

Strategic Thinking

A look at the advantages of the right mindset

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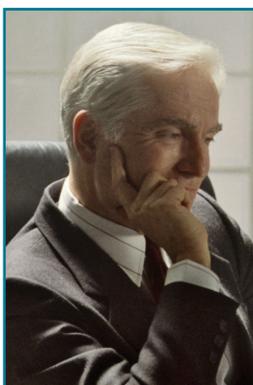
The reality of contemporary business life is that strategic planning and execution are among the most difficult jobs for leaders. It is much easier to be task oriented and pray for the best. Being task oriented is not necessarily bad. It is, however, shortsighted.

While a task orientation can yield tremendous revenue in a stable environment, it frequently misses the mark when the environment changes or competition increases. A task orientation assumes sameness. Nothing remains the same for long. As individuals we should not be the same as we were ten years ago. If we are we have slipped into unconscious obsolescence. The same is true of any enterprise; hence, the reason for a focus on understanding the benefits of strategic thinking. This article addresses the rationale behind adopting a strategic mindset.

The advantages of strategic thinking are many. It provides better guidance on the types of initiatives an enterprise should take to fulfill its mission. When an organization has taken the time to think about where it wants to go, it is much easier to plan initiatives that fuel progress. Consider this in very simple terms: An initiative developed in isolation is like a trip to a foreign land without a map or tour guide. While the trip may turn out to be quite an enjoyable adventure, it may not. It could easily be a waste of time, money and energy.

The same applies to companies that work without the guidance of a strategic plan. They may get where they are going and enjoy the rewards of getting there, but the likelihood is that they will not. These companies typically experience frustration and waste. The strategic plan reduces these negative experiences because it is a proactive tool that, by its very nature, guides the allocation of every resource imaginable.

This type of guidance serves another purpose. It not only guides the decision-making of senior management, it sets standards for managers working in the middle. They know that



there is a clear mandate, in the form of mission and strategy, that informs them how they will use their resources, manage the workforce and conduct business. This strategic information helps managers and supervisors plan their activities in accordance with a higher goal. The clearly communicated strategy retrains managers so that they are able to work proactively.

Leaders are more likely to be alert to the winds of change when they are working with a plan. Drops in production are quickly detected because at least one element of the plan probably addresses productivity. That element, if the plan is well-constructed, is attached to a measurement methodology. It is through these regular measures that leaders can spot problems before they become massive.

Understanding the role that a strategic plan plays in catching irregularities before they reach crisis proportions, it is easy to see the important role this type of planning plays in resource allocation. When leaders see subtle changes in performance or productivity, as the changes arise they are able to quickly redirect resources. These resources may be material, fiscal or human. This means that stagnation cannot become the norm because leaders are not asleep at the wheel.

The reverse is also true. When leaders are alert to consistently superior production they are able to use quick rewards and incentives to build consistency in that noteworthy work. The immediacy of positive feedback ensures continuation of desirable behavior. Since behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated, it is important to be keenly aware of any and all signs of stellar performance.

Strategic thinking, coupled with the resultant behavior, is the enemy of complacency. It is impossible to be complacent when thinking and acting with a forward focus. Strategic thinking ensures action — well-directed action that accomplishes aims. Many of those aims will be intentional, others

will not. This is yet another benefit of strategic thinking. There are always unintended positive consequences. Some of these consequences may include greater retention, easier recruitment or greater market share.

Strategic thinking provides the entire organization with a sense of unity. Leaders are constantly communicating strategy in operational environments.

They are able to connect the dots for every level of the organization. They can help employees make the link between what departments or individuals do with the long-term course intended for the organization. In addition to connecting parts as a whole, this communication helps to unify departments with one another. A leader who is able to communicate strategy is able to help employees see how well-integrated functions make the realization of that strategy more probable.

The most meaningful by-product of strategic thinking and

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action is the creation of a proactive leadership posture. This refocused attention propels the organization into new territory. This proactive posture keeps leaders from wasting energy on regrets and outdated modes of operation. It also grants them added credibility with the rank and file. Employees see them as capable leaders with vision and purpose. It is through this enhanced credibility

that forward thinking leaders are able to build a cadre of similar thinkers. This critical mass of strategic thinkers keeps the enterprise viable and victorious. ■

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