



A Lighthearted Collection of Blogs About

Strategic Thinking

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With Compliments From

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Table of Contents

How to Achieve Your Long-Term Goals – According to the Cat!

The Devil is Still Lurking...

The Telling Question!!

4 Reasons NOT to Make New Year Resolutions!

The Great Gatsby and Strategy Launches

Since When Was Making a Loss a Good Thing?

How to Achieve Your Long-Term Goals – According to the Cat!

I met a friend for coffee the other week and she told me an amazing, funny story. When her children were teenagers their neighbors got a cat. The cat took a liking to my friend's daughter, but even more, to their house.

Now unfortunately for Puss, my friend did not like cats so had no intention of letting the cat into her house.

The cat tried really hard to get in. He even attempted a drop-in from the skylight above, but all to no avail. My friend was not letting the cat in, no matter how much he wanted to be in.

A few years on, my friend's daughter got married and moved to the other side of town. The neighbors asked if she would like to take their cat, given he was clearly fond of her and she of him. She agreed and Puss moved to her new home. But a few months later, my friend decided to move and sold her house to her daughter and her new husband. So guess who finally got to move into the house? - yes, the cat!



The moral of the story is this. You never quite know how things are going to unfold, so that your goals are achieved. Sometimes you have to be persistent. Sometimes you have to wait a while. Sometimes it seems quite hopeless and you seem further away from your goal than ever. But hang in there - keep focused on important goals and don't give up. Sometimes things work in very roundabout ways and suddenly - your goal is achieved!

The Devil is Still Lurking...

I just had one of those evenings - you know, when everything goes wrong. Not badly wrong, just enough to waste time and energy, and be really irritating. It all happened because I got into the detail. I used to work with a manager, autocratic type, and I didn't agree with much of what he said except this - "the devil's in the detail". It was one of his favorite expressions and I have to agree.



Perhaps that's what I love about strategic thinking - not too much detail! But of course, sooner or later you have to implement and that means - detail.

Tonight I was attempting to use a new software that's been recommended to me. There is some strategic benefit to this. It will help me offer more services on-line. If it works.

All was going well when suddenly one of the key functions shut down for no apparent reason. Just at that moment domestic issues surfaced and I had to run off and sort those out. When I got back that function had returned but another had gone. And it wasn't quite doing what I had expected overall.

What I had thought would be a 15 minute quick trial has turned into a couple of hours. Why is technology like that? It's supposed to speed things up but too often it takes way too long to figure out. Or maybe I'm a technophobe, but I don't think so. I quite like new tools and software - but only if they do what I need them to.

So now I guess I'll have to go and read all the tutorials or watch the video versions. Video takes longer, I can skim the text, so I'll start there. Hopefully it's just some little detail that's messed things up. The strategy is still on track - delivering more on-line. That detail devil is doing its best to send the strategy off-track but I won't be beaten. Last resort - read the instructions!

The Telling Question!!

I read a discussion a while back in a LinkedIn group that asked "When would projects or programs be strategically aligned?" The question seemed so bizarre to me that I clicked through to read the full discussion. The detail didn't explain the question much further, but it seemed that the writer was indeed asking that question (I thought he might have missed out the word "not" after 'programs'!!)

Talk about asking a telling question! If any of my clients asked me this, I'd be seriously worried about firstly, how they spent their time, and secondly, whether I should be spending my time and energy working with them. It's very enlightening when someone asks a question that so clearly should only ever be asked in the reverse.

If he had put the 'not' in there after programs, that would make sense. It would show that he understood that *projects and programs should always be strategically aligned*, but was wondering if there was ever a time they wouldn't be. In other words, *'I understand the rule, but is there ever an exception?'* And likely there are one or two exceptions.

But he asked it the other way, as if the rule was the reverse - *the rule is that projects and programs are **not** required to be strategically aligned, so is there ever an exception when they should be aligned?* So presumably in his organization, there is little or no link between the strategy, and the projects that are undertaken - no link between strategy and implementation. Therefore people are busy implementing something other than strategic priorities. Hmmmm.....

It's often the way in which questions are asked that indicate common practice in an organization. If culture, practices and processes do not require people to think about strategy, and align their decisions and priorities with the strategies, then that culture will not encourage strategic thinking, nor be successful in implementing strategies and achieving long term goals.

What types of questions do people in your organization ask about priorities, decisions and projects - and what does that indicate about strategic thinking in your organization's culture?

4 Reasons NOT to Make New Year Resolutions!



I'm not sure who came up with the idea of New Year Resolutions. I suppose it's logical that a new year feels like a new start, so it seems a good time to set some new goals. The problem is, they seem to be rarely successful. Here's why - and why if you haven't made any this year, you shouldn't feel guilty:

1. They are often made in haste. It's often on New Year's night in a party atmosphere, or at least a time of reminiscence, that people suddenly hit on a resolution. If there's been no real thought about it, and particularly how it's going to be achieved, you're unlikely to stick to it, or really make it happen. It's more like a wish you make when you blow out the birthday cake candles - if you're really lucky it might come true without you having to do anything! Hmmm...
2. They are often made under the influence of alcohol or other dubious circumstances. See above!
3. The basis for making them is often regret, or at least some sense of dissatisfaction eg "I am overweight so this year I will lose weight", "Last year I didn't connect with many friends so this year I am going to be more social". This basis of setting goals fails to assess what your real priorities need to be and the reasons why you are not doing those things. Without some positive vision of what you want going forward, you are unlikely to make the necessary changes.
4. Resolutions usually stop at a vague statement, like "I will lose weight this year." Rarely do people apply the good old "SMART" formula that helps ensure the goal is able to be achieved. Nor do they develop an implementation plan and a method of keeping themselves accountable for achieving it.

So if New Year resolutions are not a great way to set goals, what is? Well perhaps a new year is a good time to sit down and do some strategic thinking. You could ask yourself the following types of questions:

What might your world look like in five years time?

What will have changed and how?

What do you want your future to look like?

Where do you want to be in five years - in business/career,

personal life, health, financial, lifestyle and so on.

Based on that, where do you need to be next new year ie in twelve months time?

What's the gap between now and then?

What do you need to take account of, that is likely to happen and be outside of your control?

So what then should your goals be for this year?

How will you achieve them - step by step?

What other information or resources do you need to achieve them?

How will you know if you are on track?

How will you keep your goals top of mind as you go about your daily routines?



These are some of the questions you need to ask yourself and then find answers to, to make successful goals. But they don't have to happen at 1 January! Personally I take most of January to work through this process for my life and business. Some of my clients prefer to do this at the end of the calendar year in preparation for the next year. And for some of my clients, it makes more sense for them to do this at the start of their financial year, rather than the calendar year. You might also choose your birthday month or some other significant time to prepare some annual goals.

So if you didn't make New Year resolutions, no need to feel you missed out. And if you did, it's time to finish the process by answering all these questions and tying down your goals!



The Great Gatsby and Strategy Launches

I just read a review of the movie 'The Great Gatsby' that said it's extravagant and will basically blow your mind with the imagery and decadence, but afterwards you'll wonder what the fuss was about. It made me think of many strategy launches I've endured over the years. Big launch, big fuss, then - not much. Which was a pity, because in many cases a lot of analysis, thinking and resources had gone into it. Here's 4 reasons why a ra-ra big-fuss launch of your strategy might be a bad idea –

1. People can get the impression that the work is done, the strategy is 'achieved', when in fact, the work is only just beginning. The work of implementation. Without it, all the resources that have gone into the strategy development are a complete waste of time.
2. Often staff treat big launches as BOHICA (for the uninitiated this stands somewhat un-charmingly for 'bend over, here it comes again!'). This tends to result in a fairly determined ignoring of the new strategy by many.



3. A big launch can tend to highlight who wasn't involved, and even if different areas have had representation, this is often forgotten as time passes. It can feel to many like this is something top management are handing down, and that really doesn't get much buy-in.
4. A high-profile showy launch can place the focus on what you're intending to change, rather than what you are keeping. A better way to get buy-in is often to start with what is working well, and what is staying the same.

Since When Was Making a Loss a Good Thing?

If making money was ever considered an inappropriate goal, it was probably never as strong an opinion as it is now. With a huge focus on issues like environmental sustainability, and social and ethical obligations - business owners could be forgiven for thinking that making a profit is very much an incidental bonus of being in business - if not a rather evil outcome! And yet, how practical is that really? Should profit be a key goal?

I have just finished a 'community sponsorship' project for a not-for-profit. They are much more concerned with member development and creative achievement than making money. However, even in this type of organization, there is an understanding that if there is no monetary surplus at the end of a project, the ability to finance the next one is severely at risk. Their activities in the community are likely to cease if they are unable to make a 'profit'. Some not-for-profits recognize this by referring to themselves as 'not-for-loss'.

So if the not-for-profit sector understand the need to make a financial surplus, isn't that need just as great, if not greater, for businesses? Proponents of the environmental sustainability cause are quick to point out that businesses will save money and gain more clients by implementing sustainability measures. But that is in fact, not always the case. Sometimes to be 'green' actually requires significant investment, and the increase in clients may not eventuate, or may take a long time to recover that investment. And if a business is investing in 'green' initiatives, sponsoring community events/organizations and providing development beyond the actual role requirements for their staff - and as a result they lose money and are unable to continue - there is a different sustainability issue. The issue of sustainability of the business.



In reality, few entrepreneurs and business owners establish or buy a business purely to make money. Most have an interest or even passion for the industry. Many have seen a gap in the market they are excited to fill. Most are involved in businesses closely related to their skillsets and professional training. Many are happy to contribute and support their local communities, and surveys suggest that up to 60% of SMEs support local community groups or charities. That support is likely to directly reduce their profits.



Any organization that cannot regularly create cash surpluses or profits of some kind, is going to struggle to survive in the medium to long term. Does that mean though, that businesses should have profit as a long-term goal? Absolutely. Does that mean it should be at any cost? Definitely not. When the concept of the triple bottom line was first developed, many years ago now, the whole point of that reporting process was to encourage organizations to value all three elements, including financial sustainability.



For most SMEs, a profit level should be identified as a key goal, in my opinion. Most of the other issues will be factored in to how that profit is achieved. And most SME owners will understand the medium to long term implications of community support, developing staff and impacting the environment. Their ability to do it all at once may be less than they, and the proponents of these issues, might like. Having 'small steps' goals can balance out these worthy initiatives with the need to remain financially viable.

Large businesses and organizations sometimes face a greater pressure, with shareholder or stakeholder pressure to perform financially on the one hand, and public backlash to high profits at the perceived cost of the environment, people and community on the other. The issues aren't very different, but the scale is. That's a balance that Governments, Boards and CEOs must grapple with.

The stories and articles in this book are based on entries in the blog of Jenni Murphy-Scanlon and are used with her permission. The blog is mostly about strategic thinking and related topics.

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“The strategic thinker sees the interdependence of all the work in an organization and assesses its purpose, alignment and focus.”

- Jenni Murphy-Scanlon
