

Once again last year, a global survey by Bain and Co., a management consultancy, ranked strategic planning as the No. 1 management tool. Some people would find this surprising, since the world is a surprising and turbulent place and even the most brilliant plan can be upset in an instant. In fact, it's because we live in such uncertain times that planning is more vital than ever.

Tony Manning

Most companies do it in one way or another. You'll probably take time out from the office this year to attend at least one, and probably more, strategy workshops. Before you go ahead, though, consider what you might do to add real value this time around:

1 Get the process right. Sound strategy is unlikely to emerge by itself. You have to talk about the right things. So you need a systematic and disciplined approach that gets facts on the table, tests assumptions, provokes rigorous debate, inspires imagination and creativity, narrows options, and results in specific actions. After long experience, I've narrowed my workshop agenda to five steps: (a) an introduction to strategy so everyone speaks the same language, (b) identification of key issues, (c) identification of assumptions about what lies ahead in the planning period, (d) development of a "ValuePlan", and (e) agreement on 30-day actions.

2 Be clear about your goals. What exactly do you expect from your upcoming bosberaad? Is it an information-sharing session? Do you want to review your strategy and confirm that you're on the right path – or are you after radical change? Best be clear before you start, or anything may happen and you may get an outcome you don't want.

3 Involve the right people. It's natural to invite your top team to a strategy meeting: after all, they're the ones responsible for strategy. They run your company and they'll enjoy a bit of "teambuilding" on the golf course after the meeting. But are they the only ones who can contribute? Absolutely not. The more voices you include in your strategic conversation, the better. You never know where the best new insights or ideas will come from.

4 Beware SWOT. If ever there was a "hardy annual", it's the SWOT analysis. Managers seem to think that it's mandatory, so year after year they slog through the same chore with the same result – approximately zilch. If a workshop is properly thought-out, debate will naturally cover your firm's internal strengths and weaknesses and the opportunities and threats it faces outside.

5 Forget about vision and mission. Like the SWOT exercise, visions and missions are trusty old timewasters. Rather, spend time on your purpose – "why we exist" – and reduce it to just a few bullet points.

6 Get help from a strategy expert, not just a "facilitator". In theory, any good executive team should be able to work on strategy without external help. In practice, a skilled outsider adds

immeasurable value, bringing to the discussion a knowledge of business trends and strategy, wide industry experience, a dispassionate perspective, and the ability to handle tough characters.

7 Insist on action afterwards. Deep discussion that ends without action is pointless. Before you walk away, agree "what we'll do tomorrow morning." Pin people down. Be specific about who'll be responsible for what. Assign clear tasks with tight deadlines. (And then, for goodness' sake, follow through!)

8 See the session as one step in a long process. Strategy is an ongoing, endless process, not a one-off event. A plan is just a framework for action. Living it will reveal what you need to

keep doing, and where you need to adjust. So your strategy meeting should be seen as just one step in this journey – not the whole trip.

Strategic planning is about framing your strategic conversation. It's serious business and should be treated more seriously than it often is. So think about it carefully, and apply the same logic to designing your next off-site meeting as you hope to apply to the debate itself. By planning the way you plan for success, you'll raise the odds in your favour.

*Tony Manning is an independent management consultant and the author of *Competing Through Value Management*. He can be reached at strategist@tonymanning.com.*



Make strategic planning work