



EAGLE HILL
unconventional consulting

ESCAPE THE YEAR-ONE TRAP

How New Executives Can Trade Short-Term Focus for Long-Term Vision—and Still Get Things Done

BY MELISSA JEZIOR

The first year in an executive role is an exciting opportunity to make your mark and deliver on your promise as a leader. But when everything is an urgent priority, it can be hard to find the headspace for the executive function. The time management gurus think they have it all figured out, but their tips and tricks don't always apply. Today's executives don't have the luxury to take time out to "be strategic."

There's also the reality of being an executive thinker in the digital age. Digital technology has rewired our brains for immediacy and multi-tasking, conditioning us to have shorter attention spans. This makes it even more difficult to take that long, strategic view that every successful leader must have.

I have found a way to do this that works for me. Instead of carving out time for strategy, infuse it naturally into everything you do. Be deliberate about it. This demands a mindset shift in three critical areas in your role as an executive. **Here's how:**

BECOME A VISIONARY, AN INFLUENCER AND A CHANGE AGENT



BE A VISIONARY BY SHIFTING FROM THIS YEAR TO THREE-YEAR GOALS

New executives are under massive pressure to meet year-one goals. From budgeting to performance reviews, so much of what we oversee runs on an annual clock. This is why executives lock into a 365-day mindset, orienting much of what they do around it.

My epiphany as a new executive was to shift my thinking, and doing, to a three-year horizon, which has made me more proactive and innovative as a leader. It's not that I dismiss my year-one responsibilities, I simply look through a longer lens. The key is to constantly ask yourself and others, "Where does this put us in three years?" This ultimately starts to thread long-term thinking through the culture.



Develop a three-year strategic plan.



Infuse three-year thinking into the culture.



Champion a BHAG tied to the three-year plan.



A practical way of doing this is to develop what Jim Collins and Jerry Porras famously dubbed the Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG) years ago. I am a big believer in these bold ideas that drive toward ambitious business goals and rally staff behind the vision. It is important to connect the BHAG to the three-year plan and make it a part of the everyday dialogue, instead of rolling it out at the annual retreat and forgetting it. Thinking about three-year goals helps leaders to think beyond short-term improvements and even infuse a continuous improvement mindset into the culture.

2

BE AN INFLUENCER BY SHIFTING FROM INTERNAL TO EXTERNAL

Having an internal focus—understanding all the nuances of the company—is part of being a successful executive. But too much of a good thing here can lead to blind spots in developing the strategy. Insulation becomes a dangerous kind of isolation.

This is why bringing in an outside-in perspective to the executive function is so important, especially considering the dynamic nature of markets and the pace of digital change. I find that following other industries can boost creativity. It is also critical to make a conscious effort to dialogue with customers and partners every day about what they think and what they care about.

Making executive decisions with this customer-first view can help your company leapfrog performance targets. The reality is that meeting customer expectations is both a complex moving target and a critical differentiator. Executives who position their companies to glean insights from oceans of customer data they and their partners have—and act on it—can set themselves apart even in cutthroat industries.



Communicate often with customers and partners.



Read publications outside your industry.



Cultivate a customer-first world view.



3

BE A CHANGE AGENT BY SHIFTING FROM IMPLEMENTATION TO INSPIRATION

One of the biggest adjustments for me when I first moved from a management role to an executive role was to let others focus on the implementation of the business strategy, which had been my responsibility previously. Letting go was not always easy.

It's not that executives should be completely in the dark when it comes to the day-to-day of how things get done, but too much focus on the nuts and bolts can take your eye off of strategy development.

I see my role as creating the necessary foundation for the organization to excel at executing the business strategy. Executives who do this well prepare and inspire their employees to embrace change. This involves shepherding the strategy, funding, resource allocation, and partnerships among other fundamentals.

Cultivating culture is the most important part of this. Executives need to build an innovative and ethical team that will propel their company forward. A culture that lives and breathes its core values is an inspirational and sustaining force for people at all levels of the organization, including leadership. It gives them the guideposts, and the safe harbor if needed, to challenge business as usual.

- ☑ Stay out of the weeds of implementation.
- ☑ Make accountabilities crystal clear.
- ☑ Use core values as a guidepost.

TRUST YOUR INSTINCT— PRACTICE LONG-TERM THINKING

The first 100 days of any new executive role are a whirlwind. You will find your own way to balance short-term needs and long-term vision, but it will take some practice. For me, it's about making strategy the red thread of your leadership approach. It's always top-of-mind, and it colors everything you think and do as a leader.