



## Strategic Leadership: Building Prepared Minds

by Don Zillioux

Strategic leadership provides the vision and direction for the growth and success of an organization. Managing change and ambiguity requires strategic leaders who provide a sense of direction, and who build ownership within their workgroups to implement change.

Building prepared minds is critical for companies needing to reset the strategic direction and transform the organization. Leaders face the challenge of how to meet the expectations of those who placed them there. For a strategy to succeed, the leader must be able to adjust as conditions require. If leaders are to win they must rely on the prepared minds of employees throughout the organization to understand the strategic intent and then both carry out the current strategy and adapt it in real time.

### What is a leader's primary role as chief strategist?

Should the focus be on being the architect of the strategy product or being the architect of the strategy process?

**Analytical:** From an analytical perspective the strategist's job is to be the "architect of the perfect strategy product," seeing the strategy itself as the outcome.

**Human:** The same question from the human dimension – the chief strategist's job is to be the "architect of the perfect strategy process," seeing the process as the primary outcome with product built by others.

### What is their job as a leader during ongoing strategy making?

This second question focuses on leaders understanding their role as they participate in the strategy process.

**Analytical:** Analytical leaders feel the need to personally come up with the right answer.

**Human:** These leaders view themselves as coaches, believing that strategy is only as good as the depth of the understanding and commitment that it engenders.

### What type of team should their strategy making create?

This question recognizes that every strategy process defines a community and creates a team, whether the leader is aware of it or not.

**Analytical:** The analytical approach to strategy creates an exclusive "inner circle" of thinkers who make most of the decisions.

**Human:** A leader focusing on the human dimension is concerned about building a sense of citizenship in a larger group of people.

### When is strategy making finished?

Most leaders have an idea of how strategy making and time are related. The questions being asked are:

- Is strategy making as a discrete set of sequential activities with a defined start and stop?
- Or is strategy something that is continually reforming itself, never quite complete, but always in a state of evolution?

**Analytical:** From this view, good strategy making follows a linear process with each task being "checked off" as it is completed.

**Human:** Leaders who lean to the human dimension see strategy as a work in process, continuously being shaped as interactions occur with customers and competitors.

To integrate both dimensions into strategizing in a way that creates a winning outcome requires leaders who have the perspective to lead in a way that incorporates both dimensions as the strategy is developed. The steps below provide the leader with techniques to do that.

- Strategy making that enlists large groups of employees needs a common vocabulary and a common set of tools in order to be effective.
- Establishing a common vocabulary begins and ends by getting alignment around three questions:
  - 1) What does X mean?
  - 2) Why and when is it used?
  - 3) Is X necessary in developing the strategy and building understanding and ownership for it over time?"

Linked to common vocabulary is a common framework or tools to build your strategy. This is in a series of five questions with the answers leading up to "the big aha." The five questions are:

- 1) What does the playing field look like now?
- 2) What has the competition been up to?
- 3) What have we been up to?
- 4) What's around the corner?
- 5) What is our winning move?

The important outcome is that the leader needs to select a vocabulary and a toolset, use it consistently and require

others in the senior and middle ranks of the organization to do the same.

Lack of clarity and ownership deeper in the organization leads to people working at cross purposes; leadership time spent correcting and clarifying the direction; and poor execution of the strategy due to conflicting priorities.

Leaders can address these dynamics by broadening out the ownership of the strategy to a much larger group. The key is to create a common context for both the “what” and the “why” of the strategy that serves as a touchstone for the broader leadership team.

Many leaders get their strategy making to this point and either stop or their process stalls. A major reason is the lack of understanding and commitment to the steps required in the groups below the senior managers. These groups and especially their leadership teams frequently do not know how to proceed.

The make-up of a Strategy Support Team generally includes one or more people from each of the operating groups. The skills and behaviors required of these individuals are a blend of both the analytical and the human dimensions.

For many middle managers, participating in the strategy development process is a mix of training and doing. Building understanding and skills on topics such as the vocabulary and toolset, marketplace dynamics and the associated ambiguity, strategy story telling and their own individual strategic leadership strengths and weaknesses are all aspects of a process that can ignite a sense of understanding and commitment across the middle of the organization.

Middle managers want to commit to something and belong to something that is more than who they are as individuals. “What does this mean for me and my team?” is the motivating question.

While front line supervisors and teams in most instances are the largest portion of the population, the strategy making work to be done with this group is relatively simple. Strategy making here begins with the organization’s strategy story. Using middle managers in this role allows these individuals to raise their own strategic leadership bar.

In every organization, there is a line that can be drawn, above the line, people use the word “we” to imply collective responsibility for success and failure. People in this group say things like, “We did this well,” “We should have done this better.” Below the line, people use the word “they” to imply that things are being done to them by others frequently these things are not good. People in this

group say things like, “They messed up,” “They should have done that better.”

Effective strategy/execution, processes move the “we/they” line down in the organization so that more people use the word “we” and “us” and take ownership for making things things better.

Building prepared minds on a large scale begins and ends with the senior person focusing on being the architect of the strategy process as much as the product. Ultimately a deep “we” line is a signal that employees are developing, evolving, modulating, fine-tuning and executing a strategy concurrently. ♣

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