



Transformative Strategic Planning: Engine of Dramatic Change

by Paul Cooperstein, J.D. and Bart Barthelemy

In his book *Strategy Pure and Simple*, Michel Robert states that when he began studying the literature around strategy and strategic planning he became more confused rather than more enlightened. "Each person who wrote about strategy used the word with a different meaning. Some authors said that strategy was the goal, and that tactics were the means. Others gave the word strategy a completely different meaning; they said that the objective was the goal and that strategy was the means." More significant may be the fact that, like mission and vision statements, a lot of strategic planning processes have failed to move organizations forward.

Every day, managers find themselves facing strategic crossroads, i.e., moments in which the future holds significant risk or opportunity, or both. At such moments some will recognize the value of taking time today to sort out who and how they will be tomorrow. Of these, some will put themselves in a room and be ready and eager to talk.

But with no clear process available to them, will the results justify their investment of time and resources? Will their efforts shift their own mindset or mood? Will a permanent shift in their organization's demonstrable capacity to satisfy its customers be produced?

Not only does a lack of a clear process seem to exist today but there also appears to exist a widespread lack of clear understanding as to the relevance of strategic thinking. Evidence of this confusion can be seen in the many companies who fall prey to one of two classic traps: (1) that of creating vision or mission statements which, within a short period of time, get relegated to oblivion and thus have no lasting impact on their organizations direction; and (2) that of producing "strategic plans" that consist merely of lists of things to do.

Rather than creating lobby plaques engraved with mission statements or a lengthy list of things to do, we believe *effective* strategic planning is about providing a catalyst to enlist the emotional commitment of as many people in the organization as possible. Creating a passionate corporate culture in an Internet driven world cannot happen without tapping a deeper level of human commitment that translates into higher level thinking, planning and action throughout the organization.

Effective strategic planning is a process that produces an answer to the question, "Who are we now and who do we need to become in order to succeed?" This shift of emphasis from creating a plan of steps to take or things to do, to creating a new way of being, creates the foundation for *clarity, alignment, resourcefulness* and *excellence* (or "c.a.r.e."), ultimately producing leverage for the organization. The thinking here is that, with a clear sense of "Who one is" in the world, the answer to "What do we do now?" becomes much easier to access on a daily basis.

Simple process, powerful results

We agree that the purpose of a strategic plan is to prioritize actions, resources and energy consistent with the vision of the team, organization or company. We add, however, that the route to this end goal is through the *means* of creating an articulation of the identity of an organization and the people in it. Such *means* is obtained through developing an alignment around a sense of values, mindset and behaviors prior to the discussion of goals, strategies and tactics.

For strategic planning to be effective it has to be organic, reflecting the conscious and unconscious intelligence of as much of the organization as possible. It must also be adaptable, easy to implement, flexible and become a natural part of the organization so that major disruptions of the organization don't have to occur every time the world changes in order for the planning to be effective. In summary the process needs to be simple, trackable and repeatable, i.e., a strategic planning process that helps answer a question from scenario planner Peter Schwartz, author of *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World*: "What do we think the future will hold for us and who do we need to be in order to succeed there?"

"Transformative Strategic Planning" is an efficient and powerful engine for producing c.a.r.e. It can be the vehicle to create organizations that support a business rather than a business that supports an organization and it can also be the vehicle that has people in our organizations talking about the company's competitors, and not about competitors people have in the company.

Transformative Strategic Planning was pioneered by corporate transformation expert Jinny Ditzler in work that she did with various clients in the UK in the early 1990s, most notably at Allied Dunbar and at NatWest. One of the authors of this article, Bart Barthelemy, met Jinny in 1995 shortly after publication of her book, *Your Best Year Yet*, and following his long career as Technical Director of the Research Lab at the Air Force Laboratory at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and then later as a consultant there in the area of strategic planning and cultural change. They decided to form The Best Year Yet Company and go public with the architecture of Transformative Strategic Planning through the Best Year Yet program. The other author of this article, Paul Cooperstein, along with other experienced consultants, joined with Jinny and Bart to help them facilitate the widespread adoption of this simple yet profound strategic planning and implementation process.

The power of Transformative Strategic Planning can now be seen in the Air Force Research Laboratory at Wright-Patterson. Over the past three years, the Air Force Research Laboratory at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio has been engaged in a focused strategic and transformational leadership development program, designed and developed specifically to enhance the leadership capabilities of a significant segment of the Laboratory's workforce. A second goal has been to produce substantial improvement in the effectiveness and performance of the Laboratory and its personnel.

The sole research and development center of the US Air Force, the Air Force Research Laboratory employs approximately 5000 civilian and military government personnel and over 5000 in-house contractor support personnel. More than one thousand individuals, in groups of 25-30, have been involved in the strategic and transformational leadership program.

The fundamental concept has been to provide the laboratory's key leaders with the management and leadership tools needed to transform their teams into a highly innovative, agile and high-performance workforce, to achieve a paradigm shift in the strategic thinking and behavior of these leaders. Using many of the principles described in this article, the leaders examine their current behaviors and approaches, formulate a new vision for themselves and their organizations and develop objectives, goals and action plans to achieve the vision.

Although the program is still underway, a significant improvement in the performance of the leadership and the laboratory itself has already been achieved. While a variety of metrics have been used to track these areas, two are particularly interesting. In the first, all of the laboratory's scientists and engineers ("S&Es") are evaluated yearly using a numerical baseline, contribution-based compensation system. During the past three years, the average annual score achieved by the entire S&E workforce has risen by over 20%.

A second interesting metric is the annual funding, from both the Air Force and other agencies, that is given to the laboratory for research and development efforts. The Air Force funding has

increased from \$1.0B in FY02 to \$1.4 B in FY04 (over a 30% increase after accounting for inflation) and the funding from outside agencies has increased from \$1.1B in FY02 to \$1.5B in FY04. Most of this increase is due to increased confidence and satisfaction by the funding agencies in the laboratory's creative and breakthrough technology development.

In addition to specific measurable achievements, the program has produced a significant increase in the innovation and entrepreneurship in the laboratory. One of the key findings during the workshops was the need to move the laboratory culture from the usual hierarchy of a government organization to the innovative adhocracy of an entrepreneurial system. Various ideas and approaches were generated during the program to do this and many of these have now been implemented to achieve the desired results. Processes have been streamlined, discretionary funding has been implemented for quick-start/high-payoff initiatives, inter-disciplinary teams have been formed to deal with high-value requirements and an overall environment for creativity and risk-taking has been achieved. As the program continues, even more change is expected since greater numbers of the laboratory's leaders will come through the workshops and reinforce the transformational and strategic intent of their predecessors.

Similarly dramatic results have been seen in a variety of industries that have experienced the Best Year Yet process. In 1992 one of the two largest UK Banks, NatWest, decided to launch a bank insurance company. It was the biggest start-up insurance company in Europe with an investment of \$225M. From the beginning the leadership of this new venture decided it wanted to be a vision-driven organization and committed to spending at least 10% of pre-launch time on culture and transformation. This desire for a forward-looking focus seemed a near impossible task, however, given the dinosaur culture of the bank. Within a few years this team had also been given responsibility for NatWest Portfolio Managers, Stockbrokers and the Sales Force, and this new combined business at that time was forecasting a loss of \$30M.

Yet within the first year of the program it reached the Top 20 among UK insurance companies, an unprecedented achievement. Polls showed 90% customer satisfaction and some of the best employee satisfaction ever seen in the country. By the end of three years the company had achieved a \$165M turnaround! Transformative Strategic Planning is credited by Lawrence Churchill, CEO of NatWest, with leading this transformational effort.

And the process supports smaller companies as well. It has been employed, for example, at ANSA Automotive, a US subsidiary of an international conglomerate distributor of market automotive parts. Mindsets that got redeveloped at ANSA during Best Year Yet planning, over the course of two years, led to creation of plans and a management structure that has boosted new client acquisition by 200%, reducing customer complaints and increasing profitability well beyond anything anticipated.

In another example, that of the Michigan branch of BNI (Business Networking Int'l.), a business referral organization, BNI's full-time director reports that his productivity has increased geometrically and as a consequence the organization has seen less turnover in assistant directors (part time positions requiring significant time commitments) and a marked increase in membership overall.

In fact, a variety of companies of all sizes, from sole proprietorships to internationally publicly held companies, over a cross section of industries (from professional practices to retail organizations) have experienced similarly successful results via the processes outlined herein. This is significant because in today's business environment, strategic plans are frequently measured by the effect they have on the organization's capacity to perform on those strategies more powerfully in a replicable manner.

Listening and collaboration

Transformative processes are those that shift the functional capacity of an individual or an organization in dramatic and powerful ways that produce results that were not possible before the processes and continue to do so long after the process. To surf the sea of today's competitive and evolving marketplaces, organizations must become "lean and meaningful." Every action taken by every employee must have the effect of contributing to the achievement of strategic results. We can no longer achieve results that are right for our functional units but do not definitively contribute to the organization's desired results. Time and time again we hear that people are painfully aware that communication across their organization is poor, or that there is no real plan in place with which they can navigate.

But if we expect our employees to give their "all" to our organizations, we must answer the question of what's in it for them to do so. Strategic plans in and of themselves don't accomplish this, but a process that has an iterative dialog with as much breadth as possible can create the plan that answers this plea. When an entire employee population is clear on how they, as individuals, contribute to the success of the organization, they are engaged, excited and feel good about what they do. Allowing thinking to "go public" and developing processes that value creative collaboration are essential for effective strategic thinking to take place.

As Peter Drucker has said, "The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't being said." It's therefore incumbent on all of us to create workplaces where listening is an active process to uncover our collective and often unconscious knowledge. In a 1999 article entitled "Building a Company on Internet Time: Lessons from Netscape" in California Management Review, by David B. Yoffie, and Michael A. Cusumano, it was reported that Microsoft was a company that embraced this type of organic contribution from its inception.

"The advantage to Microsoft's approach to strategic planning was the fact that the company had a structure in place to look systematically at its environment and then develop a set of plans both to react to that environment and try to shape it," the authors wrote. "It forced executives to look three years out, and required all senior managers to lay out their business, competitive, and technical assumptions about how the world is changing, and then state the implications of those beliefs. Netscape, by comparison, relied heavily on (founder Marc) Andreessen and a small number of very smart people who worked with him to look out into the future with a largely technical view of the world."

Creating a sense of ownership, i.e., a tangible attitude of looking at one's work and the organization as if they own the entire business, among every member of an organization is every manager's top job. Each and every manager needs to make certain that they have a strategy and that everybody they work with (both upwards, downwards and sideways) understands it. Look at what a great job Sam Walton did with this at Wal-Mart.

Lacking this however your organization joins what Michel Robert aptly named the "Christopher Columbus School of Business," using the metaphor of Columbus' travels: "When he left, he didn't know where he was going. When he got there, he didn't know where he was. When he got back, he couldn't tell where he had been."

But the good news is that, by following a few fundamental principals, your firm can do it too. Creating this level of power is within everyone's grasp. Here are six primary points to keep in mind:

1. SEE STRATEGY AS A "CYCLE"

Have we become so blind that we no longer see the value and power of regularly stepping back from our every day busyness to appreciate all of what we've done, learn the lessons and grow?

The strategic planning process begins with understanding The Cycle of Productivity, a process consisting of four separate parts yielding results, benefits or profits: The first phase where we review our concerns and decide to do something (the "start" phase), the second is the "doing" phase, the third the "completion" phase, the fourth the "review and acknowledgment" phase.

This simple system holds the powerful secret that acknowledging and planning are pieces of a total process of creating results. Too many of our organizations go straight from finishing a project to starting the next one without taking the time to incorporate acknowledgment, feedback, reviewing and learning from what happened, and then brainstorming new possibilities as a result of any insights. In the rush of "What have you done for me lately?" and "What's next?" organizations today continually miss out on the opportunity to learn, adapt and boost their collective productivity in geometric proportions. The resulting losses in intelligence and consequent productivity are enormous.

Within the many companies who do take the time to engage in such reflection and planning on a regular basis, the gains in productivity have proven to be substantial. One automotive parts distributorship, for example, that employed this principal increased new customer sales by 150% in 2002 over the previous year. After 18 months, this firm now attributes its success to its new-found method of planning and learning. Often the biggest challenge is to get a company to invest the time and effort in a transformative strategic planning process but once done the benefits quickly become apparent.

2. APPRECIATION BUILDS TRUST, THE CURRENCY OF TRANSFORMED ORGANIZATIONS

Thomas White, President, GTE Telephone Operations, has said, "If you combine a negative culture with all the challenges we face today, it would be easy to convince ourselves that we have too many problems to overcome -- to slip into a paralyzing sense of hopelessness. "And yet if we flip the coin, we have so much to be excited about...We can if we just turn ourselves around and start looking at our jobs -- and ourselves -- differently; if we kill negative talk and celebrate our successes...In the long run, what is more likely to be more useful: Demoralizing a successful workforce by concentrating on their failures or helping them over their last few hurdles by building a bridge with their successes?"

Jinny Ditzler, in her book, adds, "At the heart of most organizations is a group of overworked, over stressed and under appreciated people. But, as we've seen so often, when they are appreciated, they become confident and readily unleash new levels of creativity and productivity. Just like individuals, an organization's confidence and hope for the future is built by taking the time to enjoy successes."

It's important for people in any team to feel that they are a part of what is going on. Adults get tired of having rules, strategies, missions or visions dictated to them without any sense of contributing to their creation. Too many of our organizations have a "What have you done for me lately?" attitude or a "What's next?" conversation, or "You get a paycheck what else do you expect?"

"Appreciative feedback" is a high ROI activity. Since most people spend approximately one-third of their adult life working, we owe it to ourselves to make appreciation an integral part of our lives. We encourage our clients to broaden their view of the power of appreciation by expanding a sense of appreciation for disappointments and accomplishments as vehicles for opportunities to expand their repertoire of action. And it is always evident that when people feel appreciated they extend themselves fully, take more risks, provide great service and contribute to the management of an enterprise as if they had an ownership stake in it.

By incorporating appreciation of the individuals, the business unit, and the organization as an integral part of the strategic planning process we create a synergy contributing to the development of a plan that will yield high levels of commitment and buy in by the participants and the members of the organization that they represent.

In a wholesale distribution organization that we worked with last year, for example, it was an incredible experience for the management team to look at what they had accomplished in the past year. The faces of every member of that team dropped in awe as they viewed 5 pages of their accomplishments over the past year. And while not every team experiences the effects of their accomplishments so pointedly, we have yet to work with any team that did not get a substantial benefit out of having their accomplishments displayed so clearly.

By incorporating authentic experiences of appreciation of successes people are far more open to participating in discussing disappointments in a forthcoming and accepting manner. Trust is the social capital of business organizations, and one way to create trust is to share our appreciation for our disappointments as well as our successes. After a two-day planning retreat in 2002, the CEO at a digital marketing firm said "Thank you for letting me get to know you and buying into the vision of the company." Another manager remarked, "I feel so much closer to everyone. Sometimes I have a little confidence problem; this will help." Still another said, "Thank you for letting me help design the vision of our company."

3. LEARN FROM ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS QUICKLY

Highly successful organizations learn lessons quickly from their mistakes and their successes, then incorporate them into new practices. The power of learning is the capacity to complete new actions. It is the opportunity to separate disempowering stories and beliefs that unconsciously weaken an organization from powerful behavioral actions that an organization has within their grasp.

This is the time to answer questions like, "What were the secrets to our successes? The reasons for our failures? The lessons embedded in this experience? The answers behind how we can be more successful?" After these questions have been answered and distilled, core behavioral guidelines emerge that can be communicated in written fashion and used to design initiatives that incorporate their use as well as act as reminders to shape everyone's behavior.

The partners in one accounting firm reviewed their accomplishments and disappointments over a few hours of dialog. Among other lessons they distilled and articulated that they "fight a lot." In looking at that behavior they created a goal: "We will have a partners' business meeting and a partners' social event every month." Had they not taken the time to acknowledge and review their own actions they would have continued to live in the disempowering momentum that had been generated.

When organizations invest in the time to share their sense of accomplishment and disappointment and reflect on the behaviors that contributed to them, efficient learning is born and the return on investment can be measured in increased efficiency, innovation and individual and team initiative. We have found for example that people tend not to destroy that which they have helped to create. The focus and committed action that comes from answering questions outlined in this article is the pathway to producing demonstrable change and discovering a powerful productive order.

We are amazed in fact at how often distrust and resentment build in organizations because of a fundamental failure to engage in the dialog necessary to isolate the behaviors and skills that drag organizations down and that are accessible to be learned. Instead people often take the more well-known and easier route of living with their disappointments and resentments and ascribing

an ulterior motive or defect to others (laziness, stupidity etc.) as if the other person were purposely attempting to inflict pain and abuse on them. Obviously, what is needed here is the adaptation of our collective ability to shift mindset.

4. SHIFTING MINDSETS – POWERFUL CHANGE CATALYST

Though changing the actions organizations take can change results, rarely does changing actions result in the type of fundamental change that lasts or creates a dramatic and powerful new way in which an organization continually acts. That's why the most powerful transformative strategic planning skill for creating powerful and lasting change in organizations (and a facility for continuing change) will result from teaching people the power of shifting mindsets.

Danger exists when basic ways of thinking, valuing and doing are transmitted through culture and conveyed to succeeding "generations" of employees through collective organizational experience. These behaviors pervade our organizations to the extent that they don't even require that they be taught to be known. They can be institutional, such as the failure of the established brokerage industry to foresee the power of brokerless transactions, or the Swiss watchmaking industry's reluctance to depart from their comfort zone back in 1968 it rejected its own invention of the quartz watch, thus almost destroying their own industry. These behaviors can also be seen on an organizational level, and can be quite alarming when they come out into the open.

Many organizations, after just a few hours of dialog, have found themselves identifying restricting mind sets which they previously (and wholeheartedly) believed to be the "truth," i.e., how life "is" in their organizations. Such truths might include:

- ▶ We don't have a clear value proposition.
- ▶ There is no plan.
- ▶ There's not enough time.
- ▶ There's no leadership here.
- ▶ We fail to adjust to the size and diversity of our customer base.

Yet in another hour such organizations have been able to create these positive mindsets:

- ▶ We know where we need to go, and together we will get there.
- ▶ Aggressive new attitude for our success: WE make things happen
- ▶ Whatever we commit to and focus on, we will passionately accomplish. We call this "T.E.A.M."- "together everybody achieves more"- a concept that gains us time through positive planning and training.
- ▶ We are empowered by visionary leadership as resourceful, creative people to achieve our individual and corporate goals.
- ▶ We have the guts, determination and leadership to transform into a successful, vital, financially secure community; passionately dedicated to serving the diverse business needs of our members.

On a personal level we see people stuck in mindsets too, espousing "truths" like, "Nothing's ever going to change around here," "Management never listens," or "There's not enough time."

Steve Lishansky, President of Success Dynamics, Inc., a transformative trainer and consultant, has likened limiting beliefs to a tar pit that paralyzes us and keep us far away from acting on the power of our vision, purpose and values. Facility in uncovering the "beliefs" that organizations hold opens the door to creating effective strategy identification, goal setting and accountability.

How is it possible to actually create a new mindset? One major way is to examine the language that your organization uses to create a mindset that is "positive, personal to the organization, in the present tense, powerfully and simply stated and pointing to an exciting future for the

organization.” Leaders and managers must decide that the missions, strategies and results their organization wants to accomplish hold more importance than the reasons not to.

Another way is to become "unreasonable," i.e., create instructions to your organization that will get everyone PAST the reasons. Our experience shows that such new sets of instructions will prove far more valid and truthful than those “negative instructions” people in the organization have been passing among themselves up to now.

Here is an exercise designed to help organizations quickly capture the power of this vehicle:

Complete the following sentence:

“We'd like to _____, but we can't because we're _____.

What are the words in the second blank? This is an example of a limiting mindset. These are the conclusions that your organization and the people in it have drawn and that they live with.

In order to capture the power and facility of pushing aside *reasons* and focusing on *results* complete the following sentence:

We do or we will _____ because _____ .

_____ .
The ability to examine and shift our limiting mindsets is a critical and powerful requisite for success in business today. Repeatedly we see organizations crafting their long, mid and short term decisions having created and focused on an empowering mindset. The results are producing more ownership, more spontaneity and superior results.

5. THE POWER OF VALUES

In their best seller book *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras identified that the only thing the oldest 100 companies in America shared was the fact that they had a defined set of values that the companies had made an integral part of how they acted and how they planned.

They stated, “Contrary to business school doctrine, we did not find “maximizing shareholder wealth” or “profit maximization” as the dominant force or primary objective through the history of most of the visionary companies... We did not find that starting a company with a great idea or having charismatic or visionary leadership, or playing it safe, or focusing on beating the competition were the keys to success.” Through the history of most of the visionary companies we saw a core ideology that transcended purely economic considerations. And – this is the key point – they have had core ideology to a greater degree than the comparison companies in our study.”

While embedding values in organizations can take years before they are truly a part of the culture its important in any organizational transformative effort to begin defining organizational values as soon as possible. After defining these values the challenge is to use those values as managing and organizing principles. Organizations that declare their values and live them promote higher levels of innovation, initiative, synergy, flexibility and trust. Those organizations that fail to define their values or even worse define their values but then ignore them find themselves caught in a morass of resentment, cynicism, hopelessness and distrust. The most powerful avenue to creating social capital in our organizations is to build a culture of Trust. These cultures can be grown quickly when active values form the core of the management of a company. Organizations that engage in this process can consciously and actively make these declared values more important than the common negative drivers such as trying to look good, trying to protect a job, avoiding a conflict etc.

The long-term success stories in corporate annals are directly attributable to the fundamental value strategy they vigorously pursued throughout their organizations. Ford's recovery in the 80's and the turnaround of Merck and dominance of 3M are a product of defining their values and cascading them down throughout the organizations operations and management. We the authors endorse Collins and Porras's "and strategy" which is to say that we have found that great companies embrace great values *and* great profits, a core set of values *and* embrace change and evolution, investment for the long term *and* the achievement of short term profits.

We have found that companies who have worked with transformative processes for several months have gained a proficiency in using their values to make decisions. Few companies start with a clear sense of values, but those that identify a set of values find enormous power in deciding on what actions to take based upon reviewing these values. We have worked with several membership organizations (1,000 + members) that are loosely held together but nonetheless managed by part time employees. Prior to these organizations' involvement with Transformative Strategic Planning, they had never defined their values, yet within 12 months had embraced the practice of looking at what they did as managers on a monthly and daily basis through the lens of their declared values (including imparting this style to their constituent chapters). It has literally transformed their satisfaction, retention, membership growth and profitability rates.

6. IMPLEMENTATION: THE FOLLOW-THROUGH, THE PERSONAL PLAN

After an organization has engaged in the processes described above they will have created a corporate strategy that rests on a strong foundation. These organizations will also find that they have the foundation to continue producing goals, strategies and tactics that draw from a much deeper sense of the "intelligence" and "soul" of the organization. They will unleash a commitment to the fulfillment of those goals that will bring forth a call to action from all levels of the organization. These goals are likely to be far more accessible to those who participated and to those who participated only indirectly or not at all.

And of course the power of follow-through cannot be exaggerated. The power of creating specific and measurable goals and creating systems for their communication, implementation, evaluation, review and modification is an essential element in the cycle of productivity. Keeping an effective communication strategy in place so that people are involved in a dialog, virtual or personal, that allows for continuing commitment to the goals created has proven vital to the completion of this process.

In addition whenever possible team leaders and team members alike should be asked to engage in a self defining strategic planning process so that they can answer this, the ultimate business question: How can you be successful in implementing a corporate strategy without first being clear on your own personal values and on your own ability to transform your personal limiting beliefs?

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