

Experience Matters

empowering the 50+

Mike is a recently retired partner of a major accounting firm who now has a portfolio of public and private sector roles where his experience can add value.

I want look at where my experience (age) can help individuals and organisations with developing strategy, leading teams, delighting customers, maximising a return on money spent and helping individuals with their own development. This piece looks at strategy.

The term strategy is used in so many different ways. One of the things I have found working with lots of different organisations in the private and public sector is that it is important to find out exactly what is meant. Some organisations mean annual plan when they talk strategy, others talk about long term goals, like becoming the largest airline in the world. In the latter case their strategic goals may be about market share, number of routes and aircraft, total revenue and profit. They will also say something about their mission that may be like BA's was years ago- to be the world's favourite airline. The converse of this may be a public body's annual strategy that will be the list of priorities and objectives for the next twelve months- so for example in a police service they may refer to what targets they will meet or KPIs they will achieve within twelve months.

In either case your experience can help because too often strategy is done as an academic exercise with no real life perspective checking out that it is sensible. I remember many years ago working with a food company that had a very clear strategy and was in the middle of producing detailed plan as to how to achieve it. The numbers all made sense until an old hand- in this case the sales director, spotted that there was no realistic way that they could source their produce from their existing supply chain and meet the demand foreseen in their strategy. They had the production planned, the sales, the people but the local growers who they relied on would not be able to produce that much - hence the need to look at longer less secure and more expensive sources of supply. In fact they could not put this together in a sensible way at that time so they had to scale down their ambition but they were still able to stick to their longer term strategy. As it turned out they did and over the years they were able to secure the supplies they needed from emerging markets in central Europe. In another case a public body was planning to put together its plan to meet an ambitious target set by central government. Everything looked absolutely fine on paper and then an old hand pointed out that the funding

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would run out after nine months. Of course the less experienced had assumed that a target level of activity would be funded as that was the policy - but experience had taught someone that the Treasury is the ultimate determinant of what can be achieved not a stated target.

So why does experience help here and how can we capitalise on it especially when our colleagues hate the expression - 'we tried this before and it did not work'. I am sure that if you google strategy you will find many thousands of references- but it must be hard to get it right otherwise there would not be so many people making such a lot of money helping people devise and implement business and organisational strategies. My tips are to be limited to three aspects that I find easy wins.

First experience tells us that strategy needs clarity. What are we trying to achieve and why? Obvious stuff but so often the consultant speak or the inability of people to express what it is they are doing makes the search for clarity very difficult. What you will be able to do is cut through this and sense-check the real purpose of the strategy. A simple example might be a shift from lots of smaller customers to fewer larger ones. People will look at the cost of servicing small customers and conclude that it would be far better to focus on fewer customers. They will perhaps not ask the obvious questions. Who would the new customers be? Do we have the skills to deal with larger customers? These questions will help achieve real clarity. You could say that the sense check is asking the basic questions- in this new strategy who are the customers and can we meet their specific needs.

Secondly strategy can divert attention away from the purpose of the organisation. We can simply remind a person that is not what we are here to do. This is especially prevalent in charities where the pursuit of funding can often distract from the very reason the organisation exists. A specific example here would be a citizens' advice unit - it has two distinct aims. The first is to provide free independent advice available to all with the secondary aim of influencing social policy. A very clear strategy and one that when I was involved with the CAB informed our plans and remained at the core of everything we did- especially when charities moved to bidding for contracts to deliver services to the public. It would have been very easy to use the skills of the employees and volunteers to extend the reach to fee paying services or even services to companies. We did train solicitors in welfare rights so that they could better serve their clients and bid for contracts to provide free debt advice. We drew the line at bidding for services where we would have to

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charge the clients or develop activities whose sole aim was to generate funds. So our second skill is an ability to remind folk what they are there for.

The third aspect I want to dwell on is what I will call connecting things up. I mentioned earlier a business that put together a good strategy but had to slow things down because not all the pieces of the jig saw could be put in place. We are able to see or at least anticipate some unintended or unforeseen consequences of a given strategy. Experience gives you the capacity to have a bit of what some term scepticism but what others perhaps call common sense and others might call it wisdom. This is different than clarity or sense checking- it is far more. It is that skill that comes with experience of being able to see above the technical and get a sense of what might be wrong without appearing negative. Our younger colleagues often get a bit carried away with the technical side, the specific strands and the excitement of it all- we can just see that some obvious risks have not been thought of. Interestingly some would call it risk management- what can stop us and can we put a number against the likelihood that the risk will crystallise. A little example here would be seeing that all flights to the UK may stop for a while- Tesco who are a very smart organisation had a plan in place to be able to get planes from Kenya to Madrid and then transport flowers and fresh produce overland to the UK so that their customers were able to buy- and what made them even more smart was they were able to say that by doing this they were able to protect the livelihoods of their Kenyan farmer suppliers. Somebody there was able to look at what might go wrong when they started sources from Kenya and think through what they would do when things went wrong.

These characteristics are not unique to those of us with experience but I have found that clarity, focus and risk awareness improves with experience and can be put to good use in a variety of ways and can help us add value to whatever activity we are engaged in. And as we know too well we need to be able to demonstrate that extra something - not only to get a job or hold on to one- but to be able to be involved in all sorts of activities in ways that make us feel valued because we are of value.

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