

Defining strategy

Everyone has one, but no one knows what it is or what to do with it.

A PowerPoint® deck flashes on screen with the snappy tagline, “Strategy first!” The facilitator begins and the audience nods along in agreement, almost on cue.

Fast forward to a few months later when you find yourself wondering, “Wait, where was the evidence of improved performance or results? Why is it that though everyone agrees strategy should come first, nearly every manager claims to already be ‘strategic?’”

The problem is two-fold. If you don’t know what strategy is, chances are you won’t be able to craft a successful one. That said, it’s highly unlikely that you’d also be able to translate someone else’s strategy into action.



If you don’t know what strategy is, how can you put it first, or use it at all?

What your organization means when it says “strategy” can seem elusive. A study done with 400 talent management leaders showed that 55.7% of organizations do not have a common definition of “strategy.”¹ Goes to show how we’re often not even speaking the same language in our own environments...

No wonder strategy remains undeveloped, vague, and ignored.

It’s pretty easy to get hold of a definition, just pick one from your favorite business source. I like Forbes’ definition, personally, since it drops strategy right into a realistic workday:

- Strategy (n.) – “...a framework for making decisions about how you will play the game of business.”²

Forbes goes on to say how such decisions “...include everything from capital investments to operational priorities to marketing to hiring to sales approaches to branding efforts to how each individual shuffles [his/her] To Do list every single morning.”²

1. Horwath R. Does your team understand strategy? LinkedIn. 2020. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/does-your-team-understand-strategy-rich-horwath/?trackingId=Ci118nhYkIW-964ToMG3vRg%3D%3D>

2. Latham A. What the heck is a strategy anyway? Forbes. 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/annlatham/2017/10/29/what-the-heck-is-a-strategy-anyway/#b7d3b647ed84>

Strategy should not be abstract – it is an evolving route to action.

A strategy should not be decided upon to only then never be re-evaluated. It is not a static theory, but rather an evolving execution. As new challenges arise, a strategy should change and grow to continue solving those challenges.

For now, let’s stick with Forbes² concept and imagine a nicely printed strategy packet landing atop each of our desks...The strategy within that block of pages will only work if the person who wrote it knows how to implement it at those desks individually.

But often, they don’t. So, just like that, it’s checkmate.

This is the step where strategies often fail. The next steps within a strategy may be simple, but due to the common lack of maintenance, their potential rarely comes to fruition.

Anyone who wishes for their strategy to become action must take the time to follow through, right down to each employee’s desk.

In a small company, you can more easily manage it all the way down to a critical role, such as a sales representative. On a larger scale, however, conferring with downstream managers, providing any necessary resources, and reinforcing any remit to follow through similarly should ensure relevant action on every level.

Help the managers. Provide a framework to cross check. Encourage team members to question what their colleagues need to successfully implement the strategy. Ask them to analyze whether those actions will deliver on the strategy as a whole, or only in part – as well as to know who or what is critical in order to achieve the best strategy result. Add accountability and expect feedback.

By following through and providing a framework to question and check actions, we will soon talk the same language, explore gaps, and figure out what we are actually going to do and how we are going to do it.

Now we’ve got a strategy.