

Why CEOs Shouldn't Facilitate Their Own Strategic Planning Meetings

Contributed by Clare Ross
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Do you want to have a successful strategic planning effort in your firm? Of course you do. As CEO, ensuring the future growth and viability of the firm should be your top concern. Most people think that most firms are doing strategic planning, and secondly, are using the most effective techniques to ensure a good plan and positive results. Wrong on both counts!

First of all, most design and construction firms don't have strategic plans and therefore most CEOs are probably not fulfilling the most important part of their job-ensuring the firm is positioned in the right markets with the right mix of services. And secondly, many of those who do have strategic plans, have "FUZZY" plans, plans that lack clear direction, specific, measurable objectives, action plans, and built-in accountability for results.

For example, here is a typical fuzzy strategic objective from one strategic plan I recently reviewed. OBJECTIVE: To pursue opportunities in the environmental, health care, infrastructure and industrial markets with the intention of establishing a base from which we can build a multi-disciplined, full-service, prime professional organization.

While this is certainly a worthwhile thought and guiding principle, this objective is too broad and general a statement to encourage any serious commitment to its achievement. It can't be quantified or measured so it is not possible to know if you're making progress or how much or when it's achieved. Some firms base their rewards and bonuses on achievement of these types of objectives. How can you know when you have accomplished the objective? How do you reward good performance? In this case, do you reward the person more if he/she pursued the most opportunities? It poses all kinds of questions and problems. This objective focuses on activity (pursuing opportunities) and not on getting results (winning clients or projects). A better objective might be ...By 2012, we want our billings mix to be broken down as follows: environmental 15%, health care 20%; infrastructure 40%, and industrial 25%.

This objective is clear, simple, achievable, and measurable. Strategic action plans can easily be developed with timetables, accountability and resource commitments necessary to achieve this objective.

Most A&E firms don't have a process that they are comfortable with for strategic planning. They often simply follow a generic outline or assign work to committees to report back and then assemble information into a plan of sorts. The process is the most important element of all and often the most neglected.

The purpose of planning is not to produce a plan. It is to get things done. It is to allocate limited company resources on those areas where you have the greatest probability for success. That's why Principals, and other key staff need to get issues out on the table for discussion and resolution collectively. One consultant in the industry takes the approach of interviewing key staff using a specific format, then he meets with the CEO and writes the plan. When the plan is complete, they attempt to sell it to the staff.

Just getting staff input is not enough. Meaningful dialogue and discussion needs to take place in a strategic planning environment using a skilled facilitator/coach.

It's not a good idea for the CEO to act as facilitator for developing the strategic plan. He or she needs to be a participant and an observer. When it's necessary for the facilitator to take a firm stance and ask the hard questions, the CEO has more to lose whereas an outside facilitator can be more objective and not perceived as having a stake in the outcome.

The CEO often will tend to consciously or unconsciously lead the discussion in directions he or she wants it to go. Moreover, participants will often tell the CEO what they think the CEO wants to hear.

The facilitator is in a power position and can exercise a lot of control and influence over the direction, content and depth of the discussion. That's why the outside coach/facilitator is the key ingredient in getting a good result.

What about other key staff acting as facilitator/coach? Is the CFO or other in-house executive any better? My experience is that only very large firms can afford to have someone who is detached from day-to-day enough to not be perceived as a threat or competition from the other key staff. They may be perceived as having an agenda and therefore lack objectivity making it difficult for them to get the respect of participants.