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# Strategy

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## From the Editor

In his 1952 book, *1001 Ways to Improve your Conversation and Speeches*, Herbert Victor Prochnow observed, "The trouble with Opportunity is that it always comes disguised as hard work." That observation is as true today as it was then. However it is only *half-true*. What Prochnow didn't observe is that hard work alone is insufficient if you want Opportunity to knock. You also have to know what opportunities you want so you can see what they are when they present themselves, you have to be open and willing to change, and you have to be skilled or you can't take advantage of what is looking at you straight in the eye.

Part of what we do at LIVE Consultants is help individuals and organizations see opportunities, be open and ready to change, and develop the skills they need to be prosperous in the long run.

*Marilyn Baetz, editor*

## About the Author and the Article

What motivates an organization is as variable as what motivates individuals. Some do what they do because a crisis demands it; others are driven by opportunity; still others are moved to take action because of the preferences of the leadership team, or a fear of what the street might do, or even a desire to keep up with the Joneses. Yes, organizations are driven to keep pace with what seems like the latest and greatest.

Fortunately, for most organizations, thinking strategically has not become a keeping-up-with-the-Joneses fad. The challenge often is how to get strategy understood and internalized by everyone. In this article, Stephen offers four suggestions of how to do just that.

Stephen is a partner with LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



*Stephen Baetz*

# Go Beyond Just “Keeping Up”

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As I travel the 401 I have lots of time to think. The trouble is I don't always take the time to do just that. My mind wanders from one idea to another, never staying long enough to turn a thought into an idea let alone an idea into an insight. And what passes through my mind and what fascinates me are the oddest assortments of this and that. I often find myself tangled in something that is rather ordinary which, at the moment it happens, can seem rather spectacular.

A week Thursday I was struck by this fragment of words: keep up. Now why those words came into my head, I'll never know. But they did. We try to *keep up* with the times almost as if time were many things and they were running ahead of us at some breakneck speed. We *keep up* appearances, which suggest that we try to make circumstances appear better than they really are. We work to *keep up* one another's spirits when events seem dismal or the going gets tough. We even exhort others to *keep up* the good work. But the *keep up* that fascinates me the most is when we attempt to *keep up* with the Joneses. The phrase seems to have come out of a cartoon strip in 1913 and suggests there is an ambition that many of us have to keep pace with those trend-setters, the Joneses. How delicious the irony that the Joneses, those with an ordinary, garden-variety name, are the trend-setters.

The ability to keep up with the Joneses used to be much more difficult than it is now. Currently when something new appears, the world knows about it moments later because somebody got tweeted or poked or texted (when did that word become a verb?) and the decision can be made right then about whether to keep up or not.

And perhaps this desire to keep up is what drove a small restaurant, Deep Blue Fish and Chips, in the Danforth-Broadview area of Toronto, to proclaim boldly that they had a mission statement: Provide local communities with consistently high quality Fish and Chips. I can only imagine the owners speculating that if mission statements were good for the likes of banks, oil companies, consulting firms, and

pharmaceutical companies they must be good for them. And so they kept up with the Joneses and created a mission statement.

The problem with keeping up with the Joneses is that it is often done just to keep up appearances and, as a result, it has no real benefit other than giving you some vague assurance that you haven't lagged behind. If all that you have done is kept up the appearance that you are with it, you really haven't garnered any of the benefits and, funnily enough, you don't have what you hoped you would have; you haven't kept up at all.

Thinking through the elements of strategy and how to make them work for your organization ought to be more than a keeping-up-with-the-Joneses exercise. Although all too often within organizations it is. It gets treated like a marketing campaign: lots of hoopla at the front end, a passionate drive to gain converts, and then it is forgotten about as another new campaign is launched.

In other editions of this publication I have defined the benefits of articulating the elements of strategy — mission, vision, values, strategy, and tactics — how to do it, and some of the typical pitfalls. Now I would like to offer some suggestions and ideas on how to make sure the effort pays itself off and doesn't end up in a place in the organization's attic where all of the embarrassing “keeping-up-with-the-Joneses” efforts are kept hidden and out of sight.

## **Suggestion #1: Use the elements of strategy as a frame when making meaning.**

One of the major responsibilities every leader has is to *make meaning* of events that have occurred or of actions that have been taken. Mission, vision, values, and strategies should provide a frame for the comments that are made. Here are a couple of examples of ways strategic statements can help frame.

*Recently in the marketplace we have observed ... the challenges that will create for us are ... but given our strategic position we will be able to see these events as opportunities and not as problems.*

And ...

*In the upcoming weeks you are going to see a number of initiatives and changes. I want to tell you what they are and how they connect to the business we are in, where we are headed, and how it connects with our core strategy.*

Using the mission, vision, values, and strategy statements to frame events or initiatives creates a sense of stability and confidence i.e. we have our arms around what is happening and we know how we are going to respond. Creating that confidence is essential in economic times like this.

**Suggestion #2: Require that all operational plans, projects, and major initiatives connect to the core strategic statements.**

Doing this is a concrete signal that the elements of strategy — mission, vision, values, strategies, and tactics — do matter. That single request will reverberate through the organization and tell everyone that the leadership team is serious about the direction it has set and that strategy is not a fad or a program.

And in meetings where people are proposing initiatives and plans which will require the dedication of the organization's resources, ask this simple question, "How does what you're proposing support our strategic direction?" If the answer is not clear, think twice about saying yes. The only reason you may not want to give an immediate no to a request that isn't completely aligned is when what is being proposed is an innovation that might create new opportunities in the future.

**Suggestion #3: Create forums that give employees access to data.**

Data and information have the power to change minds. So share the compelling data that brought you and others to the strategic choices you made. Let employees understand the charts and graphs that caused you to say "yes"

to Option A but not to Option B. In essence, what is it that drove you and other leaders to say, "This is the game we are in and this is how we are going to win it."

When I raise this with most executive teams there is little debate that a communication initiative has to be undertaken. So they resign themselves to a series of town hall meetings with 200 people in a ballroom replete with 50+ animated PowerPoints. And they also ask the Communications Department to create a company website.

The truth is it takes a real long time for that approach to work. They are too passive to work on their own. Strategy requires people to have conceptual and analytic thinking skills and, in most organizations, that is in short supply. So talking *at* people about such matters will leave them glazed. Yes they will feel good that the leadership team has taken the time to talk but what is talked about has no impact on the choices they make.

Our experience is that you need to get people in informal settings around tables and show them the data. Then ask them how they would read the data and what implications they see for the organization. It is in those environments that the lights go on and people say, "I get it." Of course, in large organizations leaders can't facilitate a thousand meetings so other leaders who "get it" and who have credibility with employees have to facilitate such dialogues.

**Suggestion #4: Throughout the year, engage employees in conversations about the marketplace.**

An environmental scan is an essential part of any strategic plan. In essence it is a catalogue of what is changing in the marketplace and with all the stakeholders attached to the organization. In those changes there will be challenges, opportunities, and problems. It is from there that strategies and tactics are built. Members of the leadership team do have insights that are valuable for the environmental scan ... and so do other employees. Engaging employees in environmental scan dialogues will help to get employees connected to strategy.

# If you want to get everybody on the same page ...



**You First Have to Get Their Elbows on the Tabletop.**

## **You can't do what you don't get.**

Lots of organizations have good strategies. But excellence is in the execution. Every employee, every team, must implement flawlessly. To do that, they need to get the big picture. Everyone must *get it*.

## **Tabletop Dialogues**

is an easy-to-administer learning process that helps everyone *get it*. As a result of participating in a dialogue, employees align their effort with the direction of the organization and are more change-ready.

## **Tabletop Dialogues**

centre on a large information-rich visual that is placed on a table and explored by a group of 8 people. A facilitator leads the group in a focused dialogue and helps the group draw conclusions about the challenges and opportunities the organization is facing.

## **Tabletop Dialogues**

start with members of senior management determining the key issues facing the organization. Hard data are assembled and transformed into information-rich tables, charts, and graphs that become incorporated into the visual.

## **Tabletop Dialogues**

engage the hearts and minds of every employee in the issues facing the business.

## **In the end ...**

Everyone gets it! Then the elbows come off the table and everyone leaves the room ready to work on what is really important to organizational success.

**For more information about our services, contact us at 519-664-2213.**

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