

STRATEGY

AND THE

FAT SMOKER

CHAPTER

Much of what individual firms do... **CONTINUE**

BY **DAVID MAISTER**

MUCH OF WHAT INDIVIDUALS AND FIRMS DO in the name of strategic planning is a complete waste of time and about as effective as making New Year's resolutions.

The reasons are the same in both situations. Personally and professionally, we already know that we should do: lose weight, give up smoking, and exercise more. In business, strategic plans are also stuffed with familiar goals: build client relationships, act like team players, and provide fulfilling, motivating careers.

We know what to do, we know why we should do it and we know how to do it. Yet most businesses and individuals don't do what's good for us, because the rewards (and pleasure) are in the future; the disruption, discomfort and discipline needed to get there are immediate.

We want the benefits of these things. We know what to do, we know why we should do it and we know how to do it. Yet most businesses and individuals don't do what's good for us, because the rewards (and pleasure) are in the future; the disruption, discomfort and discipline needed to get there are immediate.

To reach our goals, we must first change our lifestyle and our daily habits *now*. Then we must summon the courage to *keep up* the new habits and not yield to all the old familiar temptations. Then, and only then, we get the benefits *later*.

As human beings, we are not good at delayed gratification. We start self-improvement programs with good intentions, but if they don't pay off immediately, or if a temptation to depart from the program arises, we abandon our efforts completely—until the next time we *pretend* to be on the program.

Discussing goals is stimulating, inspiring, and energizing. But it feels tough, awkward, annoying, frightening and completely unpleasant to discuss the discipline needed to reach those goals.

If all business improvement is like curing a fat smoker or helping an alcoholic recover, then what actually motivates people and organizations to change? Here are some of the few things we know about persuading people to change before the heart attack comes:

Strategy cannot be what “most of us, most of the time” do.

1. Leadership: Get Serious, or Get Out of the Way. Perhaps the single biggest difficulty in getting an organization's members to stick to the diet is convincing them that top management really wants them to postpone short-term gratification for long-term gain. Do the reward systems actually signal that?

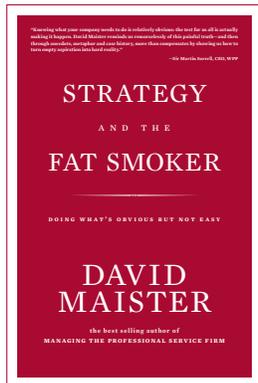
2. Principles Are More Effective Than Tactics. If strategic rules are justified only in terms of outcomes (“Treating employees well gets us more money”), the diet will always be seen as a punishment on the way to an uncertain and possibly unattainable reward. Accordingly, it will always be resented. If, however, the diet achieves the force of moral principle (“Treating clients and employees with respect is the right thing to do”), the odds are significantly higher that successful implementation will be achieved.

3. People Must Get On or Off the Bus. For an organization, strategy cannot be what “most of us, most of the time” do. You’ll never be good enough as a firm if participation in your firm’s definition of excellence is optional.

Professional firms are afraid of this conclusion. They try to work around the skeptics, the nonbelievers, and the nonparticipants in their senior ranks, preferring to hold on to revenue volume rather than put together a senior team whose members are equally committed to reaching. That’s fine, but you can’t call it strategy.

And that’s why so many firms never successfully implement their strategic ideas.

INFO



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Maister is widely acknowledged as one of the world's leading authorities on the management of professional service firms. For two decades he has acted as a consultant to prominent professional firms around the world, on a wide variety of strategic and managerial issues. In 2002, he was named as one of the top 40 business thinkers in the world (Business Minds, by Tom Brown, PrenticeHall/Financial Times). He is the author of the bestselling books *Managing the Professional Service Firm* (1993), *True Professionalism* (1997), *The Trusted Advisor* (2000), *Practice What You Preach* (2001) and *First Among Equals* (2002). These books have been translated into 14 languages. For seven years, he served as a professor on the faculty of the Harvard Business School (1979-85), prior to launching his consulting practice. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

In March of 2005, he finally took his own advice, gave up smoking and lost 30 pounds.

Visit his website at www.davidmaister.com.

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