



## Issue 221 - August 2021



An old fable tells of a farmer with a wagon brimming full of cabbage heading to a new market. He stops for directions and asks, "How far is it to the market?" The man replies, "It's about an hour if you go slowly. But if you rush, it will take all day." It was a bumpy road, and if the farmer went too fast, he'd spend most of his time picking up the cabbage that bounced off his wagon.

Taking the time to slow down can move us more quickly along our way. An experiment in crowd control provides a good example. A major -- and sometimes deadly problem -- at many large venues like stadiums with huge crowds is everyone jamming the exits when it's over and time to leave. The study found a counterintuitive solution; slowing people down with obstacles to speed up the rushing hordes of people eager to get home. Strategically placed obstructions slowed the crowd down just enough to better control the flow of people through narrower exits points. This allowed more people to exit more quickly.

In their *Harvard Business Review*, "Too Many Projects," Rose Hollister and Michael Watkins write, "Leaders keep layering on initiatives, which can lead to severe overload at levels below the executive team." This is a critical

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problem that's burning out managers and team members. Declining engagement and retention are just two symptoms of the problem.

There are many reasons leadership teams allow their priorities to be badly distorted. Things that matter most -- team dynamics, key strategic priorities, and organization change and development efforts -- are often crowded out by things that matter least -- firefighting operational issues better managed by those closest to the action.

Fall is a popular time for strategic planning sessions. A critical differentiator of highly effective and agile leadership teams is slowing down to increase their speed. This issue focuses on strategic leadership. We'll look at leading change versus being changed, four strategic planning traps and how to avoid them, how truly strategic leadership teams rock, and how to boost strategic retreat effectiveness.

For decades, Harvard professor Michael Porter has studied, written about, and consulted top companies and countries on competitive strategy. He's found that "the essence of strategy is choosing what not to do."

How strategic is your leadership team? Are you slowing down to speed up?

## Lead Change or Be Changed



Are you leading at the speed of change? If the rate of external change exceeds your rate of internal change, you're going to be changed. Impermanence and disruptive change are central life forces. This never has, nor ever will, change. Constant, unpredictable, and sometimes very sudden change is as predictable and certain as death and taxes.

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This month's cover article in *Harvard Business Review* is "**How Good is Your Company at Change?**" The authors are Bain & Company; partners writing about their decade of studying organizational change efforts to track which ones worked, which ones didn't, and why. They identified nine "elements of change power:"

**Purpose** -- Creates a sense of belonging; guides decisions, and inspires action

**Direction** -- Translates your purpose into a plan; clarifies where you are going and how to get there

**Connection** -- Taps into the social side of change; creates networks of influencers and fans

**Capacity** -- Defines the limits of change; allows you to absorb more change

**Choreography** -- Helps you to be more dynamic; adjusts change priorities and sequences moves

**Scaling** -- Creates a virtuous cycle; spreads innovation and amplifies impact

**Development** -- Prepares you for growth; builds learning and change capability

**Action** -- Builds momentum; fosters a can-do mindset and bias for change

**Flexibility** -- Helps you stay in front of change; redefines how you work and even what work is

The article concludes with three "Steps to Take Now; 1. Get the facts; 2. Disrupt how you work; and 3. Mobilize your leaders." We've found that last step to be especially vital in building an agile, highly adaptive culture. "If you want to disrupt old patterns, embrace a new approach, and improve critical change capabilities, you've got a lot to do: You'll need to orchestrate a team effort, develop a shared ambition, and map an action plan." Decades of our experience have shown the most effective approach to doing that is through a leadership team retreat.

The 19th-century British naturalist, Charles Darwin, revolutionized the study of biology with his theory of evolution based on natural selection. One of his key research findings was, "it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent; it is the one that is most adaptable to change."

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## Further Reading/Resources

- **How the Pandemic Could Positively Reboot and Re-energize Our Organizations**
- **Leading the Way: 13 Approaches to Navigate Through the Storm**
- **Escaping the Change Management Trap: From Rigidity to Agility**
- **Vital Keys to Leading a Fast, Flexible, and Agile Organization**
- **Leadership Team Retreats**
- **Culture Change and Organization Development**

## 4 Strategic Planning Traps and How to Avoid Them



I recently had a call with a CEO about facilitating a strategic planning retreat this fall with 15 of their top leaders. That will be a refreshing change -- we're all fully vaccinated and ready to get together in person again.

The CEO sent me their draft agenda for the session. Looking at the fairly typical approach they've used before, four common strategic planning problems immediately popped out:

- The agenda was loaded with about 17 reviews and updates. Yikes! Nap by PowerPoint. Hopefully, the snores won't wake others up.
- The session was focused on operational and tactical issues. With these highly technical leaders (many are engineers), there's likely to be lots of picking fly specks out of the pepper.
- Reporting and data dumping leaves little time for strategic thinking and prioritizing. Drenched by the information firehose, it's hard to look at the big picture.
- Leadership and culture development to build capacity for implementation planning wasn't on the agenda. Magical thinking causes many leaders to come back from planning sessions and direct their managers to, as Jean Luc Picard, captain of the USS Enterprise, commanded, "Make it so."

This typical approach to strategic planning is a prime example of why decades of research show that 50 - 70% of planning and change efforts fail. For example, a *Harvard Business Review* article by Michael Beer and Nitin Nohria on "Cracking the Code of Change" concludes, "the brutal fact is that about 70% of all change initiatives fail." An IBM survey of over 1,400 leaders responsible for designing, creating, and implementing change in their organizations found "only 20% of respondents are considered successful in managing change."

As the old saying goes, "if you don't change direction, you'll end up where you're headed." This leadership team was heading straight for one of **seven** common causes of failure - partial and **piecemeal** programs.

## What's Your Plan for Planning?

It's that time of year when many leadership teams are organizing planning sessions for this fall. If you're planning a planning session, here are a few key points you might find useful:

- Updates and reports need to be condensed to succinct points of information. Restrict slides and provide a summary format. The key output of these **brief** presentations needs to answer the "so what?" strategic question.

- Use anonymous surveys, third-party assessments, or other safe ways for participants to voice concerns and have real conversations about what they feel are the biggest issues to be addressed. These are often very touchy, political -- and avoided. **Smothering silence** can be deadly. Boil all the plans and actions down to three or four **Strategic Imperatives** and set up deployment strategies around those. Avoid the way too common trap of **priority overload**. Planning and budgeting focus on maximizing capital and operational dollars. How about the other equally vital - and very scarce - resource; time? Are leaders using their personal and team **time strategically**? How do you know? A great strategy that is poorly executed is useless. A strategy is only as good as the team implementing it. Leadership team dynamics and culture development are **entwined**. Aspiration and application are often separated by a massive capability gap. I might aspire to be an Olympic athlete, but my ability to compete at that level is rather limited! Build organizational **capacity** through leadership and culture development. Planning sessions focus on what needs improvement and what needs to change -- on how to get from where we are now to where we want to be. That can be daunting and sometimes tiring. An excellent retreat starting point is to list all the accomplishments and successes of the past year. What does this tell us about our strengths and can-do possibilities?

Given all we've been through in the past 18 months, refocusing and re-energizing is especially important. An effective retreat can help your team advance. Make good use of your time together, so your planning is truly strategic.



# How Highly Strategic Leadership Teams Rock



The metaphor of putting rocks, pebbles, and sand in a jar has been used for decades to illustrate the time management principle of prioritization. If we start with sand, then marbles, and finally rocks, we likely won't get many rocks in the jar. And the jar will have gaps and empty spaces. However, if we first add the rocks, then the marbles, and finally sand, we'll get more rocks into the jar -- with no gaps and empty space.

Many leadership teams fill their days with sand. And too often, in their urgent firefighting, throw pebbles and rocks at each other. Heike Bruch, professor of leadership at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland, and Jochen Menges, lecturer in human resources and organizations at the University of Cambridge's Judge Business School, wrote a series of articles in *Harvard Business Review* on the strategic use of time problem. They called it "The Acceleration Trap." This typical approach means speeding up to pile on more tasks and projects. Harried and accelerated leaders don't feel they have time to step back and focus on strategic priorities. This is another well-used time management metaphor; the woodcutter who won't stop to sharpen his ax.

In their study of over 600 companies, Bruch and Menges compared the most effective to least effective companies. Do their findings sound familiar?

"At companies we define as fully trapped, 60% of surveyed employees agreed or strongly agreed that they lacked sufficient resources to get their work done; compare that with 2% at companies that weren't trapped. The findings were similar for the statements 'I work under constantly elevated time pressure' (80% versus 4%) and 'My company's priorities frequently change' (75% versus 1%). Most respondents at fully trapped companies disagreed or strongly disagreed that they saw a light at the end of the tunnel of intense working periods (83% versus 3% in non-

trapped companies) and that they regularly got a chance to regenerate (86% versus 6%)."

The Acceleration Trap research adds to many studies showing that the most effective leaders slow down to speed up. For example, in a **study** of 343 businesses (conducted with the Economist Intelligence Unit), the authors report,

"The companies that embraced initiatives and chose to go, go, go to try to gain an edge ended up with lower sales and operating profits than those that paused at key moments to make sure they were on the right track. What's more, the firms that 'slowed down to speed up' improved their top and bottom lines, averaging 40% higher sales and 52% higher operating profits over a three-year period."

This reactive and crazy busy acceleration are the first two of our Seven Leadership Team Failure Factors **quiz**. The quickie quiz helps you "look in the mirror" to see which of the seven common traps are ensnaring your leadership team:

1. Highly Reactive and Crazy Busy
2. The Acceleration Trap
3. Low Culture/Capacity Development
4. Poor Monkey Management
5. No Time for Coaching Skill Development
6. Working in Versus on Your Team
7. Falling Down the Meeting Sinkhole

These are vital strategic issues. Complete the team **assessment** and compare your total score with our scoring guide. We will send you links to leadership team development resources. An even more powerful approach is to have your leadership team complete the assessment and compare your scores.

Highly effective leadership teams rock. They periodically put down their sand and pebbles to agree on which 3 or 4 rocks they need to focus on. A leadership team **retreat** is a great way to do that. It's slowing down to speed up.

So, is that jar completely full after adding first the rocks, then the pebbles, and finally the sand? Not quite. You could pour a beer or glass of wine over everything and fill the jar to the very top. A great way for the leadership team to toast getting their shift together.

Cheers!



# How to Boost Strategic Retreat Effectiveness



Getting your leadership team away from daily operations for a few days of reflection and planning is incredibly effective. I am clearly biased since I've facilitated so many retreats. When offsite retreats are well designed and facilitated (a bit more bias), the return on investment is exponential.

Planning a retreat starts with clarifying 3 or 4 key objectives of the session. Here are a few typical retreat objectives:

- Strategic planning to frame budgets and operational plans/priorities
- Agreeing on and planning for leadership/culture development to:
  - Improve customer focus and service levels
  - Boost quality levels
  - Increase health and safety
  - Boost financial performance
  - Raise employee engagement
  - Revitalize vision, values, and mission/purpose
- Leadership team building and development
- Identify key team/organizational issues, blocking progress and actions to reduce them
- Integrate succession planning, talent development, and performance management
- Re-energize and refocus the leadership team so they can mobilize the organization

- Build cascading change coalitions, and an implementation infrastructure for sustained follow-through

Setting retreat objectives depends on the organization's culture, team dynamics, development needs, strategic issues, and priorities. Most retreats are 2 to 3 days. Having everyone stay overnight with dinners and casual time together is a great way to get into deeper conversations and bring the team together.

Here's an agenda menu (often following this flow) that's proven to be most effective:

## Building on our Strengths/Successes

- Our most significant successes and progress milestones
- What do these tell us about our organizational **strengths** to be leveraged?

## Possible Foundational Frameworks

- Which Framing Level: **Lead, Follow, or Wallow**. When we choose how to look at the challenges we're hit with -- often unexpectedly -- we choose the frame to put around it. That frame makes our situation appear larger or smaller or brighter or darker.
- **The High-Performance Balance**: Managing Things and Leading People. Understanding the differences between technical expertise, management, and leadership and how to integrate them for greater success.
- Organizational **Transformation Pathways**. Assessment on the six key areas of organization effectiveness

## Visioning our Desired Team/Culture

- **Visioning** on what this team/organization would ideally look like
- Pull together themes and clustering overall vision "snapshots of our desired team/culture"

## Organizational Values/Team Behaviors

- Discuss using existing **values** or creating/refining them
- **Leadership Behaviors**: define the desired and undesired **behaviors** for each core value
- Conclusions/Next Steps

## Strengths and Shifts

- Top three **Strengths to Leverage** and top three **Shifts We Must Make** to reach our vision
- Strengths and Shifts are gathered and clustered
- Review, finalize, and rank order clusters

## Identifying and Addressing Moose-on-the-Table (like Elephant-in-the-Room)

- **Courageous Conversations** -- common causes of communication breakdowns and failure to address barriers and obstacles to success
- **Moose on the Loose?** -- use anonymous Moose **quiz** to see if we have a Moose Mess
- **Moose Hunting** -- identifying and ranking the main clusters of issues/moose that we need to address
- Deepening our Understanding and Brainstorming Solutions -- discussion of the biggest moose/issues to understand/agree on the core issue and brainstorm possible approaches to reduce the moose (**click** for Tips to Reduce the Moose)

## Leadership Team Development

- Visioning exercise on the conversations, behaviors, and activities this team would be doing in a few years if it was highly effective
- What **behaviors/actions** should this team keep, stop, start doing to increase effectiveness
- How will we follow through, remind, or hold each other accountable for these behaviors?

## Establishing Our Strategic Imperatives

- Discussion of using **Strategic Imperatives** to improve our team's/organization's development
- Agreeing on our 3 - 4 "must-do" initiatives in the next six to twelve months to move us toward our vision, leverage strengths, make shifts, and address the moose/issues
- Scoping out each Strategic Imperative with a leader(s), mandate, team members, high-level actions/projects, and time frames

## Wrap Up and Next Steps

- Establishing united messages/talking points from this retreat
- Discuss and decide on next steps

Time away from daily operations in a strategic retreat is critical to "sharpening the axe." Having seen the powerful R & R (revitalization and renewal) emerge from dozens of offsite retreats, it's baffling that many leadership teams don't do them. The main reason seems to be they've become **stupid busy**, allowing urgent operational issues to crowd out strategic effectiveness.

## Bridging the Distance: Reading, Leading, and Succeeding



Leaders bring hope, optimism, and positive action. That's really tough to do while social distancing and facing an uncertain future. We multiply misery if we allow the pessimism plague to infect us as well.

To counter Headline Stress Disorder and strengthen resilience, I actively scan a list of resources for research, articles, and tips on leading ourselves and others through these turbulent times. I post those articles every day.

Let's shorten our social media distancing. Follow or connect with me:

 [LinkedIn](#) and follow [The CLEMMER Group](#)

 [Twitter](#)

 [Facebook](#)

Together we can Learn, Laugh, Love, and Lead -- just for the L of it!

## Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments



The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my weekly **blog** during the previous month.

If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published over twelve months, you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

## Feedback and Follow-Up

I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without his or her permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations (online these days) of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at [jim.clemmer@clemmergroup.com](mailto:jim.clemmer@clemmergroup.com) or connect with me on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or my [blog](#)!

Let's leverage our leadership strengths to work together and get through this challenging time.



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