

Stanton Marris
energising the organisation
issue 09: making strategy live





**"However beautiful the strategy,
you should occasionally look at the results."**

Winston Churchill



Monday morning – there must be a better way

I saw Billy Elliot: The Musical¹ with my family on Saturday. We were on such a high afterwards, I can't remember the last time I felt so uplifted by the energy of a performance.

It must be great, I thought, to come up with an idea, a story, and then to turn it into an award-winning performance, to bring it to life. Then I realised that's what I want to do here.

Later this afternoon my direct reports will sit around this table considering our five year strategy. The prospect drains me. We spend so much time and effort on strategic planning every year, but nothing much seems to change as a result. We say we are going to do so many things, but most of the time we don't follow through. It's as if developing the strategy stands in for the real work we need to do. Maybe it even helps us avoid doing the real work.²

We're good at expressing our intent. Our challenge is how to turn the intent into reality.

“Strategy” means different things to different people.³ In the end, what I want for this organisation is world – beating performance. So we do need vision and direction – like the story and score of the musical. But even though each production uses the same materials, some nights are much better than others. So we know there's more to it than getting the story right,⁴ but that's still what we spend most of our time doing around here.



We also need hands-on work by the director and stage managers who provide inspiration and leadership to the cast and crew. We have to set up the theatre, and learn the lines. We must bring the director, cast and crew together and decide how they will collaborate. We do this through the systems, structures, and relationships we put in place in order to execute our strategy – but probably not enough.

The key to a really great performance lies deeper than all of this. We must harness the energy of people to make it happen, help the actors bring their own spark to their roles, get the cast and crew working together with a buzz – and finally enjoy the applause. Generating energy for our strategy and fuelling it for a long run – that’s what we have neglected up to now.

I read somewhere that Nucor, the US steel company, has no written strategic plan, no objectives, no mission statement. Of course they have direction, or intent. But they don’t spend time and energy writing it all down perfectly and analysing the life out of it.³ So I don’t think I actually need a 95 page strategy pack with diagrams, numbers, arrows, boxes, tables and matrices.

This time, all I want is for us to deliver on our intent.

In the past, we’ve spent a lot of money on strategy consultants who have given us immaculately crafted solutions, but we’ve overlooked the involvement of our own people, who we need to make it happen. It seems to me that the key to all this is how we go about developing our strategy, rather than the plan we end up with.



Later in the day...

They all came in with their presentations and I slumped in my chair. They were ready to say what their people should be concentrating on, and what that would mean for their area. There would not be much dissent or challenge, and I doubt if anyone would feel responsible for the whole story – apart from me, of course.

I took a deep breath. “Before working on next year, I want to ask how much of what you said you would do this year has actually happened.” I asked them to look around and tell me what had really happened compared with what we had said would happen since 2001.

“But we never do that,” they said.

“Exactly.”

Then I asked, “If our competitors knew our strategic plans, would it make any difference to us?”⁵ My guess is probably not. Success will come from better execution – not better strategic plans.”

We have to get away from doing strategy and plans as if they were an end in themselves. The script is not the performance.

We agreed to get back together the next morning to review and make some sense of our past patterns of agreeing our strategic plans.



Tuesday – we decide to try something different

As we talked the next morning, I realised that every year we were repeating the same pattern:

“In 2001 we approved a strategic plan that projected modest performance in the first year, and then sharply accelerating improvements after that. By 2002 we had underperformed, but guess what... we went through a very analytical process which ended up with another forecast which said that we would improve modestly in 2002 and then sharply after that. And so on.”⁶

We looked at each other. “But why do we do that?”

Finally someone said, “We’re not brave enough. We’re avoiding the real issues. These detailed strategic plans are a comfort blanket. We never really review how they turned out or what we learned. And we certainly don’t do this with our people, who have to make it happen. Then we plan for next year and beyond. But we just do the same thing all over again.”⁷

“Different story – same old performance,” I said, thinking of Billy Elliot.

One of our regional directors said, “People feel they can ignore the strategic plan, because nothing happens as a result. They don’t feel responsible or accountable for delivering on it. We just tell them the strategy and expect it to happen.”



“It’s as if everyone is on stage getting on with their own individual performances.” The penny dropped for me. “And if we’re not careful we’ll do it again. I think we should try something different this year.”

Looking back, we could see that the challenge of building commitment and energy for delivering our plans was what we had missed out, preferring to spend time perfecting the plan.

Responsibility for developing and delivering strategy was landing up in the wrong place – with us, the executive team, rather than with the people who we really need to make the strategy happen. In any case, who says we, the top team, know all the answers?

This was uncomfortable. It felt like giving up control. You could feel the tension in the room as we worked on what to do. We agreed to invite Liz, an old friend of mine who is now a consultant, to give us some help.

We did not want her to tell us the answers (we have the script). We were after some challenge, and some help thinking about how we could bring our performance to life.

The first thing to do tomorrow was to confirm our vision and direction, and to agree our roles in getting there.



Wednesday – we decide where we want to go

“So how helpful is the strategy? Does it sum up what we are about? Is it clear where we want to go? Does it help people decide where to use their time, energy and effort? Or is it a big piece of work avoidance?” Liz started us off with an uncomfortable question. We began to sweat. We knew the answer to that one.

We began by offering a statement of what we’re all about – our strategic principle.⁸ I thought of it as the “trailer” for our performance. I remembered the one for Billy Elliot which had prompted me to go and see it. “Inside every one of us is a special talent waiting to get out – the trick is finding it...”

The sentence had to fit with our values. We also wanted it to force us to choose and trade off between different strategic options, help us test the soundness of operational decisions and set boundaries within which people could try out new things. We struggled with it for a bit.

“It’s interesting that this seems so difficult,” said Liz. “Why is that?”

We realised that, for perhaps the first time, we were really taking responsibility as a team for the whole story – not just our own bits of it. It meant choosing, and sticking with the choices we made. It meant saying no.



Once we had our one-liner, Liz suggested that we think together about what our role as a top team would be, and what we wanted other leaders in the organisation to take on. We knew that simply telling people wouldn’t engage their commitment. Maybe asking them would?

“Be direct” Dell

“Low prices, every day” Wal-Mart

“Focus on trading communities” eBay

“It’s best to do one thing really well... Google does search”

“But what are you going to ask, and who are you going to ask? Who needs to do what here?” Liz was not letting us off this hook.

We finally agreed that we must own our own story before we could help others with theirs. We had to explain our vision and direction and then ask people questions to help them come up with their own. We would need to work with leaders throughout the organisation to do this with their teams.

In the end we crystallised our role into providing three things in service of our strategy:

- A **frame** in which people can form local plans and bring them to life in performance
- **Links** between the organisation’s story and the everyday local performance in all parts of our organisation
- **Support** to our people in coming up with their own contributions to the performance.



We made a start on the frame for the strategy. Like the director of a musical or film, we could not control everything that happened. The end result is better if the actors have space to improvise and make their parts come to life in their own way.

So we came up with some themes which cut across the organisation and which would drive our growth. (One was “growth through delighting our customers.”) Starting from the customer made it easier to come up with themes which were cross-functional, and got us out of our silos. This helped us all feel part of the whole story, not just our bit of it.

Then Liz helped us to describe the customer outcomes we wanted in the future for each theme, in very straightforward words, to help front line and supporting teams work up their own versions – stories which make sense for the work they do, and for their customers.

We tried some reality-checking. Would the themes make sense to someone at the front end of our organisation? We picked some examples – a sales advisor on the helpline, a delivery van driver, an area manager. We tested our themes from their points of view and satisfied ourselves that any of us could sit with these people and help them make the links between their own daily work and the success of the organisation as a whole.

That was enough for one day. Tomorrow we would think about the structures, systems and relationships (I think of them as the dynamics) we would need to make the strategy live.

“The basic fact of today is the tremendous
pace of change in human life.”
Jawaharlal Nehru

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Thursday – we set up the dynamics to create some buzz

We felt good in the morning. We had a crisp statement of vision and direction, and a framework for the strategy which fitted together well.

Liz encouraged us to think ahead and imagine what the process of developing our strategy would look and feel like. There was a buzz, the pace was fast, the air thick with ideas, argument, noise.

“Once the rest of the organisation starts work on their own contributions it has to feel the same as this,” I said.

This strategy would move us forward rather than recycling the past. It would energise our people, customers and investors. We developed a picture of it – very different from the slide packs we started out with on Monday.

We wanted it to be more accessible and less formal, based on people’s stories about the future (what we want it to be like) and the present (how we are getting on and why we want things to be different). There should be pictures of real people doing things differently. It should feel human.

“And how,” asked Liz, “will you find out how the vision and direction are landing in the organisation?”

That was a good question. Our organisation is big. We have sites all over the country, and people in our operational teams are seldom in the office. This was going to take some effort. “We could get local managers to do it for us, maybe using scripts, and keep us updated on progress,” said James.



“That doesn’t feel enough to me,” I said. “I think I need to hear it from the horse’s mouth. We are going to have to get out there, in amongst them, ourselves.”

We decided to review progress every month, including the unexpected opportunities that have come up, and what we’ve learned on the way. The story will evolve, but that’s okay – that can happen as we go along, we don’t have to wait until next year to make changes.

“Great,” said Liz, writing this on the flipchart. “You’re going to review progress every month. How?”

In the end we decided we would track progress against our growth themes, and the outcomes we had developed the day before. But we would also collect stories and anecdotes of real successes from people all over the organisation, and find ways of sharing these and spreading them around.

Liz suggested that we spend a few hours in the morning taking stock of where we had got to, and what we as a top team needed to change in order to do all this successfully. We went back to our offices and started to clear our diaries.

“Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without the strategy.”
Norman Schwarzkopf

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Friday – we get going

Having got our minds around this new and slightly scary process we realised we would need to do some things differently ourselves to lead and model the change. What were the shifts we needed to make in ourselves in order to shift the rest of our organisation?

With Liz’s help and her experience in other organisations which had taken this on and succeeded, we put together our top tips for success:

Top tips for creating more momentum through your strategy planning process

- ✓ Start from the outcomes you want for customers – these are likely to lead to cross-functional streams of work
- ✓ Review the strategy all the time – the world moves quickly and you need to move faster in order to keep ahead
- ✓ Help teams take responsibility for their part of the performance, including coming up with good ideas themselves; not letting them wait for the top team to come up with the answers – posing the difficult questions
- ✓ Challenge teams to commit only to things they will really do (rather than what they think you want to hear)
- ✓ Communicate the strategy (and progress towards it) compellingly – not just tables, matrices and arrows, but more stories and pictures
- ✓ Take an interest in local plans – ask questions about them when you are with front line teams, ask what you can do to help make them successful
- ✓ De-risk strategy by tackling the things that often get in the way of success – start delivering, bring people together to solve complex organisational issues in creative ways, make change real and relevant so that it sticks
- ✓ Make the link between work on values and behaviours, and how they support business goals



Liz looked us each in the eye, one by one, and asked if we were sure we could commit to seeing this through. It felt like being in the spotlight. We all nodded and said yes.

It had been quite a week.

Liz said, “It’s Friday afternoon, we’ve made a lot of progress this week. I think you should all feel proud of what you have done. It takes courage to admit that you need to do something differently. It takes even more actually to do something about it.”



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Saturday – on the golf course

I met John this morning for our weekly round of golf. He’s also a chief executive. Today he looked weighed down. We were in the long grass.

“So John, what’s happening?” I asked.

“Mark, to tell you the truth, I am not looking forward to next week. I never do at this time of year.”

“Why is that?”

“As my daughter would say... same old, same old. We start our usual, tedious strategic planning process on Monday.”

“Really?” I smiled. “We don’t.”

Stanton Marris
audience reaction

Please take a few moments to tell us what you thought about this booklet. All responses will be entered in our prize draw when returned using this pre-paid postcard. The winner will receive two tickets to Billy Elliot: The Musical.

What did you think and feel when you read the booklet?

What insights did you get from the booklet?

What else would you like to find out about making your strategy live?

Name _____
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Terms and conditions:

1. All entries must be received before 31 December 2006. 2. Proof of posting cannot be accepted as proof of delivery. Stanton Marris cannot accept responsibility for any lost entries. 3. The winning entry will be chosen at random on 12 January 2007 and the prize winner will be notified by the given email address. 4. The prize includes two grand circle tickets for Billy Elliot: The Musical, at Victoria Palace Theatre, Victoria Street London SW1E 5EA on a date selected by Stanton Marris. 5. The prize is not transferable for cash. 6. Contestants details will NOT be passed to any 3rd parties.

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- 1 Billy Elliot: The Musical. Music by Sir Elton John; lyrics by Lee Hall; author: Lee Hall; director: Stephen Daldry
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