

Avoiding Strategic Meltdown

A discussion on the application of strategic planning in an organization

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Over the past few years, it would seem that even the most trivial organizational task has suddenly become much more important (or at least impressive) by the addition of the adjective *strategic*. No longer does a manager make a decision, but today he makes a strategic decision. A plan is not a plan unless it is a strategic plan. Now we have strategic marketing, strategic research, strategic growth, strategic cutbacks, and the day may soon be upon us when we will all be out having strategic lunches and washing our hands in the strategic restroom.

In the process of becoming popularized, the true impact of strategy has been diluted and, in the clutter, much of our ability to use strategic planning to accomplish an objective has been lost as well. So, let's back up a few steps and take a good look at what strategy is so we may be better prepared to use this process in our organizational planning and decision making.

The word strategy or stratagem comes from the Greek *stratos* meaning an army and *agein* meaning to lead. Strategy is total process by which one effectively leads an army or marshals one's forces to accomplish an objective. It is not static, or a thing, such as a plan, but rather represents an ongoing quality of leadership.

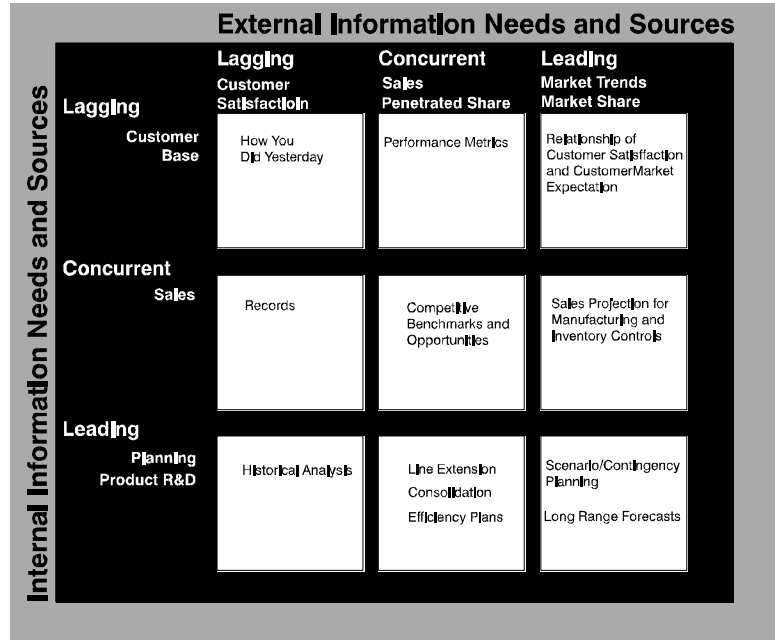
The whole purpose of strategic planning is to give you an absolute advantage! You don't use strategy to fight the battle, but to win the war!

Some of the best strategies are the ones which enable you to win without ever having to fire a shot. These are the ones we who provide strategic services love. They are the highest achievement in the strategist's craft. Imagine being able to finesse a victory or simply take uncontested ground.

The best way to understand the real meaning of a strategy is by comparing it to what it is not. A strategy is not a plan, no matter how well conceived. Neither is an objective nor goal a strategy. Rather, a strategy is a continuously adapting integration of both internal and external resources and opportunities.

In essence, strategy is the knowledge and communications component of management. We use the term “Corporate Information Infrastructure” to describe how this works. A basic model of this can be presented in the following chart, called the 3X3 grid.

The basis of strategy is intelligence or information. One could say strategy is the command and control network of management. It is dynamic and requires constant updates as both the external and internal situations evolve.



Strategy is HOW one achieves goals and the strategic process is applied to not only to the creation of plans, but also to the tracking, and adaptation or change of those plans, as they are implemented and even afterwards to assess results and impact. Strategy is separate and apart from any specific objective or result of the process. Strategy is a skill of continuous improvement and effective corporate leadership. In today’s business environment, one can never afford to lose that advantage.

And yet, with strategy being so essential to continued success, and everyone claiming to be contributing to a strategy, why do so many “stratagemers” fail? In fact, most fail.

One reason for this is that businesses, all too often, fail to carry the strategic process beyond the planning stage. In essence the moment they think they have a plan and make a decision, they stop applying the strategic process and lock themselves into a narrow or restrictive objective. They fail to continue gathering intelligence, key portions of the plan are delegated or assumed to be complete, and they adopt an invalid assumption that the world and their surroundings will stay put while they make their move.

Another common cause of strategic meltdown is that many businesses rely too heavily on outsiders to provide the strategic component in their decision making. This can be the most disastrous mistake of all. Who is running your business anyway? Strategy is a leadership quality. It must be integral to your management team. It must be your skill, not some outside expert’s.

Sure, it is nice to have a consultant to blame when everything goes wrong, but why blow it in the first place? If you really want to succeed, you must master the strategic process yourself, and continuously apply it to the management of your business.

Now is the time to introduce the services of Whipple, Sargent & Associates. As a note, this is our plan, which is part of our firm's marketing strategy, but not the strategy itself. The reason it is not a strategy is because it is a paper, a thing, not a process. If it were not effective, we would abandon it, but, as long as people keep reading it, and telling us how it has given them new insight on how to develop more effective strategies for their businesses, we will keep it available.

We call ourselves a "Strategic Services" company. Our mission is to help organizations achieve more effective leadership and decision making through the adoption of both the resources and the information infrastructure necessary for strategic planning and implementation. I have been working in this area since 1972 and was one of the founders of WS&A in 1987.

In various capacities related to the planning and decision making we have served clients ranging from individuals, political candidates and start-up ventures, to some of the world's largest corporations. Nearly all of our engagements are confidential, though there have been notable exceptions, such as work for governments and areas in the public interest.

What WS&A Provides:

While we provide a full range of research and communications services, WS&A's expertise is in delivering two critical components of an organization's strategic process - 1) the research curriculum, including market control data, and 2) the specification and design of the information infrastructure. In these two areas, WS&A's capabilities are almost unique.

In the area of research curriculums, WS&A helps an organization determine the appropriate research disciplines, segmentation criteria, metrics and methodologies to acquire the business intelligence necessary to make informed decisions. Most important, by establishing standard demographic or circumstantial controls through market research, all other research conducted by an organization can be fully integrated, compared and contrasted, so that all information can be analyzed in its proper context.

The second area of expertise is how all that research is organized, reported, distributed, and internally evaluated in relation to a businesses goals and capabilities. This involves the 3x3 matrix or grid. Here, we conduct an information audit of managers and decision makers to develop not only the reporting format, but how the information is distributed and the context for communication and decision making. Basically the application of the 3x3 grid gets everyone singing from the same page in the song book.

The combination of the two capabilities within an organization gives that company an absolute marketing advantage and a bulletproof insight on opportunities to dominate their markets, minimize risk, and maximize profits.

How WS&A Services are Delivered:

While WS&A does, on occasion, accept an engagement directly from a client, for very specific types of projects, including workshops, market surveys, and reports, the bulk of our strategic services work is provided through management consultants who work directly with you. The consultant provides all the contact and project administration. This is done for a very good reason.

WS&A's services are a one time investment for a company, which normally require from two to six months for us to complete. But, once we are done, our services are no longer required. It becomes a technology transfer and the company or client must learn to master the capabilities they have acquired.

A company's strategic planning function, to be effective, must be continuous, both in implementation and adaptation to the changing environment. It takes time to implement our program at all organizational levels and, once implemented, it must be continuously updated with new information. We have found that adoption of a strategic planning function is most effectively accomplished by a management consulting organization, with experience, in your area of endeavor.

WS&A services are represented, worldwide, by more than twenty separate organizations or specialized industry consultants. Additionally, we are always seeking new alliances and would welcome the opportunity to work with your existing consultants.

So, if you are ready to empower your organization with effective leadership and decision-making and want to avoid strategic meltdown, let me know. We can help.

Sherman Whipple

May 9, 1997