



Beat Your Competitors over the Head with a Plan

David M. Walker, former U.S. Comptroller General and author of the book, *Comeback American*, (Random House, 2010), said in a recent television interview:

The United States has never had a plan. It does not have outcome-based indicators for education, public finance, environmental issues, savings issues, and so on. So it's no wonder we're a mess. We don't know where we're going. We don't know what's working and what's not working. Therefore, we just throw money at problems.

No plan? Say it isn't so. But it's not surprising. More than 80 percent of organizations in the U.S. don't have a plan, so the government isn't standing by itself in an empty field. Of course, if you have unlimited resources, then you probably don't need to worry about strategic planning. But that's not reality for most of us—including the U.S. government (although unlike us, they can print money).

Create a Guiding Strategy

Legendary football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant said, “Most people don't have a plan. That's why it's easy to beat most folks.” Instead, many business leaders fall into either knee-jerk tactical or reactive modes. Inevitably though, without a guiding strategy, they end up executing ideas that, however good, do not build on the long-term directional success of the business. When you are reactive, it is usually to other people's agendas or random circumstances.

If your business does not have a specific vision of where it is headed, it will constantly switch gears based on changing priorities and crises du jour and be run by employees confused about their purpose. So, instead of making a New Year's resolution, make a plan that:

- Captures your organization's vision, driven by measurable outcomes
- Identifies the obstacles specific to achieving that vision
- Devises a plan of action (tactics) that's directed at those specific obstacles and that you and your employees can implement

Track Your Way to Success

Once you have the plan, use it as a measurement tool to track progress on a regular (monthly or quarterly) basis. Remember, if it can't be measured, it can't be managed. This helps to ensure that the organization is following the strategic plan's direction and timeline. If they are not, then ask the following questions:

- Why are the deadlines for completion not being met? Should they be changed (if the reasons are good)?
- Are there adequate resources (e.g., personnel, money, equipment, training) to achieve the vision?
- Is the vision still realistic? If no, should the vision be changed? If so, why and to what?
- Should priorities be changed to put more focus on achieving the vision?