

STRATEGY

Simplify, Prioritize, even Delegate, but keep the Flame Alive
Singing the Woodstove Blues and Other Ballads of the Season

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Oh Tannenbaum, Oh Tannenbaum...

Autumn was a time of dramatic change – from the haunting to the comforting. Reflecting on a recent consulting engagement, I am struck by the beauty and practicality of the changing seasons. If strategy hasn't featured prominently in the past months, then make a new year's resolution that it will become a significant part of the dialogue for your next three quarters. It doesn't have to take a lot of time nor money. It isn't going to result in your having to commit to shedding more pounds, cutting more limbs off the business, nor learning a seventh sigma in The Year Two Thousand and Six. But it may be the best use yet of the little energy you feel at this supposed "most wonderful time of the year." Why?

Let it Snow Let it Snow Let it Snow ...

Some years snow just doesn't arrive quickly enough. Unforeseen circumstances have forced September's strategy sessions to be cancelled, October's offsite retreat to be postponed and November's management workshop to be cut short. These were the scheduled dates when senior management was going to "take a long term perspective of the business." Already it's December and instead it is the season to craft a reasonable reckoning of accounts and submit preliminary budgets for the New Year. We've run out of time to rake and bag our best thinking, so we pray for snow to hide the guilt that comes with wishing we could "do this strategy thing" better. And we had such high hopes. Maybe next year.

I'm Dreaming ...

Late this past summer while working with a CEO and challenging his no-to-slow-growth plan, a client **CEO** became concerned about his mortality. "About time to call it a day. I give up. Let the next guy figure it out. Let the competition set the place aglow in a fire sale if they want to." Reluctantly, he questioned his organization's ability to continue to make the grade. The pattern of strategic choices had become predictable – and unchanging. To those closest to him, it was evident that decisions were not being made with the same speed and determination that had traditionally been his strong suit. His "vision," once known and understood by every employee and vendor, had disintegrated like a highly active REM sleep dream as dawn approaches.

The Weather Outside is Frightful...

We worked with him to reevaluate his strategic choices. We had decent data – everything pointed in one direction. So why was he stuck? We all have a bit of the tired and bitter Scrooge in us. Looking at the glass half empty. Seeing only the worst of things. Justifying our negativity as insightful analytical competency. We look for trouble – and we find it everywhere. The business conditions give us plenty of cause to believe that our situation may worsen before it improves. Optimism doesn't come easily. Especially as the daylight hours shorten with the coming of winter.

And when we do take a look around – and benchmark ourselves, for example, against some of our peers, we unwittingly let the data lead us, instead of the other way around. Our spirit turns sour and we choose to “sit this one out” and become benchwarmers.

All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth...

It wasn't easy at first to identify why such a great company wasn't apparently preparing to go anywhere. Arguably, the business was still licking wounds from 2000 high tech nose dives, and the troubles caused by overzealous 80's investments were still tattooed on the ledgers. But could this company afford to be so conservative? Weren't the CEO's sights set just a little too low? And who will make the flame burn brightly again?

Hark the Herald Angels Sing...

Any logical, linear process would have had us suffering from analysis paralysis before we got to the answer. We did not have time for that. And this was a good thing. We needed the new chill in the air to help us keep our explanations brief, our plans straightforward and our promises short and sweet. The CEO admitted that his company's biggest obstacles were not outside after all; with a bit of nudging he decided that his successors would require greater strategic instincts and knowledge than he, but that he'd have to first step up before he stepped aside.

After a disciplined assessment of his strategic resources, he gave employees a special gift: an organizational **restructuring** that rises above personal peeves and limitations, a **top team** with a surprising **composition and purpose**, and newfound **clarity and accountability**.

He resisted the status quo (moving the same faces in and out of end-of-year limelight) and **decided to make the price of change worth it**. He is not going to stake the company on a wish and a prayer anymore. He's made contingency plans, understood the assumptions guiding the 80:20 rule and grown quickly comfortable that the best thing he can do for his business is to instill in it a new spirit of strategy or purpose – be it first, fit, fat or far-flung!

So even now, just weeks from our fateful face-off, team dynamics are fast improving. Bold ideas are no longer out in the cold. The right hand knows what the left hand is doing.... There is a renewed appetite for once-frightening marketplace growth.

It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like ...HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Trust between client and consultant is essential. Here, the CEO appreciated that a look at strategy meant not only telling him something that he already knew about the market pressures, but making sure he did not miss the implications of those messages for what kind of team he'd need to be strategic in the future. He is relieved to be finally focusing on the things that truly keep him up at night and feeling renewed comfort that a team with strategic prowess will provide the foundation for improvements in bottom line growth for many years to come.

What do I hope you'll find in your stocking next to that piece of bituminous rock this year? 1) individualized attention and candor; 2) working the business issues in real-time with sensitivity and cultural vigilance; and 3) executive courage that comes with strategy skills and renewed confidence.

For those looking to turn over a new leaf, stop singing the woodstove blues and take a closer look at what concerns the business leader most before the snow thaws and those moldy leaves revealed.

KSH Strategyhouse LLC: *a small consulting firm with big domestic and international experience devoted to improving the quality of advice business leaders receive from the consulting profession*

