



Three's Company: Leadership in the Three Spheres of Strategic Influence

“Strategy” is probably one of the most overused words in organizations, to the point where it can become almost meaningless. I’ve come to the conclusion that leaders should not think of “strategy” as an isolated phenomenon, but more as an interrelationship among three spheres of influence they need to consider for real organizational change and growth: *strategic thinking*, *strategic planning* and *strategic execution*. When it comes to strategy, you could say that “three’s company” instead of a crowd.



Stop for a moment and ask yourself this question:

In which of these three spheres of strategic influence do leaders struggle the most? Do they struggle more with encouraging strategic thinking in their organization, planning the strategies to implement, or executing the chosen strategies?

If we think critically, we will find that strategic planning is not much of a struggle within most organizations, including libraries and other service-oriented information organizations. In fact, staff retreats and other similar brainstorming sessions to create strategic plans are almost *de rigueur* these days. Most of us can recall such meetings, and we might also remember that we spend most of our time

on tweaking already existing strategic plans in order to complement any new goals or insights that have come up in the interim. We then derive some satisfaction that we have done our duty for the year in order to remain strong and competitive.

Few of us realize that we have left strategic thinking and strategic execution by the wayside, thus missing the opportunity to innovate and increase the competitiveness and effectiveness of our organizations. In a 2006 study done by the American Management Association, it was found that the most important competency for a leader is the ability to develop strategy (which requires strategic thinking). However, only 4% of leaders were found to be strategists when leaders were examined at all levels in organizations (Horwath 2009). Strategic execution, however, isn't the black hole it used to be, thanks to Kaplan and Norton's introduction of the "Balanced Scorecard" concept in 1992. Today, most organizations are aware that poor execution of strategy creates a performance gap.

Consider your organization, whether it is a library, information organization or a unit providing a service: when was the last time you and your colleagues were provided with professional development programs specifically geared toward strategic thinking and strategic execution? The fact is, many libraries hire an outside consultant to create their strategic plan. I argue that this approach creates a disconnect that negatively impacts the long-term effectiveness of an organization's strategy. Instead, we should teach our LIS students the skills they need in order to think, plan and execute strategy effectively in a holistic manner. What is needed is significant restructuring of leadership and management course curriculum in library schools in order to incorporate the conceptual issues related to the three spheres of strategic influence: strategic thinking, planning and execution.

How can we develop these leadership skills and competencies in our LIS graduates?

Strategic thinking versus strategic planning

While certainly not obsolete, strategic planning has long since fallen from its former pedestal as a magic bullet guaranteeing organizational success, and is considered more of a necessity for organizational effectiveness. But even now, few people fully understand that there is a distinction between strategic thinking and strategic planning. “Strategic planning” can be defined as the channeling of business insights and intuitions into an action plan to accomplish the goals and objectives of an organization (Horwath 2009). However, the label “strategic planning” has erroneously become an umbrella term for all aspects of strategy development within an organization.

Strategic thinking, in contrast, is an abstract concept that we can’t just reach out and touch, and that makes it much more complex and challenging to define and teach. “Strategic thinking” could be defined as the generation and application of business insights and intuitions on a continuous basis to achieve competitive advantage. It involves intuition, creativity and insight. A key distinction between strategic thinking and strategic planning is that the former should occur on a regular basis, as part of our daily activities, while the latter usually only occurs at discrete, prescribed times, such as on an annual basis. Ideally, strategic thinking is an ongoing mindset that can be developed by continually seeking and sharing creative business insights into our organization that can lead to competitive advantage (Horwath 2009).

Strategic execution

Strategic execution is an emerging concept that is starting to get attention as a key component of organizational strategy. In contrast with strategic thinking and planning, it involves everyone in the organization, can be time-consuming, and requires both a short- and long-term focus. “Strategic execution” can be defined as all the actions necessary to convert strategy into success for creating competitive advantage (De Flander 2012). Strategic execution is a leadership skill that fosters a culture of collaboration, great communication, empowerment, accountability and performance management in an information organization. In Jim Collins’s best-selling book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don’t*, he concludes that it is not strategy alone that can

separate the good from the great, and that strategic execution is also a key factor. In a similar vein, research from Robert and Kaplan indicates that organizations with a formal system for strategic execution have a two-to-three times better chance of success compared to those who don’t have such a system.

Developing strategic leadership skills in LIS graduates

In order to accomplish strategic change that will have a positive and long-term impact on the information profession, I consider it important to develop strategic leadership skills in our LIS graduates. It’s time to revisit the leadership and management curriculum in LIS schools and think critically about how we can develop the skills of our graduates so that they can become skilled in leveraging the three spheres of strategic influence within their organizations.

This may seem like a daunting task, but I have learned that if you provide appropriate structure, background information and support, students will rise to the challenge. My students are asked to create a strategic plan for a library, archive or information organization. They do this project in a collaborative fashion, just as they would do in the context of a real organization. They are asked to do environmental scanning, SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses/Limitations, Opportunities and Threats) and gap analysis, in addition to creating a vision, mission, goals and objectives, by adopting the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely) goal approach. They are also asked to create a budget, timeline, performance management plan, action plan and contingencies. In sum, this daunting collaborative assignment helps students develop their various leadership skills and competencies for strategic thinking, planning and execution in addition to improving their team management, conflict management, negotiation, collaboration and communication skills.

The success of this approach has been evidenced in feedback from students. When choosing the products of their studies to highlight in their capstone portfolios, their completed strategic plan is one of the most frequently chosen products.

Students’ comments tell the story:

“It was a huge challenge and learning opportunity for me as a team leader. My team faced many challenges,

including managing the information from our collaborative research, developing the written content of our plan as a group, and finding ways to improve an already high-functioning and well-funded library. We turned our challenges into opportunities for innovation, with great success. Having honestly acknowledged our strengths, weaknesses and interests, we were quickly comfortable with presenting new ideas and collegially disagreeing with one another. The end result was a truly original strategic plan, a sleek, professional presentation, and the satisfaction that we had lived up to our name—the Awesome Action Faction.”

“The principles and concepts related to administration and management of an academic archives department were learned during a group project I was a part of to develop and present a strategic plan to our board of directors. Although the actual institution and board were fictional, the storming, norming and performing steps taken during the project were the most effective in teaching me how to work in groups, find my own strengths, and rely on the strengths of others to complete an arduous task. We were responsible for identifying and evaluating a need, proposing a budget and timeline, and defending our plan during our presentation. My confidence in my ability to apply the strategic plan exercise to practice is high because personal leadership abilities were discovered and developed as well as trust in others and the final product.”

In house

In my opinion, a good leader must be keenly aware of the three spheres of strategic influence: strategic thinking, strategic planning and strategic execution. If we can offer the right mix of theory and practice in teaching leadership and management courses, we can help our LIS graduates become skilled and strategic leaders in their own right rather than having to outsource for such talent. I argue that for the long-term success of information organizations and the LIS profession, it will be important to have those leadership skills and talent on board with us. Who better to advocate for our profession and our organizations than our own future professionals? 🏡

References

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