

The advice comes in many forms.

"You need to think more strategically."

"You've got to get out of the weeds and think big picture."

"You have to ensure your activities are aligned with your strategy."

It's all great, well-intentioned advice. But nobody tells you how to do it. And the truth is, there is no magic formula. But there are some key steps you can take—in fact, with apologies to Stephen Covey, here's our list of the seven habits of strategically focused organizations.



1 INCLUDE the right people at the table

So many organizations are starting at a disadvantage because they have the wrong people at the table. This begins with the Board. A common challenge is the reluctance to transition non-engaged members off a Board. In many cases, you're not going to get to tomorrow with yesterday's thinkers. Consider term limits and attendance requirements that make it easier to identify those who are not as plugged in as you'd like—and constantly look outside of the organization and your immediate sphere for "unusual" potential Board members who can add new or different perspectives to your organization.

2 CHALLENGE assumptions

"We've always done it that way" is rarely an acceptable answer for an organization that wants to get to the next level. Even if no change comes from such discussions, regular reviews of what an organization does and how it does it at a minimum can validate that staying the course is the right thing to do. Of course, these conversations can also lead to new ideas or key refinements to existing ways of working.

3 SCAN the environment

Change is constantly happening outside of your organization that can impact your group on the inside. The growth of the TED conference, for example, wasn't just about the content of the conference—the development of better video codecs and next-generation fixed and wireless networks made video streaming ubiquitous. Those sizable environmental changes therefore enabled massive strategic shifts for TED. Unless you spend time talking about what's happening outside your organization, you'll probably miss opportunities to reach for new goals.



4 EXPAND the time horizon

It's easy in an organization to worry about tomorrow at the expense of next year. There's a reason "where do you see yourself in five years" is such a cliché job interview question—it causes the candidate to think about the bigger picture.

Organizations that want to be more strategic would be well served to use that same filter on themselves. A lot of times, thinking longer term actually helps organizations better prioritize in the short term.

5 FOCUS

When Steve Jobs returned to Apple in 1997, his first move was to cut 70% of the product line. Why? Because Jobs knew that the company needed to focus to be successful. Too many organizations have their mission, their goals, and then a giant list of "other tasks." Use the mission as a filter to determine what's really important and focus like a laser on execution. In addition, effective Boards tend to use this simple rule of thumb: when you add a new goal or activity, always look to remove one that's no longer pertinent. Many Boards tend to simply add new activities without ever pruning existing ones, which tends to dilute their ability to get anything done.

6 LISTEN

It's critical to listen to your members, customers and stakeholders to be sure you're serving them well. This can take many forms—from formal surveys and focus groups to simply talking with customers at points of interaction. Beyond surveys, listen to what customer behavior is telling you—for example, which products are moving, which aren't, or which activities are engaging members versus others. Another tip is to always ensure the membership value proposition is front and center in board conversations – especially the strategic ones.

7 Create a CADENCE

Many organizations have strategic planning retreats on a one- or three-year cycle. But the reality is, change doesn't come in regular intervals—it is constant. At minimum, establish an ongoing cadence through which strategic-level issues are a meaningful part of Board meeting agendas. In fact, it can be argued that Board meetings should be exclusively strategic in nature, and that operational and tactical topics get covered in other forums best suited to those activities (such as an Operations Committee or Executive Council).

Practice these seven habits and you'll likely see your organization spending more time achieving goals and less time trying to follow vague advice.

