

4 Excuses to Avoid Strategic Planning

By Paul Plotczyk

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The time needed to develop a good strategy, i.e. a strategy that is both robust and flexible, is not trivial. When done properly, strategic thinking and planning will ensure the continued health of the enterprise. The challenge for leaders in today's resource-constrained organizations, is overcoming the excuses on why not to plan.

We have found that leaders will often use operational pressures to defer the activity. Here are the 4 most popular reasons we generally hear:

1. Time Constraints: This is the ever-present pressure of running the business and meeting the needs of clients and customers. These are the short-term tactical tasks and fire drills that interrupt plans in much the same way that answering the phone usually disrupts your train of thought.

2. Fire Fighting: This excuse goes something like "With all hell breaking loose, I can't delegate and expect things to be done correctly. There's no way I can make time for planning right now."

Often, the reality is that thinking through what the future may hold – with the myriad of unpredictable variables and all the added complexity it may bring - is often unattractive, tiring and "out of my comfort zone."

The real truth is that people often enjoy the tactical/firefighting elements of their job and don't want to give it away. It also provides a perfect excuse for not doing the work of strategic thinking. Additionally, the almost constant firefighting helps perpetuate the myth that the leader – often the founder entrepreneur – is the ONLY person who can solve the company's problems. This also limits the input of what might otherwise be productive, engaged employees who can contribute into solutions the enterprise needs to fight the fires or prevent them!

3. Shortsightedness: We are reluctant to allocate the time because we convince ourselves that if we solve today's short-term issues, then the long-term issues will take care of themselves.

There is no doubt that we have to solve the short-term challenges to have a chance at addressing the longer-term issues. Sadly, both time and competitors have a habit of sneaking up on us.

An analogy to our own health is appropriate: We are good at delaying a trip to the dentist until what would have been a routine activity has escalated due to neglect into a much more serious, costly and painful problem!

4. Illusion: Finally, we are fairly effective at kidding ourselves. Most of the leaders we have gotten to know well over our 25+ years consider themselves to be strategic thinkers. Indeed, some were, and some still are, but sadly many of them talked about it but actually didn't do much planning beyond developing an annual budget.

Not only does this represent a lost opportunity that their organizations would have been able to capitalize upon, but it also exacerbates succession issues. That is, the leaders were not modeling real strategic thinking and planning and therefore were setting an unfortunate example for others to follow.

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This is not to say these leaders were not great at their jobs and led successful companies. But we believe they could have been more successful had they actually taken the time and made the effort to think strategically.

Conclusion

We view strategy as the creation of a unique value position for the enterprise that differentiates them from competitors. This is the process an organization makes time for in order to think through and plan a strategic direction supported by a set of activities that are different than competitors, which -- when operationalized-- can deliver a unique mix of value.

Delivering on the promise of a strategy occurs via a business model which serves to outline how the enterprise will compete in a given market and the specific activities employees will engage in to ensure the enterprise positions itself "in the lead" among competitors. This requires that leaders meet the challenge of strategy creation head-on. Avoiding it is not really an option for those who want to survive and prosper.

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