



Catalyzing Brilliance: Strategy from the Inside Out

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There is a built-in challenge to conceiving really great strategy, and the challenge usually resides within the very team charged with its conception and implementation. How can a team, albeit, brilliant and well-intentioned, bridge all of the natural barriers that separate them from each other, in order to agree upon a unified direction. On one level this may seem a silly question.

After all—they are all on the same team and therefore, agreement shouldn't be a problem. But however charming that point of view, it simply is not borne out by the facts. On any executive team, there are multiple different ideas, expectations and visions for the future and the road that will lead to that future. For the most part, the differences between individuals' ideas are not necessarily great, but they are also not explicit, explored or resolved. Without the articulations of the differences and possible conflicts, there can never be any real consensus. So usually, there isn't.

Despite that, most organizations do ultimately create a strategy document. How they do that is an interesting process, one often based on implicit assumptions, outright domination by a single individual's vision or the use of an expensive consulting firm's thinking. There is also the option of hiring an outside consulting firm and having them do the research and thinking necessary to devise a brilliant strategy. While this is ideal in some ways, it has some drawbacks that may keep it from being the best option for many organizations. When an outside entity does the strategic thinking, there is a lot that they cannot take into account: The culture of the organization, its unique personality, the proactiveness of the participants, and even the question of whether that strategy captures the hearts and minds of the executives and directors. These factors are essential to seeing that a strategy gets accomplished. While a strategy may be conceptually brilliant, if it can't be loved by those who must execute it, can't be applied by the managers in day-to-day operations, or doesn't jibe with the character of the organization, it will remain conceptual. So many strategies remain conceptual that strategy has come to be another process that is viewed as motivational rather than practical activity. The proclivity for consultant-designed strategies not to work is seen in many of our most recent business tragedies – Enron, Swiss-Air, Kmart and Global Crossing. Each one had its strategy created by one of the most well-known and admired consulting firms—but failed to implement it despite have invested (in the case of Enron over \$10m) in its creation.

The pages of the Wall Street Journal are rife with examples of companies that invested in the thinking of major consulting firms, only to fail dismally at implementing the great ideas they had purchased. From a pure fiscal standpoint, it is unconscionable to spend stockholder money on projects that will never be utilized. But that wasn't the original intent. The intent was to hire great minds, buy their ideas, and then implement them. As so many failures show though, outsiders don't successfully map a company's future – insiders do.

Traditional strategy meetings, the kind of off-site inspirational presentations that are usually done in the absence of expensive consultants' work, rarely capture the genius that resides in the directors and executives. Instead, they usually capture one dominant person's thinking (the CEO, perhaps) and the presumed agreement of everyone else. The nature of the process itself almost guarantees the lack of authentic consensus between the entire team. That lack of consensus and the burning drive that comes with real consensus, can undermine the fulfillment of even a great strategy.

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Insidiously, even when there is disagreement or conflict between visions, the very people holding those contrary views may be unaware that they are doing so. They will embrace the strategy that is presented, subtly changing it in their own perception so that it is a better match for their own thinking. That can lead to implementation problems, or worse, wholesale tactical conflicts down the road. We usually start off strategy sessions with teams who say they are cohesive, and that they agree in principle on most things.

Inevitably though, profound differences arise that need to be resolved. Those differences are potential obstacles that may show up later in a different guise, and will almost always cost the organization in real, measurable terms.

The question then is how to best harness the insiders to create a strategy that will be brilliant, and ultimately, implemented. That is one thing that makes the difference in having the plan come to fruition-- having captured the hearts and minds of those who are responsible for bringing the strategy into reality. When the executives and directors have created the strategy themselves, out of true consensus, they have a deep relationship with and understanding of its logic – making it a natural expression for them throughout the implementation. Galvanizing a complex team of good minds into a cohesive thought process that transcends individual opinions is a difficult undertaking, one that very rarely happens “naturally”. It requires a clear methodology, and facilitation that is expert at eliciting the best ideas of everyone without thwarting the necessary argumentation that leads to consensus.

Catalyzing great minds to create new ideas is a skill in itself. If one starts from the premise that all of the necessary intelligence, information, wisdom, experience and passion is already there, in the executive team, a different vision for creating strategy begins to take form.

Maybe what is needed is a different kind of consultant, one who is adept at eliciting the creativity, brilliance and consensus of the participants.

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With the use of a methodological framework that allows for creating top-to-bottom strategy, Framework Consulting partners are able to ask the questions, direct the inquiry and moderate the disagreements such that whole new avenues of thought and strategic models are invented. These conversations aren't easy. Sometimes they aren't even fun. But the outcomes almost always astonish the participants by being bolder, more inventive, more unforeseen, and more likely to succeed than anything they dreamt was possible.

With the advent of a strategy that gives life to the ideas of the leadership team, and truly expresses each person's passion and wisdom for the future of the organization, there is a different possible implementation and result. At Framework we are in the business of harnessing our clients' brilliance, rather than demonstrating our own. Their great thinking has created unforeseen results time and time again. Our participation in those processes serves as the inspiration for our own passion, continuing to generate breakthrough results at the very heart of business

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