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## **Strategic Leadership -- Achieving Agility**

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Having a good plan is compulsory, but knowing how and being able to respond to the unknown is the real goal and benefit of strategic leadership.

Many business leaders think being strategic means being the author of the company's plan for the future. No one would argue the value of a sound business plan but given what happens to the best laid plans of mice and men, experienced leaders know that planning is only the beginning.

### **Determine Where You Are**

In reality, planning isn't even what you should do first. For any long-term plan to be successful, you must first be realistic about where you are today. This requires an honest assessment of strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities -- a step many organizations are loathe to do. The reason usually cited: time.

Taking time before jumping in requires patience -- a competency that many quick thinking and fast moving entrepreneurs don't naturally exercise. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, since many entrepreneurs are successful because of their impatience. Their skill is in seeing opportunity and jumping quickly to take advantage of it. Not afraid of risks, they get to their desired result more quickly than their counterparts; often a critical reason behind market dominance.

Still, leading strategically requires time for reflection and the ability to realistically assess where you are. With this information, you can most accurately define your destination and chart the course that will take you there.

### **Define Your Mission and Direction**

A clear understanding of where you are must be balanced by a clear picture of where you need or want to go. Where you want to go is your company's mission. According to the

first quadrant of the [Denison Culture Model](#), created by Denison Consulting, based in Ann Arbor, MI, an organization's mission includes the company's vision, long-range direction and short-term goals.

An organization without a mission is like a sailboat without a rudder -- it just goes where the wind (or the marketplace) blows. To define your mission and give your company its direction, you must focus externally, which is usually easy for the risk-taking, fast moving entrepreneur.

Leading strategically includes defining your organization's mission. This requires a keen understanding of the marketplace and your reason for being in business. With a clearly defined mission, you give your organization its rudder.

## **Engage Others and Foster High Involvement**

While a clear vision is critical, you cannot make it happen by yourself. Once you've set the course, you must focus internally to engage others whose involvement you will need to successfully make the journey. This second quadrant of the Denison Culture Model includes engaging employees, empowering them to do their jobs and insuring that they have the skills and resources they need.

While the tactical side of these characteristics may be delegated to HR, leadership must first realize their importance and create a corporate culture that supports and values engagement from others.

Leading strategically must include engaging others. This requires articulate communication of your company's mission and a corporate culture that fosters ownership with high involvement across departments, divisions and the entire organization.

## **Coordinate Systems and Processes to Ensure Consistency**

Strong commitment without good coordination and integration can lead to chaos. In order to support high involvement across your organization, you need to coordinate the systems and processes that enable people to work together in a consistent manner. The third quadrant of the Denison Culture model emphasizes integration and coordination of effort and the core values needed for consistency across the organization.

Leading strategically for consistency requires the effective coordination of internal systems and processes. When these systems are in place, people in disparate departments, facilities and geographic locations can successfully work together to repeatedly recreate the quality products and services that make the company successful.

## **Managing Internal and External Tensions to Create Adaptability**

Even the best of systems can result in inflexibility. The critical fourth quadrant of The Denison Culture Model focuses on the organizational characteristics necessary for

adaptability. Adaptability is the result of successfully managing the internal and external tensions that naturally arise between the need for flexibility in the marketplace and consistency in the organization.

According to Denison, ensuring adaptability means your organization must be proficient at knowing your customers and market, learning from experience and creating necessary change. To be adaptable, you must have the internal systems and high involvement necessary to be agile enough in the face of change to maintain your customer focus and accomplish your mission.

Leading strategically for adaptability is knowing when and how to deviate from the plan and having an organization that is stable yet flexible enough to successfully maneuver through the change and still reach the desired destination.

### **The Challenge: Doing It all Well**

Given the range of focus required to lead your company strategically, the biggest challenge for most entrepreneurs is doing it all well. The entrepreneur who is great at reading the marketplace, seizing opportunities and setting good direction is naturally externally focused. They know where they want to be and are comfortable changing course in order to get there. These types of entrepreneurs are very flexible and may think that, like them, their organizations are agile.

Unfortunately, this entrepreneur is probably not as internally focused as he or she needs to be. As a result, they may lack the ability or interest to expose organizational threats and weaknesses. The externally focused leader often underestimates the impact of fostering high involvement or establishing the processes and systems that are necessary to create the stability an organization needs to achieve consistency.

Without stability and consistency a company will not be able to deliver on the opportunities created by an outward focus on the market place. Instead of leading strategically, the externally focused entrepreneur can be perceived as a "fly by the seat of your pants leader," which is definitely not the path to sustainable growth.

On the flipside, the leader who over-focuses on current reality can become too internally focused. They are usually great at fostering involvement and establishing consistent systems but they may be too rigid to be able to respond quickly enough to changes in the market.

The bottom line is that not many of us are good at everything. Be honest about your own strengths and weaknesses. Seek personal development to become better where you can and hire to compensate for areas where you can't.

## Conclusion

The ability to lead with a balanced internal and external focus is at the heart of leading strategically. When the resulting opposing tensions are managed successfully, you encourage the adaptability that makes your organization agile. Agile companies have the ability to recognize and respond quickly to market demands without losing the consistency of quality and involvement that made them successful -- the hallmark of sustainable, successful organizations.

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