TELEIOS STRATEGY

The Problem With Priorities

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Why Execution Beats Prioritization
Traditional strategic planning tends to overemphasize long lists of strategic priorities while underemphasizing concrete plans for executing on those priorities. As a result, a shocking 60%–90% of strategic plans fail to fully materialize.(1) The problem lies not with planning itself — identifying strategic priorities is vital — but rather with the lack of clear execution protocols to activate those priorities. Let’s look at the limitations of prioritization and unpack a framework for transforming strategic priorities into quantifiable, actionable objectives that drive execution excellence.

The Folly of Priorities
One of the most dangerous things a business leader can possess is an extensive list of “strategic priorities.” Leaders often compile inventories spanning dozens of critical priorities across growth opportunities, operational improvements, customer initiatives, and more. However, having twenty “top strategic priorities” is equivalent to having none at all. Attempting to actively pursue such a wide array simultaneously stretches resources too thin. Without adequate focus, it becomes challenging to achieve critical mass on any specific initiative, causing frustration and initiative fatigue across teams.

Moreover, priorities trick leaders into complacency, fostering the false belief that merely identifying something as “important” will somehow guarantee execution. Like overly ambitious New Year’s resolutions, priorities rarely catalyze change without concerted plans for accountability and follow-through. Despite good intentions, only 8% of people fully achieve their resolutions each year.(2) Similarly, while leaders excel at strategizing priorities, 60%–90% of organizational strategic plans fail largely due to flawed or total lack of execution protocols.

Transforming Priorities Into Objectives
The path forward lies in transforming strategic priorities into quantifiable, actionable objectives centered on specific execution plans. For instance, rather than just identifying “improved customer retention” as a priority, leaders must drill down to concrete goals like “reducing customer churn by 2% within 6 months.” This clarity of purpose fuels strategic discipline.

Here is a simple framework for activating priorities:

1. Limit priorities to a maximum of five annual strategic goals to allow adequate focus and resources.

2. Define each priority via S.M.A.R.T. objectives: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.
3. Detail a strategic execution plan for each priority, including owners, action plans, and progress tracking.
4. Continuously monitor and course-correct on plans to drive outcomes.

In today's disruptive business landscape, both planning and execution are indispensable. However, leaders must resist conflating priorities with outcomes. A paradigm shift focused on execution-based strategic management is crucial for channeling priorities into real-world impact and results. Just as resolutions without concerted action plans go nowhere, strategic priorities minus execution equal zero.

Sources:

[1]The statistic that only 8% of people fully achieve their New Year's resolutions comes from a study conducted by the University of Scranton, as noted by multiple sources, including the Association for Psychological Science and Knowledge at Wharton.

[2]The statistic that 60%–90% of organizational strategic plans fail largely due to flawed or total lack of execution protocols is supported by research from Harvard Business School and Bain Consulting. These studies highlight that the majority of organizations struggle with effective strategy execution, which often leads to the failure of their strategic plans (HBS Working Knowledge) (PwC).