

## Strategic Planning....Frankly Speaking

Why do so many firms invest time, energy and resource in creating strategic plans that never see action or implementation? For long suffering Liverpool supporters it's a bit like spending £20m on an Italian midfielder and never giving him a run out!

In this article I want to briefly look at what local firms can do to avoid the wastage and frustration that comes from forgotten strategies – whatever size or industry sector. Someone once said “a strategic plan is like a navel – everybody has one but they don't know what for”.

Jim Collins (author of Good to Great) suggested that effective managers go out of their way to ensure the “brutal facts” are on the table in advance of strategy creation and implementation. By this he means leaders creating processes that enable conversations with their teams that are:

- **Honest** (revealing the silent killers of strategy implementation)
- **Collective** (involving key people in the value creation process – cross-departmental)
- **Public** (everyone must know the conversations are taking place, this conveys that management are serious about hearing the truth and about change)
- **Safe** (those who contribute directly or indirectly are protected)

A strategy created in the absence of such conversations will be less viable and more exposed to the ‘silent killers’ of strategic plans. The difficulty is that many managers feel such interaction weakens their leadership..... Leaders who deliver winning strategies know the opposite is true. Just take a look at the Patrick Hurst MLN Ambassador article.

So what are the silent killers of strategy implementation? Harvard Professor Michael Beer suggests there 5:

1. Top-down management (pushing the organisation, but not asking why there was so much drag) or laissez-faire management (not engaging in frank conversations)
2. Ineffective senior management team (focussed on their own agendas or departments at the expense of the greater good)
3. Conflicting priorities and resulting poor coordination (everyone is on a treadmill & eventually the strategy stalls)
4. Poor vertical communication (people become cynical and top management does not get to learn what changes they need to make)
5. Inadequate down-the-line leadership skill (in other words the very same barriers that block strategy execution also tend to block leadership development)

A strategic plan is designed to deliver results. To deliver results it must be implemented by all. Full implementation requires full buy-in. Buy-in requires a two-way conversation.

It's good (leadership) to talk and better leadership to listen.

Returning to the Liverpool example, if Rafa had talked to Gerrard and Torres in the summer he may never have sold Xabi Alonso!

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