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Kill the “S-word” before it kills you

Tony Manning

Every company needs a strategy, right? Well, maybe not. Maybe the time you spend talking about strategy is a waste. Maybe you’d do better without the “S-word” in your business.

Heresy! After all, everyone knows that strategy is a key factor in any organisation’s performance. It provides direction, frames decisions, orders priorities. (And by the way, I’ve written many books and countless articles about what it is and how to use it. I am a raving fan.)

But I spend a lot of time watching what happens when managers get together to work on strategy. And almost always, the process goes the same way:

Phase One: “What the hell are we doing here?” The call went out, and a bunch of people appear in a conference room somewhere. The agenda said this was about strategy. But everyone was busy, and this is a distraction. So why is it necessary?

Phase Two: “How should we do this?” Someone makes an opening speech – maybe with PowerPoint slides to show they’re serious. But the process is unclear. So someone else suggests a SWOT analysis. Or maybe a look at the “five forces” or a review of “core competences”.

Phase Three: “What should we talk about?” Well, how about the vision and mission – are they still OK? Or what about the values? Nah – let’s cut right to the chase and talk about a difficult deal or an aggressive competitor. Or perhaps someone has a view on some tricky customer problem.

Phase Four: “Can’t we please have some direction.” The conversation bumps along, goes in circles, and becomes irritating. There’s nothing to write on the flipchart because people are just tossing words into the ring. One or two make smart-assed comments which get a laugh or piss others off. Eyes glaze. Frustration levels rise.

Phase Five: “This is operational stuff, not strategy!” Because no one has a better idea, someone starts banging away about current problems. The sales office needs restructuring. We need to close the Port Elizabeth operation. Can we please, please fix the ERP system? But wait a minute – we came here to talk strategy, not tactics. Well, which is which? How much detail should we get into? Or is *this* strategy?

Phase Six: “Right, back to work.” The conversation is back where it started. What a waste of time. It was good to hear what folks in other departments had to say, and it was useful chatting to those from out of town. But decisions? Hah!

All too often, the outcome of “strategy” meetings is business as usual. People leave no wiser than when they arrived. Perhaps they sorted out some operational matters. But if they thought they knew what the strategy was before they got together, they are now thoroughly confused.

So what's the point of all this? Do you need a strategy? Is there a better way?

In fact, all you do need is to get your people aiming at the same hill, and understanding clearly what each of them must do to get there. What you call that process is irrelevant.

By all means invite your team to talk strategy – but don't use the word during your discussions. And don't use words like "vision", "mission" or "tactics" either. Keep the conversation jargon-free. Talk about what you really need to talk about.

Where you're going. How you're doing. What's happening around you. What you need to do next. Who'll do it, and by when.

That's strategy. Everything else is hot air.

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