

Strategic Planning as a Method for Business Growth

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Verne Harnish, founder of the Young Entrepreneurs' Organization and founder and CEO of Gazelles, Inc., wrote the book "Mastering the Rockefeller Habits" back in 2002, and this book was the basis of three separate all-day sessions he presented to approximately 30 CEOs during the 2008 NAPEO CEO Forum. I had participated in these annual forum sessions in the past, but 2008's forum proved to be the most beneficial for my firm and me. I decided to hire one of Gazelles' certified coaches to help my company in our strategic planning and implementation of what Verne had developed as the Gazelles growth method.

I think it is safe to assume that most NAPEO member firms have participated in some type of strategic planning during their company's lifetime.

As in many companies, our senior management team members are highly competent, "hands on," and very in tune with what is going on in our business. We had regular meetings, but the focus was always on short-term possibilities and issues: how to win a key prospect, service and retention of our existing clients, new technology, and so on. What we were missing was a consistent, dedicated approach to discussing and planning for our future.

We had used consultants in the past to guide us through our annual planning sessions, but after the planning was done, we didn't have an effective way to see if we were on course and keep the planning process moving forward. By adopting the Gazelles' strategic planning model, we not only now have clarity around our strategy, critical goals, and measurements, but also a tool to keep us focused on the big picture each week, month, quarter, and year. The best success was recog-



nizing how important it is to get all of our employees engaged and committed to the same priorities. The method was also able to provide visual means to keep our employees updated on our progress against goals.

This new way of planning our coach helped us develop was very different from what we had tried in the past. The Rockefeller habits process uses a system, and the system is designed to keep you focused on thinking strategically. Thinking strategically was not something our group was used to doing. Our group members were used to bringing the big decisions to my partner or me and letting us do the strategizing. Now our leadership group approaches problems as a team, with all members' thoughts heard and everyone contributing to the solution. This model gives each member "permission" to voice his opinions, even when they may not be popular. It became clear to my management team that long-term strategic planning (i.e., five years or more) is a thing of the past. Many of the components of a long-term strategic plan are still important and relevant today, but making detailed long-term plans in today's extremely fast-paced, ever-changing

environment, is, we believe, not an effective use of time. One- to three-year plans fit our world well. The strategic planning process itself has evolved to fit the changing times and the changing nature of our work. We discovered that the right facilitator is vitally important to ensure the right choices are made to support the central theme that emerges from the collective intelligence. The facilitator/coach should also be able to step outside the politics of the room and create a path that allows the team to grow. Otherwise, too much time and energy will be wasted on personal and political positioning people do to protect their silos.

As the saying goes, "If you fail to plan, you can plan to fail!" However, don't attach yourself to detailed long-term strategic planning, as that also will be the death of your plans. Instead, embrace and play at strategic advancement, use a professional outside facilitator or coach, and you will most certainly be making many more winning strategic moves. ●

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