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A Three Year Strategic Plan May Alter Your Map for Success

Certain factors affecting your organization's success can't be controlled, such as the state of the economy and credit availability. Other things you do have power over are how you treat your customers, the attitude you bring to the workplace, and planning for your organization's future. Strategic planning, that serious forethought about the direction you want your business to take, is now more important than ever as you fight to stay on the road to success.

Once you've realized you need a strategic plan (commonly for a three-year period) or decide you need to revamp one, take a look at where you are today. Once you've made that assessment, start thinking about where you want to be in 2012, even though it may seem a long row to hoe.

Consider including your full staff in the process of developing goals and strategies. Doing so will help build consensus, transparency and a sense of team work, which may be especially important in the current economic landscape.

During the process, ensure everyone has the opportunity to raise issues they'd like to see addressed. For optimum objectivity, and to keep the process on track, consider using an outside facilitator, someone experienced in strategic planning and used successfully by others in the industry. For example, you might set the stage by pinpointing the business in the next town as your main competitor and stating that your organization needs to surpass it to be No. 1 in the region. While facilitating this discussion, remember that the business owner should always lead.



Here are five questions to ask once you have a strategic plan on paper:

1. *Is the mission clear?* Your mission statement needs to reflect your businesses' reason for being. It needs to be specific, suggesting an action plan that points your organization in a clear direction.
2. *Is it supported by specific goals?* A good mission statement leads to goals that outline how the mission will be achieved. The goals will define how you'll get there, incrementally, in the first, second and third years. Lay the groundwork for benchmarking success and your return on investment.
3. *Does it provide clarity?* Good strategic planning helps a business to sharpen its focus and better allocate time, money and staff to support its mission. This may mean eliminating activities that may no longer be critical to your goals or that fail to make an impact that justifies the resources they consume.
4. *Is there accountability?* To bring a strategic plan to life, you must assign responsibility for pursuing specific goals to individuals, departments or teams. And these goals must be supported by action plans with specific due dates. A plan without due dates is no better than a wish list.
5. *Are daily operations consistent with goals?* An organization's goals should be evident in how you use your resources. Do your monthly and annual budgets support your strategic goals? Are all daily staff activities aligned with the goals?

Effective strategic plans share key elements by providing practical value and they serve as an indispensable reference. A common reason why strategic plans start gathering dust as time passes is that businesses don't update them regularly to reflect change. Whenever an unexpected situation arises, your strategic plan and its companion goals need to be revised to reflect that change.

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