

BUILDING THE BRIDGE BETWEEN STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT: THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

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Introduction

The field of strategic planning is undergoing an identity crisis. The Strategic Leadership Forum, the international professional association, has now been out of existence for several years. The graduate school of management science at George Washington University will be teaching a course in strategic planning in the winter 2004 semester for the first time in several years. Strategic planning consultants are looking down a double barreled shotgun: one barrel shows decreasing demand for their services; the other barrel shows their rates plummeting.

One major reason for this decline in the strategic planning profession is that the quickened pace of businesses and non-profit organizations has rendered the often slow and cumbersome strategic planning process irrelevant, if not obsolete. A second reason for the downward spiral of the industry is too many strategic plans cost a lot of money and merely collect dust. Everyone in the industry agrees that the purpose of a strategic plan is to guide an organization intelligently into the future. This article provides a clear rationale explaining why strategic plans so often become dust catchers and provides a solution to the major problems in the field of strategic planning. While this paper is written for our students in the strategic planning course we will teach at George Washington University in the winter of 2004, we believe its message is relevant to all providers and purchasers of strategic planning services.

The Disconnect

There is no shortage of strategic planning books or strategy “gurus.” The authors of this article have a bibliography of over 100 recently published books in the field that we will gladly share with our readers. A few books actually use the word “implementation” in their titles. These books are beginning to pave the way toward reforming the field of strategic planning. The disconnect in the strategic planning industry is the failure of strategic planners to develop plans with the help of persons with project management capabilities so that a strategic plan can be easily transformed into a working, successful operational plan to guide an organization in the future.

However, in spite of this new wave of books, and the abundance of 10 pound strategic plans collecting dust in the American business and non-profit landscape, this issue is still not topic A at meetings of strategic planners. This disconnect between the development and completion of a strategic plan and the development and completion of the project management plans results in huge cost overruns, delays in implementation, chaos in the workplace, low worker

morale and most often results in an organization's inability to create its future with any resemblance to the picture painted in the strategic plan. The failure to build a bridge between the strategic planning process and the project management planning process is, we believe, the number one reason most strategic plans don't work. Strategic planners have figured out how to take into account all of the views of all of the stakeholders, how to include financial projections for each activity, how to set proper goals and objectives and even set timelines, milestones and target dates. However, the reason strategic plans are not "functional" is they are created by a person or team who is not either a certified or experience project management specialist. The failure to get a person or persons on the strategic planning team who deals in the day to day reality of managing complex projects is the single largest failure of the strategic planning industry.

Suggesting that the strategic planning process be infused with project managers and their processes seems like we are suggesting that the strategic planners who live at 30,000 feet and the project management professionals who keep their noses very close to the ground, begin to fly at the same altitude. We are. Further, we are suggesting that the wall between "strategy" and "tactics" come down like the Berlin Wall. After the wall fell, there were still "East" and "West" Germans; but they had much greater opportunities to collaborate and share their expertise and cultures with the other to the betterment of their unified country.

Strategic Management

Many authors have used the term "strategic management." We choose this term as a catch all phrase that brings together the strategic planners and the project managers whether they are at GE, DARPA or Harvard University. We know that the best CEOs fly at 30,000 feet and near the ground simultaneously. They create strategy and they require successful implementation. When they do their job best, they are both a strategic planner and a project manager.

The brilliance of Frank Lloyd Wright was that he was not only an immensely creative designer and architect, he was also a skilled electrical and mechanical engineer and an expert in understanding all of the physical properties of the materials he prescribed for his buildings. The students he trained at Taliesin and Taliesin West had to go out and fetch the rocks and other natural materials they would use in their building projects. They would have to do their own wiring. They would have to learn deeply about the goals, traits and character of the people and organizations for whom they were designing buildings. By knowing how to develop an architectural plan, they were performing the role of a strategic planner. By developing the specifications for the materials, the furniture, the uses of the space, the interior designs, the budgets, the lighting, and creating the exact relationship of the building with the physical environment and the users of the building, Wright and his students took on the role of a project management professional.

Next Steps for the Strategic Planning Industry

Integrating the strategic planning process and the project management process can be done, and must be done, wither you are planning a blood drive or planning an enterprise level new financial system for a large company or non-profit. The field of "systems integrators" does not meet this need since they often come into the picture after the strategic plan is written and about to collect dust.

The project management industry must flex its growing muscle to get into and become effective at the strategic planning stage. CEOs will initially resist this idea because they will continue to think of the strategic planning stage as being “earlier” than the project management stage. As more and more project managers successfully become involved earlier and earlier in the strategic planning process, strategic plans will become more relevant, more operational, more realistic and more implementable.

Conclusion

Under the term “strategic management,” the worlds of strategic planning and project management can combine to produce strategic plans that guide organizations rather than collect dust. Project managers will need to develop the political skills necessary to succeed as an intruder in the unfamiliar territory of strategic planning. Strategic planners will need to convince senior management of the need to add people with project management skills to the strategic planning team. And, new presentation formats will have to be created for strategic plans so they include all of the relevant analysis, goals, objectives, implementation guidelines, budgets, and personnel assignments so that the strategic plan is readable, understandable, credible and actionable. This new format for a strategic plan must incorporate the knowledge that attention spans are getting shorter and shorter. LBJ (Lyndon Baines Johnson, President, 1963-1968) demanded that anything written for his eyes be no longer than one page. Future strategic plans may consist of PowerPoint slides, Visio drawings, spreadsheets or other new graphical/text combinations that integrate project management templates with strategic planning templates. Whatever format strategic plans take in the future, they will not look like the 100 – 200 page plans of the past. The goal must be to make strategic plans implementable, not readable. Project management professionals can go a long way to making this a reality.

About The Authors

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