



# Mapping a Company Strategy

By Tim Miles

**W**hat do you want to improve this year? How are you going to do it? Do you have a plan?

For several years, I have traveled across the U.S., Canada and the U.K. to speak to owner-operated companies about how to make their messages more persuasively powerful.

I would talk about the principles of a powerful message, and I would always have three or four owners come up to me afterward and ask conspiratorially what the secrets were.

There are no secrets, though—just principles wrapped around values specific to your business. It occurred to me that we had to back up and speak about strategy first, however.

A number of small businesses are positioning themselves to overtake their much larger competitors. Here are ways you can begin to do it too.

## Little X, Big X

Sometimes it is as simple as asking someone what they are trying to make happen.

Beware if the answer sounds like “yada yada yada.” After working with more than 400 companies, I am no longer surprised by how many companies lack a clear vision of what, specifically, they are trying to do.

You cannot proceed with planning until you have a consensus answer to that crucial question. I often use a treasure map metaphor. Draw an island. Put a little X and a big X on it. The little X is where you are today, and the big X is where you want to be.

Start by describing what the big X looks and feels like. Next, describe the little X—where you are today. Then draw a dotted line between the two and determine how long it will take to get from one to the other.

Once you answer that question, ask yourself why you are not there already and what is in the way. Finally, determine what you think the first step should be in getting from one point to the other.

## Reverse Engineering

Let’s say your big X is to do \$1,000,000 in billing. If, at this time, you want to call me shallow for choosing a financial goal instead of something more altruistic, like

helping manatees, then you don’t know me at all. Let’s say you want to do \$1,000,000 in manatee-loving billing.

Work backwards from that goal by asking questions such as:

- How many customers or clients do I need?
- How much do I need to sell each month?
- Can I feasibly do these things?
- If not, what needs to change, and by how much?

Be specific. See it clearly in your head. Write the answers down—goals without plans are dreams. This is one of the few times you will hear me advocate the use of spreadsheet software.

Deconstruct what your big X looks and feels like operationally. Can you swing the hammer? If not yet, what has to change to help get you there?

Along the way, you also have to consciously decide what must not change. As you grow toward your goals, you need to decide on your uncompromising principles.

If you are having trouble seeing a vision of your company or yourself once you have reached your goal, then maybe you have chosen the wrong big X.

## Scary Questions

Now for something scary: Ask each employee the following questions, but don’t let them compare answers. You want each person to answer independently to see where their answers converge and diverge with yours and with each other’s.

- What are we trying to make happen? Is it what we should be trying to make happen?
- When we throw a huge blowout party to celebrate, why are we celebrating?
- Why aren’t we there now? What is holding us back? What is the limiting factor?
- What goals will get us to the huge blowout party?
- Prioritize these goals: Which one do we need to tackle first? Second? Third?
- If money were no object, how would we address the first question?
- Money is an object, so what is a realistic first step to solving the first question?

Now that you know your employees’ beliefs, take it a step further and ask your customers.

## Child’s Play

Recently, after I had gotten back from a speaking engagement, my son Will said to me, “Daddy, you should come speak to my class.”

I asked him what I should talk about. “I don’t know,” he said. “Rachel’s mom talked about Hanukkah. Do you want to talk about Hanukkah?”

“Probably not, buddy,” I said. Then he told me I should think about it. So I did.

I have spoken on stage in front of more than 1,000 people, and it did not produce more than a flutter of anxiety, but at that moment—trying to imagine holding the interest of a group of 40 discerning elementary school students—I was more nervous than ever.

I needed to find a way to engage them—I supposed that storytelling would be the best. It’s kind of what I do.

I thought about every Pixar movie my family loves and constructed a simple, foolproof method for inventing any story that I could teach to the children. It seemed foolproof, and it worked on my son.

## Daddy’s Storytelling Formula

To follow my storytelling formula, answer these questions:

- Who is your story about?
- Who is with him?
- Where are they going, and why?
- Is there a “bad guy?” Who is it?
- What is in the main character’s way?
- How does he get around it?
- How does he live happily ever after?

This storytelling formula is just about the same as strategic planning. Try using it to simplify the problems facing your business the next time your worries get too big. *wqp*

Tim Miles is founder and president of the Imagination Advisory Group. Miles can be reached at [tim@thedailyblur.com](mailto:tim@thedailyblur.com) or 573.234.6282.

For more information on this subject write in 1005 on this issue’s reader service card.



Simple tips for planning your company’s future

