



#6 Confessions of a Strategy Coach

B. Nandagopal*

As a professional coach, most of my waking hours are spent between long hours of reading and equally long hours of coaching. Also, I should admit that, a typical coaching client approach me when the discipline of strategy becomes a less stately art and gyrates towards a career threatening experiment. Its only during our deepest conversations around operational excellence that we collectively grasp the sensitivity of dealing with the Stratagem doctrine. A trifling error in our intended judgement, could easily deliver a fatal blow to an enterprise, hurling it into a multi-year debt spiral.

The confessions in this article are coming from pure professional guilt, embryonic from my inability to inspire some clients to look at strategy differently. I hope these 2000 words show them the light forward.

Confession #1

Leaders have never understood their Organisational Vision in the first place:

If we reflect on our assessment of a strategic leader's potential, we weigh them against the power of execution only. But practically speaking, execution has little to do with a leader's Strategic thinking paradigm. An ability to execute is a pure supervisory competency. Whereas a proficiency to strategize is hidden in-between exhaustive Sensory Elegance. We can't gauge leadership depth by relying on people's capacity to achieve defined targets, such as- number of insurance policies sold, number of loans disbursed, number of clients serviced etc.

Strategic Leadership is a different game. Its enunciated in a different language and it's also played with a different set of instructions. To keep it modest, a strategic leader's endowment has a direct correlation with a sturdy leadership narrative that he dispenses to his business. Articulating Vision with profound clarity is certainly the meat of all successful sturdy narratives.

Over the years, I have been amazed to see very young leaders articulate organisational vision with the same kind of panache that Beethoven would have delivered the Fifth Symphony with. But I can admit that these are a rare set of people. Many leaders are mystified when they are solicited to connect their team goals to the organisational vision. They show profound immaturity to understand the need to chart team goals in line with the vision. I attribute this incompetency in working with Vision to a legacy of a failed leadership program.

The prime part of clearly defining a vision is defining what "vision" means in the first place. Vision is of course not your company's mission. The mission is what is already anchored in the day to day and is not a forward-thinking statement. The mission encompasses all the concrete goals that have been laid out, which the employees should already be working to meet. A mission is always the sum of these parts. Company vision extrapolates from the mission. It gives the organisation a grand idea of where they might go as an extension of where they already are.

Confession #2

A Top-Down approach to strategy is a failed strategy

Team Strategy is a sub-set of the corporate strategy, in other words, corporate

strategy is not the same as team strategy. Though a simple concept, most of the leaders don't get a hang of this discipline. Whenever my clients come to me with their execution dilemmas, the discussion gets funnelled to poorly defined team / business / functional or divisional strategy only. But it's so sad to know that these insipid strategic replicas are a consequence of poor empowerment. Many organisations do not empower their leaders to plot their own vision for their business.

I recommend all corporates to learn strategy making from the military. An army commander only shares his military objective and leaves it to the divisional commanders to construct the battle plan keeping the Order of Battle in mind. The objective is then broken down to the field level and thereby empowering the youngest leader to devise the most effective strategy to execute his task. This is how victory is re-constructed in war.

Confession #3

Leaders don't understand how strategy really creates Value.

If you are a serious student of Strategy like me, we both have a common god - That's Michael Eugene Porter. Porter was one of the earliest thinkers who validated that for a company to attain serious competitive advantage, a resounding competitive strategy to lean on is essential.

My conversation with many in the executive leadership have made me realise that only a small percentile of executives actually understand what is the competitive strategy of their organisation. When we ask leaders to wear their strategist hat, we expect them to bring a big picture perspective to all that's spinning around them. But most often this request ends in a cognitive struggle for the leader and a failed strategic outlook in the offering. A strategic perspective is not about knowing the corporate strategy but knowing how this strategy creates long term value for your business.

The answer to this incompetency lies in the way our EQ (Emotional Quotient) is designed. Very few humans have the capability to bypass the menacing feelings around Fear, Habits, Politics and Incremental Thinking. These four maladaptive behaviours stop our emotional brain from thinking long term. Hence making strategy a perplexing subject to understand.

Though coaching can help some leaders overcome these dysfunctional behaviours in profound ways, the answer to a transformational change in our thinking is captured in self-awareness and reflective thinking.

Confession #4

Culture is the only key to a successful strategy implementation.

Many years ago, I remember having coached the CEO of a wellness company. And let me remind you, this company was a leader in its category. By the time my contract had started, the company had already commenced sailing with a well-defined corporate strategy. I was hired after the CEO sensed things was out-of-place.

It had been eight months since the organisation had revitalised its growth plan. Series of executive conversations had also nailed a new vision for the company which sounded "Building memorable experiences around family and friends".

Though the chosen corporate vision was truly inspiring, it was not making the impact that it deserved. During our coaching engagements, we poured over large data sets to understand where the disconnect lay.

It was a little-known document hidden in-between few files that gave us the answer we were looking for. The company was a great place to work, with employee attrition many notches lower than the industry average. But employee surveys had a devil hidden deep inside. The company rarely entertained family and friends of employees in the work premises. I am sure they had a reason for this policy. But their lay the disconnect with the corporate strategy. You can't build memorable experiences for the family and friends of your customers, if your corporate culture did not entertain it in any which way. Most organisations work on strategic planning without taking cognisance of the underlying culture that is going to work towards implementing this strategy. If Strategy and Culture don't match, it's a marriage that's being engineered to fail.

Confession #5

Strategy and not execution is the cardinal task of the Executive Function.

Accurately conquering the future in not the desired sequel of a strategic plan. Anyone who has worked on corporate strategy understands that an unforeseen calamity or surprizing opportunity can heave well-crafted plans off the window. But we all need to remember that, if strategy making is a sensory function, the executive is the reagent behind that sensation. A truly refined leader is a hyper active strategy spewing beast. He is forever scanning the environment with an uncanny ability to see what's uncommon. His displeasure towards volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) lets him foster new futures for his business. He believes that developing multiple futures for the business is the only way to de-risk his enterprise from the vagaries of VUCA. And for all this cognitive heavy lifting he is rewarded with greater responsibility for change.

I see many senior executives spend a large portion of their work day, driving execution. They eventually relegate thought-leadership to a weekend pastime, without realising that execution capabilities are only a small piece of their leadership supremacies. Spending long hours in execution speak of poor delegation and staff development incompetency in the leader. If a leader can tactfully make delegation a habit, it frees a lot of the leader's time to do more leading work. An ability to build a Strategic Perspective with dexterity is a manifestation of repeated practice. Its recommended that senior leaders start grooming their succession pipeline with the essentials of thought leadership in them.

Confession #6

Many leaders consign their strategic vision to the corporate junk yard.

"Strategy making is an annual exercise" – This is what I keep hearing from a large percentage of clients I work with. These exercises are so predictable that their outcomes don't come in varying surprises. They are all driven by straight jacketed tools like the SWOT or 3 Horizons, preferably set in an offsite location like a resort. But ceremonially all these gatherings only end up with a stale looking Vision Statement that finds its final resting place in the last slide of every presentation.

Forbearingly it doesn't have to be this way. The company's strategic plan should be a living, breathing document that drives the future of the organization. Its strategic intent should be relevant, reliable and robust. Its vision statement and mission statement should be narrated by the leaders in infinite ways to keep the business on track.

The Vision you and your team set course on, is the only trophy you need to be proud of. Display it boldly in the first slide of your presentation, speak about it in every forum you chair, broadcast it on every tele-con you dial-in, celebrate it on every triumph you conquer. Just don't let your vision turn stale.

Inference

If you are identified as a leader, remember you have been hired to champion change and nothing more. But championing change is a 24/7 business. Hence leaders ought to gear themselves to go beyond the narrative set for them. But going beyond the narrative is no easy task. It's a battle of instincts over thought, experience over prudence and of course matter over mind. If you need to manage change, you need to change yourself first. And that demands lot of mental cleansing for the leader. Our old ways of thinking as a manager could be overtly detrimental for our new leader role. Abandoning our managerial baggage would be the best way forward to abandon incremental thinking. Exercising our strategy muscle early in our career could prove bountiful, similarly mentoring a bright talent on tactical manoeuvres could prove sincerely resourceful.

The above illustrated confessions need to be used purely as guidance tools to accelerate our ability to drive strategy better. Members of a boardroom should be humble to the thought that they are in business as far as their strategy is in business. ■

B. Nandagopal, PCC, APF, F.IOD is a Strategy coach and professional futurist to build leadership. He is also a Fellow of Institute Of Directors.

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