



For Managers, Principals, Team Leaders and Internal Consultants  
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### **Issue No 18: Think – for better results**

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#### **Think – for better results**

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I was recently speaking with Peter, the CEO of a major national chain of business to business retailers. Peter was lamenting the difficulty for small businesses in finding both the time and motivation to develop high-level strategy. He pondered why this was and I, being me, was only too happy to offer my views.

No doubt there are many reasons, but one of the major reasons some leaders avoid, (either deliberately or not), setting direction, improving value, building a stronger team or determining desirable outcomes is because making a bold statement of what you want or where you want to go, is making a great commitment. You might risk failure. You might risk criticism or conflict. Or your people simply might not like it and may even leave. Some or all of these are things that many managers fear.

Another reason that I often see is that we are driven by our overwhelming need to be seen to be 'doing something' – to be seen to be busy. It's all well and good to tell leaders in businesses that they need 'thinking time' – but what does that mean? What will thinking time achieve when you know that if you answer that phone call or go to that meeting you have been busy and productive. Or have you? Have you been effective? Have you helped create a business that will not only make money this month or this year but be something better in one or two years time? If you are not doing this you are not fulfilling the role of a manager. If you are not doing this you are working operationally but not strategically.

Some of my most satisfying moments in consulting have been hearing CEOs describe their direction and strategy to their teams (after due consideration and consultation). I have observed team members jump up from their chairs willing to be part the success story. And that's what putting aside some thinking time is about: stating what your success will be so that you pull it toward you. Most people want to be part of something successful,

(you only have to look at the exodus of good staff from struggling companies to prove this). Teams want to have pride in where they work just as clients are attracted to businesses that 'feel' successful.

So let's demystify the strategic thinking process. Most people fear that strategy is a 20-page document, written by boffins for large organisations that no one will ever understand or read. Quite conversely, some of the most inspiring strategies I've seen have been written on no more than two pages – but have had a good level of thinking put into them by the leadership team and input and contribution from staff members at all levels in the organisation.

Strategy starts with being clear on the following:

- Your core values (the principles you would never resile from)
- Your Vision and Mission (your focus)
- Your key point of difference (has to be deliverable and truly differentiated from the competition)

The next step is to determine which of the following areas to focus on (and in what priority):

- Building the skills and capabilities of our people (to facilitate attraction and retention)
- Improving client satisfaction (to build retention, reordering and value)
- Improving production/operational/productivity performance (to reduce costs and remove staff and client frustration)
- Getting more and better business (to grow the business profitably)
- Best organisational structure (to facilitate productivity and reduce frustrations)
- Succession – How will our business be led in the future? Will you remain independent or prepare for a merger? (to keep the discussion from being put in the too hard basket)

Once the key strategies are in place, you can take action - I have found that actions/tactics then flow effortlessly once there is a clear strategy in place.

You don't need to have all of the answers or get it perfect. Good strategies are a work in progress because ultimately your staff and clients will be your litmus test.

### **And it also applies to ...**

Once you have clarity about the business' high level strategy, the same thinking processes can apply to many other aspects of your business. Here are some examples:

#### **1. Training Session**

If you are conducting a training session or outsourcing the training how much thought have you given to what outcome you are seeking? Do you have clarity on what you want your people to think, feel or do after a meeting or training session?

Let me give you an example of two different ways of writing an outcome for a training session on developing new business.

**Too broad:** For participants to make more sales.

**More specific:** For participants to be able to influence prospective clients with basic business development techniques to gain permission to submit a proposal or to undertake additional work at least 33% of the time.

The more specific you are the easier it will be to identify the right content.

## 2. New staff appointments

When appointing new staff it is essential to be clear about what their role will be and how that makes a contribution to the business overall.

A position description outlining roles, reporting lines and responsibilities is the starting point. Thinking about specific tasks and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) will make the recruitment process easier. You can test a candidate's previous experience against what is required, or you can at least test their understanding of what is required.

Here are some examples of specific KPIs for a bookkeeper role. These provide absolute clarity about the expectations for the person coming into the role, as well as showing what the company standard is in dealing with debtors, creditors and the team in-house.

- Debtors outstanding less than 45-day average (rather than 'collect money from the debtors')
- Financial reports to be finalised monthly no later than the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the following month (rather than 'produce regular reports')
- Ensure all suppliers are paid on time according to agreed terms of trade (rather than 'pay creditors accounts')
- Be willing to work collaboratively with others to achieve the required tasks (a bit harder to measure but it can be done)

## 3. Mergers/buy outs/additional location

Mergers can be an excellent strategy. However, I am often puzzled as to why some organisations consider such things when in fact their own operations are fraught with problems. Perhaps as one commentator said, "...they may just be bored." Or is it a panacea for a lack of a succession plan? Some mergers I have seen have just been 'quick fixes' instead of doing the real work of management – thinking, discussing and making strategic decisions.

Before considering a merger, test your thinking with some of these questions. If a merger is done for the wrong reasons, the best outcome is often the status quo - the worst outcome could be a train wreck.

- How will a merger/takeover/additional location benefit the existing clients?
- How will a merger/takeover/additional location benefit the existing staff?
- Will the merger enable us to deliver better client care, meet deadlines or offer more value to our clients?
- Will the merger improve our operational ability?
- Will the merger assist succession and so better service the clients?

If the merger will enhance the client and staff experience, that's great. If not, in the words of George Bernard Shaw "...it's the triumph of hope over experience."

The more thinking and clarity you have about the outcome you want, the more likely you are to achieve it. Yes, it does take longer up front – however, you then save yourself a whole lot of back-peddling and 'patching up' time in the future. You also provide a better focus and therefore a higher level of engagement for your team (people want to know where things are going), and, as my experience shows, the results are significantly better.

*"I know we are busy – we just have to make the time to think plan and improve"* Noel (client)

*"Doing will determine your current income - Thinking will determine your future income."* Henry Blatman

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