

Strategic agility and leadership in uncertain times webinar

Wednesday 25 November 2020

Q&A

Questions for all speakers:

Q: With so many organisations simply trying to survive – do they have the luxury of time for exploration and exploitation?

Peter: Time may indeed be short, but this only underlines the need to use it efficiently and wisely. Whilst resources are constrained, enabling a culture within an organization, including the leadership teams but crucially within all layers of an organization, to reflect and consider opportunities for making incremental advances internally but also looking externally to how to respond to changes in the business landscape, will aid the organisation to prosper.

Phil: I believe this is part of the “Way of working” for Directors and every business needs to reflect on and understand the risks and opportunities related to the strategic goals of the business. As well as the day to day functionality of each department Directors have a responsibility to step back regularly and look at the business from a higher level to ensure the Market place and the line of travel the business has set itself as part of the strategic planning process is still what you believe it to be.

Stella: I think the evidence is that if staff (and customers/patients/users) are engaged in that survival process in terms of what needs to change, what will work , what won't work, the organisation is more likely to survive so time may be short but even in short term - scales it is worth involving mixed teams even if in short sharp discussions in real time.

Q: Organisational historical knowledge is important. Similar problems recur and earlier solutions have been lost due to some staff having left the organisation. Staff may be risk averse or they may lack engagement, hindering strategic agility. Can HR policies help overcome this?

Peter: HR policies can undoubtedly aid an organisation to overcome such issues. However, HR policies need to be clear, transparent and crucially be embedded within the culture of the organisation. Very often 'HR' has a 'dark' undertone within organisational settings which is unhelpful for the organisation to achieve its strategic objectives. In order to avoid issues around risk aversion and lack of engagement, employees need to certainly feel secure and valued and in time employee turnover should be reduced.

Phil: I am sure HR policies would help if individuals feel engaged in the business and staff turnover is reduced however the flip side of this is that new blood is good for an organisation and diversity is key to ensuring a balanced decision making process. Good record keeping is also important so new staff can understand what has happened before they joined the business.

Stella: There are a lot of cultural issues layered in this question:

- Recurring issues - Some of the biggest difficulties are a) too much staff memory and b) too little staff memory
- Staff memory without context - not helpful e.g. we did this before, and it did not work without any context (but be careful - the staff might be right)

Not enough corporate history and understanding of how the organisation got to this place and why, is also not helpful. E.g. why have we ended up with these amazingly bureaucratic procedures in relation to XXX? Well, the likelihood is, it's because something went wrong before - so can we find a different approach to being successful without making errors that does not involve this level of bureaucracy?

HR Policies are important - but also judgements about people and their effectiveness are important - don't under - estimate reliable , steady people who have surveyed a lot in the organisation, some of those quieter types may be of more value than Mr (often a Mr !) " Shout it to the roof tops - I've got a great idea..." Clearly whether people are engaged or not is mainly due to quality of management. Ideally you need mix of people at every level, some of whom are long standing employees and some of whom have worked in other places and are newer. Both are valuable, as long as they have the right qualities.

Q: How may you now go about planning business strategy for 2021? Do you think the traditional strategic review still has value?

Peter: The traditional strategic review certainly retains its value. Within a climate of uncertainty, having a clear, strategic objective can provide well-needed strategic direction.

Phil: A strategic review and process should not be static and based upon one Year it is a fluid process that may be changed as and when required based on new data / events that change the need for one's plan to evolve. Strategic objective setting is key and still relevant – the way that objective is achieved is the variant.

Stella: Yes - it does - Phil and I both talked about this in the session. The winds may be stronger, the storms more unpredictable, but the need for strategic objectives and a way of navigating towards them are still important.

Q: The pandemic has necessitated a rapid agile approach, but is agility sustainable over the longer term or does strategy need to stabilise at some point?

Peter: I believe that agility is clearly here to stay so to speak. Organisations have always had to be nimble and agile to maintain competitive advantage and 'stay ahead of the pack', the pandemic has illuminated the need for organisations to behave in such a fashion and also the increasingly constrained space in which they operate. With technological advances and increasingly globalised markets, the importance for organisations to be strategically agile, will remain.

Phil: Agility is a way of working and whilst we are going through chaotic times in most markets this change will slow down in the future. The Winners will be those business that maintain their agility. As an example, Amazon are the largest retailer in the World now, but they remain very agile to respond to the markets they operate in and the customers they deal with. Likewise, the traditional brick and mortar retailers that never valued agility in the old world have been struggling for many Years.

Stella: I would say "agility" is always needed .As a word It tries to sum up several different concepts , many which have been around for a long time e.g. multi - disciplinary working, small - focused teams, breaking down processes etc, etc. However, there are some prerequisites. Agility handled badly can equal "chaos", so it does need to be managed in a proper framework with clear lines of accountability.

Question for Stella:

Q: Does the toing and froing of different government policies hinder or help the public sector? And how would you advise a public sector organisation when the government does not see the need for change?

A: This is a hard question to answer. I have spent a lifetime working in a political environment and that is what a democratic country brings - changes in policy to respond to circumstances which is right and proper .If the changes to management structures for key services are too frequent or too complicated, or too theoretical, it can of course be destructive , but that is why the process of consultation on changes is so important. But public services do have to respond to political leadership and be aware of it. If a government is resistant to change then you have to keep working on producing the evidence, and if necessary, try and engage other allies in an open and transparent way.

Questions for Phil:

Q: Do you find employees are more creative and innovative when working from home? If yes, how can you keep these practices and policies after Covid?

A: Yes, I do believe they are more creative working from home although the group discussions and idea generation using a team are a little more difficult due to the technical limitations of current communication systems. The best way to keep the innovation flowing after Covid is to offer more flexible working so people are not simply sat behind a desk in an office for 40 hours a week but have a level of freedom to work both remotely and in the office when required. A recent Harvard Business review study has shown that companies who encourage the work from anywhere policy have seen a 13% improvement in productivity.

Q: Can you list the Super 7 again please?

A:

1. Empower your teams
2. Find a commercial and emotional reason to change and be agile
3. Less is more (Mainly around levels of reporting, No of meetings etc...)
4. Once you arrive at your destination resource up (This prevents any slippage back to old ways of working)
5. Find and support real change agents in the business
6. Reward Agility (Build it into your incentive schemes and measures)
7. Cease and resist old habits that slow things down