

YOUR STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS IS INEFFECTIVE. It's doing more harm than good. Board members sense that their time and talent is being wasted in the process. Even if they haven't voiced it yet, directors are wondering if they are really adding value. Unfortunately, you won't wake from this dream.

Strategic planning boils down to the basic business process of aligning an organization's assets to achieve consensus measures of success. It's no wonder board members are reluctant to make time for what has become something more akin to compulsory ritual than the foundation for organizational success.

In his critical 1994 Harvard Business Review article, Henry Mintzberg poked fun at strategic planning as "applied to all kinds of activities, such as going off to an informal retreat in the mountains to talk about strategy. But...watch how quickly the event becomes formalized—mission statements in the morning, assessment of corporate strengths and weaknesses in the afternoon, strategies carefully articulated by 5 p.m."

Sound familiar?

In organizations of all sizes and sectors, the strategic planning process has become consumed by "planning" and in the process ignores the far more critical work of "strategy." Planning is the equivalent of coloring within the lines. It fantastically assumes those lines are in place; that the world is standing still. It blindly assumes as correct all unspoken assumptions about the context the organization operates within. And the current portfolio of products, services, and certainly organizational structure — including existing divisions or departments — are given. Test this provocative characterization against your own experience: When was the last time a strategic planning process you've witnessed ended with the recommendation to eliminate or transform entire departments or product offerings?



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There is a way to resurrect the board's enthusiasm by engaging them in the very work they hoped they'd be doing. To make things right, we need to acknowledge the difference between strategic *planning* and strategic *thinking*.

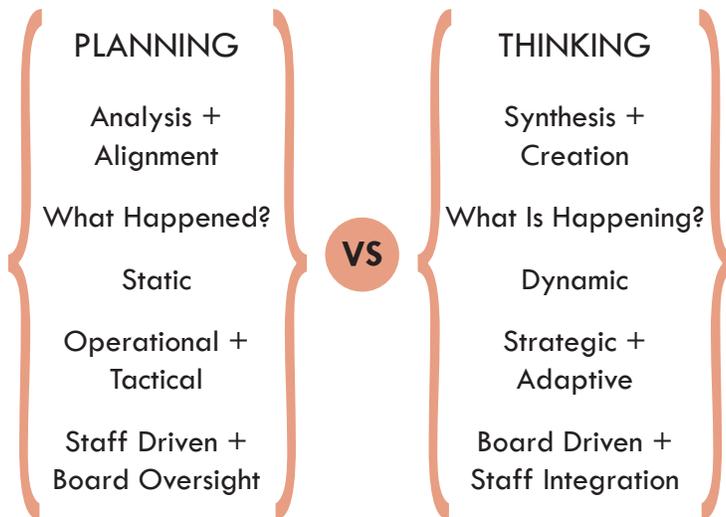
Planning is about analysis. Mintzberg describes planning as "breaking down a goal or set of intentions into steps, formalizing those steps so that they can be implemented almost automatically, and articulating the anticipated consequences or results of each step." Planning is closer in nature to implementation and operations than it is to strategy. Strategy requires identifying those factors likely to impact an organization's viability, and addressing them head-on.

Board members engaged in strategic planning could be seen as breaching fiduciary duty. Putting it in a more positive light: It's time to stop wasting your directors' talent and experience by asking them to do staff's job. Boards belong at the top of the mountain peering over the horizon, not underwater tangled in the weeds of tactics.

The message is not that strategic planning is unnecessary and without benefit. However, it is certainly not the starting point or responsibility of a board charged with ensuring an organization's future survival. What's needed is a return to thinking about strategy—or strategic thinking. Once properly addressed, executive staff should be in the best position to handle the job of resource planning with the board in the best position to provide oversight.

Strategic thinking is about synthesis. Planning is about aligning resources and tactics within an existing framework. And this is where boards and the staff they direct can get uncomfortable. This difference also explains the popularity of planning over thinking, especially for organizations where boards may be disengaged. Synthesis requires creativity and

intuition, as well as the high-level “long-view” of strategy and vision that the board should provide. In the form of strategic thinking developed by Thinkspot, a path for learning combines otherwise disconnected ideas (even data points) to expose elements of change that could, if not confronted, result in failure for the organization. Equally important is the role strategic thinking plays in revealing the next point of departure for evolving opportunities.



Strategic thinking is a continuous process in contrast to planning routines triggered by flipping pages of the calendar. Strategic thinking creates learning organizations that recognize and integrate a body of knowledge about their customers, suppliers and emerging technologies in the third quarter of business is different than it was in the first. Where strategic planning hopes subtle changes will emerge from a spreadsheet, strategic thinking draws insight from disparate sources in an obsessive pursuit to notice everything that could impact the future. It captures feedback from the receptionist to the service representative. Externally, it ponders societal, economic, environmental and technological changes—and puts them into play intelligently and quickly.

Let’s consider one final distinction between the benefits of strategic planning and strategic thinking by contrasting the end products. Planning creates plans. Most are very impressive prognostications for the coming year or two, maybe even five. Large binders serve as repositories for data and formalized tactics which articulate the organization’s deployment of existing resources to achieve preferred outcomes. There is comfort in planning.

With strategic thinking, the product is dynamic. Less rigid in its development, the result resembles a dynamic map. Think of a GPS screen that refreshes continuously and signals changing conditions. Scanning processes cover the entire organization and the far corners of the conceptual universe where the next big thing is hiding. Everyone engages to prepare for potential futures rather than predicting them. There is power in thinking.

Instead of putting your board through another painful strategic planning process in 2015, improve the likelihood that your organization will prosper by engaging the brain-trust of your board in a systematic approach to strategic thinking.



Thinkspot Inc. is committed to lifting companies and communities into positions of market leadership through strategic thinking, data and policy analysis, structural economic development, and smart policy and issues management.

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