

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.

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References

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want to know more?

If you want to know more about how Right Lane can help your organisation focus on what matters most, contact

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