Strategic Sales and Marketing Planning
Part II: Execution of the Plan

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Previously we discussed the need for a well defined written strategic plan to support the corporate vision. Good plans answer the following:

1. Who is our customer?
2. What does our customer value?
3. What is our mission?
4. What is our plan?

In order for the plan to be effective, however, there must be a fervent focus on tactical implementation of the plan. Indeed, this is generally where the plan begins unraveling. Providing you have a strong discipline and utilize a good template (which can generally be found after searching the web for a few minutes) creation of the plan is the easy part. As you can see by the below chart, most of the reasons planning fails (6 of the top 8 reasons) is the inability to execute.

Failure to understand the customer	**Poor communications**
Failure to obtain employee commitment	**Over-estimation of resource competence**
Under-estimation of time requirements	**Failure to coordinate**
Failure to follow the plan	**Inability to focus**

What constitutes a strategic plan? The best plans provide a sense of common purpose, an alignment of goals, fosters collaboration and creates focus. The plan must cascade down the organization if you hope to achieve alignment and focus. The leadership team is chartered with establishing and communicating the vision. They in turn create the strategy with senior team members. The senior team then needs to develop the specific tactics, in conjunction with their team, who is chartered with delivering on the tactical activities which make the plan a reality. It's all quite simple actually, until we add customers, vendors, employees and a dynamic business environment.

Where precisely does it go wrong is hard to determine and it varies from company to company, but here are some of the common mistakes that I generally see:

1) Failure to break the plan into smaller, more manageable chunks
2) Failure to keep the plan at the forefront of team members
3) Poor communications of the plan
4) Inability to define and manage the tactics supporting the plan
5) Lack of coordination between business units/departments

Let's examine each failure point in greater detail...

Failure to break the plan into smaller, more manageable chunks

Strategic planning begins with a 2-5 year vision supported by annual goals & objectives. Management usually breaks these annual goals into smaller bit-sized chunks; quarterly or monthly, and a resulting budget is arrived at. Most companies develop a financial scorecard by which they can measure results, but they neglect to chunk the strategic initiatives into tactical quarterly or monthly objectives. This inability to "strategically chunk" the plan into quarterly and monthly milestones leads to a loss of focus. Thus, these strategic milestones are pushed off as we deal with the urgent and endless fire drills. You must establish quarterly and monthly milestones to which you measure and hold yourself and all team members accountable. This can only be accomplished using SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time Sensitive). Remind yourself that goals which are not written down are, at best, wishes or dreams. These strategic chunks become rallying points for the troops and are essential if you wish to keep the plan at the forefront.

Failure to keep the plan at the forefront of team members

How frequently are you inspecting the contributions of each of your team members toward their plans? Most companies wait until year end for the annual review and then tell their people what they did well and not so well over the preceding 12 months. Annual reviews have gotten better over the years BUT despite the quality, annual is not nearly frequent enough. Each of your team members must visualize success each day. Help them define success by knowing what must be done tactically each day if they are to succeed. You scale a mountain a single step at a time - attaining goals is the same. You need to envision the destination at all times, but you cannot afford to take your eye off the present step lest you misstep and cascade to a lesser position, thus losing momentum. The vast majority of people have an earnest desire to do well at their career; they simply get sidetracked or have difficulties mustering the courage to do the tougher and more important things. As a leader, it is your job to lead the way in voice and in example. Make sure you hold your people accountable to what they need to do in order to succeed. Catch them doing things right and inspect their progress and growth.

Your "chunk strategies" must be translated into specific tactical initiatives and your team members must realize their specific contributions to the strategies and in turn the longer term objectives.

Poor communications of the plan

Corporate budgets and plans are generally communicated in the first quarter of the year. In practice, I have even seen companies deliver the annual plan as late as the end of the 1st quarter or beyond. Clearly this is way too late, especially given a selling cycle of 3 months or greater. The plan must be shared with all your team members BEFORE the fiscal year begins, or as close as possible to the start of the year. Although often time's final budgets come down stream late in the planning process, the strategic initiatives which led to that budget must be completed in the last quarter of the previous fiscal year. This is the area upon which your people must manage themselves. In addition to the timing of the plan's communication, leaders must be concerned with the frequency of that communication. Leaders should provide each of their employees with a quarterly review in which each person is assessed on their performance to quarterly objectives set forth. This becomes a wonderful opportunity to coach and develop your people, and should not be overlooked.

Inability to define and manage the tactics supporting the plan

Your direct reports must be managed to Standards of Performance (SOP's) The SOP clearly defines two critical items; both the quantity and quality of their activities. There are two questions which must be answered:

1) What does excellent performance for that position look like?
2) Where's the line between "good enough (barely)" vs. unacceptable?

Recommended layout for a (SOP) document is quite specific. A SOP is specific to a particular position, influenced by who the position reports to, is often flavored by the culture of that company and may vary from site to site. To avoid potential ambiguity is critical! Step back a bit and think in these terms: In a perfect world and with an absolute superstar manning that position, what would the performance and contribution look like? What are the important components? How is each quantified? How would you describe that performance to a very discerning senior manager or owner? The quantity of activities required become your Key Performance Indicators and there are generally 6-8 of these for most positions. The second required piece is to convey a firm understanding of the quality of those activities. The SOP answers the question: What does excellence look like? Both pieces are required if you expect compliance to a longer term plan.

Lack of coordination between business units/departments

In many of my engagements I find two or more business units or departments within the same corporation COMPETING for resources or at odds with one another over how do perform their jobs. Most frequently this is between the sales and service department or

sales and product development or pricing. Generally the cause of such conflict is ambiguous or short sighted vision. All organizations will have conflict to some degree and in fact some conflict is good as it drives improvement. This lack of coordination is usually due to shortsightedness by leadership at a higher level in the organization than the two units involved in the conflict. Sometimes, however, it is a result of a rogue manager. This is a manager who views the world from a scarcity mentality, always scrambling to get their fair share of resources versus a manager with an abundance mentality, who is always seeking synergy. The troops will follow the culture established by their manager, and in this case the solution becomes that of changing the manager's approach or changing managers.

Conflict is caused by misalignment which places two or more business divisions at cross purposes. Vision and alignment is fundamentally the responsibility of the senior leadership team. Failing executive leadership in this area, it is imperative that the head of the business unit rally the troops by creating alignment with other business divisions instrumental in their success. The managers of the respective business units need to build bridges of communications and cooperation. Senior managers must recognize the roadblock and get people on the same side of the ball because despite all the great fundamentals taught in practice, you will not win the game if you are not sharing the same game plan.

How are you at executing on the plan? Answer the following to find out...

- Do you break the plan into smaller, more manageable chunks?
- Do your people understand the greater plan and how they contribute?
- Are you conveying the plan chunks and each individual's performance to quarterly standards?
- Have you as a manager eliminated or mitigated the roadblocks to your people's performance?
- Do your people know on a current basis how they are performing?

