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Don’t be Wally

I am a Dilbert fan. If I read no other comic strip I read Dilbert.

Scott Adams, the author of Dilbert, recently penned a strip about business plans. In it Wally, the loser, announces that he is a winner because he always makes his goal. The punch line is that his goal is to have a pulse. I will give Wally this; at least he set a measurable metric.

So how do we avoid being Wally?

Some years ago an organization I know treated “strategic planning” as a box to be checked and therefore did little actual preparation. The organization had a vague primary goal, growth. The single planning session resulted in a set of specific initiatives the outcomes of which were not in control of the organization. The initiatives were along the lines of planning to sell specific projects to customers that had never bought from the organization. So when these didn’t happen, the plan was over and no one paid any attention to it again.

Some years later I led the strategic planning initiative for the same organization. We formed a team to plan the process. The team set a reasonable agenda and a schedule to be met. We gathered data on the organization’s strengths and weaknesses. We looked at a range of opportunities and analyzed the competitive situation and risks involved in each. We did budget analyses of alternatives. In addition we looked carefully at the resources of the organization and identified gaps that needed to be filled.

One of the key items this process brought to the forefront was that the organization was heavily dependent on one industry and that this industry was rather mature. While this was well known, it had not been identified as the main limitation to growth. In fact the organization had focused substantial effort on another customer in the same industry attempting to unseat the incumbent competitor.

The plan therefore refocused the organization’s efforts on expanding its other business lines and seeking new ones. Revenue growth objectives and diversification objects were set. These had numbers and time lines attached, in other words metrics. The plan was publicized within the organization.

When the opportunity to acquire a competitor in one of those lines presented itself the managers knew they would be backed up because it met the plan. The deal was quickly completed. The organization’s newly hired business development manager (one of those gaps filled in) recently landed a piece of business that opens up an entirely new customer base for the first time. The organization is well on the way to meeting both its top line goal and its diversification goal.

Here’s the take away. It takes some well-planned planning to be able to set achievable and meaningful goals.

- Greg Meurer, November 2008