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Article one of six…coming next – "The Right Stuff."

Dear «Formal_Salutation»

'When Does Your Company Vision Become Unrealistic?'

'What Are You Aiming For, Where Do You Really Want To Be – And When…"

This may not surprise you, but many senior executives acknowledge the futility of established visioning techniques. It could even be said that long-term planning solutions are suffering from a lack of, well, foresight.

Increasingly seen as a costly luxury, managers who've previously boarded the visioning bandwagon are now keeping a tighter grip on the financial reins. Rejecting "traditional strategy literature" that assumes "the more we're able to control the future, the better off we'll be."(1). And there's good reason for this restraint.

Any senior manager worth their weight in share options has long accepted that you can't completely control your company's future, but you certainly can implement sound strategic thinking to plan for it. The extra cost of a lengthy visioning process that doesn't allow for flexibility and change will not bring your business goals any closer. You have to ask yourself what is important about your company right now, identify what you're doing well, and determine how you can build on this to secure your core strategic aim. Watch the ball in other words, don't focus on the back of the net.

"Often cited within the business press as the defining quality of an outstanding company, (visioning) seems not to be top of executives' lists when questioned about the brands they really respect."(2). So you aren't surprised at all then. Visioning aside, it seems that today's managers are finding more of "immediate" concern to admire in both their own and other people's companies. Realistic, contemporary characteristics are widely regarded, such as possessing an achievable business model, sound ethics and great people. A five-year vision may seem a good idea on paper, but will it really mean your team are more productive when they come into work tomorrow morning? Probably not. Remember boo.com?

Having reinvented themselves to achieve some of their previous market position, the demise of boo.com first time round is an important warning against focusing on vision over substance. The "vision" was to change the face of online retail; the strategic realities were quite simply ignored…..

…..“The collapse of European online sportswear retailer boo.com was the result of poor execution of a good idea, according to analysis by Forrester Research.

“In a memo distributed to journalists, Forrester's Dr. Therese Torris asks: "Why did boo.com flame out so fast?" -- and answers by saying that the firm failed to do what it promised, namely to enhance clothing presentation through online innovation.”

“Its reputation as a cumbersome and slow site still sticks even though it's now simpler and faster," says Dr. Torris.”(3).

What the executives at boo.com failed to do was determine their core strategic focus – the fact that they needed a website that people could easily buy things from. That’s it. Of course other strategic priorities would extend from this core requirement, but with careful monitoring and target setting this simple main aim of functional online retailing could have been sustained. Where they all expected to be in five years has little relevance in the face of such detail denial.

To counteract the negative reliance on visioning, executive teams need to develop their core strategies from within, at all times holding course to those essential aims and taking onboard outside influence where necessary. Just as the team at secure software firm Symantec did when sales plummeted in 2001. Again, it started as a case of aiming for the wrong vision and taking their eye off the ball:

“Part of the problem was that while the company’s management was focused intently on its transformation goal to become a leader in serving the enterprise customer, the mainstay consumer business suffered.”(4).

But it’s how the executive team reacted to this that’s key. They sat down and looked at what the company did best; Web software security products. They focused on where their specialism lay and built upwards from there. The result of these measures was surprisingly positive, and included “refreshing the consumer product line (and) raising prices.”(5). Capitalising on the growth of online hackers and expanding its Norton product suite, Symantec has now turned failure into success and “consolidated its marketing activities in a few key markets.”(6).

Ultimately, when it comes to driving your company where you want it to be, “lack of vision” within this context need not be a negative. Lack of coherent goals and current, realistic strategic planning, however, can be fatal.

And where will that leave you in five years’ time?

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2. Lucy Davison, “Managers Place Ethics Over Charisma.” - Research International for the 2003 Business Superbrands Awards.
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