Growth River
Guiding Business Evolution™

STRATEGIC PLANNING IS DEAD!

By Tom Lombardi, *Senior Consultant*

In a vaulted tower somewhere far away, an impassioned Chief Executive hunches over a thick wooden table, quill in hand. Dipping and writing, pondering, anguishing, he considers and writes the much anticipated company strategy. In the course of hours and days, his team holding vigil, he consults the eager wise men, visionaries, and gurus who come to posit their strategy wisdom.

After much travail, the CEO emerges, masterpiece in hand. Following the ritual Board meeting and blessing, the document is printed, bound, and embossed. Suddenly, a sunbeam splits the clouds and lights upon the tome. Let us all bow down! It's the birth of the COMPANY STRATEGY!

But lo, given time, the strategy is neither implemented nor executed. In fact it's never directly referred to again. The CEO and executive team return from their strategic planning session, full of intention, but soon meet the tyranny of "Monday morning" and evil Lord Blackberry (and his Wall Street henchmen). And so, the haloed plan makes its way to the shelf, beside the strategic plans of years' past. And the team's brief experience of vision and clarity fades away …. until the next strategy meeting several years from now.

OK, a little dramatic, but can you relate to certain aspects of this phenomenon? Have you invested heavily in plans only to see them, "take the shelf?" Is vision and clarity an elusive, rare experience on your leadership team? Does strategy elude you altogether?

The fact is, no matter how much we invest in plans, they arrive D.O.A.

WHY STRATEGIC PLANNING IS DEAD

There are several reasons why strategic plans fail to deliver:

1. *Many plans are immediately un-executable*. The organization lacks the infrastructure—an adequate, clear, system of roles—to carry out the plan. By the time this is recognized, the plan and any momentum it has created have withered on the vine.
2. *A lack of basic agreement on key issues* such as investment priorities, innovation focus, and keys to competitive advantage all can ignite parochial entitlements and power politics, driving strategic thinking far from the room.
3. *The speed of change* in market conditions, technology, and competitive landscape renders the plan irrelevant by the time it sees the light of day.
4. *It's easy to neglect or ignore* a plan (especially during times of stress and survival) as long as it's an "it" over "there" instead of a living agreement, between us, over "here."

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Plus, let's be honest. We all derive too much satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment from the act of planning. Plans can be imposters. Having invested heavily in them, we become too close, practically lovers, and spend our best energy promoting and defending them. This steals energy from executing the plan itself. We buy into the equation:

A. I have taken significant time and energy to do the work of strategic planning.

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B. I have a new vision and great intention. I will do what it takes to see my vision become reality.

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C. They (those I lead) will embrace the plan. It will be a success, come hell or high water.

What's missing in this equation is the critical factor that reflects the truth that *business is a multi-stakeholder social system*. And no matter how thoughtful, powerful, and prescient a plan may be, it's not the plan that inspires, motivates, and organizes teams, it's people. And it's not one person, but a team of people working interdependently toward a common goal.

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So I just returned from a meeting with an eight-member executive leadership team, previously stuck in a threatening transition, under enormous stress, and with no room for strategic thinking, let alone acting. This was the third, two-day strategic alignment session, and I felt a significant shift taking place on the team. Here is what I noticed as the meeting began to wrap up:

- There was a **new energy** in the room about the possibility that eight individuals could execute a strategy as one team, putting the team's best interest ahead of their own.

- There was a growing, even giddy, **confidence** that—having clearly identified specific constraints to growth and assigned an owner to each—the team could get immediately into action to resolve those constraints.

- There was collective **amazement** that the two top leaders would willingly push power and responsibility down to the team. Especially amazed was the unsuspecting, least experienced team member, who was given ownership of a new business, created real-time in the room, in response to a unique market opportunity.

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- There was a visibly **different looking CEO**, who alone had born the burden of growing the enterprise, as well as keeping the lights on, for some time. The monkey was gone from his back and had bred new monkeys who had come to rest on the backs of all team members.

- More than anything, there was **tangible joy and new motivation,** as individuals got clear about their roles and accountabilities. Two conflicts—really two elephants—were cleared up as a result. One veteran team member exclaimed to the CEO: "I have never known what you have wanted of me in my role until this very meeting!"

Does this scene describe your strategic planning meetings? Does each of your team members leave with this degree of clarity? Do they understand enterprise business and investment priorities? Are they willing to align to them? And are they equipped with the tools and mechanisms to stay effectively accountable going forward?

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Here's the key to creating effective strategy:

> *Approach Strategy as a process and understand that real leaders are busy creating conditions (not just plans) to support the process and make growth inevitable.*

There are *seven conditions* you must satisfy in order to create an organizational mindset and culture that embraces strategy as a process. These seven conditions set the stage for *Strategic Alignment*.

Condition #1

Roles and accountabilities on the team are clear and team members empower themselves to play their role, full-out.

Condition #2

All members of the leadership team own both the outcome and the process of strategy-making. Every team member is a strategist. There is no one on the sidelines, no place to hide, and therefore no victims.

Condition #3

All members of the leadership team are on the hook for the growth and evolution of the enterprise. They see themselves as the source of the results the organization envisions.

Condition #4

All members of the team advocate freely and passionately given the perspective of their role. Conflict is seen as a path to innovation and evolution.

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Condition #5

The best available ideas and tactics are surfaced and adopted, with speed. Prevailing politics are not allowed to stifle a compelling atmosphere.

Condition #6

All are responsible for the professional development of all others. Team members practice a candid, authentic, de-personalized communication style that gets quickly at "the truth."

Condition #7

The natural "flow" and process of business growth and evolution is felt and understood. When it feels like the team is swimming upstream, any fear, doubt, or scarcity that enters the room through one or more individuals is dealt with as those individuals take responsibility and change their mindset and language.

So let's rerun the opening scene. Yes, there is a CEO pondering and anguishing. And yes, there may be wise men and gurus milling about. We can even stand to emboss our strategy document (as long as we can make updates along the way). But the team is not holding vigil. There is no tower. The CEO is not alone, but one member of an interdependent, high performance team.

Further, it's clear to all, that strategy is a process owned by all members of the team and executed under the conditions described above. To be sure, the habits and disciplines associated with the Strategic Alignment process are trained into a team over time, but it all starts with the expectation that strategic plans will never do the job that conscious, evolving team members are meant to do.

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