

Published in Sunday Independent, April 8, 2001

IN STRATEGY, QUESTIONS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANSWERS

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Would-be strategists are suckers for snake oil. They love easy answers. And when they can't find those, hard ones will do.

They love fads with a catchy ring like reengineering, core competence, lean production and knowledge management. That they usually don't know what these things mean, or how to make them work, makes no difference.

According to research by Bain & Company, a management consultancy, an average big firm is likely to use about 12 of the top 25 management "tools." At the same time, other research shows that about 75% of all change efforts do not deliver the expected results.

What's more, all indications are that "interventionitis" mostly causes more trouble than it's worth. To sell their new "solutions", managers make speeches, bang drums and put graffiti on the walls. Skeptical employees put their heads down and get on with their real work. Soon everyone gets bored with the new initiative, and it dies.

The pity is, many management concepts have great value. They do work well in some companies. So the question is, what can be done to make more of them?

For a start, executives should accept that there is very little new under the management sun. For all the talk of the need for innovation in organizations, the field of management though is itself remarkably short of innovation.

The best ideas are re-hashed, re-labeled and recycled. The lousy ones are wrapped and hyped, trade-marked and branded. But where's the really new stuff? Where are the insights that will throw fresh light on management dilemmas, or enable busy managers to apply resources in new ways or get different results?

Most of what needs to be said about business has been said best by Peter Drucker over the past 50 years. Pretty well everything else is a derivative of his wisdom. No one else has come remotely close in sorting the wheat from the chaff, in understanding what really counts and in explaining what to do about it.

Drucker is a profound thinker with an unusual ability to decode what goes on inside organizations and in the societies around them. But if he towers over his peers, it is because of his ability to make things simple rather than complicated.

A professional writer long before he became a management consultant and teacher, Drucker said long ago that his best ideas had "one moving part". This is probably one reason he has never enjoyed as much acclaim as he deserves from other academics, and it may also mean that the value of what he says in his many books is now overlooked by practicing executives.

The power of his advice, however, lies not in what he says managers should do, but rather in what he says they should ask. Others have claimed credit for being first to ask questions like, "Who is the customer?" "What value do you offer?" "How will you do it?" But Drucker was there first.

He understood, better than almost anyone since, that effective management is less about definitive answers than about constant probing questions.

On the whole, South African managers are hopelessly weak when it comes to asking questions. They fail on three counts.

First is the fact that they do not clearly define the problems or challenges that need attention; and when the wrong question is posed, the wrong answer will surely follow. If they merely asked, “What is the question?” they would set out facing the right way and would focus on the right things.

Their second error is that they don’t question their own assumptions. They jump to conclusions, often providing answers before doing their homework. When asked, “Do you know that for a fact, or are you guessing?” they quickly see that they’re on shaky ground.

The third problem is that they encourage others to agree with them rather than challenge what they say. The result is that while a team might appear to be aligned, it is in fact just mute. And while it may seem to speak with one voice, the reality is that its members are not speaking up at all, and certainly not in a way that might anger the boss.

Because managers think they need to project confidence and certainty, they often assume that their first answer is the best answer – if not the only one. They choose not to see possibilities and they shut out other people’s views.

This “my way or no way” attitude is dangerous and debilitating. It causes firms to pursue the wrong goals, and it creates a climate in which people put their heads down and do as they’re told. Their “strategic IQ” never develops, they stop volunteering ideas and they become increasingly demotivated.

Effective executives never stop asking questions. Apart from constantly examining their external environment, they also keep testing five headline issues: their business purpose, their business recipe, their organizational character, their priorities and actions and their “strategic conversation”.

These five questions, in turn, are answered by asking a set of 20 others in my new management book, *Making Sense of Strategy* (see diagram). Together, the answers add up to a powerful statement of strategy.

This seemingly simple framework has profound implications for almost any firm. Experience with many companies shows that they do not have the answers. In fact, they often have not even thought about them. They have been so busy writing flowery vision and mission statements, and making hollow plans, that they have forgotten the basics.

No company can ignore these questions and hope to survive. The company that does think through them, and that does develop clear answers, has a head start in the race for the future.

Strategy is made and driven by the conversations within a company. But those conversations have to be about the right things. This handful of questions provides both a starting point and an ongoing discipline for strategists.

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