

All Roads Lead to Chicago

We were having dinner with some friends and at one point, Patti said that when she and Ken were in Thailand, they met a Buddhist monk. Whilst talking about religion with the monk, the monk, at one point, said, “*all roads lead to Chicago.*” This was not exactly what the two midwestern American’s might have expected to have heard in Thailand from a monk, but the point was made. The monk’s comment - *all roads lead to Chicago* - is also a highly appropriate metaphor in the world of business as well.

Organisations, well the ones that have leaders who have their shit together, have an objective to strive for. In business, what is usually being strived for is a sustainable future for the company. Yes, of course, subsets of this vision do include ongoing profitable income streams over time, a solid growth potential, and a commanding position in the marketplace they are in; but when you roll all those and other goals up, what you get is a sustainable future. And the reality is that there is no singular way to achieve a sustainable future. No singular way for organisations in the manufacturing sector; no singular way for organisations in the service sector; no singular way for any organisations of any size located in any geography. Period.

Achieving a sustainable future can be achieved in many ways using many different strategies. Having said that, there are several things key elements that are evident in just about all successful strategies. These several things do work, and they can and will virtually guarantee that an organisation will be able to achieve a sustainable future. These key elements include:

- Ensure that senior and mid-level managers are equipped to demonstrate the competencies of Thinking, Influencing, Achieving, and Leading. If key decision-makers are not able to think systemically and identify potential unintended consequences of a strategic direction, a strategy can be nothing more than a fanciful picture of a dream-like plan for the future. If key decision-makers are not able to influence others in their respective organisations, the potential that there will be a sufficient amount of alignment to make any strategy be implemented. If key decision-makers do not demonstrate their willingness to operate and function within a company’s value framework, an organisational population will see them as not worth following into the future. And if key decision-makers do not demonstrate effective leadership, managers and employees will continue to do what they assume might be appropriate, which will lead to on-going gaming the system.
- Ensure that all managers and employees in an organisation know and understand the challenge and how their day-to-day activities will contribute and support the drive toward a sustainable future. If managers and employees are not completely clear on where an organisation is going, and why it is going that direction, they will not be able to help it get there.
- Ensure that all managers and employees in an organisation feel that their contributions – whether work contributions or strategic contributions – are valued by the company. If managers and employees do not feel that their

efforts are appreciated and valued, it makes logical sense that they will cease trying to do anything more than the bare minimum to keep their jobs. In some cases, this also means that some good employees will simply leave the company and go work for an organisation that will value their contributions. The saddest part of this risk is that the ones who will leave will undoubtedly be the best employees. This is because good, motivated, and hard-working managers and employees will always be in demand. If the good ones decide to leave because their contributions are not valued, who does that leave the company with?

- Ensure that organisational decision-makers look for and understand any potential unintended consequences to strategic plans. Identifying the answers to the question, “*if we do (this), what else might happen?*” is crucial to long-term success. By identifying potential unintended consequences, it is possible to develop Contingency plans that will enable an organisation to either eliminate or mitigate the impact of these consequences. By not identifying potential unintended consequences, an organisation’s strategy will be doomed to fail.
- Have all senior manager decision-makers be willing to accept that they don’t have all the answers. There is no doubt that senior decision-makers need to be smart – that is probably one of the implicit job requirements. But there is a huge difference between being smart and having all the answers. Having all the answers implies that a decision-maker does not need any input or feedback in putting together plans of what to do and when to do it. If that were the case, then the decision-maker would have his or her own company and not need any employees, but would still be successful. The key to making better decisions is soliciting and accepting effective input about what to do, when to do it, and why this or that action makes sense.

Anyone who has looked at a map will clearly recognise that all roads do not lead to Chicago; but metaphorically, this statement is a wonderful example in business of the reality that no matter which form of strategy you might think is ‘right,’ the key elements of an effective strategy will always take you to the same place...a sustainably successful future.