

STRATEGIC PLANNING: GETTING IT RIGHT

Essentially, strategic planning appears simple enough. Just answer the questions, 'Where do we want to go?' and 'How do we plan to get there?' Make an analysis of current products, services and markets. Assess strengths, weaknesses and the business environment.

Generally, however, strategic planning calls for the kind of clear, objective, rational thinking that most of us would find inordinately difficult, especially when our careers are involved.

There are many common misuses of strategic planning including:

- Providing the company with a thinly-veiled means of control over line managers
- Preparing a public relations document that manages internal pressures, particularly those from head office, the Board or the Minister
- Establishing a bureaucratic process that enables planners to justify previous decisions
- Producing a political document reflecting the preferences of a dominant manager or management group
- Acting as a symbolic ritual to calm staff anxieties relating to an uncertain future.

Hence in practice, strategic planning often falls short of expectations and casts doubt on its usefulness. Here are some common pitfalls and practical solutions.

You cannot fly a plane without a pilot.

No plan or planning process will work without complete commitment from the top. The chief executive must take and be seen to take the lead.

You cannot take off unless everyone is aboard.

The process must be both 'top-down' as well as 'bottom-up'. The people who are responsible for implementing the strategy must also be involved in formulating it. Simply because it becomes their plan, too, and they share responsibility for its success.

You cannot fly safely without instruments.

The strategic plan must have points at which progress towards previously agreed goals is checked and measured. So you can tell how well you are doing and what progress you are making.

You can't fly the plane in three different directions at once.

The larger the organisation and the more independent and powerful the business unit and divisional managers, the more likely it is that internal groups may be pulling in different directions. Clearly there is a need for consistency in formulating and implementing strategy.

You cannot fly to London in an hour and you cannot fly to the sun at all.

Goals and objectives need to be challenging, yet realistically achievable. Over-expectation or over-promising will kill a plan and demoralise staff.

You cannot fly the plane all by yourself.

The ultimate aim of strategic planning is to develop and encourage strategic thinking across the entire organisation. The process is both an end in itself - documenting the plan - and a means to an end - developing strategic thinking as an important part of organisational life.

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