will identify the kind of world they want tomorrow's child to live in.

6. Make waves

Reliance on plans that are comfortable and acceptable is the sixth planning enemy. Planners who are overcome by this enemy avoid making waves or upsetting anyone. They

understand where their daily bread comes from. Why upset the person with the checkbook? New plans may imply criticism. What's wrong with the way we currently do the work or deliver the product?

Why confront this planning enemy? One reason is ethics. As the old planning saw goes, "For every problem there is a solution that is simple, straightforward, understandable, universally acceptable—and wrong." Comfortable is not the same as useful or right. Why swap what is "useful" for what is "acceptable?"

Successful planning often requires rethinking old victories and challenges—the parameters and ground rules that have previously served us well. It often involves change, threat, and new directions.

Critical Success Factor 6. The sixth success factor is the willingness to move out of your comfort zone in order to define and reach useful destinations. The other five factors depend on this one. It lets you go beyond the known, the acceptable,

and the conventional.

If we do only what is comfortable, we might increase our efficiency—in reaching outmoded destinations. The world is constantly changing. Old ground rules, boundaries, paradigms, and frameworks will steer us toward what Peter Drucker alerts us to: getting better and better at doing that which should not be done at all.

Pushing our current comfort zones and identifying new objectives can bring success beyond what is merely acceptable. Heading in the right direction is less risky than continuing on an incorrect path that is more comfortable. ■

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