Think. Plan. Do.

STRATEGIC IMPACT

FIVE IDEAS TO IMPROVE

your next strategic planning process

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At Right Lane, we exist to help our clients develop and implement better strategies. And we know a thing or two about it! We spend a lot of time reading up on the work of leading academics and practitioners in these fields. We take what we learn from the world leaders in strategy and planning theory and combine it with our experience and learnings from hundreds of recent engagements to present this guide: ***Five ideas to improve your next strategic planning process***. This guide contains some of our foundational thinking with regard to strategy and planning processes, frameworks, and principles we have found to be indispensable in our client work.

In preparing this collection we were struck by how privileged we are to be entrusted with co-creating strategy and planning processes with our clients. We get to envision an exciting future and turn ideas into plans that will have great impact. At Right Lane we help our clients with a range of other opportunities and challenges, but the interrelated disciplines of strategy and planning are, and have always been, central to our work and they provide us with interesting and novel challenges every day.

We encourage you to get in touch with the Right Lane team to discuss your next strategic planning process – we'd love to talk to you about it.

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STRATEGIC IMPACT

How to disrupt your next strategic planning process

by Dr Marc Levy

One of the main functions of strategy teams is to choreograph the strategic planning process. This is the typically triennial or quinquennial process of strategic thinking and planning that culminates in the minting of a new strategic plan. Over the years, these processes can become formulaic and tedious – neutralised by disparate stakeholder demands, dominated by the sometimes heavy work of planning and budgeting, cascading and aligning.

Sound familiar? In this article we suggest five ways to disrupt your next strategic planning process and bring back the strategic impact.

1. Try one or more different frameworks

When Canadian academic Jeanne Liedtka said that strategic planning should be freed from the unilateral imposition of frameworks and techniques (Liedtka 1998), she struck a chord with us at Right Lane. Some organisations become captive to one framework or another – for example, Playing to Win (Lafley & Martin 2012) or Kaplan & Norton's strategy maps and scorecards (Kaplan & Norton 2008). These are excellent frameworks; but managers should draw on a 'rich repertoire' of techniques as the choice of a singular approach surely contains thinking.

2. Test your strategy with strategic questions or tests

We often ask clients Alan Lafley and Roger Martin's classic strategic questions – What's your galvanising aspiration? Where will you compete? How will you win? What capabilities do you need to build? What management systems do you need to put in place? (Lafley & Martin 2012).

At the start of a new strategy process we sometimes ask clients to read through the list of questions and identify those that they don't believe they can answer to their own satisfaction. Any blank stares and we know we're onto something that might extend the client during their strategic planning process.

Sydney-based McKinsey partner Chris Bradley and colleagues developed 'ten tests' of a good strategy (Bradley et al. 2011). The tests give pause for reflection. Does your organisation's current strategy pass all of them? Will your intended strategic planning process enable all of them to be answered? If not, any failings you identify may help give focus to your efforts to disrupt your next strategic planning process.

3. Entertain heretical thinkers

Most organisations have them: often gnarly, deep thinkers who harbour different views about what they think your organisation should be doing but isn't. We've met many dissenters over the years who've challenged whether a board and management team had the right capabilities for the future, or how the organisation approaches strategic decision making, or the organisation's 'where to compete' choices. Seek out these heretics. Create safe spaces for them to share their dissenting views. They might extend or challenge the dominant thinking.

4. Do a more thorough diagnostic review

We work primarily for mid-sized organisations. Some are reluctant to invest in deep diagnostic reviews – covering, for example, a perspective on future market structure, trends in technology and consumer behaviour, and financial benchmarking – that might unearth new insights.

We sometimes encounter the view that managerial judgement trumps analysis and the attendant insight; but over hundreds of strategy engagements, we've found that the former is usually substantially strengthened by the latter.

5. Start from a different source

Most executives and directors have seen strategic planning processes up close. They frequently have a preferred 'entry point' or way of approaching strategy. We've seen lots of different entry points – industry analysis, a CEO's unwavering aspiration, a long term actuarial forecast, a set of questions that need answering, and so on. We encourage clients to view their strategy through more than one of these lenses, as oftentimes – at the risk of torturing the metaphor – a different lens can bring the landscape into sharper focus.

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Seeking out different perspectives is the consistent theme of the five ideas presented in this article. Jeanne Liedtka again: 'Concepts, frameworks, techniques – all provide us with new windows that help us to escape the limitations imposed by our own inevitably narrow ways of seeing our world'. If you want to disrupt your next strategic planning process, extend your viewpoint.

Ten strategic questions you need to ask ...

1. Why do we do what we do? What's the problem or opportunity in the world with which we are engaging?
2. Who are our primary customers?
3. What do we want to be famous for?
4. Where will we compete, specifically?
5. What is our winning move/s?
6. How will we add value to our stakeholders?
7. How does our strategy rest on insight that only we have?
8. How does our strategy put us ahead of the market?
9. What capabilities do we need to be successful in the future?
10. What could a competitor do to hurt us?

This is an extract from the Right Lane Review article **Ten strategic questions you need to ask**. For full article including references visit www.rightlane.com.au

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The value of a ROBUST DIAGNOSIS

Be better prepared for next year's strategy and planning process

by Debbie Williams, Abhishek Chhikara & Dr Marc Levy

Right thinking

Undertaking robust analyses of what's happening in the world, the industry, and within organisations, is critical for clients to build an evidence base and a common reference point to draw upon when engaging in strategic thinking and strategic planning. We suggest that clients adopt a diagnostic approach that sorts data into patterns, and replaces the overwhelming complexity of reality with a simple story from which levers for action can be identified.

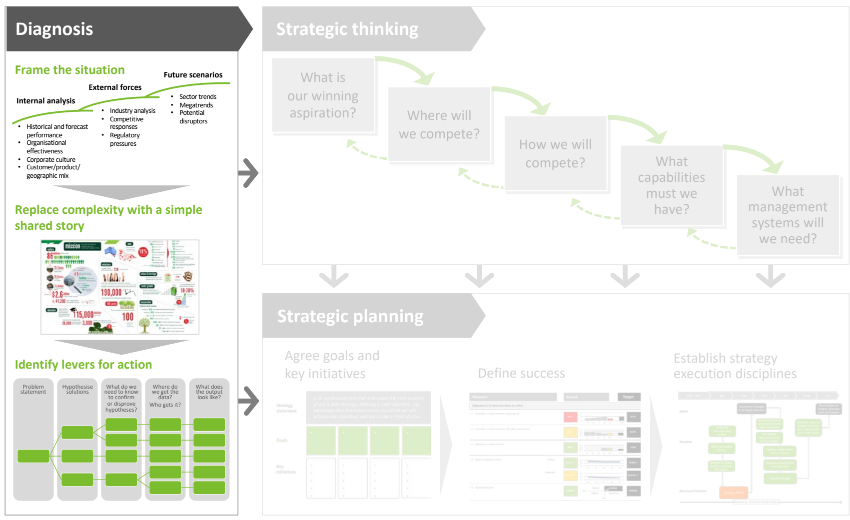
In a previous Right Lane Review article, we described our approach to strategy development. It involves asking unassuming but challenging strategic questions like: Where will we compete? How will we win? and What capabilities do we need to build? (Levy 2016). We ask clients to spend time 'upstairs' thinking about these questions, and, only when they've been satisfactorily answered, 'move downstairs' into strategic planning discussions covering goals, measures and priority initiatives. This sequence is shown in the following chart and this link (Strategic thinking before strategic planning).

While these two steps are critically important they are generally not sufficient. Preceding strategic thinking and planning – which frequently comes to a head at board and executive team strategy offsites – we encourage clients to undertake robust analyses of what's happening in the world, their industries and their organisations, so that they have an evidence base and a common reference point to draw upon.

This sounds obvious enough, but over hundreds of strategy and planning engagements we've found that it's common for the analysis phase to be foregone or given short shrift. Leaders don't always see the value in it. Why? Only recently one of the executive team has done some strategic analysis; a consulting firm's report includes a section on industry analysis; an external report or some market research traverses some of the ground; leaders may believe that their senior teams already know what they need to know.

This reminds us of an Indian parable of four blind men walking through a forest who come across an elephant. Each blind man feels a different part of the elephant's body and describes the elephant based on their experience. One feels the trunk and describes it as a snake, another feels a leg and describes it as a pillar.

Right Lane's approach creates strategic clarity



Source: Right Lane Consulting, 2017 (strategic questions adapted from Lafley, A & Martin, R 2012)

'... an especially insightful diagnosis can transform one's view of the situation, bringing a radically different perspective to bear.'

What happens next depends on who is telling the story. In some versions, the men suspect the others and come to blows. In another version, they stop talking, start listening and collaborate to 'see' the full elephant.

Richard Rumelt, in his book *Good strategy, bad strategy*, calls this analysis a **diagnosis** and notes that 'an especially insightful diagnosis can transform one's view of the situation, bringing a radically different perspective to bear'. And with radically different perspectives can come different opportunities.

Consider these recent examples from our work:

- A financial services organisation realised that taken for granted assumptions about the demographic profile of its membership were incorrect, leading to a reappraisal of its marketing programs.
- A representative organisation identified that its growth would come from industries and member cohorts that it was not explicitly targeting.
- A government enterprise discovered that long-term trends in its financial performance gave it less time to change its business model than it previously thought.
- A deeper understanding of a retail business's stakeholder intentions led to a change in the way it framed its strategic options.
- A facilities manager came to the conclusion that its prospects would be enhanced by privileging one type of customer over another.

We encourage clients that are unsure of the merits of a diagnosis to consider these questions:

- Is there an opportunity to identify a handful of hitherto unknown, strategically material insights among the overwhelming morass of analysis that is typical within organisations today?
- Will everyone bring the same understanding of the organisation's performance and health (Davis, 2005), situation and prospects to the strategic thinking and planning discussions?
- Does the organisation have a contemporary 'house view' about how changes in the world will impact the organisation and its business model?

We suggest that clients adopt an evidence-based approach to discussing the elephant in their boardroom. One that links data into patterns, and replaces the overwhelming complexity of reality with a simple story from which levers for action can be identified.

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STRATEGIC THINKING
before strategic planning

Know where to start and where to finish

by Dr Marc Levy

Right thinking

A strategy without a plan is too conceptual. A plan without a strategy is hollow. What is your strategy and what does it mean for what you are actually going to do?

Timeless strategic questions (strategic thinking), which resonate with our clients , must be satisfactorily answered 'upstairs' before clients move 'downstairs' to strategic planning.

Strategic plans should comprise strategic objectives and attendant measures, priority initiatives and a measurement monitoring and review cycle.

Helping clients with their strategy and planning processes is a major part of our practice.

This year our firm will help nearly 50 organisations with their annual strategy and planning cycles – conducting analysis, taking executive teams and boards offsite, documenting strategic plans, and assisting them with implementation, measurement, monitoring and review. I've personally helped more than 100 organisations with their strategy and planning work over 20 years.

In this work we are frequently asked about the interplay between strategy and strategic planning. Are they the same thing or not? There is a rich body of literature on this topic, typically lauding adaptive strategy development and lampooning rigid strategic planning.

We have a different view about the value of planning, and the confluence and complementarity of the two disciplines. A strategy without a plan is too conceptual. What does the strategy mean for what you are actually going to do? It is certainly possible to draft a strategic plan having paid little or no consideration to central strategic questions like where are you going to compete and how are you going to win. However, a plan without a strategy is hollow.

Our work in this area is inspired by leading international strategy academics and practitioners, like Jeanne Liedtka (1998), Ken Favaro (2013), Roger Martin (Lafley & Martin 2013) and Robert Kaplan and David Norton (2008).

Exhibit 1 (overleaf) makes the distinction between strategic thinking and strategic planning. As it shows, the former tends to be more divergent, creative and synthetic and the latter more analytical, convergent; the former can disrupt an organisation's agenda the latter align it.

We centre our strategy work with clients on a handful of strategic questions – see article one in this document *Strategic impact: How to disrupt your next strategic planning process*. As shown in exhibit 2 we sometimes employ Roger Martin's five strategic questions (2012) to focus clients' strategy development efforts.

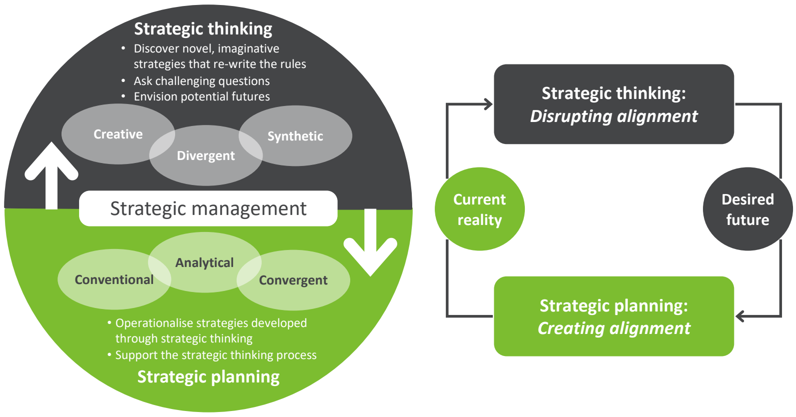
These timeless strategic questions, which resonate with our clients, must be satisfactorily answered 'upstairs' before clients move 'downstairs' to strategic planning, the elements of which are perhaps best reflected in the work of the creators of the balanced scorecard, Robert Kaplan and David Norton (2008). Their work suggests that strategic plans should comprise strategic objectives and attendant measures, priority initiatives and a measurement monitoring and review cycle.

The strategy development should precede the planning; because, for example, you can't make a good fist of initiative prioritisation and resource allocation unless you've 'been granular' about where to compete (Bradley et al 2011). Equally, there's not much point creating a galvanising aspiration if you can't action it.

We frequently tell the story of a healthcare client who identified seven distinct customer cohorts as equally important. This was not a recipe for focus and the client needed to think through prioritisation of these customers, before it could start on objective setting.

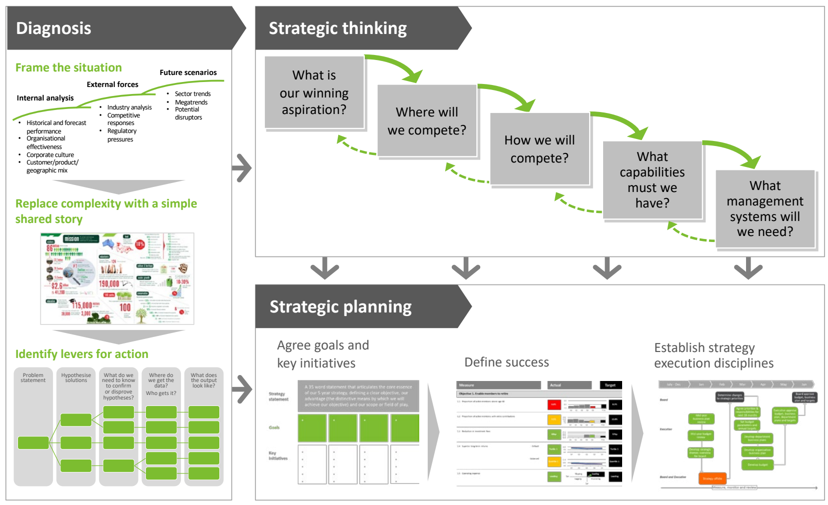
We are not the first to make this observation about the distinction between strategy and planning. Ken Favaro (2013) makes a similar point in his work on the 'strategic five' and the 'corporate five'. However, much of the literature unhelpfully sets strategy and planning up as a trade off or dichotomy. We believe that they are necessarily complementary and entwined.

Exhibit 1: Strategic thinking and strategic planning



Source: Adapted by Right Lane Consulting from: Heracleous, L 1998 'Strategic thinking or strategic planning', *Long Range Planning*, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 481-487; Liedtka, J 1998 'Linking strategic thinking with strategic planning', *Strategy and Leadership*, vol. 1, pp. 120-129.

Exhibit 2: Five strategic questions



Source: Right Lane Consulting, 2017 (strategic questions adapted from Lafley, A & Martin, R 2012)

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STRATEGY MEANS SACRIFICE

Make sacrifice an essential aspect of your strategy

by Dr James Mills

Right thinking

Resourcing constraints and the need to make strategic trade-offs limit what an organisation can do. The heart of strategy is selecting from among the vast number of possible activities an organisation could pursue, a select few which strongly reinforce one another. This requires leaders to define not just what their organisation will do, but also what it won't do, to ensure sharp focus on the things that matter.

Strategy is often reputed to require an uncommon skillset, distinct from the considerations of everyday life and demanding exceptional mental acuity. Traditionally it has been the preserve of generals with decades of military experience; political leaders supported by teams of analysts and advisors; and the brightest business minds, selected for their perceptivity and sound judgement.

It is true that, given the great many factors that must be weighed when setting an organisation's strategy, such as emerging industry trends, new regulatory developments, evolving customer and employee preferences, changing competitive forces and shifting political influences, determining the best course of action for any organisation is a significant challenge. However, strategic decision making is in fact more commonplace than is often recognised.

A strategy is simply a course of action intended to achieve a desired outcome. As individuals, we make strategic decisions all the time. For example, when deciding whether to pursue a full time qualification or enter the workforce, when choosing a job that offers greater development opportunities over one that offers a higher salary or when deciding whether to rent or buy property.

What makes these decisions *strategic* is that they all involve an element of sacrifice. Pursuing the qualification means sacrificing industry experience, accepting the better development opportunity means sacrificing the higher salary and investing in property means sacrificing financial liquidity.

Distinctive leaders find their niche

In general, executives are highly practiced at making strategic decisions at the personal level. In advancing to the C-suite most executives make myriad sacrifices, such as declining lucrative job offers that were not aligned with their career objectives, forgoing interesting development opportunities to focus on core development goals and often working longer and harder than their peers to deliver exceptional results.

As competition for advancement intensifies with greater seniority, it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to excel on multiple fronts simultaneously. Recognising this, many personal development experts encourage aspiring leaders to build their own 'personal brand', becoming distinctive within a particular domain (Ashkenas 2010, Corkindale 2008).

By focussing their personal development energy on areas of natural ability, aspiring leaders can develop exceptional competency in a specific areas of expertise (Drucker 2005, Saunders 2013). In doing so, these leaders of tomorrow are adopting a differentiation strategy hoping to outshine their peers.

Distinctive organisations make sacrifices

Despite this proven ability to make strategic sacrifices at the personal level, we often find that executive teams struggle to make sacrifices at the organisational level. It is possible that this incongruity arises because when selecting the activities they will, or will not, personally be involved in, individuals can take comfort in knowing that capable colleagues will step in and take these on.

Nevertheless, just as successful individuals must often forgo tempting opportunities if they wish to develop a reputation for being truly distinctive in a certain area, so too organisations must make sacrifices to achieve differentiation. It is not enough to simply say 'we want to deliver exceptional customer service'. If this is truly what matters for your organisation, strong leaders must ask, 'what are we willing to give up to make this so?'

What are you willing to give up?

As you work to develop or refine your organisation's strategy, we encourage you to consider, not only where your organisation will be distinctive, but also the areas in which it is acceptable to simply 'meet the market'. This is the core of strategy. Strong leadership means avoiding the temptation of proclaiming excellence on all fronts.

When working with new clients, we often see the aftermath of such 'strategies': resources get spread too thinly across dozens of strategic initiatives with predictably poor results. Ultimately, failing to embrace sacrifice as an essential element of your strategy, means sacrificing your strategy.

Sacrifices protect your market position

In his seminal work 'What is strategy?', Michael Porter argues that 'trade-offs are essential to strategy. They create a need for choice and purposefully limit what a company offers' (Porter 1996). Just as individuals must make sacrifices in some areas to outshine their peers in others, to achieve a truly distinctive position, organisations must make sacrifices by leaning into trade-offs.

It is the sacrifices made when an organisation embraces trade-offs, that protect its market position from would be emulators. For example, a manufacturing company whose strategic focus is centred on customisation, may choose to structure its operations in a way that allows the customer to make choices on every design element. In doing so, the company likely sacrifices the custom of a price sensitive customer cohort to meet the needs of a segment for whom customisation is important. Because of this sacrifice, they have little to fear from a low-cost competitor who would be unable to deliver the same level of customisation without giving up its low-cost position.

As you work to develop or refine your organisation's strategy, we encourage you to consider, not only where your organisation will be distinctive, but also the areas in which it is acceptable to simply 'meet the market'.

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CALLING ALL OFFICERS

Four steps to getting greater strategic impact from your CEO+2 cohort

by Dr Marc Levy

Right thinking

- The All Officers group (or SLT) is often used to accelerate strategy execution. We believe, if well harnessed, this group can make a significant contribution to strategy development. This group is an ideal 'hot bed' for idea generation, and in our view they represent an ideal site for capability building and bottom-up renewal.
- The All Officers group want to, and frequently need to, build capabilities in strategic thinking, strategic planning and strategic management to prepare them for more senior leadership and to deliver further value for the organisation.
- We believe the key to unlocking the All Officers group is to focus on four actions: Determine what you want the group to do (their 'purpose'); determine the process for who should be included; allow the groups to develop their own remit in relation to this purpose; stick with it for 2-3 years.
- In doing so, you can realise better business cases, more well-conceived business plans and budgets, and help this cohort to better understand the strategic context of their, and their teams', work.

Bob Frisch's book, *Who's in the room* (2012), talks about three senior teams with quite distinct roles: the kitchen cabinet (a few executives drawn together by a CEO to make decisions), an executive team, and an 'All Officers group' (for the next layer of leaders). We have seen this structure at work in most of our clients, and we've seen these groups operating with differing levels of success.

In most of the organisations we work with the role of the executive team could be sharpened for greater impact, but in this article the focus is on what Bob calls the 'All Officers group'. In our clients, this group is more commonly referred to as the senior leadership team (SLT) or the senior manager/management group (SMG), although there are numerous names for it.

There are similarities and differences in the ways that the organisations we've worked with have set up their All Officers groups. Most of these groups are similar in size, say 20-30, although they can be much larger in our big clients; they frequently include the executive team members' direct reports; they mostly have alignment to strategy as part of their remit. But other aspects of the way clients engage All Officers groups are widely divergent. Some clients use them to accelerate strategy execution, or iron out strategy execution barriers;

others use them for leadership development; some use them for brainstorming and idea generation relating to business or process problems; frequently they are a communications vehicle or conduit to the middle layers of an organisation and below. Organisations have their All Officers group meet as rarely as annually and as frequently as monthly.

In our experience, most organisations, and most officers, are dissatisfied with the All Officers group. They frequently feel patronised by being used as a communication channel, disconnected from the real strategic decision-making; they believe that their views should be heard and acted upon. Top teams tend to chop and change what they want from the All Officers group and alter the composition of it, sometimes without explaining why. We've see instances of organisations oscillating between different qualifications for membership – first by place in the hierarchy, then by whether officers are on an emerging talent list, and then back to hierarchy but with a screen based on the number of direct reports officers have (for example, some technical managers with few reports may be excluded).

How to harness the All Officers group

Our prescription for enabling a successful All Officers group is simple and can be described by four actions:

1. Determine what you want the group to do
2. Determine the process for who should be included
3. Allow the group to develop their own remit in relation to their purpose
4. Stick with it for 2–3 years.

Negotiate a remit that adds value for the organisation and is exciting and challenging for the officers. The remit should have two to three main themes, but it shouldn't be too circumscribed. Part of the benefit to the organisation is to see how its members cope with the ambiguity of defining and negotiating their own scope and taking responsibility to deliver something valuable. We agree with Bob Frisch that an All Officers group can be very helpful for brainstorming and idea generation, and in our view it is also an ideal site for capability building and bottom up renewal.

Take this change seriously too: give the group some power and autonomy; encourage them to take risks and to initiate change; give them the resources and the support they need; put proper governance around the effort; and agree clear measures of success. Then, most importantly, put them to the test to deliver something to a timetable, with full visibility to the executive team (for example, pitching sessions to the executive can work well). It is also critical to embed performance evaluation into the new management system.

All Officers groups want to, and frequently need to, build their capabilities in strategic thinking, strategic planning and strategic management (Heracleous 1998; Liedtka, 1998). These topics help prepare them for leadership and should also deliver immediate value to the organisation in terms of better business cases, more well-conceived business plans and budgets, and a better understanding of the context of their, and their teams', work. We suggest to some of our clients that they invest in a number of intensive sessions with the All Officers group covering: forces at work in the external environment; envisioning alternative futures; discovering disruptive strategies; operationalising strategic thinking in plans; prioritising and integrating initiatives; resource allocation; managing dependencies; aligning the team; and measurement, monitoring and review.

Some organisations we know have abandoned All Officers groups altogether. This may be a sensible step in some cases, but if organisations are prepared to get behind them to make them work – more pointedly, to give them what they need and ask the officers themselves to make them work – then they can be very valuable forums.

* * *

Right Lane has collaborated with Boston-based Strategic Offsites Group, where Bob Frisch is the Managing Partner, on knowledge sharing initiatives.

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About Right Lane

Right Lane is a flourishing, top quality, management consulting firm.

We employ our distinctive ideas and processes, and our absolute commitment to delivery, to help clients we care about pursue their inspiring missions.

We work alongside clients who do great work within the sectors they operate, and we are excited to be involved in creating outcomes that truly make a difference.

We are an ethical consulting firm with a strong belief in the work we do, and with a passion to give back to the broader community with the skills and expertise available within our walls.

Right Lane was established in 1997 to help private, not for profit and public sector clients to clarify and accelerate their future plans. Over the past 22 years, we have helped the executive teams and boards of over 300 organisations to define and adapt their direction and strategy, identify and clarify their priorities, align their efforts with their aspirations, get their major projects started and finished, and measure and improve their performance.

B Corp certified - what does it mean?

In 2015 Right Lane became Australia's first B Corp certified strategy consulting firm and the first to be recertified in 2017.

This follows Right Lane's decision in 2011 to adopt 'for benefit' principles, including reasonable returns, inclusive ownership, stakeholder governance, transparency, and social and environmental responsibility. Capping our return on shareholder funds at reasonable levels, rather than seeking to maximise financial returns, has allowed our firm to pursue our purpose to contribute to a better society by helping organisations that do good, do better.

B Corporations are a new kind of company that uses the power of business to solve social and environmental problems. Certified B Corporations meet higher standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability. The performance standards measure a company's impact on all its stakeholders, including workers, suppliers, community, and the environment. It's like Fair Trade certification but for the whole business.