

Coaching Confidential – Structure for Strategy

Got a professional predicament? Then let business coach Mark Riminton guide you to the solution. This month making time for strategy.

Edge, March, 2007

Mark: I know many managers will identify with this problem – all too often, promotion means doing more work without relinquishing any of your previous responsibilities, leaving little time for strategic planning.

Broadly speaking, the skills needed to run a successful business can be broken down into three colour-coded groups: red, blue and black. Red activities are non-revenue generating tasks such as HR, administration and IT. Blue activities are those that are customer related and generate revenue – sales, production and customer service. Black are any strategic activities related to developing business growth, such as business development or defining the company's market position.

It sounds like you are spending most of your time on red and blue activities, when an executive team should be focusing on black, strategic priorities. Meanwhile, in your senior management role, your time is taken up by red activities, leaving you little time to look at the bigger picture.

To overcome this problem, your executive team needs to establish a new functional structure for the organisation that will enable it to maximise the talents of its employees and operate at maximum profitability. This means assessing which job functions and activities are needed and then allocating roles to the most appropriately skilled person for the job.

Each person needs to understand that they are responsible for delivering in their area of expertise. This approach greatly increases an individual's job satisfaction and makes them more productive – but it also means having to relinquish responsibility and delegate. So, in your department you have to delegate the administrative tasks to someone else, leaving you time to concentrate on your job. As a rule of thumb, I recommend that a departmental manager should divide their time as follows: ten percent on red activities, 75% on blue and at least 15% on black activities. Because planning is not something you do when you have finished other tasks. It's an integral part of your role and should be built into your weekly schedule.

As you have recognised, it's not unusual for senior managers to spend most of their days fire-fighting – sorting out today's problems with no time to plan for the future. I often come across the scenario where the CEO organises a strategic retreat to talk about future direction. The senior managers come away with a long list of things to do. But when they get back to the office the fire-fighting begins again and there is no time to implement any of the agreed actions. Six months later, at the next away day, it's no surprise to find that very

little has changed. And nothing will, until time for strategic activities is built into the culture of the organisation.

By its very nature; functionality at executive level can be a sensitive issue. If your struggling to assign roles to members of your executive team, bring in an external advisor, who can identify strategic activities you need to perform to deliver business growth. They will also look dispassionately at the most appropriate people to take on specific responsibilities at an executive level – something you might find it difficult to do among yourselves.

There's no quick fix to your problem, but you should talk to the others on the executive team and get the topic discussed. Working with an efficient functionality structure has considerable benefits for a business, not only in commercial terms, but also in developing a culture where employees feel valued and fulfilled.