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Photocopying the Future

You know the type. At any given opportunity they introduce the word "change", they carry the flag of strategic thinking and shout out for whoever is around that the key is to "think outside the box." Sometimes they are our bosses, sometimes our peers or our direct reports. But, when they engage in re-thinking this ideal future and visualizing the change which will shape it, the maximum they end up risking is a small cosmetic change. The most innovative proposal they bring to the table is a *photocopy of the status quo,* as they are trapped in the always dangerous comfort zone.

In order to generate any change, shaping the future and delineating a really outside the box strategy, It is critical to first know the box. In other words, revise how your unit (business or support) creates and distributes added value within the organization. As a unit cannot exist without all the people that are part of it, they should also be involved in this revision. Therefore, block some time in your agenda, gather all the team, and together "revise the box." Surprisingly, you will notice that for some people it will not be a revision but the initial discussion that should've happened a long time ago.

Six key questions will help us to know the box:

1 | Why do we exist?

Our unit exists because someone needs it. Therefore, we should ask ourselves: *who are our clients and what needs do they have today? What could their needs be in the future?*

2 | What do we offer?

Knowing our internal and external customers, *how do we offer value to them, through products and/or services? Comparing to their needs, does our offer meet, exceed or fall below their expectations? How do we know if these products and services have the quality, usefulness and accessibility that are needed?* There is only way to answer these questions: Put ourselves in their shoes, experiment with the products we offer, and use the services we provide, as if we were them. It wouldn't be pleasant to find out that what we offer is not only useless but also *painful*.

3 | How do we reach our customers?

The first step is to create a bridge or the needed channel to deliver what we offer, in a timely and effective way.

The second step is to keep this channel open, via additional "after sale" services, with the purpose of receiving complaints, consultations and suggestions for improvement. The key is to always be close to your customer and to be accessible, so that they feel that we are there for them.

4 | From the perspective of our cost and pricing structure, what is involved in our value proposition?

We need to ensure that our costs are always less than the benefits we get. For that, we need to have a crystal clear understanding of the cost-benefits equation, but from the customers' point of view. *Does our unit generate revenues or is it a cost center? Do we know how much our customers are willing to pay for what they are getting? How is our pricing calculated? How much do we spend? What is our breakeven? What is our margin for discounts? Where can we save? Where should we invest? Which trends have we observed during the last 12 months?*

5 | Which activities are involved in producing and delivering our value proposition?

Do we have the right structure? What about our team, do we have the right people? What about our processes and information flow? What about training? Raw material and other resources? How do we measure customer satisfaction? If we haven't thought about these questions, remember that if we are the unit leader, some of these tasks belong to us. Therefore, we should ask ourselves the following additional questions: *How appropriate is my leadership style? How satisfied is my team?*

6 | Who are our partners?

It is impossible to develop a value offering without strategic partners or allies to support us. *Do we have them? Do we know who they are? What are we doing to keep the connection at the desired level of trust and reciprocity? How is the communication process?*

With this information on hand, the next step will be to **identify what needs to be eliminated and what needs to be incorporated**. In other words, *what is working for us, and what is not? What is supporting our current strategy and what is hindering it?* But, careful. This should be done not only from your unit's perspective. It is critical to incorporate our customers' perspective and of course, the strategy of the organization. Change is not generated in a vacuum. Similar to the best strategies, they are born through the identification of what is not working.

Once we are clear on the changes to be implemented, which will shape the strategy for next year; it is time to translate them into a structured three point action plan:

"What" (tasks to be implemented), **"Who"** (responsible for the implementation) and **"When"** (deadline for these tasks to be implemented – in an orderly and logic sequence). Assume nothing here. Define roles and responsibilities, very clearly.

Finally, we should remember that structuring the strategic plan is not enough, since three groups of people will be present on its path: the supporters, the ones who will bring objections and, worst of all, those who, in spite of having no information about it, will criticize it.
Therefore, we need to **communicate the plan, every single time we have a chance,** to peers, staff members, managers, and customers. Only communication will ensure alignment and adherence to the plan.

Strategy cannot be in the hands of a few bright minds who work in the "Strategic Planning Unit." It should be in the heads and attitude of each and every one of us, regardless if we work in a business unit or operational/service unit.

Do not expect changes if your strategy for next year is a photocopy of the current plan. A copy reproduces the same image of the original and consumes trees.

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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