

## **Delivering actionable plans is about commitment and accountability**

Every executive has sat through at least a few strategic planning sessions that have been worth the time and effort. However, how many of these exercises end with a nicely published book that is never referenced again?

This lack of use and action is partly due to executive buying patterns and facilitators being trainers rather than strategic consultants. The other part of the problem is you, the executive. Delivering on a strategic plan and actually moving that plan to action requires a different way of thinking about the process.

Strategic planning is an exercise that firms know they should participate in, but they usually go about doing it the wrong way. Every time I am asked to help a client execute on a strategic planning process, I always ask them to show me the last one they did. Usually, the executive walks across the room to a credenza and pulls out a rather thick document and hands it to me. From that point on it is clear it has not been opened since it was published. This is because strategic planning is often handled as a training or team building exercise. As soon as it is done, all the very smart people who participated in the process go back to their busy offices and deal with the realities of their work. Strategic planning is not a commodity, a product or even something that is real. Strategic plans are conceptual ideas that become real only when acted upon. When done well, they become a compass reading and a map for the future.

No strategic plan will ever come true. It's not supposed to. Imagine Thomas Jefferson doing a strategic plan with Lewis and Clark in order to cross the continent. They hire a facilitator to come in and together they do some collaboration on a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, which eventually leads to the strategic document. Then, Lewis and Clark gather their team and tools and set forth on the journey. The plan they developed suggests they go west, up the Missouri, and all the way to the Pacific Ocean. However, in that plan they did not account for the Rocky Mountains or grizzly bears. Making it even more difficult, Lewis and Clark could not communicate to the boss (President Jefferson). Therefore, the team has to change their plan, adjust for long winters and make key alliances with Native Americans, which means they had to wing it. What Jefferson did right was to empower his executives to deliver and allow them to change plans along the way; Lewis and Clark achieved most of their goals by mapping the journey, documenting the natural history and finding a rough, north-west passage. These goals made their plan actionable. One final thing that Lewis and Clark had going for them was commitment. Simply stated, a passion for the goals a plan produces and an enduring commitment to success make all the difference. If they were not successful, they could die — that is commitment.

To make goals actionable, real and executable, the people who have to carry out the plan must believe, be committed and be able to move with the current of change. This is not to say goals won't be achieved. Rather, goals can be achieved using alternative plans or by changing goals based on the circumstances presented. Therefore, making plans actionable

requires a systematic review, an ability to change direction if necessary and an exploration of new ideas. This means that the planning document becomes a mark on a map with a possible direction. From there, we have to reflect on that direction from time to time, not put it on the shelf until it is done again. To deliver on a plan, systematic actions must be taken.

For executives to make their strategic plans more valuable and actionable, the planning never ends at the conclusion of an off-site planning weekend. Rather, the initial planning must be followed by detailed functional action plans that will be measured over time. In addition, the staff involved must buy into the concept, be committed and accountable.

The following planning steps can be taken to improve a firm's strategic action:

- Strategic planning is not training. It does have an important element of team-building, but that is not the sole purpose of planning.
- Hire facilitators, coaches or consultants who have experience staying with a project. Keep the facilitator after the initial planning ends. This person can objectively review subsequent planning actions and results, and help the team to re-plan, adjust and dig into new ideas and opportunities.
- The team you assemble, not the facilitator, must be responsible for the outcome. While facilitators are important, it is too easy for contributing executives to complain that the facilitator failed.
- Ensure that each functional department has a set of goals that tie into the overall plan. Everyone must be heading in the same direction.
- Systematically review goals, targets and results, then adjust accordingly.
- Ensure that senior staff sponsors the initial and follow-up planning. They, too, have to be committed.

One could say that Lewis and Clark failed because they did not find an easy passage to the North West. But, they did provide a path for the country to expand, which eventually changed everything. They did not turn around when they faced difficulty and realized there was no easy route. They kept their journals, remained partners in the quest and reviewed their progress with the entire team daily. If they hadn't done this, Jefferson might have strolled across the room to the credenza to find the planning document they put together several years before, and California might now be Mexico.

Russ Ouellette is an executive coach and organizational consultant. He can be reached at [www.russouellette.com](http://www.russouellette.com) or (603) 472-8103.