

# SmartBlog on Leadership

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## STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

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### Take your plan beyond numbers and into action

By Pat Tremaine on September 26th, 2012

Most people think of planning as an annual exercise, and many see planning as developing financial plans and budgets. But planning isn't just about numbers; the real test is the ability of the organization to actually execute it and drive measurable results. Done well, a plan aligns, unites and mobilizes.

A successful plan is a living document that allows you to outline clear milestones and goals so you and your organization know what success looks like. It becomes that living document by asking and answering three fundamental questions.

1. Where are we today?
2. Where do we want to be?
3. How are we going to get there?

Thinking through these questions allows you to set goals, build strategies and develop action plans for one, two or five years from today.

#### Where are you?

Getting a clear picture of where you are involves 3 key steps:

##### 1. Collect, sort and analyze your customer information.

You may not realize just how much data you have. The key is knowing where to look. If you're lucky enough to have quantitative data, gather that, but qualitative information can also help you understand what customers think and feel. Your whole organization and each customer touch point is a source of information and insight. Spend time with customer-facing employees and listen to how they interact. Find out what your customers are saying or asking about your products or services, and don't forget to check blogs and social media. Remember that insights and data can also be found in customer complaints.

Review this data and distill it down to a few key insights. The goal is to get a holistic understanding of your customer so that you can determine what you need to do more of, and what you need to do better.

##### 2. Understand your market and analyze your competition.

Define your market and identify trends, key issues and opportunities. Investigate any adjacent markets that might be a threat to your organization's ability to compete and grow. Identify the top two or three competitors and focus

on those. Understand them intimately. One way to know them is to become a customer (mystery shopper). The Internet can help you find out how your competitors are positioning themselves, what is being said about them and how they are communicating with customers.

Summarize this information and understand what it means to your organization by identifying threats and areas of opportunity for you.

##### 3. Understand how your company sells to and services your customers today.

This will require you to look internally to understand how your processes and procedures help to deliver on the customer experience and organizational goals. Are your customers a factor in all of your decision processes? Are you delivering an excellent customer experience? Do you have a value proposition that has been operationalized across the organization? Answering these questions will provide insights into the operational, product or service gaps that need to be addressed.

Completing these three steps will allow you to understand where you are today in relation to your customers' perspective, your competition, and your internal operations. From that you can start to understand what you are doing really well and what needs attention.

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## **Where do you want to be?**

This is about goal setting. Start to paint the picture of your success; what it looks like and how it is dimensionalized in terms of overall growth, product set, operational changes and investment needed to get there. This will allow you to clearly articulate your vision, mission, strategies and goals for the next three to five years.

Unfortunately, many companies stop here in their planning process. They forget the final and most important step:

## **How are you going to get there?**

A good plan includes every functional area in your organization. With a clear understanding of where the organization wants to be, each functional lead can create a plan of action that relates to their area of responsibility and articulates how and what their department will deliver to help reach organizational goals. This phase is fact-based, numerical and tactically driven with detailed action plans and roadmaps that will drive results.

Pull this all together in a collaborative way, and then prioritize. The analysis above should make clear which activities in your organization will deliver the highest return; the successful plan helps you understand where to place your bets. It is important to be tough-minded about priorities and to articulate what you're going to do, as well as what you're not going to do.

## **Make your plan a living document**

The final step is to make your plan a living document. This requires communication, the assignment of clear accountability, and regular measurement and monitoring. Communicate the plan throughout the organization by going through each of the functional areas and levels — help employees understand what they need to do to contribute to the overall goal. Hold everyone accountable for what they said they would deliver.

It is important to regularly assess, re-evaluate and make changes as needed to stay on track to meet your goals and objectives. At the execution level, the plan needs to be fluid so that those tactics that aren't working can be changed or stopped. That's what makes it a living document.

## **Assign an owner**

Finally, keep in mind that someone needs to lead this process. While development of the plan is usually sanctioned by the business owner or CEO, most successful organizations assign someone to be responsible for the actual coordination, facilitation and delivery of the plan — usually an executive or outside expert.

In many cases, executives accountable for planning find that bringing in outside help to coordinate and facilitate the planning process is a worthwhile investment. Doing so allows them to learn how to plan successfully and

provides knowledge, tools and approach which they can replicate thereafter. Beyond an outside expert's skills and experience, the ability to have a third-party, objective view helps to frame issues and opportunities in a different light.

To be successful and grow, small and midsize businesses need to move beyond their conventional checklists of financial goals to develop plans that align, unite and mobilize.

*Pat Tremaine is a strategic business and marketing consultant and a partner at **TMG International**, where she helps clients develop customer-focused strategic plans and construct sustainable and differentiated value propositions, resulting in bottom-line growth and healthy brands.*