



Is Your Organisational Strategy D.E.A.D or A.L.I.V.E?

I would consider myself a very lucky person because every client I have been fortunate enough to work with has (as an aside to the core challenge of helping them understand their business better) taught me something.

Some of the lessons learned were accidental, some designed, some painful and some joyous. It doesn't seem to matter whether the organisation was a Top 50 corporate, a small privately owned manufacturer, a niche non for profit or any level of the Government groups I've worked with – the lessons have been varied and valuable.

Because my main purpose of working with an organisation is to help them understand their potential future operating environment more clearly, and in so doing help the organisation make strategic choices intended to maximise their result, there are some common themes that have emerged over time. I've managed to collate some consistencies in how some organisations struggle or stagnate, whilst others excel (or at the least propel themselves forward).

This brief article then is an attempt to highlight those common themes

The Idea of Strategy:

The word Strategy comes from the Greek root 'strategos' which roughly translated means 'The General'. And in ancient times it was the role of the General to issue instructions to his (most often a 'him') army about where they were to go and what they were tasked with doing.

The critical thing to note here is that in ancient times the General understood clearly what is a phrase only used consistently in modern day military applications – 'that no plan survives contact with the enemy'. In modern day business speak that can be translated into 'no strategic plan survives contact with the marketplace'.

Which meant that the General was not in a position to influence the outcome once that battle was under-way. The only influence could occur PRIOR to engagement with the enemy. The word Strategy then is deeply connected to the idea that the thinking about use of the organisational resources (army capabilities) needs to happen BEFORE the battle gets under-way.

Unfortunately for our modern day 'generals' in the organisational world, many make some core mistakes or hold flawed beliefs about their ability to influence proceedings in the heart of the drive for operational success. What is clear, is that some of the modern Generals across a range of industry sectors and organisational types, go into 'battle' with a Strategy that is already DEAD.

Here then are the common themes for D.E.A.D Organisational strategy:

D is for 'Direction-less'. The strategic plan or operational actions lead no where in particular. This is most common in organisations that mistake 'activity' for 'productivity'. The two are very

different. Activity is 'Busy-ness' where as Productivity means Outcomes and Results. To drive productivity the General must first set the organisation's intended destination, its Vision. From a Board level, approval of expenditure of an organisation's resources cannot be justified in any way, unless it can be clearly stated what the end destination is. 'Growth' is not an end destination and does not stand for a direction.

E is for Execution-less. Sometimes the Generals have put together an excellent set of ideas that determine where they want the organisation to go. BUT and it's a disconcertingly large 'but', too many make the assumption that having an idea, and having the ability to execute are one in the same. They are not – Vision is NOT the same as Action and if an organisation lacks the capabilities to execute (lack of resources or insufficient skills resources) then no amount of dreaming will lead to a positive outcome. The exceptional (and alas now late) E James Rohn used to say: “Affirmation without action is delusion”

A is for Accountability Lacking. When Accountability is lacking the chances of execution reduce dramatically. Accountability comes through having a clearly defined person responsible for ensuring action is taken AND an established and pursued set of potential ramifications for INACTION! The more common failing I see in DEAD strategy is the unwillingness of the organisation to demote or even sack personnel who consistently fail to execute what they have been tasked to do. The reasons for this are varied and there is more prevalence in some sectors than others, but the impact is still the same – the organisation is weighed down by failing to be accountable to the actions it says it is going to take.

D is for Disconnected from Reality. I'm a Strategic Futurist, not a Theoretical Futurist. That means I want to ensure that any discussion about a potential future, any exploration of what is emerging and what it might mean MUST be tied into an clear understanding of what is going to happen back in the real world of operational activities tomorrow when everyone is back in the office. The most common cause here is when senior managers developing ideas make or carry forward a series of unfounded assumptions about their business, what it does and who it does it for. Consistently, though less common, is the second challenge – generating a series of unrealistic expectations as a result of the assumptions that have been made. The simple example is growth forecasts that discount or ignore emerging technologies that may make the Organisation's incumbent approach, obsolete.

Most DEAD Strategy can be spotted with just a few questions. The work to resolve the implications is a whole other challenge.

Thankfully there are consistent themes seen in some really successful organisations too. And by 'successful' I do not mean 'perfect' or that they never hit hurdles. In fact what makes these organisations successful is the consistency with which they have not only hit hurdles, but managed to overcome them and move forward – something that DEAD strategy firms NEVER do well.

Here then are the common themes for A.L.I.V.E Organisational strategy:

A is for Actionable. The organisation's strategies are not just a wish list, they are supported by the required capabilities and resources needed to ensure action can be taken. Those resources may be internal or external – the key is that the organisation has them available

L is for Linked to the Strategic Issues. In this sense EVERY SINGLE ACTION the organisation chooses to take is designed to move them closer to the Vision that has been set by addressing the

core Strategic Issues the Organisation faces. Organisations running this way use a laser like precision question for decision making – 'Will this proposed action move us closer to our Vision by helping us address this core issue – yes or no?' If the answer is yes, they execute and if not... In this way Organisations overcome the busy-ness syndrome and can even lower their workloads by stopping actions that make no difference or even harm the chances of success.

I is for Informed. ALIVE Strategy requires an ongoing awareness of internal operational state of affairs as well as information that informs the Organisation about the world in which it operates. Informed strategy is one where an ongoing Environmental Scanning (ES) capability is used to spot signs of change, of potential opportunities, or possible emerging issues that may require an operational response. The ES capability distributed across the Organisation, is also used to regularly identify and test Assumptions prior to final decisions being made – in this way the ES function acts as both informant and devils advocate or court-jester – it provokes thinking about how we are thinking. In DEAD Strategy firms, invalid assumptions are rife!

V is for Vision Focused. ALIVE Strategy is always connected to the intended destination of the Organisation. In planning documents and discussions it can be shown how an action will likely lead the Organisation closer to its desired destination – its Vision. In order to show the linkages an ALIVE Strategy will define who is accountable, what resources are needed to address an issue of significance; what resources are available and how those resources will be used.

E is for Executed. ALIVE Strategy gets done, pure and simple. As part of the execution the Organisation will know who has responsibility, as well as having determined (in advance) some of the likely signals that indicate whether or not it is Off or On Track to it's desired result. These Off/On track signals act as both an alert function tied into the ES capability as well as driving accountability in an ongoing and dynamic way. Tied into the A element, things get done.

And so the question for you to consider is simple:
is your Organisation Strategy D.E.A.D or A.L.I.V.E?

About the Author Marcus Barber

He is a Strategic Futurist and is the founder of The Australian Strategic Planning Institute (see www.taspi.com.au) Marcus is director of the futures strategy firm Looking Up Feeling Good and has worked with an array of Organisational types across almost all sectors. His skills have been used by Organisations in Europe, North America and AustralAsia. His full profile can be found at the company website via www.lufg.com.au/marcusbarber