

THE SWITCH OF HATS. FROM OPERATIONS TO STRATEGY



Taking the daily operational hat off to focus on the future can be a challenge for the most adept business owner or manager. The day to day running of our businesses and organisations often demand our all, leaving little energy and focus for anything else. We tend to get caught up at ground level with our minds and actions centred on making today happen to the neglect of future planning and strategic progress that are so essential for success. When this is the norm, the ideal future gets delayed.

Strategy is about the future. It relates to a guiding statement or directive as to how objectives will be achieved. All associated activities gain their place by the strategic instruction.

When we are not giving enough time or thought to future work; when we are not reviewing operational progress against strategic directives, course veering can be subtle but significant if left unchecked.

The switch of hats, from operations to strategy needs to be a planned activity as more often than not, does not occur on its own. A study in recent years concerning the disciplines of Australia's leading CEO's revealed that of the top three practices, the scheduling of time out for weekly review and reflection along with planning the future were paramount to their success. A further study by the Centre for Management and Organizational Effectiveness (CMOE) that surveyed a wide range of influential US executives indicated that on average 25 minutes per day were spent on strategising.

We would do well to practice similarly.

Being able to jump off at regular intervals the business or organisational boat we are sailing on; to sit on the sand and stare out at the horizon – reviewing, reflecting and planning, will help us when jumping back onto the boat in operational mode. Timeout spent in this manner will enable us to take the ship more directly to its destination.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN STRATEGY AND OPERATIONS

The interactions between strategy and operations are illustrated in the graphic below.



Figure 1. Operational Strategy flow

Taking time out to Review, Reflect and Plan is essential for managers and owners if they are to lead and manage a growing organisation effectively.

Review

Is about looking back at the past week, month, year or years to see what has happened concerning numbers, key indicators, growth or decline, staff, inefficiencies, successes and so forth.

Reflect

What is the review process and actual data communicating? Taking time to reflect on the meaning of this is essential for the next stage.

Plan

Based on what HAS taken place and in light of your key goals, how do we continue progressing from here to there? From actual to ideal. What do we need to do, change and enact to drive this ship forward? Planning is also about scheduling the critical activities identified from the above process into your calendar. It assists in taking it from your mind to the page, to the actual operational (action) stage.

These are some areas to centre on when practising this:

- What is our destination?
- Review of progress and results in recent days and weeks – the good, the bad, the ugly.
- Key issues requiring immediate attention
- Activities that are irrelevant to the current journey and need to be stopped.
- What were the successes and how can we further build on them?
- Are we on track as far as the milestones previously established?

SOME TIPS ON HOW TO BE ABLE TO FIND TIME FOR STRATEGY

Individuals review, reflect and plan in different ways and at different times. There are no right or wrong ways as to how strategy should be inserted into working life, but the tips below may be useful for you to improve the time you set aside for strategic thinking.

1. Schedule regular strategic times in your diary in advance.
2. Use an electronic or paper notebook to jot down thoughts as they occur to you, and then when you have a spare moment, review and reflect on these notes.
3. Ask how what and why questions.
4. Choose an inspirational location.
5. Do it with others if that is helpful.

If you are similar to me, spending too much time at the operational coal face can make one a little weary over time. Taking time out to think future; while advantageous for our organisations, can also return significant benefits to our personal lives and be a regular source of inspiration and freshness.

Ray Hodge speaks and consults to businesses and organisations, a notable event being the Department of the Australian Prime Minister and Cabinet. His emphasis is on improving critical efficiencies to dramatically increase key results. He has coached and provided consulting services to leaders and teams for over 25 years.