

## Strategic Thinking and Planning in Turbulent Times

---

Gone are the days, if they ever existed at all, when an organisation's external environment was entirely knowable and predictable. Instead we have global complexity, instability and opportunity. Gone too are the days when managers managed by requiring that employees left their brains and aspirations at home in order to comply with prevailing managerial wisdom, insecurities and control. We are now living in the era of the knowledge worker.

It is somewhat puzzling therefore to see that many organisations continue to enact rigid strategic planning processes that assume a range of external and internal certainties and restrict input, bound by these assumptions, to a very small group of very senior managers. Once the white smoke from the various strategy retreats emerges up the corporate chimney there is often a vigorous campaign of 'consultation' designed to sell Vision, Purpose, Values, Strategic Themes and Goals in order that the process is seen to be both top down and bottom up.

On the other hand a number of organisations (we are fortunate to be working with some of these) have recognised the inadequacy of this approach in the context of the 'different world' we now live in. A world in which external complexity and unpredictability requires organisations to build adaptive capability in order that they can flex to changing demands from customers, stakeholders and markets. This means developing a kind of dynamic stability in which change is not seen as episodic but continuous. The white (change motivation) lie given to many employees that 'once this is over things will get back to normal' is pretty well laid bare in this context.

The strategic thinking and planning process is at the core of adaptive capability both in terms of its content and the process used to develop it. We have developed an approach to this based upon meaningful engagement with the whole organisation and its key stakeholders and customers, that has resulted in fresh strategic thinking, new possibilities and a collective commitment to its implementation. The process breaks down organisational boundaries allowing knowledge exchange to create sharper insights and stimulate innovation. It results in a strategic plan that is universally understood and legitimised. It represents an emergent dynamic process in keeping with the complex world that organisations inhabit. It is the foundation for building a collective leadership capability allowing many, not just the chosen few, to step up to the plate and help to ensure that their organisation is still successful in the future.

We have a choice, to adapt or perish, and our strategic thinking and planning will get us to the place we have chosen