STRATEGY
AND THE
FAT SMOKER
CHAPTER

Managers build their plans and strategies… **CONTINUE**

BY DAVID MAISTER

MANAGERS BUILD THEIR PLANS AND STRATEGIES on the assumption that people in their firm are ready and willing to be team players, acting collectively to create or achieve something in the future. The truth, however, is that these attitudes cannot be assumed to exist. In fact, they're notably scarce. People differ on their desire to be engaged in a joint, mutually-dependent enterprise (collaboration) and the time frame they wanted to apply to their decision-making (future-orientation). These differences are either inherent personality characteristics, or at least strongly-held preferences.

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An organization with a broad mixture of these types of people would be quite literally incapable of having a company strategy. If a majority of the key people really DON'T want to act collectively in building for the future, it is meaningless to develop plans as if they did. The preconditions for strategy are rarely exposed and examined, possibly because the implications of discovering a disparity of preferences can be very scary and disruptive.

What choices would you have if you found that you had a broad diversity of preferences?

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OPTION ONE: TRY TO ACCOMMODATE DIFFERENCES

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Personally, I'm not sure I have much hope in this area. Is it really possible to get short-term individualists to "do the right thing" for the company's long-term best interests through persuasion or systems? Can they realistically set individual goals that further corporate goals?

OPTION TWO: WORK TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S ORIENTATION

The second choice for dealing with biodiversity is to try to affect people's orientations, perhaps by crafting a sufficiently compelling vision for the future that even those who do not start off with an initial preference for team play or investment are willing to sign on.

Are people's orientations relatively fixed, based on underlying personalities and preferences? Can they change with time or become dependent upon specific circumstances?

My own hypothesis is that the fixed component in many people's personalities is relatively high. People really do differ on to how they want to live their lives. Solo operators rarely develop a preference for team play, and people who want immediate gratification rarely develop the patience

to sacrifice even a portion of today for an uncertain future—especially if they have to make that investment in conjunction with (and be dependent upon) others.

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OPTIONS THREE AND FOUR: SPLIT UP OR COVER UP

Sometimes, a firm which has been in existence for a long time can find it impossible to define a coherent strategy because there is no consensus on why the relevant people are together. In a world in which many organizations have been put together with mergers, acquisitions, and extensive use of lateral hires, the underlying problem may grow in importance, rather than diminish.

In such a situation (which is remarkably common) there are really only two options: splitting up and issue avoidance.

Splitting up is not necessarily a tragedy. If the people in an organization truly want to pursue different objectives and operate in different ways, it can be better for all concerned to confront the topic and, amicably, go separate ways than to squabble or silently resent each other!

Issue-avoidance is, of course, the way fat smokers would deal with the problems!

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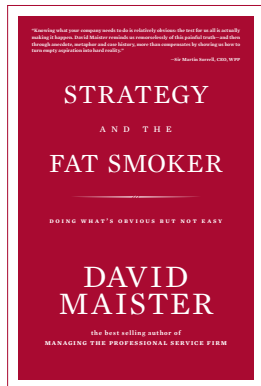
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ABOUT **THE AUTHOR**

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.

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