

STRATEGIES

If you're determined

To get there

First

First determine

Where

You want to get

Do you have a plan?

We all know the importance of planning, yet despite that fact remarkably few have a clear plan.¹

“It’s in my head” is a common response. Which means that what is in your head will be different to what is in others’ heads. Meaning that while you may think you are aligned, in all likelihood you will not be.

This lack of clarity goes even further. The reality is if your plan is in your head, chances are even your own actions are not fully aligned with your intentions.

Strategy in Action

ALIGNING STRATEGIES

How clear are the plans that exist only in our minds?

Here is a simple experiment to find out.

Think of something that it is important to strategically achieve specific results for, that you do not have a written plan for – yet. This might be an overall business plan, a work project, a career plan or a personal project.

Get a blank page or document. At the top write the name of the project. Now in a single sentence write down the overall aim of the project.

Keep reading this only when you have completed that.

How easy did you find that? Did you instantly know the precise phrases to write down? You should do – after all, the plan is clearly in your head.

Or possibly not so clearly.

Chances are you realised your strategic aim was not quite as clear as you first thought. The way we hold intangible ideas in our head is very different to how they appear in a tangible written form.²

Thoughts in our mind can seem very clear while actually being quite abstract and fluid. The act of writing them out forces decisions to be made. It also better enables us to reflect – as it is easier to reflect on something that can be seen.

Now that was the easy part.

It is likely your plan involves other people. If it is a business or work project plan it is sure to, even if you work alone. If it is a career or personal project plan, chances are successfully achieving your plan will also depend and impact on others.

How aligned are your plans?

To test this, write down three important measurable time-bound goals on your plan – which means the line for each will include numbers and dates.

Keep reading this only when you have completed that.

Most likely this took longer than you expected. Particularly if you asked yourself, if I could only achieve three key goals with this plan, are these the right ones?

Which is where collaboration comes in. There is no need to decide if these are the right priorities on your own. In fact if you do, you will be less likely to achieve them as you have not yet engaged the aspirations and energy of others in your plan.

Avoid making the mistake most do – do not simply show someone else your plan, asking them what they think. As showing them something and the way you phrase your question will lead their response.

Instead ask someone to repeat what you have just done, without looking at your version. Just spending a few minutes to name the project using their own words, write what they think the major aim might be along with three important goals.

Now compare. This is where the real strategic planning happens – with the new thoughts and realisations your conversation provokes. I have worked this way with co-founders who have been surprised at how different their view of the future was – discovering greater possibilities as a result.

Develop a Memorable Plan

It is one thing to have a plan.

It is another to actually refer to it.

And another thing to be able to remember it.

All three are important. In isolation and together.

On the face of it, there might not appear to be any value in going to the work of creating a plan if no one then refers to it. It is definitely not the ideal outcome. However the act of merely (although it is never a mere act) creating a plan has enormous value on its own.

Much of the value of developing a strategic plan is in the process of developing the strategy rather than the resulting plan.³ The conversations had. Facts discovered. Differences explored. Actions decided.

This then highlights the importance of moving beyond discussion and investing time in writing down the plan. Otherwise actions decided will soon be forgotten. You can only refer back to a plan, if a plan actually exists.

At the same time, design your plan so that the core strategies are not only visible but also memorable. The reality of human nature means that it is highly unlikely that your strategic plan will be referred to on a daily basis – unless you design it into your daily systems and processes. Even then the tyranny of the urgent versus the important means that it is all too easy to unintentionally stray off the strategic track.

For this reason your core strategies need to be memorable. Worded in such a way that they can be easily recalled and used to guide prioritisation and decision-making. Given that strategy is a plan of action to achieve major aims, the major actions needed to reach your aims should be coded into the culture of the organisation. Culture is the beliefs and behaviours that shape an organisation – so if you want your people to believe in your strategy and behave in a way that achieves it, the plan needs to move beyond the page and into the hearts and minds of everyone involved.

To achieve this, your strategic priorities have to be simply memorable to inform action.

What do we mean by strategic priorities? Different organisations call them different things. Typically they might be referred to as your strategic pillars, themes, focus areas or priorities.⁴ Or potentially something else. Whatever you call them, they are a group of top-level concepts defining the major actions needed to achieve your vision and goals.

Juggle Fewer Things

If something cannot be remembered, it is unlikely to inform or influence action.

Think of it like juggling – the more strategic priorities there are, the less likely they are to be remembered. The less likely they are to be remembered, the lower the probability that they will be followed. Ultimately the greater the risk they will not be followed, the greater the risk you will not successfully achieve your goals.

If you have ever tried juggling, for most people keeping three balls in the air is the reachable limit. One ball is easy, two take some coordination, three take practice, four or more take extraordinary focus and dedication.⁵

In other words, more than most people will invest.

Otherwise it would be ordinary, not extraordinary.

So how to make your strategic priorities memorable?

One approach is to make them just one word each. Possibly starting each with the same letter – such as Demonstrate, Diversify and Deliver. With each having a fuller explanation that can be referred to. With the single words being action-oriented verbs rather than a passive noun, as strategy is a plan of action.

If you need to stretch beyond three memorable priorities to avoid compromising the complexity of the strategy, selecting lead words that form a memorable acronym provides a memory hook to help recall all of the priorities – such as the word LEAP recalling Leverage, Expand, Action and Progress.

Remember, memorable results start with memorable aims.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Increase strategic clarity by moving plans out of your mind into a written form.
- Build alignment with each person drafting separately before everyone compares aims.
- Much of the value of developing a strategic plan is in the conversations.
- Culture is the beliefs and behaviours that shape an organisation.
- Make your strategy memorable and actionable with focused strategic priorities.