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# Rethinking Strategy

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There's an old Chinese saying: "If we don't change the direction we're headed, we'll end up where we're going."

You've heard the jokes about strategic plans... how an organization spends days and days developing their big, important plan... how they pay \$300,000 to some big consulting company to facilitate the strategic planning process... make the big announcement about having this new plan and new direction... only to put that big, ol' 300-page plan up on a shelf ne'er to be seen again. Unfortunately, like leads from a trade show, strategic plans often end up in the organization's black hole of good intentions.

Developing a formalized strategic plan is arduous. Actually implementing that plan can be daunting. Think about it. What exactly is the difference between a Vision Statement and a Mission Statement? And, maybe more important, what's the point?

In the good old days (gosh, ten or twenty years ago) strategic plans looked far into the future. Strategies were loooooong-term thinking. They didn't loom over your head on a daily basis and most employees never saw them. They assumed leadership was headed in the right direction.

The problem today is obvious. It doesn't really make sense to create long-term strategies when an increasingly evident fact is that long-term is rapidly going away. It's an uncomfortable fact that later is a lot closer to sooner than it used to be. As a result, the direction pointed out in the strategy developed last year may now be headed for a cliff.

There are three realities that have caused this tectonic shift:

- Regardless of what industry you are in, you can count on intensified competition. And tomorrow's competitor may not even be on your radar screen today.
- Today's customers are time-starved, impatient and demanding. They presume product quality and demand solutions, personalization, meaningful choice, and easy-to-do-business-with companies. As I said in my last *Rambling*, the customer has the power.

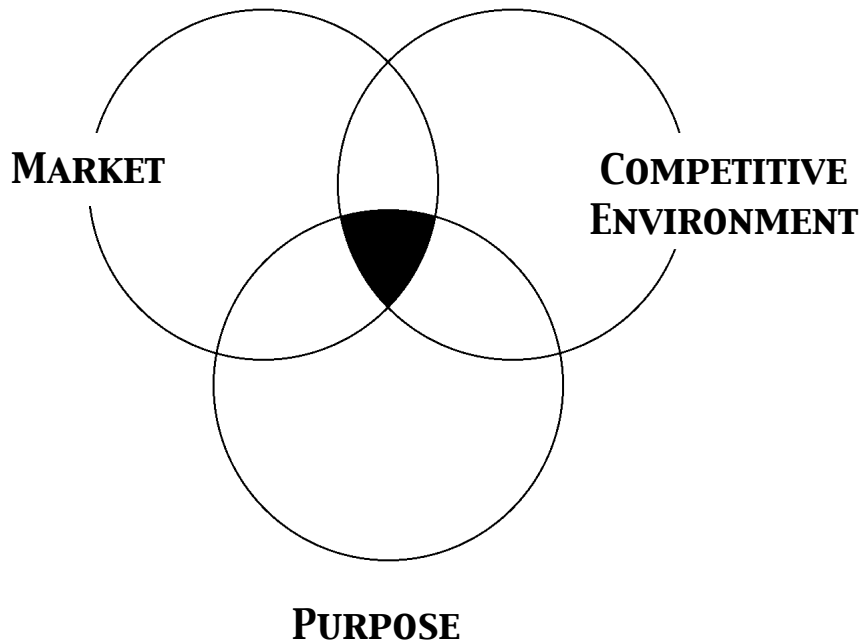
- It's almost impossible to overstate the magnitude of the changes being wrought by information technology. The next time you're in a Starbucks, an airport, even a McDonalds, watch how the roomful of people are connected to the flow of business via WiFi. And it's not that people are working harder and longer away from the office, it's that they could be communicating with someone in Beijing, Bombay, or Prague.

Am I saying we shouldn't think strategically? Absolutely not. Strategic thinking is as important as ever. I am suggesting, however, that strategic thinking today needs to be simpler, more nimble, and in two parts.

Part One includes the *High Altitude Discussions*:

1. Who is our *Market*? What do we know/don't know about them? What's keeping them awake at night? Where are they getting solutions now? What needs do they acknowledge having that make their lives more difficult and take too much time?
2. What is the *Competitive Environment*? What white spaces does our market have that are not being served?
3. What is our *Purpose* in serving this Market?

With apologies for sounding too much like so many other consultants\*, we can visualize these as three concentric circles:



The big Duh is to hit the Sweet Spot.

Part Two includes the *Low Altitude Discussions*:

1. G – What is the measurable *Goal(s)*?
2. R – What is the *Reality* of our capabilities and competencies?
3. O – What *Opportunities* can we see for products/services, and as defensible areas of competitive advantage?
4. W – *What* needs to be done to make this all happen?

In the past Part One would encompass Strategies and Part Two would be Tactics. But this new thinking isn't about semantics. Strategy and tactics tend to be separate and not necessarily equal exercises. Strategy is done in the glass tower and only once in a great while. Tactics are what everybody else does.

The new thinking is Yin and Yang. It's a part of everybody's daily business and everybody's daily discussion. It's in the culture and it's dynamic. Everybody pays attention to the Market. Everybody pays attention to the Competitive Environment. Everybody understands the Purpose. Everybody understands how these connect with the organization's ability to G.R.O.W.

If the next few years are anything like the last few (does anybody doubt they will?), then long-term and short-term thinking and planning will become one. The path we take will no longer be straight and predictable, but meandering and capricious. The winners will be those organizations most willing, most flexible, and best able to navigate.

\*I really dislike the term "consultant," as it automatically gives you a picture of what someone is... usually a negative picture. I think on the ladder of respect and trust Consultants are just above Lawyers and just below Televangelists. I prefer to label myself as a Handyman.

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## About Steve Miller

*Steve is Kelly's Dad and a really good strategic handyman. He is a Reality Monitor for many really profitable organizations. His elite client list (associations & show management companies, and corporations) includes only the most successful and most innovative organizations.*

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