Build an Organization That's Less Busy and More Strategic

Graham Kenny

Working with the top executives at a company I'll call Titan (which designs and makes transit concrete mixers), I noticed that they were flat-out busy doing everything *except* thinking about strategy. They were keeping a close watch on factory operations, tracking production targets, handling problems with staffing and equipment, and even getting involved in administrative tasks like supplying quotes and checking that all the invoicing had been done. And that set the pace for everyone else in the organization. Employees took few breaks. Many of them worked 12-hour days.

The trouble is, all this hasn't improved performance. In fact, Titan isn't doing very well financially, with customers slow to pay, creditors chasing their money, the bank overdraft growing, and profits in decline. When I took a look at its 13-page strategic plan, I could see why.

The company lacks focus. It has 15 "strategies," none of which are actually related to how it achieves a competitive advantage. Rather, they're a bunch of activities that keep the company's managers very *occupied,* but to no clear end. While I could see from their disposition that in their hearts they knew something was wrong with their plan and their thinking, they were basically too busy to reflect. This has effectively taken the company's destiny out of their hands.

Even if your organization is successful, being too busy isn't a good thing, because you can't sustain a frenzy of activity. But it's much worse if the activities themselves don't cohere strategically and your company's performance is suffering as a result.
So, what does it take to build an organization that's less busy and more coherent? An outsider's perspective.

As insiders to our companies, when we look at what we do, we see only activity. When we think "improve," we naturally focus on the world we know (Procter & Gamble CEO A.G. Lafley refers to this tendency as "the gravitational pull from the inside"). This leads to an *operational* mindset.

A *strategic* mindset is outside-in. Position yourself across the street, so to speak, and focus your attention on your firm's competitiveness. Ask yourself questions like: "Why would I want to buy from them?" and "Why would I want to work for them?" When you look at your company this way, the world becomes one of outcomes, not activity — and it becomes much easier to establish a few key performance criteria. Then you can ask yourself "So what?" to set priorities.

When's the best time to think about all this? Well, not at work, when you're surrounded by all the hubbub you've yet to control. The work environment is designed to focus our attention

on the tasks at hand. To become more strategic, you have to escape this channelling of your thoughts. Try using a simple device that leaders have relied on for eons: walking. The rhythmic effect of putting one foot after another frees the brain from itself, allowing you to take a helicopter view of what you do day-to-day. You can reflect on relationships – which ones are most important to your competitiveness and how well you're managing them. From this vantage point, you can better see how to reengineer your activities, saving both time and effort.

Had Titan's CEO taken a walk and reflected, he might have identified that the company's real source of competitiveness lay with three things that customers valued. First, it customized its products. While one of Titan's main competitors supplied cheaper mixers, made in Malaysia, they were standardized. Titan's mixers and other products were purpose-built, a considerable advantage to the customers that Titan ought to be targeting. Second, Titan offered a "complete package" — not just the initial mixer sale, but a suite of follow-up repairs and product servicing that rivals weren't providing. And third, Titan could offer superior customer service — steeped in years of industry, product, and technical experience.

Sometimes these advantages can be right in front of us. But they remain underdeveloped, or we fail to capitalize on them, because everyone is consumed by tasks that don't support them. Focusing a company requires thought. It won't happen if you don't make the time.

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