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The Power of Focus

As we are nearing the end of the first quarter of 2010 and continuing to teeter on the edge of a recovery of sorts, it is a good time to think about the power of focus. Ideally, your company developed and clearly articulated the top priorities for 2010, and specifically for the first quarter of 2010, prior to the beginning of the year. If you were to ask three randomly selected managers or corporate staff at your company about them, what would they say? Do you know the focus for the second quarter? Why does it matter?

In my experience, regardless of company type (manufacturer, distributor or service organization), industry, and reach (local, national, global), the 80/20 of client project success - improved bottom line results - relates directly to focus. Undoubtedly, when we start the client project, it seems much more complex; however, I've yet to find an example where a key driver to success doesn't substantially fall into the category of focus. So, why does focus matter? The main reasons include: 1) Strategic clarity. 2) Practical application. 3) Motivation.

1. **Strategic clarity.** First, a baseline tenet - the most successful companies understand where they are headed. So, with this assumption, it is vital to consider the top priorities to ensure progress towards that vision. The top companies not only understand where they are headed but they also achieve a strategic clarity throughout the organization by aligning focus with the direction.

Ideally, the Executives have a solid handle on the key aspects of the 3-5 year roadmap to achieve the vision. Then, on a yearly basis, the top priorities should emerge. I've noticed that this topic can become a circular conversation, as strategic clarity leads to the top priorities - and focus on the top priorities leads to strategic clarity throughout the organization. However, the key point is that the organization will excel through the power of focus which typically manifests itself in clearly communicated top priorities.

In the words of one of the best financial leaders I've worked with throughout the years when asked her opinion of the key to success of the CEO who not only turned around the company while valuing people but also completed a successful sale of the company, she said, "he refused to veer off the strategy and kept the organization focused".

2. **Practical application.** No company can be successful when it divides its resources (people, capital/ cash, etc) among too many initiatives. Focusing on the right critical issues - no more than 3 to 5 in most cases - is crucial to achieving success.

How many times has it felt as though you have 100 priorities (and directions) to achieve at the same time? Most likely, far too often! As tempting as it is to try to achieve what all seem like vital priorities, stop. Instead, take a step back and go through a rigorous prioritization process.

Which of the priorities are most important and will have the greatest impact on achieving the strategy during the next year? Consider breaking it into quarters. A steadfast focus on a select few priorities will move the organization forward at a much quicker pace than working twice as hard on a hundred priorities.

3. **Motivation.** Help your organization translate the top priorities into succinct goals. Do not get sidetracked with those which you know how to achieve, those which are easy to achieve or those which are more interesting to achieve at the expense of those which will accelerate progress towards the strategy. In a word, "focus".

Make sure everyone understands the value to the organization of achieving their goals. Make sure the goals are achievable yet require a stretch for the employee. Accelerate the pace of progress with an unrelenting focus. There is nothing that motivates an employee more than clear goals, which are not only valued by the leaders but will also contribute to the company's strategy and success. A leader's focus and appreciation translate into happy employees and bottom line results.

I've seen projects ranging from a 50% reduction in inventory levels to a launch of a new product line achieve the intended results largely through focus. In today's cash-constrained environment, finding a recipe for success that doesn't require a capital or cash investment is undoubtedly worth pursuing. What can you achieve through focus alone?

Lisa's Tips: Quality

Even the founder of lean principles, Toyota can falter on quality; thus, anyone can lose their edge - yet it is cornerstone to business success.

1. View quality from your customer's perspective - what matters is what your customer expects when agreeing to purchase the product or service. Be vigilant in understanding your customers' expectations.
2. Over delivery of quality is a problem - sounds strange but there's no doubt that over delivering on quality can be a significant problem. Consider the cost that goes into over delivering - eventually your price will have to account for the over delivery of quality in order to make a profit.
3. Don't inspect; instead, build quality into the process - although inspection will avoid customer issues, it will result in significant cost. Not only do you have to add inspectors into your process but you also find the issues after the fact. Why not build quality into the process upfront?
4. Track key metrics - what is measured becomes the priority. Parts per million is a common metric for quality control.
5. Quality is increasing in importance to today's marketplace - since cash is tight, people and businesses are becoming more particular about how they spend their money. Quality must be consistently high to just "be in the game" - high quality is no longer a differentiator; it is a requirement.

Recommended Reading

"Repositioning" by Jack Trout - this is an update to the classic, "Positioning" for how to adapt, compete and succeed in today's overcrowded marketplace. I found it to be an insightful book on marketing strategy.

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