

Strategic Plans Are Less Important than Strategic Planning

Graham Kenny

Mention the word “plan” to most managers and the image that springs to their minds might well be a travel plan. Drawn up by travel agents, these lay out in clear and certain terms the sequence of your trip and what to expect when, specifying: where you’re going from, your destination, where you’ll stay en route and when, how you’ll travel, and so forth.

Or they’ll think of the kind of plans builders employ, often referred to as “blueprints.” The result is much the same as with travel: a specific beginning and end with precise steps along the way. Both plans are neat, prescribed, determined — and manageable. You figure out what to do and then do it.

But not all types of plans have that level of precision. In a fluid, unpredictable environment you need to have a very different understanding of plans and planning. A case in point is military strategy.

Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke, also known as Moltke the Elder, lived between 1800 and 1891. He was a German Field Marshal and is credited with creating a new approach to directing armies in the field. This entailed developing a series of options rather than simply a single plan. Moltke the Elder held the view that only the commencement of any military operation was plannable. He famously stated that “no plan of operations extends with certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy’s main strength.” This has also been popularly interpreted as “no plan survives contact with the enemy.”

Much later Winston Churchill (1874 — 1965) came out with this pithy statement: “Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential.” As a graduate of Britain’s elite Royal Military College at Sandhurst he would certainly have read or heard about Moltke the Elder’s insights on plans and planning.

The U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890 — 1969) had a similar take: “plans are worthless, but planning is everything.” This statement came from a speech to the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference in Washington, D.C. on November 14, 1957. He went on to explain: “There is a very great distinction because when you are planning for an emergency you must start with this one

thing: the very definition of ‘emergency’ is that it is unexpected, therefore it is not going to happen the way you are planning.” Like Churchill, Eisenhower appears to be channelling Moltke the Elder.

Like military strategy, business strategy is developed and applied in a fluid, unpredictable environment, and the distinction that Moltke, Churchill, and Eisenhower draw between planning and the plan is very pertinent for senior executives charged with crafting a company’s strategy. All too often, I find, executives seem to share the traveler’s and builder’s understanding of planning and the trick to helping them create a strategy that will actually work lies in getting them to rethink that view. What does that involve? Let me share with you a few principles I’ve learned from my more than 25 years of facilitating strategic planning sessions.

Think of the plan as a guidance tool. The problem for many managers is that their expectations are all skewed from what can be realistically achieved via a strategic plan. Their image is more of the house-plan type or travel itinerary. They anticipate that by doing the necessary analysis and writing down how their business will succeed the world will be converted from uncertain to certain. In their eyes the strategic plan becomes a device for *control* rather than one of *guidance*. They’re not comfortable with the fluid and uncertain Moltke-the-Elder concept. This can manifest itself as “we’ve given up on strategic planning.” This emanated from a CEO whose experience in writing “it” all down was that he got it all “wrong” as things changed rapidly. In other similar situations executive teams find themselves simply ignoring any document that is produced.

Look for disagreements and toward the future. Even though your plan is liable to become immediately irrelevant, you still need to invest in writing it up. Why? There are two reasons. The first is to surface disagreements that may otherwise remain hidden. You can have all the discussions you like with your fellow staff and think that your management team is in agreement, until you actually distill these discussions in a written document that people have to sign off on. It’s in the crafting of your organization’s position that you realize that, well no, we’re not all on the same page. The second reason is that it provides a platform from which change can be leveraged. This line-in-the-sand concept may seem paradoxical but the very process of preparing the plan has you thinking about the future and assembling resources. Moltke the Elder wasn’t advocating *not* having a plan to start with but that the plan itself and the planners needed to be flexible because it generates preparedness.

Focus on the organization and key stakeholders, not individual actions. A plan can’t be “strategic” if it’s simply about action by individuals. While action is fundamental to implementation and success, there’s another level above that — the organization level. In my experience *most* managers, operating as they do inside their organization, aren’t fully cognizant of this important distinction. This can have

them launching prematurely into who, what and when or, at the very least, **unconsciously crisscrossing between the organization and individual levels**. Business strategy operates at the corporate level while action functions at the individual level. Remain aware of this underlying logic and **keep a firm focus on your organization and its relations with its key stakeholders**. Develop business strategy for each stakeholder in turn but also **acknowledge the causal link** between them.

Assume the plan is a work in progress. A strategic plan is not a set-and-forget instrument. It's a living and breathing document that guides decision making and helps marshal resources. When managers talk about "giving up on strategic planning" I suggest that they haven't thought through how to keep their plan fresh. The fact that circumstances are changing rapidly is a very good reason to visit their plan regularly. How regularly? This varies by industry, of course, but my general recommendation to most clients is monthly. Your executive committee may meet more frequently, perhaps weekly, so put aside the first meeting of each month for a plan review. This allows you to not only update the document due to changed conditions but to also go through the actions that were scheduled for completion as part of the execution process. Make your agenda item "progress against strategic plan."

Moltke the Elder wasn't in business nor born in the modern era. Yet my guess is he'd have made an excellent keynote speaker at a conference on our modern obsession, "disruption." He understood that the world doesn't stand still while we plan. He also appreciated the importance of planning's role in preparing for change. Your strategic plan is an essential device in navigating disruption's headwinds.

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