



Strategy acceleration: where's your blindspot?

by Mike Griffiths and Alison Tisdall

Leaders create strategies. Leaders can also accelerate those strategies. What would it mean for your organisation if your people were really focusing on their customers, scanning the future and alert to competitive disruption? What difference would it make if they could move beyond the status quo to where value was shifting to and had the skills to prioritise, adapt to and pursue opportunities?

Strategy development is essentially about identifying growth opportunities that play best to the organisation's abilities. Execution is all about seizing those opportunities, coordinating with other parts of the organisation and creatively solving unforeseen problems and pursuing unexpected opportunities.

Tasking leaders with strategy is not a small ask given the complexity out there and the stakes of winning or losing. It's critical to ask those developing strategy the question: "what horizons are you focused on?" Where is value shifting in your industry? Do you understand this intellectually or feel this viscerally? How is your eco-system evolving? What uncertainties are you building into your planning? Will your culture enable or hinder your plans? Do you fail quickly and adapt? Do you have clear priorities? Is your organisation aligned to these priorities? Are you all speaking the same language?

We have noticed six recurring blindspots in leaders tasked with strategy:

Blindspot 1: Focusing on the near term

Consider your leaders? On what horizon is their thinking, three years, one year or more likely the next quarter? Realistically how much time are your strategy creators spending focusing on where value is shifting in your markets? How adjacent are you looking for where your next disruption or opportunity might come from? The future is at once predictable and yet also uncertain. Great strategy calls for leaders to have a point of view of possible futures and live back from a range of possible future worlds to bring their organisation to meet it in the operating world of today. How are your strategy creators connecting with these possible futures for you or your customers?

Blindspot 2: Attachment to a successful past

Time and again we see market leaders assuming what's worked in the past to be the best predictor of the future, and tied to a set of sacred assumptions about how their market operates. Just ask the leaders at Nokia, Borders, Tower Records, RIM or Nortel how beliefs such as 'Music needs a format', or 'Phones are for communication' worked out for them? How then can we develop agile strategy, invest for the long term, adapt for the nuances of the near term? What are our flawed truths about how the world operates?

"It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so." Mark Twain was right. Managers can only deliver to the level that their unconscious bias allows them to. These default assumptions drop out of our awareness and put the lid on our personal potential and our organisation's potential. It requires a very specific kind of culture and process to allow people to really open up and commit to a strategy that doesn't regurgitate the past.

"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth"

Mike Tyson

Blindspot 3: Decision paralysis

This need to formulate and execute strategy in a constantly changing world creates ripe conditions for decision paralysis. Leaders who understandably are waiting for the day that will never come when they have all the data, or have consulted all the experts. The world of one time 5-10 year strategic plans is extinct. Today's strategy creation and execution must

be undertaken in uncertainty. It must be created with scenarios of possible futures and how we execute must adapt to those scenarios. How well are your leaders able to adapt when new data is available? Think Darwin "It is not the strongest of the species that survives but the most adaptable"

Blindspot 4: The language gap between senior and middle management

If strategy and execution are inextricable why don't we share a common language between those who set and guide strategy and those who drive it? Can your front line teams articulate the difference between your core, new and wow initiatives? Do they understand the priorities that should be driving investment decisions?

Accelerating strategy demands that we define terms and smash down the barriers between those charged with creating and executing strategy. Let's rethink the old divide between those leaders who analyse strategy and those who guide creation and those leaders who are executing. The military have known these risks for years. When your life is on the line, unsurprisingly you quickly establish a shared language, ensuring there is no room for gaps in understanding between the top and the front lines. Sophisticated at painting the picture of intent but allowing those on the front line to make survival decisions to adapt in the moment.

Providing a common taxonomy around developing strategy and an engagement process for those who drive execution builds four significant advantages:

1. Managers entrusted with execution start to own their initiatives because they understand the context and have a voice in creating the detail of execution.
2. They become more confident and resourceful. They can adapt to facts on the ground and can problem solve in real time when facing sudden issues.
3. They can communicate more effectively to senior managers. Rather than a data dump or mystery story, middle managers can succinctly communicate the rationale behind their decisions through a common language.
4. They can co-ordinate productively within their own team and across the organisation.

Blindspot 5: "Bottoms up ..."

Everyone agrees that executing a strategy is a team effort, however in many cultures, leadership is still synonymous with 'senior'. To guide and accelerate

strategy, leaders often add more checks and balances, whereas by fostering shared leadership, everyone can own and drive their piece of the strategy. When you then encourage better communication across functions and up and down the organisation you create great energy and collaboration and avoid choking middle managers with tighter directives. Fostering shared leadership means equipping people with lighter leadership skills such as fostering engagement, building resilience and resourcefulness, dealing with seemingly irreconcilable differences, enlisting the hearts and minds of others, mastering conversations that count and designing change interventions that drive performance leaders.

“If you think you are leading and turn around to see no one following, then you are just taking a walk.”

Benjamin Hooks

Blindspot 6: Failing to fail

Tata give an award for the best failed idea. Facebook have a core value of ‘move fast and break things’. Many other company cultures are yet to catch on. Frankly the approach we see in most companies is that failure is more likely to be a ticket to gardening leave rather than a ticket to promotion. How then is your organisation learning from mistakes and using them as a spring board to new ways of doing things? Trying new things inevitably entails short term setbacks but honestly discussing the lessons learnt increases long-term success. Strategies today won’t work without improvisation but many managers avoid taking the initiative because of fear of reprisal.

We believe the end result of addressing these blindspots will be to accelerate your organisation to a living, breathing strategy that gets refined and updated in real time and a workforce motivated and aligned in execution, and more capable of working with the variables and adapting.

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