



Why Strategic Planning Isn't Working Pamela Stambaugh

Resignation around the strategic planning process reigns in most companies that try it. That is a bold statement. Strategic planning lives like the "should" that we hopefully grew out of as we matured into adults. Of course we never REALLY outgrow our childish nature. It is at the source of silos, gossip around the water cooler, scapegoats, the blame game and perhaps that resignation about strategic planning.

The process too often only includes senior executives who aren't in the trenches and whose egos won't let go of their view of reality, in which case the predictable result is a myopic view of the company and its future.

External to companies, we are not in an ideal world. Strategic planning's demise is also attributable to more tangible issues than human nature. We are in change-on-a-dime, chaotic, dare I say even dangerous times. Our national economy teeters on a precipice because of the national debt and destabilizing national policy changes. Mexican drug cartels are invading the United States with guns, masquerading as police. International economic and political unrest is even more unstable than our own, threatening the price of oil upon which so many economic factors depend.

Yet, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in institutions has decreased in the United States whereas in the rest of the world trust has increased (<http://www.edelman.com/trust/2011/>).

When Wisconsin Congressmen who were voted into office to make policy decisions leave the state so they don't have to make a decision, I ask myself, "Where is the courage of real leadership?"

Lack of trust works the other direction as well. Real leaders would reach down into their constituencies – in business that would be the front line and middle management, their customers, their suppliers – and get real about what does and doesn't work. Ad hoc groups could form to solve problems

and even to invent possible futures if employees were sufficiently trusted to make decisions that take into consideration not just the surface tensions, but the deep ones. What would it take for the senior staff to hand over some of those issues to people down in the organization? How might their intelligence be harnessed for the good of all?

That begs the question, "How qualified are people to do their jobs, much less contribute to the strategic future of the organization?"

If people occupy positions that satisfy their curiosities and pique their natural interests they will be engaged employees with something to contribute to the strategic conversation and ready to contribute to the organization in a bigger way. They are "A" players because they are suitability for their job (they WANT to do their work) and their appropriate skills are optimized.

Conversely, if "B" players occupy seats at the strategic table, the result will be less than optimal. So while there are very real external threats to the strategic future of companies everywhere (some industries are more threatened than others) the first and biggest threat to breakaway success and planning for it is the people, the people, the people on the bus.

Strategic planning does not work for one systemic reason that deeper thinking cannot and does not occur when the wrong people are in the wrong seats on the bus and trust is not present in either reporting direction. Credit goes to Jim Collins, Good to Great, upon whose research that statement is made.

Royal Dutch Shell is credited with being the father of strategic planning. Joseph Jaworski, author of Synchronicity, The Inner Path of Leadership led their strategic process for several years. In Synchronicity he said of the process, "At the top of the list I prepared in January 1990 (in advance) was to create for Royal Dutch Shell a set of global scenarios that would begin the process of positively shaping and influencing collective thought, not only in Shell, but in the world at large — scenarios that would help ensure social cohesion in the world of increasing fragmentation."

Jaworski described his cross-disciplined team of hand picked individuals — including 20 percent recruited from the outside — as "race horses' who knew the import and value to the Group of the work we were to undertake, and who were proud to be on this select team." This team crossed the globe talking with leaders in many countries to identify trends that were

concerning and sought systemic solutions.

The return of strategic planning requires the inner work that Joseph Jaworski so eloquently shares through his own journey into the dark places and deep spaces to prepare himself for this leadership position. At the end of the day, we all live with the results of others — the scoundrels and the heroes who stand in the face of what is popular and do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. If you are leading an organization of any kind or size and you wish to return strategic planning to its former reputation, read Synchronicity. Although it was last published in 1998 it is more relevant today than ever.

One fundamental planning structure worth evaluating is James Fischer's. His book, Navigating the Growth Curve is not only a great read, it provides a deep structure for forward thinking small companies, to engage employees in planning and turn resignation on its ear.

Pamela Stambaugh is President of Accountability Pays for over 20 years. Her clients have included Kodak worldwide, SKF worldwide, Coca Cola in Greece, Efes Pilsen in Turkey, and locally The Old Globe Theater and The Blanchard Companies Worldwide. She was a Vistage Chair for five years. She is a Master Distributor of the Harrison Assessments Talent Solutions (HATS) for 12 years. Pamela has spoken and trained around the world on topics related to accountability and developing high performance teams. She holds an MBA from the University of San Diego, has authored two business books and is currently Vice-Chair of the San Diego MIT Enterprise Forum and a member of the Association of Strategic Planning. www.accountabilitypays.com. pstambaugh@accountabilitypays.com.