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Ten Common Reasons Strategic Plans Fail

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While the data on strategic plan failure rates is all over the map, suffice it to say it's HIGH! Below you'll find ten common reasons strategic plans fail. It's likely that the last strategic initiative to fall short in your organization could be attributed to one (or some combination) of these ten causes.

1. **History** – You have to be mindful of your history when it comes to launching strategic initiatives. If you're the kind of organization which, just a year ago, launched a new initiative with great fanfare only for it to have died an unceremonious death, then your employees are not likely to be fooled again. They're smarter than Charlie Brown, who as you recall was repeatedly foiled by Lucy every time he was asked to kick the football. If your announcement is met with rolling eyes and a collective groan, then you stand little chance of real success no matter how brilliant the plan.

2. **People/Culture** – Knowing what to do in the abstract is usually the easy part. Knowing what YOU can do based on the unique skills and mindset of your team is an entirely different matter. Understanding your people, the culture and sub-cultures within your organization, and shared vision/values are essential to developing a plan that stands a chance of success. Failure to do so is a recipe for disaster. Dave Logan's research on "tribes" in his book Tribal Leadership offers a practical framework for understanding and working with your culture to achieve what Peter Senge describes as the difference between apathy/compliance and commitment/enrollment.

3. **Leadership** – How committed is your leadership team to the success of the strategic plan? Not just in terms of what they say when the plan is announced, but how they communicate (words & actions) during the life of the plan. What signals do they send to the employees? As Kouzes and Posner might ask: How is your leadership modeling the way? If employees sense that the leadership's commitment is tepid, then that's what leaders can expect in return.

4. **Discipline** – Let's say you've got committed leaders and employees. That's great, but commitment to achieving strategic goals is still not enough. The question is: Do they have the discipline necessary to make real behavioral change? Jim Collins refers to this in terms of "disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action." So in individual terms, someone might be committed to losing ten pounds, yet lack the discipline to do what's necessary to achieve the goal and maintain the weight. It's no different in organizations. David Maister says that without discipline your strategic plan will have all the teeth of a typical New Year's Resolution.

5. **Communication** – Most strategic-related communications, even if thoroughly planned and executed, are designed only to create clarity around what management wants the employees to do. (Which by itself can be a tall order). As a result, the communication efforts fall woefully short of the mark. Good strategic communication should have one goal: To make sure everyone in the company sees the strategic plan NOT as just the leadership's plan, but as THEIR plan. Failing that, you're asking your employees to be more committed to your goals than their own. Not sure that's very realistic.

6. **Monitoring, Measurement, Feedback** – Even the best conceived strategic plans require adjustments along the way. It's critical to monitor the plan's progress, measure outputs as well as outcomes, and obtain feedback from all your stakeholders. It's also essential to consider unintended effects. For example, is success in one area of your company undermining results elsewhere in the organization? Are you realizing short-term gains at the expense of long-term growth? Have you considered delays, both positive and negative, that could result in outcomes you may have to wait months or years to fully understand? So if your organization didn't listen along the way and lacked patience, it was likely accompanied by a failed effort.

7. **Lack of Flexibility** – While it's helpful to have all the right systems in place to track your progress, it's all for naught if you lack the will, the flexibility, and the triggers necessary to make adjustments along the way. Over time, and presented with solid evidence, you can't be afraid to depart from the original plan. Keep the goal, change the plan – not the other way around!

8. Milestones/Rewards – Most strategic initiatives of any consequence take time. Even for the most disciplined among us, we need to be motivated and inspired to achieve a longer-term goal. Consider what it takes to keep your people on track. How do you stay focused on the goal and celebrate your progress? What are the best milestones and rewards for your plan? Your organization? You can't let your organization lose steam.

9. **Bad Planning** – Make a list of the people in your organization who were involved in developing your last strategic plan. Who were they? How deep did you go in the organization? How wide? What was the extent of their involvement? OR, did the senior leadership team develop the plan on its own and then announce it to the organization? How did that work for you? Off-site huddles by the senior management team to develop a strategic plan often result in developing a plan that has no chance of success.

10. **Bad Plan** – Sometimes plans fail because they are simply bad plans, and I would argue that they are often bad plans because we don't tend to get everyone involved that we should. We either fail to tap into the collective talents and dedication of our people or we misjudge the external environment and the response of our stakeholders. It can make employees feel isolated and the leadership look out of touch.

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