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STRATEGY HQ

the cooper group



**KEEP ALLEYES
FOCUSED ON THE
PRIZE IN 2025**

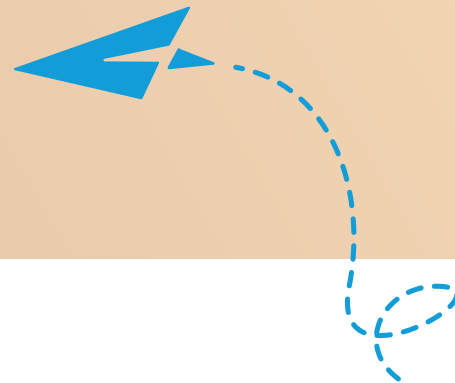
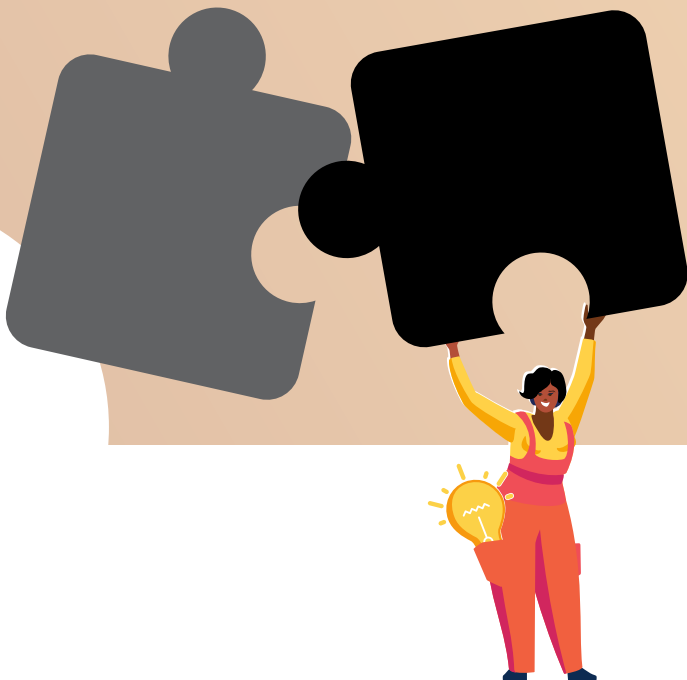
RAZOR SHARP VISION EDITION



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Changes are on the horizon for many U.S. businesses.

Dear Colleagues,

ARE YOU READY?

First and foremost, I wish you and your organizations the most successful and prosperous New Year! My wish is sincere, and this edition of Strategy HQ backs me up.

This is the first in a series of articles that delve into the nuances of strategic thinking and actions. We start by exploring the pitfalls of mistaking tactical actions for strategic initiatives. And we flip that script by examining the composition of a well-crafted strategy, the growing importance of nurturing an organization-wide strategic mindset, and steps for effectively implementing a rock-solid strategy.

As you can clearly see, it's all about strategy – and we all need to pay attention. Here's why.

Long before the start of 2025, many organizations were struggling to stay competitive and resilient in our rapidly changing business landscape. And now, even more changes are anticipated. For companies across multiple sectors, the ability to strategically navigate the landscape may be impacted by increasing mergers and acquisitions, economic and policy shifts, tax reforms, new trade policies, inflation and monetary policies, and regulatory changes with the potential to affect interest rates and investments.

Nevertheless, 2025 is teeming with opportunities and rewards for companies that keep their eyes on the prize. Where there is a solid strategy, there is always a way.

Read on and let's commit to making 2025 the best year yet for our organizations!



A 3D maze with a person walking down a central path illuminated by a bright light. The maze is constructed from thick, light-colored walls, and the path is a smooth, light-colored surface. A bright, golden light source at the top center of the maze creates a long, glowing path that leads towards the person. The person is seen from behind, walking away from the viewer down the path. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by oranges, yellows, and reds.

The Illusion of Strategy:

Mistaking Tactics for Grand Plans

by David Cooper

In today's fast-paced and unforgiving business world, it's easy for teams to get swept up in a flurry of seemingly urgent activities and lose their focus on the ultimate destination.

As the saying goes, being busy isn't the same thing as being productive, and this is highly relevant to executing a successful business strategy. Everyone in the organization needs to know the difference between strategy (grand plans) and tactics (short-term actions), and the onus is on

leadership to ensure teams stay focused on doing the right thing at the right time and for the right reasons.

There are many unintended consequences of mistaking tactics for grand plans. Here are three big ones that I see again and again within today's organizations.

1. Confusing the means with the end: Misidentifying tactical steps as strategic goals

Granted, the business world changes so fast that sometimes it's just hard to keep up with it all. But if you find that you're in a continual reactionary mode, it's time to find out if you're mistaking day-to-day tactics for strategic goals – a common culprit that causes

mission and desired direction. You can prevent this from happening by clearly distinguishing strategic goals from tactics and prioritizing this understanding among your teams.

Too often, teams get their marching orders but don't understand how their solitary activities are supposed to help lead the whole organization to long-term success. For example, a marketing team might be doing a stellar job of executing a campaign (which is a tactic), but their efforts and the expended resources are wasted and opportunities are lost because there's no strategy to provide direction on how to differentiate the brand.

Without strategic goals and objectives ("This is who we are and this is where we're going."), there are no guardrails to keep teams and tactics moving in a single, cohesive, and unified direction.

The words of General Electric's late, great CEO Jack Welch will always be true: "No company, small or large, can win over the long run without energized employees who believe in the mission and *understand how to achieve it.*"

organizations to react instead of plan.

Companies and teams that allow the lines to blur between strategic goals and tactics lose sight of the big picture. Plus, focusing on short-term actions ends up playing an adverse role in driving key decisions. Misaligned decisions have the power to derail a company's

All teams need a shared vision of how their organization will stand out, drive engagement and sales, and scale operations. When everyone is focused on the same long-term goals, teams have the clarity to reverse-engineer every tactic they conceive and implement. And along the way, they also see how to make strategy-aligned decisions with precision.



2. Lack of clear direction: Failing to define a clear vision and mission

Mission, vision, and direction (strategy) are distinct but wholly interdependent components of a solid operating foundation for any business. They demonstrate the unique role a business plays in the market, the value that's promised and delivered to customers and employees, the company's aspirations for the future, and most important, the company's direction, which is the grand plan that comprises and protects these operating cornerstones.

for accomplishing your mission and vision.

Learn more about each of these cornerstones in the next article entitled, "The Anatomy of a True Strategy: A Framework for Success."

or simply react to disruptions, rather than focusing on how to produce repeatable and sustainable results. Unless they change course, they fail.

Leaders and teams need clear direction. It's the only way forward.

During my nearly 30 years as a business and marketing consultant, I have watched too many organizations attempt to launch, grow, or scale their businesses without a strategic foundation for stability and growth.



3. Too reliant on short-term fixes: Prioritizing rapid gains over long-term sustainability

As touched on above, due to our fast-changing business environment, many businesses get tangled up in a spiraling groove of implementing short-term solutions to challenges. This also happens by chasing sudden opportunities that may or may not align with a company's mission, vision, and direction. Don't get me wrong. Agility is good, critical in fact, but never at the expense of longer-term stability.

No company can stand for long without three essential components, and they all lead to strategy.

- Your mission statement defines your company's core purpose.
- Your vision statement defines your company's desired future state.
- Your direction is your strategy

During my nearly 30 years as a business and marketing consultant, I have watched too many organizations attempt to launch, grow, or scale their businesses without a strategic foundation for stability and growth. The results aren't pretty. They drift along without a purpose or direction. They set their sights on quick wins

In essence, operating with a quick-fix mindset cripples a company's ability to maintain direction toward future success. It shifts focus away from strategic goals to smaller tactical efforts that promise immediate results. For example, aggressively cutting costs or



as a leader and developer of cutting-edge solutions or services, and 2) identifying your target customer base – those who need what you offer.

Once your strategy is nailed down, only then do you begin to determine the tactics you will use and how you will use them to implement your strategy. The following tactics are among countless others. They include marketing, sales, social media engagement, providing a beta version of a product for market testing, rolling out product or services, devising incentives, developing partnerships that can advance your goals, and implementing product refinements that are based on soliciting customer feedback.

No matter your goals and aspirations, decide right now that you will refine your organization's mission, vision, and direction – and stay true to it in everything you do. This is your true north.

Going full circle, this will ensure that all actions and tactics used by you and your teams, and that all important decisions will align with and contribute to your company's overarching goals and objectives.

Letting short-term fixes or rapid gains supersede strategy is a fast track to compromising a unified mission and vision. None of this is good for employee morale, customer relations and retention, scaling the business, staying competitive and relevant, and especially in adapting to market changes.

Choose the better way.

Try this fix instead: It's a smart and sustainable one

Immediately shed the 'illusion' of strategy!

- Remember that tactics are narrow, specific, and short-term actions that are used to implement your business strategy. They are not the strategy itself.
- Your strategy is your big picture. It guides you in what you need to do and why. Tactics determine how you will do it.

Let's say your goal is to become the market leader in your region or industry. Your focus, or your strategy, should be centered on 1) positioning your company

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repeatedly offering promotions or discounts to boost near-term profit can bring down product or service quality, customer satisfaction, and brand reputation. Regular knee-jerk tactics also exhaust and demoralize teams.

When leaders stay focused on immediate results, they usually struggle to establish overall priorities for themselves and their teams. This drifting breaks the chain of stability and connectedness among teams. Communication and company goals begin to conflict. And often, misallocation of time and resources are wasted on efforts that don't even align with a company's larger goals.

Here are the components of a strong business strategy.

A clear mission and vision: Defining your organization's purpose and direction

Given the deep investments companies make in their operations, people, and customers, nothing is more critical to return on investment than having a clear mission (purpose), vision (aspirations), and direction (strategy). These must-haves are more pronounced than ever in today's hyper-competitive and evolving business environment.

■ Your Mission

When you state your company's mission, you are explaining to your employees, customers, business partners, and other constituents exactly why your company exists, along with your overarching goals. Your mission is your core purpose in the market, and it also communicates the value that you deliver to all of your stakeholders.

As an example, here is The Home Depot's mission statement: "The Home Depot is in the home improvement business and our goal is to provide the highest level of service, the broadest selection of products, and the most competitive prices."

As such, a company's stated mission communicates who they are and what they're doing right now to fulfill their purpose and to move closer to achieving their vision.

■ Your Vision

When you state your company's vision, you're claiming what your organization ultimately desires to become and achieve in the market. This is your aspirational, future-oriented, long-term ambition or end goal. It's the shining beacon that keeps your company, leadership, and teams moving forward toward a common and unified goal.

For example, Adobe's vision statement is, "Changing the world through personalized digital experiences. Adobe empowers everyone, everywhere, to imagine, create, and bring any digital experience to life."

Vision statements are broad, realistic, and achievable – and getting there requires that the company have an interconnected strategy to provide direction.

■ Your Direction

Your direction is your grand action plan – the business strategy that you communicate and continually reinforce across your leadership and teams. It reflects your ground zero for making key decisions and the pathways you take in demonstrating your purpose and how you compete, grow, and succeed.

In other words, your strategic direction is what enables you to fulfill and sustain your mission and progress toward your vision. Here at The Cooper Group, we call strategy the holy grail for navigating today's business climate. It calls for exploration and data-driven analysis of the current state of a business, as well as new variables that impact a company's ability to produce repeatable, sustainable results.

Strategic goals and objectives: Setting measurable targets to achieve your vision

A solid business strategy is built on discovery through business and market intelligence, data analysis, and using these metrics to set strategic goals and objectives and instill them across the organization.

For example, if a growth-minded company aims to increase revenue or market share by 50% over the next five years, it's essential to identify clearly profitable trends and industry and market projections. Equally important is to uncover opportunities for organic and procured growth, as well as make plans to integrate innovative processes that are scalable and measurable, anticipate and reduce exposure to competitive and other threats, establish realistic brand and business unit initiatives, and create a fluid process for managing an evolving portfolio of products or services.

Everyone in the organization needs to know what success looks like as the journey begins and unfolds. This is why strategic goals and objectives must be clearly defined and why targets must be achievable to provide purpose and direction in fulfilling the company's mission and achieving its vision.

A few examples of clearly defined and measurable goals and objectives include establishing a well-defined customer base so that financial, operational, marketing, and human resources can be effectively allocated to activities that will have the greatest impact. Another example is establishing a plan to profitably expand or scale the business without significantly increasing costs.

And every rock-solid business strategy has built-in methods to track performance and make data-driven decisions and adjustments as necessary. After all, the journey to growth is never a straight line.

Strategic initiatives: Identifying the key actions needed to achieve goals

Finding success in implementing a business strategy is fully reliant on good planning, smart execution, and a commitment to continuous improvement. A lot of companies start by building and empowering the right teams to carry out their mission, focusing on operational excellence, leveraging technology, and prioritizing the customer experience.

Those are indeed good starters, but strategic initiatives require that many other explicit actions be woven into the overall business strategy to achieve company goals.

- Today's organizations must gain and **maintain a thorough understanding of the competitive landscape** – today and beyond. This involves dedicating resources to analyzing the competition (existing competitors and new entrants over time), identifying market and industry trends as they emerge, and keeping a solid pulse on constantly changing consumer preferences and buying behaviors. Staying aware of shifting market dynamics also helps to foresee and mitigate risks, and stay agile, resilient, and relevant on the journey to achieving company goals.

- Identifying and implementing key actions helps **achieve goals by differentiating your brand from**

the competition and in the minds of customers and target prospects. The right actions play on company strengths, discover and correct weaknesses, identify opportunities, and anticipate and avoid potential threats. You might recognize these advantages as those that can be discovered through a SWOT Analysis, which I strongly encourage any forward-thinking business to pursue on a periodic basis. Time changes things.

- One of the most profitable strategic initiatives a company can undertake is to **create, communicate, and stand behind a strong value proposition**. Never underestimate the power of key actions and messaging that repeatedly reinforce how and why your company solves problems and fulfills needs in the market more effectively and efficiently than any other company. This is one of the best ways to differentiate your brand, gain a competitive edge, and achieve your goals.

- Knowing how to **transform strategy into execution** is a key action in and of itself. Building, sustaining, and growing profitability and market position over time requires an internal roadmap that's populated with timelines and responsible teams. It includes the acts of tracking accountability and incremental progress, and documenting milestones as they are reached. Keeping your roadmap current ensures that leaders and teams stay focused on the end goal every step of the way.

Structure your strategy for lasting success

If you align your organization's resources, teams, initiatives, and actions behind your mission, vision, and strategy, three things will happen. You will never suffer from lack of direction. Your value proposition to employees and customers will take on a profitable life of its own. And you will always have the foresight and flexibility you need to adjust to changing market conditions.

Everybody wins when you build a framework for success.



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