MASTERING STRATEGY
MAKING STRATEGY A TEAM SPORT

Why Leadership Teams Struggle to Make Strategy Work

The problem is rarely the plan alone. It is whether leaders can make clear choices, stay aligned and act with discipline over time.

Most organizations do not struggle with strategy because their leaders are incapable of developing a plan.

They struggle because making strategy work requires something more demanding: a leadership team that can think strategically, make difficult choices, stay aligned and act with discipline over time.

A strategic plan may set out a clear direction. But it cannot make the day-to-day decisions required to pursue that direction. It cannot resolve competing priorities, protect resources, manage disagreements or prevent immediate pressures from pushing longer-term objectives aside.

That work belongs to the leadership team.

Yet even experienced teams can find it difficult. Five problems tend to get in the way.

1. Leaders do not always share the same understanding of the strategy

A leadership team may have approved the same plan without reaching a genuinely shared understanding of what it requires.

Different leaders can interpret the organization's priorities differently. They may disagree about what should change, what must be protected and which opportunities should receive attention. These differences often remain hidden until decisions need to be made.

Agreement with the wording of a plan is not the same as alignment around its meaning and implications.

2. Too many priorities compete for attention

Leadership teams are rarely short of important work. The problem is deciding which work matters most.

When every major initiative is described as strategic, the organization does not really have priorities. It has a large workload accompanied by the expectation that everything will get done.

Real priorities require choices. They determine where leadership attention, organizational capacity and financial resources will be concentrated. They also establish which activities will receive less attention – or will not proceed at all.

Those choices are difficult, which is why many teams postpone or avoid them.

3. *Operational pressures repeatedly displace strategic work*

Most leadership teams begin with good intentions. Then customers need attention, performance problems emerge, deadlines approach, and unexpected issues demand decisions.

Leaders are pulled back into day-to-day pressures. Strategic discussions get deferred, review meetings become operational updates, and the urgent gradually displaces the important.

This does not usually happen through one dramatic decision. Strategy loses its place through the accumulation of smaller choices about where leaders spend their time and what they allow the organization to prioritize.

4. *Leadership behaviour sends conflicting signals*

Employees pay attention to what leaders do – not only to what the strategic plan says.

If leaders continue to fund activities that are no longer priorities, tolerate behaviour that works against the strategy or make exceptions whenever pressure arises, people notice. If different executives communicate different expectations, employees are left to decide which signal to follow.

Strategy becomes credible when leadership decisions, resource allocations, performance expectations and everyday behaviour reinforce the same direction.

5. *Execution is treated as a separate stage*

Strategy and execution are often discussed as though one ends before the other begins: first leaders develop the strategy, and then the organization executes it.

In practice, execution continually tests the strategy. Leaders learn more about the market, the organization's capabilities and the assumptions behind their choices. Circumstances change. Obstacles appear. New opportunities emerge.

Leadership teams therefore need a continuing process for reviewing progress, learning from results, revisiting assumptions and adjusting their choices without losing strategic discipline.

Execution is not simply the implementation of strategy. It is part of the work of strategy.

The real requirement: shared leadership discipline

Making strategy work does not depend on producing a longer plan, adding more initiatives or holding another annual retreat.

It depends on whether the leadership team can repeatedly:

- develop a shared understanding of its strategic context;
- distinguish important work from true strategic priorities;
- make clear choices and accept the trade-offs they require;
- align decisions, resources and leadership behaviour;
- translate direction into ownership and practical action; and
- review results, learn and adapt without allowing the strategy to drift.

These are not the responsibilities of the CEO or strategic planning department alone. They are collective leadership responsibilities.

That is why strategy must become a team sport.

A strong strategic plan matters. But the plan produces results only when the leadership team develops the shared discipline to make it work – especially when pressures rise, priorities compete, and the easiest decision is to return to business as usual.

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