

# Sharpen your focus

## Editor's note: Bringing a New Year, and new outcomes, into sharper focus

It is that time of the year when we start to exchange wishes and sentiments as we transition from the year we have come to know as 2013 to the one we are about to meet for the first time.

As individuals and organisations reflect on what has been, and mull over what is yet to be, two sayings with a similar message come to mind: *'you cannot get anywhere without leaving somewhere'*, and *'what got us here won't get us there'*.

What they basically reflect is the incessant pursuit of exploration and improvement. And the fact that this requires moving beyond existing knowledge and thinking.

Sometimes only a small amount of change is needed to provide that transformation – much as water at 99°C is just hot water, but raise the temperature just one

degree to 100°C means it is boiling, which produces steam, which can power big engines.

Our December newsletter proffers some illustrative examples, which could help you or your organisation find that one degree of difference that might make all the difference.

Could it be that your organisation finds it hard to focus on what really matters amid the helter-skelter of daily life? Could it be that your board is not sufficiently focussed on the path to better outcomes? Is your strategy sound but do things seem to go missing-in-action as it filters down through the organisation? Could there be many areas requiring investment or attention, but your organisation lacks guiding principles? Or is it that not everyone in the organisation has the same view of what

the winning scoreboard looks like and where they contribute?

These are five areas we focus on in this newsletter, offering some insights and experiences to assist getting clarity on what sort of organisational resolve will bring greater reward in 2014.

We also provide relevant thoughts from ten luminaries as diverse as Steve Jobs, Michael Jordan, Charles Dickens and Peter Drucker.

The articles, and the thoughts, are designed to be conversation starters. The brief summer respite provides a little time to think about the 2014 path, and how the right conversations can quite quickly provide focus, which in turn can flow through to real change and improvement. Just one degree of difference can start to make a real difference.

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# making focus

a habit of your organisation by marc levy



## Right thinking

- As with individuals, organisations can sometimes struggle to achieve their objectives through lack of focus
- We suggest that organisations:
  - focus on fundamental objectives
  - focus on strategies and plans that will meet those objectives
  - focus on the measures that will make a difference
  - focus on a scoreboard that tells the evolving story for everyone
  - focus on creating a rhythm of engagement
- Make a habit of focus

In the whirlwind of day-to-day work, life can seem hectic, the battle to ‘keep up’ and ‘succeed’ a struggle; reaching targets, with less stress and angst, elusive.

So too with organisations. In our experience, the reason most organisations struggle to achieve their objectives is lack of focus, because there are simply too many distractions, temptations, opportunities, choices, changes, interruptions, disruptions. Sometimes all in the same day! And the whirlwind – as Franklin Covey (McChesney et al 2012) calls the daily press of business as usual – can be more testing amid challenging economic or competitive conditions.

Whirlwind work can easily blow a strategy or plan off-course, and it can be a challenge to get back on track.

Focus is critical to successful strategy execution. It sounds like a straightforward enough maxim, but many organisations, large and small, established and start-up, either struggle to focus and identify their fundamental objectives or to stay focused on them with sufficient effort and time to give themselves a winning shot.

In nearly 20 years of working with and alongside organisations of all sizes and sectors, we have seen over and over again that successful people and organisations develop good habits that enable better choices to produce better and more sustainable results.

And a pivotal good habit is focus. Here are some ways that organisations can create and sustain it.

## Focus on fundamental objectives

If an organisation has put the necessary focus on clarifying its fundamental objectives (McChesney and colleagues call them ‘wildly important goals’), the ones that will make all the difference, then the organisation will not be buffeted off course by the fickle winds of business urgency. Instead, it will deliver:

- clarity on the priorities of the organisation
- engagement of a team in the ‘winningest’ game
- a better balance between fundamental objectives and day-to-day business as usual work.

## Focus on a small number of priorities

Most organisations try to do too much and priority initiatives suffer. Bite off a reasonable number of priorities that will give your organisation the best chance of delivering the strategy. Be prepared to excise or deprioritise some activities. Push some things out if they aren't time critical. Commit to a balanced portfolio of priorities that will impact over the short and long term (Bryan 2002).

## Focus on how the work of the strategy will get done

Aligning an organisation's effort with its intentions is critical to the success of any strategy.

Working out how to operationalise a strategy (comprehensive work plans, executive team resource allocation forums, reviewing the impact of resourcing decisions and making necessary adjustments) can be challenging, even taxing. However, in our experience focusing on the detail of how the work of the strategy will get done leads to a far greater chance of success.

Is your organisation's discretionary effort, as opposed to that work required by, for example, legislation or regulation, or an overseas parent, focused on those things that will give your strategy the best chance of success? Is your strategy supported by the right people doing the right things at the right time? That might sound glib, but we frequently see resource misallocation; for example, when organisations build skills in areas that are not strategic priorities and cobble together resources for initiatives that are.

## Focus on ensuring that everyone knows how committed you are to the strategy

Reflecting on 50 strategy and planning engagements in 2011 (Levy 2013), we concluded that the most important factor in successful strategy implementation was the CEO and the executive team 'being like a dog with a bone', consistently reinforcing

the importance of the strategy, in words and deeds. Strategy implementation can provide a compelling focus for CEOs' and senior executives' communications and engagement efforts.

## Focus on a 'scoreboard' that tells the evolving story for everyone

The team will have a sharp eye on the scoreboard – a simple and highly visible display of key measures and actions that suggests immediately whether objectives are being met. See the article in this issue of Right Lane Review titled 'Seeing is believing: visual metrics displays'.

## Focus on creating a rhythm of engagement

The team will be comfortable with the pursuit of a 'winning-est' culture where there is a natural rhythm of personal and team engagement (McChesney and colleagues refer to creating a 'cadence of accountability' in a similar context). This can be reinforced in as little as a 30 minute weekly meeting, focused solely on fundamental objectives, where everyone sees and reviews the updated scoreboard, and makes commitments for the forthcoming week to positively impact results.

As we see an end to 2013 and get our heads into 2014, there's a good opportunity to start developing the habit of focus by considering your organisation's fundamental objectives and the strategies and plans that will meet those objectives. Consider asking your board and executive team simple-but-not-easy questions to give them the necessary focus. These questions might include:

- What's our winning aspiration? (i.e. what's the aspiration, and is it winnable?)
- Where can we play to win? (i.e. which competitive landscape?)
- How will we win? (i.e. what's the game plan?)

- What capabilities do we need? (i.e. what resources, knowledge, skills?)
- What management systems do we need to have in place (e.g. what processes, tracking, technologies?)

Such headline questions, like headlines in a newspaper, don't tell the whole story, but are designed to get you interested enough to absorb the detail and context that follows.

And they are questions designed to ensure good strategic conversations, which can make some people uncomfortable, and organisations need to recognise this reality. People might be satisfied with the status quo or previous history. Or believe the long-standing organisational vision ought not to be revisited. Or they may bring their own 'biases' based on past experiences.

Staying focused is an oft-used expression, and a seemingly simple adage, but it does not come easily, and is only sustained through serious and ongoing conversations about seemingly simple but challenging questions.

**As we see an end to 2013 and get our heads into 2014, there's a good opportunity to start developing the habit of focus by considering your organisation's fundamental objectives and the strategies and plans that will meet those objectives.**

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# want to know more?

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# the end is the beginning

by stuart wilkinson

Imagine a writer from The Wall Street Journal walks into your organisation and asks a director, senior executive, middle manager and staff member to give a clear, concise outline of the business strategy.

Would you be confident that everyone would readily give coherent, consistent and accurate responses? And if the director and senior executive cannot readily provide a concise, coherent and accurate outline, what chance the middle manager or staff member can do so? An old saying is that in the end is the beginning. In this context, how a strategy ends up, successfully or otherwise, can usually be sourced back to the beginnings.

Crucial at the beginnings of strategy development are the most senior players. Which is why, in any strategic work, we engage in particular with the chair and the board, as well as the CEO and senior executives.

Right Lane is well cognisant from a wide-range of strategic engagements with diverse organisations that there are three basic foundations for getting started with strategy:

1. Understand the role the board can play and use a process that generates a strategy that is widely supported
2. Develop a common understanding and articulation of the strategy
3. Develop commonly used and understood language

## 1. Understand the role of the board and use a process that generates a strategy that is widely supported

Organisations, just like individuals, will execute best what they are engaged with, and they will engage best in what excites them.

For boards, amid all the onerous responsibilities of governance and compliance, strategy is perhaps the most exciting and challenging role. Boards, and their chairs, need to embrace the tasks associated with strategy as substantial and challenging, tasks that can allow them to truly demonstrate leadership through their thinking, attitudes, advocacy and endorsement.

And it can be challenging, especially if there is any rivalry, resentment or discontentment among directors.

In initial strategy development, boards might focus more on perspectives, setting priorities and boundaries, testing management's thinking; management might focus more on providing quality information and discussion papers, advising risks and rewards. But they are not limited to those roles, and a good process will challenge and draw the best out of each group.

The best, and most sustainable, strategies are widely supported. A co-development approach between executive team

## Right thinking

- The best, and most sustainable, strategies are widely supported, which means appropriately involving not only the executive and staff in developing strategy, but also the board
- We have found there are three basic foundations for getting started with strategy
  1. Understand the role the board can play and use a process that generates a widely supported strategy
  2. Develop a common understanding and articulation of the strategy
  3. Develop commonly used and understood language

and board can provide great benefit, maximising the upsides of a team approach and minimising the risks of derailing through individual personality bias, or knowledge assymetry.

A common element of a co-development approach is a board and executive workshop. At such a workshop, utilising an expert facilitator, teams of directors and executives can time-efficiently get to a shared understanding and view, and identify where more work or thought is required.

As with meetings, workshops require effort to make them work and to achieve objectives. Death by (bad) meetings and death by (bad) workshops are destinations to be avoided. No one wants to take last year's strategic decisions and simply change the calendar dates; equally no one wants to re-invent the wheel every year. Which means boards, and executives, make the time (usually outside normal board meeting schedules and topics) to do the thinking, focus on the 'we' rather than 'me', engage openly, and ensure there is robust discussion and analysis. A mutuality of engagement, understanding and confidence can provide a powerful momentum.

And they need to be prepared to deal with questions that might cause some discomfort. The facilitator, for example, might test some self-awareness issues: the strengths and capabilities of the board and the executive team; the capacity and willingness of the organisation to engage with and meet the objectives; the time it will take to meet the objectives.

Effective strategy development will allow boards, executives and staff to have input, so there are no hidden fault-lines; participants will feel they were genuinely part of the process, have been heard and valued; and the outcomes will be seen as having emerged from within the organisation not as stone tablets from on high.

## 2. Develop a common understanding and articulation of the strategy

The resulting outcome should be a strategy that looks desirable and viable from any angle, through any prism. And it needs to be easily articulated to, and understood by, all those looking through those prisms. Which means board members and executives ought to be crystal clear on the business strategy and be able to articulate that strategy simply and concisely.

**'If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there.'**

**Carroll, 1865**

This is one of many sayings that make a similar point: an unclear sense of what you are trying to achieve reduces the hope of attaining the goal. But making something look and sound simple or easy is the outcome of considerable dissection,

understanding, development and practice. Making the complex simple is a real challenge.

As the late Mike Rukstad identified with David Collis some years ago (Collis & Rukstad 2008), there are three critical components of a good strategy: objective, scope and advantage. These elements are simple yet sufficient for any strategy that addresses competitive interaction over unbounded terrain.

Objectives need to describe an end point, within a timeframe. A simple and current example: a strategy to get all foreign troops out of the Middle East at some point would be very different from an exit within three years, or by Christmas.

The second critical component is the scope or space for the business. This might be the sector, or the type of business within the sector. It might be geographical. It might be bricks and mortar or virtual. What are the boundaries of activity, past which the organisation would not tread?

With these two elements in place, the third leg of this stool is the question of competitive advantage. How is your business going to do this better than the plethora of existing and emerging alternatives? Why will your customers come to and stay with you?

Defining objective, scope and advantage requires trade-offs, depending on whether the priority is rapid growth rather than profit maximisation, scale economies rather than product diversification, mass appeal rather than niche.



Base questions for early consideration in workshops might include:

- What are the exact objectives that will drive the business: profit, growth, market share, innovation, sector leadership?
- When is the point in time that we expect to meet those objectives?
- Where is the field of endeavour: geographic, demographic, psychographic, virtual, or vertical? What is the territory we most want to compete in and avoid?
- Who is the customer we most want or need? Why will those customers see us as providing unique solutions or value?
- What is the clear differentiation of our offering versus the rest of the world?
- How will we ensure the organisation has the capacity and the means (skills, finance, technology, data, processes, systems, measures, incentives, rewards) to best facilitate prospects of success?

Simple 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where', 'why' and 'how' questions are invariably the start of robust conversations, more questions and data-based analysis. This leads to clarity and simplification of the complex, and the beginning of

conversations that ultimately ensure the whole organisation understands the objectives and how their daily activities contribute to reaching them.

### 3. Develop commonly used and understood language

If the board and senior executives get the strategic simplicity and clarity among themselves, the parallel challenge is to develop and inculcate a language that best captures and communicates the strategy throughout the organisation, and to other stakeholders. There is often challenging, even heated and passionate discussions about which is the right language: Are we using the words that say what we mean? Do we really mean what we say? Is this going to mean what we want it to mean to the shopfloor and our suppliers?

Words, meanings and interpretations for different audiences can make or break a strategic plan. 'Chinese whispers', and a plethora of variations on a theme or the objective, are a recipe for sub-optimal outcomes.

Music buffs will talk about a 'wall of sound' developed in the Motown heydays of the 1960s, with lots of diverse musical input filling all the space and creating powerful

and uplifting sound. When it comes to strategy development, the challenge for business is similar. What sound are you making?

While there can be significant differences in strategic priorities for different organisations (for example, between a start-up and a well-established business) there is a common need for inclusion and engagement, clarity, simplicity and consistency from the start of a strategy development or strategic planning process. And there is a need to have logical steps or building blocks, to meet the desired objectives, whether that is fast build-fast exit mode or long and lasting legacy mode.

**When it comes to strategy development, the challenge for business is similar. What sound are you making?**

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**want to know more?**

If you want to know more about Right Lane's approach to strategy development – and getting started on the right foot – contact **Stuart Wilkinson:**

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# cascading

## strategy to align your organisation



### Right thinking

- Having a continuously integrated and aligned cascading of strategy is essential for the wellbeing of organisations
- To remove obstacles to a smooth cascading of strategic objectives throughout the organisation:
  - succinctly and clearly communicate the strategy
  - adequately resource and test
  - be self-aware
  - clarify individual roles and accountabilities
  - adequately engage and communicate
  - align processes and performance measures

by brad mcswain

Bookshelves abound with business strategies for growth, profit, market-share growth, innovation and social responsibility. But while getting the right strategy is hard enough, getting the strategy right is often an even greater challenge.

The best-laid strategies can be brought undone by a failure to execute, perhaps at the first hurdle, or even at the last. Such failure sometimes comes about when organisations don't invest enough time and effort in ensuring strategic objectives are aligned with operational execution.

It can be helpful to picture strategy and its implementation as being akin to a river: it might start as a trickle high up in the mountains, pure and healthy at its source, but it needs to cascade down through various terrains and climates, each level influenced by forces of nature and human behaviour – pollution, drought, diversion. The trickle might well become a mighty river, but the water may not finish its course pure and healthy.

So the purity and health of a strategy developed by the highest or best minds of an organisation will only cascade down to the fields of success if it can go through various tiers of the organisation's workforce, and can survive intended or unintended organisational equivalents of 'pollution', 'drought' or 'diversion'.

Unlike a river that finds its way naturally down through the paths of least resistance, however strategy does not naturally flow anywhere. The strategy needs to be shepherded through the different terrains and tiers of an organisation, and those terrains and tiers need to be prepared and cultivated. Doing so can help to ensure that an organisation's strategy 'river' does not lose its force or momentum by being split into varying streams of understanding or effort.

## What can be done to remove obstacles to a smooth cascading of strategic objectives throughout the organisation, thus giving the strategy the greatest prospect of success?

### Succinctly and clearly communicate the strategy

The organisation's strategy must be clearly understood and embraced, with a common language and understanding of that language, so there is no risk of 'Chinese whispers' or individual interpretations diluting the intent. The various components that come together to communicate strategy — missions, visions, values, objectives, themes, targets, and others — must remain consistent with each other and enhance, not diminish, clarity of the strategy.

### Adequately resource and test

A strategy must only be implemented after it has been the subject of rigorous resource planning, and possibly only after some limited trials to verify the basis of the strategic thinking and assumptions. Many a good strategy has under-achieved because of lack of resources or testing, to give it a winning shot.

### Be 'self-aware'

There needs to be an acute understanding of the organisation's capacity to successfully implement the strategy. This applies at each level, including board, senior executives, staff, and possibly key suppliers and customers. Is the organisational structure appropriate for the strategy? Are the executives sufficiently skilled and experienced? Is there sufficient depth and breadth of skills to do each and every part of the strategy? Does the organisation have the capacity and the appetite for the task?

### Clarify individual roles and accountabilities

From senior executives down through organisational tiers, there needs to be clarity about who is responsible for what, where individual and collective accountabilities lie, and where and why there is interdependency between individuals and/or groups. Such clarity helps the flow of information to and from the right people, and it facilitates understanding of the choices that can or cannot be made by individuals, which will lead to better decision-making.

### Adequately engage and communicate

In most cases, a strategy will impact both internally and externally. Having a clear understanding and focus on who will be impacted and when, and how/when they can be optimally engaged, will boost momentum and commitment and minimise unexpected obstacles.

### Align processes and performance measures.

All the 'mechanics' and dynamics of an organisation need to be aligned. This includes the organisational scorecard, individual and collective performance measures, job descriptions, performance reviews, rewards and incentives. Together with clarifying roles and accountabilities, this increases understanding and 'valuing' of individual contributions to the strategy.

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The more effort that is put into not just getting the right strategy, but getting the strategy right, the greater the prospect an organisation will get to having the strategy flow through each tier, division and discipline, and then have it inform and be part of daily activity.

Just as a continuous flow of good clean water is essential for the wellbeing of humankind, so a continuously integrated or aligned cascading of good clear strategy is essential for the wellbeing of organisations.



## want to know more?

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right lane case study:

# principles

## for responsible investment

by julia bentley

### The client

The United Nations-supported Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) initiative is an international network of investors working together for a more sustainable global financial system.

Since its launch in 2006, the London-based PRI has grown to become the leading global network for investors to: publicly demonstrate their commitment to responsible investment; collaborate and better understand the financial and investment implications of environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues; and incorporate these factors into investment decision-making and ownership practices.

The PRI network includes 275 asset owners, 178 professional service providers and 774 investment managers, with total assets under management of \$US35 trillion.

### The challenge

In early 2013, the PRI board recognised that since its aspirational launch seven years ago, the organisation had grown substantially and faced a new set of operating challenges. A new role of managing director (MD) was created, with specific responsibility for the organisational development and growth of the PRI. The new MD wanted to immediately put the Initiative's strategy to work.

### The project

A week was set aside for the MD and senior staff to cascade the PRI strategic objectives through to specific executable plans for each of the Initiative's nine teams. There was an identified need and opportunity for the MD to initiate necessary organisational and cultural changes rapidly, identify 'quick wins' to readily implement, and build momentum for performance improvement.



### The approach

Over five days in London, Right Lane choreographed and facilitated a series of intensive workshops for senior staff. The workshops involved various sessions with the MD, the MD and team heads and teams.

The PRI's rapid growth from an innovative concept to a more established initiative, and the appointment of a new MD with a specific brief on organisational development issues, meant that these workshops were a pivotal opportunity to enact change.

## Right thinking

- There are times when an executive will seek to initiate organisational and cultural changes quickly, identify 'quick wins' and build momentum for performance improvement
- Setting aside a short period for intensive planning through a series of workshops can pave the way for direct communication, and shared understanding of priorities and responsibilities

Recognising this, Right Lane took a multi-dimensional approach.

Firstly, to generate a stronger connection across the PRI's strategic objectives, resolve obstacles seen to be inhibiting more effective execution, and to elevate engagement on interdependencies between teams.

Secondly, for the MD to share her views on issues and opportunities in fulfilling the PRI's potential, priorities, budget realities, measures of success, team roles, accountabilities and decision-making.

Thirdly, to allow senior staff to get input and feedback from colleagues on team issues including strategic clarity and alignment, priorities, communications, professional development and morale.

Fourthly, to allow senior managers and team leaders to collaboratively construct a new management meeting 'rhythm', to clarify and commit to priorities, budgets, decision-making approaches and ways of interacting.

With the MD's support, the underlying objectives of meetings and workshops were two-fold: create a safe, engaging and challenging environment to enable agreement on roles to be played in PRI's success; and clarify management team expectations and decision-making protocols.

There was a focus on discussions being about the 'to' rather than the 'from'. The emphasis was not about trawling over organisational history and performance to date, or about the strategic direction, but rather about what everyone was being expected to create and contribute from that day forward.

Similarly, there was no time, or benefit, for anything but a willingness to be open, honest, respectful and constructive.

The driving ethos of the workshops was to strive for more 'connected' thinking to get to 'answers' and 'get it done'.

## The process

The process started with a survey of staff, from which it was clear there was a desire to improve, be clear and disciplined on strategy, fulfil the Initiative's potential, overcome uncertainty, and improve communications.

Armed with the results and the MD's background briefing, Right Lane embarked on the intensive week of workshops:

### Day 1

#### Six-hour workshop with team heads and senior management team

Strategy refresher; MD perspectives on 'from...to...'; staff survey results; framework for team contributions to strategy; management perspective on priorities; agenda for team planning workshops.

### Days 2, 3, 4

#### Three-hour team planning workshops

Contribution to strategic objectives, initiatives and priorities; measures of success; team roles and accountabilities; decision-making; implementation plans and timelines; monitoring and review protocols.

### Day 5

#### Six-hour workshop with team heads

Team presentations on objectives and priorities, dependencies between teams, etc.; colleague feedback; aggregated priorities; expectations for decision-making and management team interactions.

Between workshops, Right Lane also had progress review meetings with the MD and the team heads as required, to ensure steady progress towards the outcomes within the designated timeframe.

The MD and team heads finished the week with a detailed 2013–2014 Business Plan, identifying the key initiatives and priorities for each of the nine teams, and agreed measures of success.

An agenda for the monthly senior management meeting was agreed, to focus on a review of key trends, update on agreed priorities, director input and feedback, people and resourcing issues, relevant Board and Council issues, business and individual workplan updates, and open discussion, especially on improvement ideas.

## Summary

A focused and disciplined approach to business plans, undertaken in an intensive week of activity, allowed a new MD and team leaders to:

- quickly establish greater clarity and connectedness around strategic objectives and priorities
- get collective and individual commitments on the initiatives and priorities to better meet those objectives
- agree on how the success of these efforts would be measured.

The week of workshops allowed the new MD to initiate necessary organisational changes quickly and to build momentum for performance improvement.

**'Working with Right Lane is always a positive experience. The team is very outcomes and action oriented, which is exactly what we needed from the week long intensive that they ran with us in London. To be successful, the pre work is crucial and Right Lane went to considerable lengths to work with me to understand what I was trying to achieve, and to map out how to get there. We were really happy with the results of the week; it set us up to deliver on our strategic plan.'**

**Fiona Reynolds, Managing Director, PRI**

# want to know more?

If you want to know more about how Right Lane can help your organisation with intensive planning, contact **Julia Bentley**:

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# seeing is believing: visual metrics displays

by lauren spiteri

## Right thinking

- A visual metrics display (VMD) is a visible, visual representation of the progress you are making on your strategic objectives and your priorities, along with key how/who resolutions.
- A VMD can be front and centre of conversations about, and the management of, what matters within an organisation.
- A key challenge with VMDs is to identify the important stories in that data, and then visually tell the story in a way that provides truth and meaning.

Most organisations use some form of scorecard or dashboard to measure performance against their strategic plans. Sometimes these are only visible to a handful of senior staff. This risks the rest of the organisation being oblivious or disinterested in how the organisation is performing to plan or how individuals' efforts are contributing.

One of the newer tools available to help ensure that strategic plans are cascaded and aligned and to better manage the flow of strategic information throughout organisations is the Visual Metrics Display (VMD).

A VMD is a visible, visual representation of the measures that matter to the success of your objectives, the progress that is being made or not made, and the identification of some key how/who resolutions.

VMDs are not entirely new because they have long been common in manufacturing organisations, to highlight, for example, how many accident-free days have been clocked, or how many products have been shipped.

Today, there is a greater need to do it smarter. Data is now almost real-time, complexity demands new ways of achieving focus, organisational alignment is make or break, sustained continuous improvement is key.

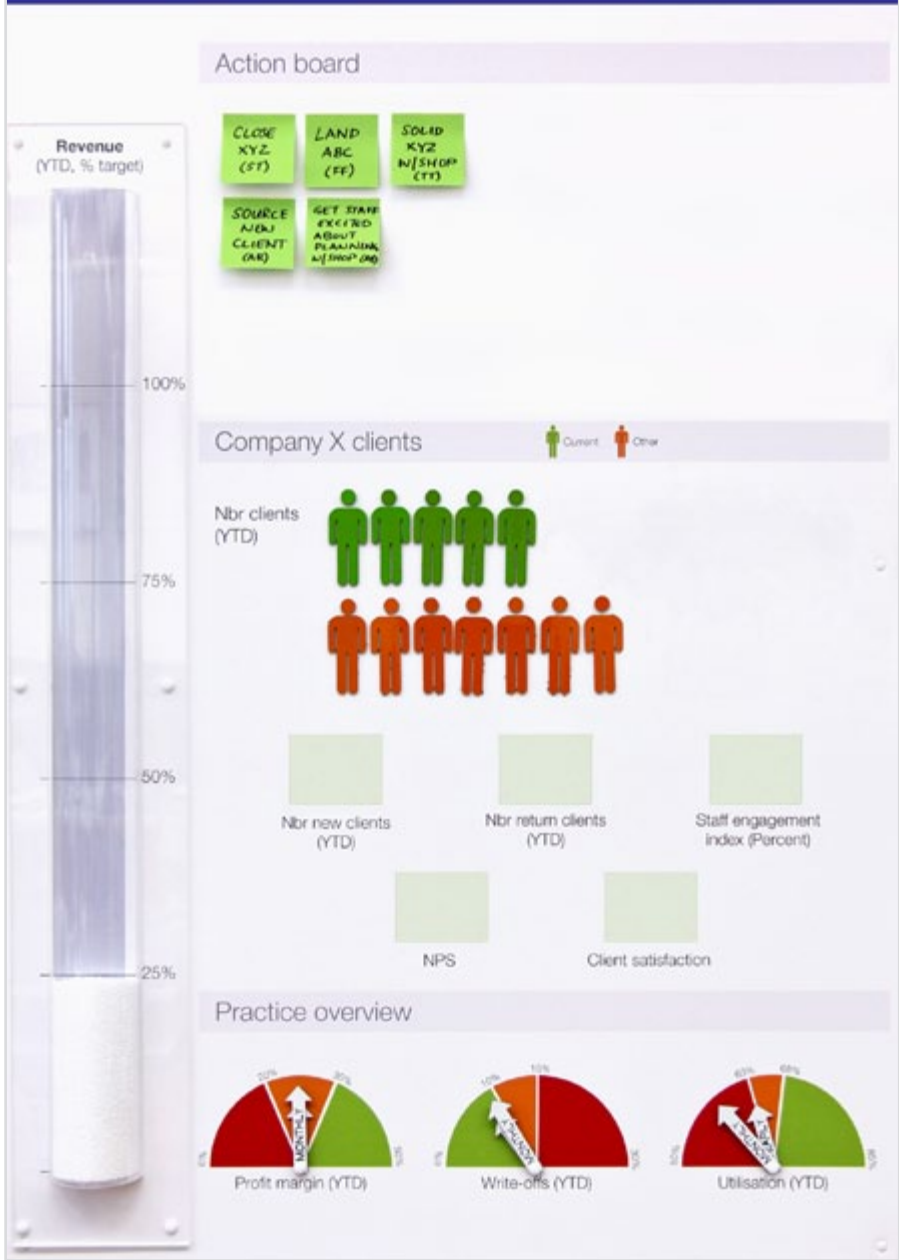
Organisations frequently display their vision in their shared spaces, but smart organisations find ways to link the vision with strategic plans and their implementation at every level. And as we live in a visual world, the use of wall-mounted 'visual metrics' can be transformational.

VMDs are a particularly powerful tool for organisations needing greater alignment to ensure a strategy's prospects of success, including those with staff with an inadequate understanding of their contribution, those seeking greater urgency to meet certain objectives, and those looking to break down silos.

## What can a VMD do for your organisation?

A visual metrics display can align your organisation; keep priorities top of mind; ensure transparency when communicating to staff; and encourage the right conversations within the organisation (What are our goals? What's working? What needs to be fixed (quickly)? Who is responsible?).

# Company X performance



Today, there is a greater need to do it smarter. Data is now almost real-time, complexity demands new ways of achieving focus, organisational alignment is make or break, sustained continuous improvement is key.

## The benefits of a VMD

- Creating awareness and understanding of strategic objectives, and the building blocks of success.
- Creating more energy and focus around the measures that matter most.
- Encouraging understanding of individual and collective interdependence, collaboration and team ethos.
- Increasing individual and collective accountability for specific metrics and action items.
- Allowing teams to easily identify areas that are working or not working and make changes accordingly.
- Increasing awareness of progress towards the strategy and providing a 'winning' feeling and increased momentum.
- Promoting transparency through the organisation, especially when the metrics are used in regular 'stand-up' meetings.
- Celebrating what is working/going well.

## What to consider when creating a VMD?

Like any good visual, a VMD needs to draw attention, and communicate clearly and quickly. They are fit-for-purpose: no two boards are the same, given the numerous variables of activity, size, maturity, geography, culture, focus, timeframe, competition, etc.

They are well designed, but they are not organisational wallpaper; rather, they are used actively and regularly within an organisation.

Here are some key questions to consider when developing your VMD.

### 1. What are the key measures?

Just like a dashboard on a car, too many measures can confuse. Focus on a small number of measures, those that really matter/are relevant and will make a difference to the performance of the organisation.

### 2. Can the measures be updated frequently?

Measures that might be updated weekly or fortnightly, and are thus 'alive' for current discussion and immediate focus, are more compelling and suitable for VMDs than, say, quarterly or semi-annual measures.

### 3. Do the separate measures add up to an integrated and relevant 'picture'?

It's important there is cohesion in what the VMD says, like building bricks in a wall.

Just as with powerful photographic or film imagery, or a compelling presentation or lecture, simple visual images can cut through and encapsulate a story; they illuminate, convince and motivate.

As Nathan Yau, who has worked on visualisation, statistics and design with clients such as CNN, New York Times and Mozilla, has written (2011): 'Face it. Data can be boring if you don't know what you're looking for or don't know that there's something to look for in the first place. It's just a mix of numbers and words that mean nothing other than their raw values.'

### 4. Are the measures able to be shared?

Whether there is one VMD or a series, information or measures are 'public', and will be informally shared across the organisation, so individual 'audience/s', or any sensitivities about the information and/or the relationships, needs to be considered.

### 5. How can the VMD be as dynamic as possible?

Will the measures be represented in a way that is interactive and easily updatable? Can elements be 'movable' such as dials, thermometers, etc.

### 6. Are insights at-a-glance easy to 'get'?

A simple visual image frequently has more cut-through, and impact, than any amount of figures or words; for example, big red circles highlight what is not working well, big green ticks for trends going well.

Visualisation can also involve traditional graphs, charts, thermometers and the like. But there are also techniques that can add a sharper sense of individual organisational relevance, even an entertainment factor. The important thing is to have a metrics board that is fit for purpose, and works.

### 7. Can data be gathered quickly?

Gathering data and updating the VMD for a weekly meeting should not be a full time job. Data should be easily accessed and the VMD should be simple to update (move an arrow, erase and replace a number).

### 8. How will action items be captured?

Action items underscore responsibility and accountability and therefore are an integral part of a VMD. Action items should have responsibility allocated and be specific to the timeframe until the next meeting.

## How to use your VMD to encourage the right conversations

As a CEO of one of our clients observed, 'Our visual metrics board provides a format to bring staff together to discuss the business and to get staff interaction going.'

VMDs are well-suited to small, stand-up type meetings, so there is some intimacy in sharing the physical space, the content, the ideas and issues, and the actions and accountabilities.

At Right Lane, we use our VMD as a compass to guide our weekly team discussions about performance, with measures designed to provide both client and practice perspectives. Measures range from enablers such as client contact and servicing levels, to outcomes, such as new project wins.

Staff can easily see current and year-to-date performance against objectives and key issues arising in the previous week, and our conversations are geared to what actions we agree to undertake.

Our visual metrics meetings allow for staff to contribute insights and ideas that will make an individual or collective difference; they underscore the inter-dependence of people and productive activity.

Regular meetings like this, centred on the VMD, provide clarity and unity of purpose, and deepen understanding about the measures that matter. It's as simple and complex as getting the picture.

The visualisation of data is pivotal. If a picture is worth a thousand words, why take a thousand words? If you want staff to 'get the picture', then give them the picture not a zillion individual pixels. If seeing is believing, give them something to see and believe in.

Visual metrics, like signs in our cities, are a visual means to an end, meant to help people know and understand where they are, and help them find their way to a destination.

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#### Reference

Yau, N, 2011, 'Visualise This, The FlowingData Guide to Design, Visualization, and Statistics', Wiley Publishing Inc, p2.

## want to know more?

If you'd like to find out more about Right Lane's potential to help your organisation develop and create a visual metrics display, contact **Lauren Spiteri:**

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# ten conversation starters



1. That's one of my mantras – focus and simplicity. Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it's worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.  
**Steve Jobs**, founder Apple
2. The game has its ups and downs, but you can never lose focus of your individual goals and you can't let yourself be beat because of lack of effort.  
**Michael Jordan**, basketball legend
3. Goals provide the energy source that powers our lives. One of the best ways we can get the most from the energy we have is to focus it. That is what goals can do for us; concentrate our energy.  
**Denis Waitley**, American motivational speaker
4. If you keep on doing what you've always done, you'll keep on getting what you've always got.  
**W.L. Bateman**, 19th century American businessman
5. Most people don't focus very well. That's the reason they ultimately end up broke and disillusioned.  
**Jim Rohn**, American business philosopher
6. I never could have done without the habits of punctuality, order and diligence ... the determination to concentrate myself on one subject at a time.  
**Charles Dickens**, novelist
7. It is a bad plan that admits of no modification.  
**Publilius Syrus**, Latin writer
8. The success of most things depends upon knowing how long it will take to succeed.  
**Montesquieu**, French political thinker
9. The best plan is only good intentions unless it degenerates into work.  
**Peter Drucker**, business thinker
10. One prays for miracles, but works for results.  
**Saint Augustine**, early Christian theologian