

Strategic Planning Makes The Difference

It is a universally acknowledged truth that every business needs strategic planning. After all, if you don't know where you're going, how will you know if you get there? True strategic planning provides focus and makes things happen. It charts a mutually agreed upon course revealing where your company is now, where it is going and where you want it to go (which may not be the same thing). Then by defining the steps you must take to get there, it leads to constructive change.

Unfortunately, the kind of strategic planning toyed with over the past 25 years has not been effective. Viewed more as an executive venture than an applied technology, strategic planning is usually remembered as an interesting but failed experiment.

Especially today, companies do not have the time or money to waste on planning diversions. Nor can they afford to allow big opportunities to pass them by because their leaders are overly focused on day-to-day operations and can't see the big picture.

In order to make strategic planning work the CEO must be dedicated to turning the planning process from a mere exercise into real action. First, top management must be willing to make a time commitment to strategic planning. Time has to be set aside for the development of a plan-and then more time must be spent on a regular basis to make it happen. If not, the plan will be incomplete or ignored under the pressure of day-to-day "fires" and other major business emergencies that crop up.

Top management also must encourage employees to be involved in it company-wide. Otherwise there will be no "buy-in" and may even be subtle sabotage by staff members who fear change and prefer the status quo. Without employee involvement, the plan is doomed and eventually becomes a dusty document lost in the back of the filing cabinet.

Strategic planning sessions that are held away from the office are the most productive. Under the day-to-day pressure of phone calls, meetings and constant interruptions, it is very difficult to be relaxed and creative.

In most cases, a two or three day retreat in a hotel, meeting site or other "foreign" environment is best-a new site helps everyone approach the process from a fresh viewpoint.

Working with an outside facilitator is also important.

Business owners who have attempted strategic planning on their own will be the first to acknowledge the need for an independent facilitator with no vested interest in the outcome of the process. Companies who use an insider may find the atmosphere lacks candor or can become bogged down in personalities and office politics. An outside facilitator will make certain that discussions don't turn acrimonious and provide for open and honest exchanges. He or she will ensure that questioning focuses on results-oriented considerations, that results are recorded and communicated throughout the management team. Sometimes the facilitator even serves as the CEO's alter ego in strategic matters.

The ideal facilitator understands management concepts and tools thoroughly because he or she will become a tutor to top management. Sometimes it will be necessary for the facilitator to confront managers and keep them focused on appropriate issues.

Those attending the strategic planning sessions are usually not well-acquainted with strategic concepts and techniques, but are decision makers within their industry.

A workshop session consisting of lectures, application guides and personal counseling by the facilitator provides a chance to learn by doing. This permits the managers to challenge their existing strategic framework and experiment with new behavior. More importantly, the process demonstrates the CEO's commitment to strategic management and change.

All those involved in strategic planning must remember that it is a process. This process is not an end in itself but continuously sustains the goals and actions that are vital to the success of a growing, healthy business.

Reaching long-term goals obviously takes time, but it is exciting to visualize and identify the direction of your organization. Asking such "big" questions as "Why does your company exist?" or "What groups does it serve?" enables you to clarify your company's most important business objectives.

How do you reach your goals? Better than average companies use teamwork at every level and develop a vision, goals and tactics, then implement that plan and account for each step along the way.

George M. Noceti is a management consultant to CEOs of rapidly growing businesses. He can be reached at: g.noceti@att.net