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The Heart of Business Strategy: 56* Things That Matter

We usually think of business strategy as some sort of aspirational market positioning statement: "We aim to be the foremost management consultancy serving middle-size technology firms in the Southwest." Or some such. Doubtless that's part of it. But I believe that the number one "strategic strength" of any firm-organization is superiority in talent, execution and systemic relationships (i.e., with everyone we come in contact with), and the overwhelming desire to pursue EXCELLENCE per se. Hence I offer the following 56 pieces of advice in creating a "winning strategy" that is inherently sustainable:

1. **"Thank you." Minimum several times a day. Measure it!** Recognition for contributions or support is of inestimable value in cementing relationships—and inducing future contributions and word-of-mouth support. By the way, you can practice "thank yous"—proffering thereof is a learnable skill. And a measurable one. Bottom line: This must become habit-ritual in order to be successful. (FYI, when I develop *my* MBA curriculum, there will be a core course on "thank you," proffering thereof, per se!)
2. **"Thank you," "Thank you," and "Thank you" again. Thank *all* of you!" Message: Thank everyone even peripherally involved in some activity— especially those "deep in the hierarchy."** There are no "small" acts of support. The "real work" of organizations happens several levels below the "top." Recognition and inclusion of "support" members of a team, no matter how indirect, has multiplicative value when it comes to getting things done—perhaps *nothing* is of greater import. ("The deepest human need is the need to be appreciated."—William James.)
3. **Smile. *Work* on it.** Smiles change the world—think Nelson Mandela, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Their smiles (called an "irresistible grin" in Ike's case) kept Allies together at D-Day in Eisenhower's case and washed hatred away in Mandela's. Smiles are key to customer retention—think Starbucks. And, no joke, you *can* work on it/at it.
4. **Apologize. Even if "they" are "mostly" to blame.** "I regard apologizing as the most magical, healing, restorative gesture human beings can make. It is the centerpiece of my work with executives who want to get better."—Marshall Goldsmith. Strong language from the master of executive communications. Apologize if you are 10% to blame. Apologize especially if it hurts, if the person you're apologizing to is an "enemy." Measure it: set time aside weekly for "three-minute calls," mostly to apologize: I contend that for every ruptured r4elationship there was a time when a "mere" three-minute call would have gone a long way toward turning things around.

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*The number could be 6 or 56 or 656. The point is that these "soft" things are the true basis of top performance—not abstract notions about "conquering new markets," or some such.

5. **Jump all over those who play the "blame game."** And if they play it constantly, and can't let it go, let *them* go. The blame game slows things down, savages cooperation across internal borders, and can sour the entire organization. Accountability is not at issue—but accountability can be a team sport. Rewarding those who acknowledge screwing up is paramount. Those at the top *must* model this!!) (Football coach Bill Parcells: "Blame nobody! Expect nothing! Do something!")

6. **Hire enthusiasm**. "Nothing is more contagious than enthusiasm."—Samuel Taylor Coleridge. "I am a dispenser of enthusiasm."—Ben Zander, symphony conductor. Measure this trait in hiring and promotions. Take it very seriously—and, as usual, model it.

7. **Low enthusiasm. No hire. Any job. No promote. Ever.** Measure it. You have to be around somebody for a while to figure this one out—one more argument for "over"investing in the hiring process.

8. **Hire optimists. Everywhere**. "Positive outlook on life," not mindless optimism. Like it or not, there are genetic variations in proclivity toward optimism. Fact is, optimists are unrealistic in their expectations about outcomes—the trait is invaluable but can indeed come back to haunt you.)

9. **Hiring: Would you like to go to lunch with him-her? 100% of jobs**. We must test personability and breadth in every serious candidate for any and all jobs. You need not "fall in love" with a candidate, but good chemistry matters.

10. **Hire for good manners.** "Courtesies of a small and trivial character are the ones which strike deepest in the grateful and appreciating heart."—Henry Clay. Measure it. If "relationships are everything," then good manners matter. Big time!

11. **Do not reject "trouble makers"—that is those who are uncomfortable with the status quo.** Hire for manners. *And,* hire for rude. Pissed off people are the prime source of innovation, small and large. There's a fine line between the complainer and the entrepreneur aiming to fix things that bug him.

12. **Expose all would-be hires to something unexpected-weird. Observe their reaction.** Somehow or other we have to get a handle on *resilience*. This is pretty lame; it's just meant to raise the issue. Another possibility is looking for major glitches along a person's way—to which they have responded without missing a beat, and have grown from.

13. **Overwhelming response to even the smallest screw-ups.** Overwhelm = Overwhelm! Track/measure this. Spend $$ on it. Spend time on it. Talk about it. Set an absurdly high standard for response time and intensity. The problem is rarely/never the problem. The *response* to the problem invariably ends up being the real problem. Perception is everything!!

14. **Perception *is* everything!** It may be the most stunning fact I've come across: A study of 140 former patients from 225 U.S. hospitals revealed that of the top 15 factors determining "patient satisfaction," none—*NONE!*—was related "to the patient's health outcome." The two biggest contributing factors were "staff interaction [with the patient]" and hospital "employee satisfaction." The implications are clear: An obsession with the "simple" human factors pays off—and, furthermore, these sorts of reactions grow rather than diminish in the patient's recollection with the passage of time. The rallying cry of one successful hospital, derivative of these

findings, is, "Kindness is free": "There is a misconception that supportive interactions require more staff or more time and are therefore more costly. Although labor costs are a substantial part of any hospital budget, the interactions themselves add nothing to the budget. Kindness is free.   Listening to patients or answering their questions costs nothing. It can be argued that negative interactions—alienating patients, being non-responsive to their needs or limiting their sense of control—can be very costly. Angry, frustrated or frightened patients may be combative, withdrawn and less cooperative—requiring far more time than it would have taken to interact with them initially in a positive way." (From *Putting Patients First*, by Susan Frampton, Laura Gilpin, Patrick Charmel.) "Perception is all there is"—you must become a Master Student of all things associated with the creation of perception surrounding the provision of any and every product and service.

15. **Life is theater!** All the world *is* a stage. Every one of us *is* an actor. (100% of the time.) This is as true in the provision of logistics services as in running a hotel—and is the reality of the third-grade classroom and an army at war focused on community stability. "Getting" the "theater bit" is the essence of strategy. Acknowledging "theater" as the centerpiece of effectiveness in implementation and acting accordingly is of the utmost importance.

16. **Call a customer.** Right now. (Stop reading this—make the call now!)

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19. **Hiring may be the most important thing you do.** Period. "Development can help great people be even better—but if I had a dollar to spend, I'd spend 70 cents getting the right person in the door."—Paul Russell, Director, Leadership & Development, Google. So are you spending time and other resources in a way that supports this hypothesis? Hiring: It must become an obsession! You must become a Serious Student thereof. ("My"/Tom's MBA curriculum, as yet unveiled, will have a full course on hiring!)

20. **Hire "weird."** For innovation's sake, we need a heavy dose of oddballs. "Odd" on and all dimensions—e.g., spent 3 years in the Peace Corps in Africa after university; is a sailing champion; sings in a BBC choir. Beware sameness in hiring and promoting! Measure it!

21. **Become a *student* of all you will meet with. Big time.** Nelson Mandela studied his string of Robbins Island wardens as assiduously as someone aiming to be a doc studies anatomy. Internet or not, if you are determined you can get a bead on most anyone you meet with—six degrees of separation and all that. Upon getting to know someone continue your studentship—Harvey Mackay describes the process brilliantly in Swim with the Sharks. The "business" of effective leaders is first and foremost relationships. The best, like Bill Clinton, were people students from a very early age. *Work* assiduously on your PhD in relationships!

*Call a customer. Right now. (Stop reading this—make the call now!)**

*Also see Appendix ONE

22. **Become a student of yourself.** Sound self-absorbed? Do it anyway—and you need help. "Being aware of yourself and how you affect everyone around you is what distinguishes a superior leader."—Edie Seashore. "To develop others, start with yourself."—Marshall Goldsmith. Strong language—the main point, bosses, especially senior bosses, tend to be woefully ignorant about how they come across to others; Richard thinks he's mostly easygoing, most of his colleagues think he's constantly short tempered; he thinks he's a good listener, "they" think he interrupts constantly.

23. **Hang out with interesting new people. Measure it**! You simply must press yourself on this—and measure it religiously for yourself and others!! You are what you eat— your pool of associates forms you, mostly inadvertently. You must carefully control your contacts to give yourself fresh food.

24. **"d"iverse *always* wins.** I call it "lower case 'd' diversity" We're not talking social justice—we're talking effectiveness. Experts are the death of us—the research is now clear. ("Diverse groups of problem solvers—groups of people with diverse tools— consistently outperformed groups of the best and the brightest. If I formed two groups, one random, and therefore diverse, and one consisting of the best individual performers, the first group almost always did better. … Diversity trumped ability."— Scott Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*.) Bottom line: Any decision making process must, simply must, include every form of diversity you can conjure up—gender, race, top university, no university, nationality, preachers and teachers. Whatever. Measure it!

25. **"New Diverse"—welcome the *Crowd*.** "Crowdsourcing" is the most powerful innovation and execution and marketing tool—ever. Yes, ever! From Wikipedia to finding new gold fields, working-the-electronic-crowd is a priceless weapon. In marketing, a WMA, weapon of mass adoption. Measure it—your use of "crowdsourcing," that is.

26. **Do Lunch with folks in other functions.** Measure it! Cross-functional communications, or the lack thereof, or "silo-ing," are frequently cause #1 of execution problems and cause #1 of missed opportunities. There are no surefire remedies. Or maybe there is one, I've concluded. Lunch! Go to lunch with a member of another tribe, and odds are you'll find you have a lot in common. You won't shed your professional perspective, nor should you, but you will almost always find it easier to have a discussion with no muss and fuss when something comes. Winners often, almost always, have the fattest Rolodexes of folks—high and low—throughout every nook and cranny of the enterprise. Yup, measure it: the number of these X-functional lunches you have in the course of a month. See xf50

27. **Lunch "down"—"wire" customer operations and you will win the sale and keep the business.** Most of the decision-making concerning a new system (telecoms, software) is made by prospective users—and the analysis is made three levels "down" in the client organization. Your goal is to patiently find and court these folks—hint, women are better at this then men, they are more willing to forget rank and invest according to prospective value.

28. **Lunch "down"—"wire" your own operation 2 or 3 or more "levels" "down," and watch your implementation success soar.** "Risk management" staff at GE say "yes" or "no" to your sale to a developing country. Getting to know the mid-level risk management staff will probably not influence their judgment, but it probably will get

29. **Manage the "Hang Out Axiom" as if it were a life or death issue—it is.** We are what we eat. We are who we hang out with. Hand out with "interesting"—get more interesting. Hang out with "dull"—get more dull. Hang out with those in other functions—improve cross-functional communication. Hang out with weird customers and vendors—get dragged into the future. Hang out with 19-year-olds—and watch your use of the Web get more interesting and extensive. Little, if anything, is more important for innovation than precise "hang out management." Measure it!

30. **Use physical configurations to erase barriers and [wildly] alter communication patterns—and critical outcomes.** Talk about a "power tool"—and one that's underutilized. An oil company co-mingles geologists and geophysicists—and finds more oil. A CEO hires her first corporate head of design—and plants the Chief Designer next to the CEO's office; soon, everyone is humming "the design anthem." Oddball task to be done that challenges conventional wisdom—put the work team in an office 6,000 miles away.

31. *Work* **on everyone's listening skills.** Practice. It's hardly news that effective listening is near the top of everyone's skill set. So if it's not news, why are most of us so bad at it, especially men? Most of us, bosses in particular, have no idea of the regularity of their interruptions. The point here: As Stephen Covey and others have taught us, listening is a learnable skill, just like playing the cello or football. We need to become students, individually and collectively, and we need to practice-practice-practice. If I created an MBA program the met my heart's desire, there would be a core course in listening per se.

32. **Become a "professional," a serious student of information extraction-interviewing**. You've seen great interviewers on TV. They seem to be able to extract anything from anybody. A lot of professional life is about extracting information effectively. Beyond general listening skills (see immediately above), work on interviewing skills—once again it is a topic worthy of formal study and significant investment.

33. **Become a student of presentation giving. Formal. Short and spontaneous. Etc. Etc.** Listen! Talk! That's what we do professionally, as well as in "real life." So why are we not serious students of these two Fundamental Human Skills? Getting good, really good, at either one is as tough as getting good, really good, at neurosurgery. Failure to give superb presentations—2 minutes or 2 hours, planned for a month or spontaneous—has stopped a jillion high-potential careers dead in their tracks. Great presentation skills can go a long way toward getting you elected President of the United States of America. As one quote put it: "Pens are mightier than swords. But nothing compares with vocal chords."

34. **Incredible care in 1st line supervisor selection and development. Aim for "World's best."** The evidence is extensive—and clear. Employee (retention, etc) is most influenced by the quality of their supervisor—particularly in the case of front-line supervisors. Hence one could accurately say that front-line supervisor selection and development is the most important activity a firm undertakes. (That's quite a mouthful, but probably true.) While none take the promotion decision to 1st-line

supervisor lightly, very few obsess on it to the extent they should given the importance. Subsequently, the general observation is that the quality of front-line supervisor training is by and large appalling, slapdash at best. Goal in front-line supervisor selection and training-development? World's best! (P.S. Front-line supervisors need and benefit from coaches more than CEOs!)

35. **Construct small leadership opportunities for junior people within days of starting on the job.** "Everybody a leader"? I think it's entirely possible—and of inestimable value. Whether it's a lead role in a small bit of a Memorial Day employee picnic, or responsibility for logistics for a field trip, give the most junior folks in the place leadership responsibility from the outset—if not day #1, then within the first month. Hence "leadership development" becomes an overarching theme-activity from stem to stern, "24/7."

36. **You = Your [few] promotion decisions.** My quick and dirty "research" suggests you (Ms/Mr Boss) get on average 2 serious promotion decisions a year, maybe just one. Suppose you're in a job 5 years. That's ten decisions. Premise: Those 10 decisions more or less determine your legacy for a long time to come. At the end of a career the most important "product" is the people you develop. A Harvard prof told me he defined a 20 year career by 3 profs he'd developed into institutional leaders. Likewise, a 4-star general passed on his philosophy, perhaps for decades to come, through a handful of generals he developed and placed throughout the system to act as his moles. The "bottom line" is obvious: You cannot put too much effort into these decisions!! Insane care in all promotion decisions. The leaders you develop are your legacy as a boss—27-year-old-manager or 4-star general or admiral. Measure this! Keep a personal record close at hand! If you're a Big Boss, create a Talent War Room or some such. (This is far more important than any "strategic decision" about marke3t positioning.)

37. **"People people." Period.** "There are two kinds of people."—what a foolish statement. Yet on one dimension I believe it's more or less true: There are people who "get off on" people, and those who don't. The latter can be incredibly important "individual contributors," but should not manage others. I have tried this hypothesis out on numerous very successful leaders, especially business owners; simply put, they agree. Ms/Mr X should be a talented financial person or researcher or logistician, no doubt. But the great logistics leader will achieve superb results by developing superstars, a super team—and getting things implemented through out his/her organization-network. Measure this!

38. **Dreams come true—the key to enterprise success.** *The Dream Manager* by Matthew Kelly is not ordinarily my kind of book. (I like "real stuff," not parables.) But the premise of *Dream Manager* got to me—and it has become a centerpiece of my work. The idea is simple: Everyone has a dream! And if we can help him and fulfill those dreams than he and she will be more engaged human beings—which will, practically speaking, pay off for the organization as it strives to serve its customers. "A company's purpose is to become the-best-version-of-itself," Kelly writes. "But an organization can only become the-best-version-of-itself to the extent that the people who drive that organization are striving to become better-versions-of-themselves." When you ponder that (slowly, please!), it is both obvious and profound: "We," the team, is only as good as the engagement and commitment to personal growth and

Excellence of each and every individual. Kelly continues: "The question is: What is an employee's purpose? Most would say, 'to help the company achieve its purpose'—but they would be wrong. That is certainly part of the employee's role, but an employee's primary purpose is to become the-best-version-of-himself or herself." Makes sense to me!

39. **Hire-promote for demonstrated curiosity.** Mayor-entrepreneur mike Bloomberg claims his most distinguishing trait is curiosity. It appears as though that's more or less true for President Obama as well. Curiosity is important per se—but what's most important is that it becomes a part of the organization's culture. I don't know whether or not I coined the term, but I started writing about the "curious corporation" in 1994 at the latest. (I'm sure Peter Drucker or Warren Bennis got there 20 years earlier—it's usually the case.) Fact: you can evaluate curiosity, by moment-to-moment approach to life, and the eclectic nature of one's demonstrated background—this probably shows up by about age 15 at the latest! (Or was, in my case, ingrained by my Mom by age 5!) One wildly successful business owner in professional services insists on, in hiring, at least one substantial deep interest beyond the "required" skill set—particularly, interestingly, for his engineers! Measure it!

40. **Insure that women are well represented or in fact dominate exec teams**. Women everywhere buy over 80% of consumer goods. And in the U.S. about 50% of commercial goods and services—women are now 50% of the managerial population, including purchasing. Overall women's commercial participation around the worlds is soaring. The typically understated *Economist* put it in no uncertain terms: *"Forget China, India and the Internet: Economic Growth Is Driven by Women."* And one global association president (male, French) added, speaking to the *Financial Times*: "One thing is certain: Women's rise to power, which is linked to the increase in wealth per capita, is happening in all domains and at all levels of society. Women are no longer content to provide efficient labor or to be consumers with rising budgets and more autonomy to spend. … This is just the beginning. The phenomenon will only grow as girls prove to be more successful than boys in the school system. For a number of observers, we have already entered the age of 'womenomics,' the economy as thought out and practiced by a woman." One consequence of this, obvious to me, is that women's representation on the Exec Team should roughly mirror purchasing power. Fact is, men are woefully ignorant about women's needs in terms of product development, marketing and distribution. This is incredibly important! Fix it! (If it needs fixing.) (It doubtless does.) Measure (the living hell out of) it!

41. **More generally, I believe—for reasons commercial, not moral—that the Exec Team ought to more or less mirror the population served, or which might be served.** We may understand "others" intellectually as a result of meticulous study. (I've been a serious student of gender differences for a dozen years.). But there are severe limits to "walking in 'others' shoes." If you want to "get" "others" then those others must be fully and visibly and permanently represented on decision-making teams.

42. **Focus for the next quarter century (!) on creating products and services for and selling to boomers-geezers.** We talk ceaselessly about using the new tools to turn the world into "market segments of one." Fine, but do not ignore the two, by far, largest market segments—both of which are misunderstood and underserved. One, see

immediately above, is women. The other is boomers-geezers. The singlemost significant "demographic trend [tsunami]" is aging in North America, the EU, Japan, Oceania and even China. Yet marketing and product-service development remains squarely focused on the young-youngish. The lost opportunities are staggering. This is *the* "marketing megatrend" of the next 25 years!

43. **Work on first and last impressions as if your life depended on it—it does**. Walt Disney, in its parks operations, spends in ordinate time and money on parking lots and the hiring and training and development of parking lot attendants. The research is crystal clear: Beginnings and endings play a huge role in our perception of a product or service. (E.g., for professional service firms, the reception area and receptionist are of extraordinary importance. So, too, the quality of the automated answering system! One bank spends a sizeable amount of money to insure that phones are always answered, with dispatch, by humans.) Life is theater, and the theater associated with beginnings and endings is worthy of [lots of] time, [lots of] attention, and [lots of] $$$.

44. **Try it! Try it! Try it!** If a suggestion is made, your instinctive response should be: "Try it." In 40-plus years of study and practice, I sometimes think I've only learned one thing: *"He or she who tries the most stuff wins."* Here are a couple of my favorite quotes on the topic: "We have a 'strategic plan.' It's called 'doing things.'"—Herb Kelleher, Southwest Airlines.   "We made mistakes, of course. Most of them were omissions we didn't think of when we initially wrote the software. We fixed them by doing it over and over, again and again. We do the same today. While our competitors are still sucking their thumbs trying to make the design perfect, we're already on prototype version #5. By the time our rivals are ready with wires and screws, we are on version #10. It gets back to planning versus acting: We act from day one; others plan how to plan—for months."—*Bloomberg by Bloomberg* (by Mike Bloomberg). "This is so simple it sounds stupid, but it is amazing how few oil people really understand that you only find oil if you drill wells. You may think you're finding it when you're drawing maps and studying logs, but you have to drill."—*The Hunters*, by John Masters, Canadian oil and gas wildcatter. The issue/opportunity, of course, is that this must become a "core value" or "cultural trait" of the organization, wee or huge.

45. **Screw it up! Screw it up! Screw it up!** My friend Richard Farson wrote a wonderful book titled *He Who Makes the Most Mistakes Wins.* This is almost a religion with me—and fits perfectly with #44 immediately above. Again, a tolerance for (encouragement of!) the quick try that necessarily runs amok must become a "core value." The absence of the ingrained "try it" mentality—and its twin brother "screw it up"—is arguably the number one reason sizeable organizations so frequently come a cropper—alas, this problem arises even in tiny organizations.

46. **Big ends, small beginnings. Become a devout and devoted student of "nudgery."** Wal*Mart increases shopping cart size—and sales of big items, like microwave ovens, shoots through the roof. Years ago, Frito Lay started "messing around" with bag sizes—a new size created an entirely new market without cannibalizing the old. One of the top diet tips? Smaller plates. Stop unnecessarily killing tens of thousands of hospital patients? Get fanatic about hand washing. Become much better at finding oil? Put the geologists and geophysicists in the same room. There are literally

millions of examples like this with the most profound consequences. The point is to become a "nudge fanatic"—experimenting with these little twists all the time. Try. Fail. Adjust. Try again. Reject. Or proceed. The important point is that to succeed this "idea" needs to become a pervasive "mindset," a big part of "the way we do things."

47. **Yesterday? Tomorrow?** Some companies' walls and halls are laden with pictures and plaques celebrating a glorious past. Others focus on the future. When Steve Jobs returned to Apple, he ordered all visible evidence of yesterday's victories to be put away or destroyed—his New Apple would smack of aspirations of tomorrow, not reminders of yesterday.

48. **Simplify systems. Constantly.** Internet or no Internet, Web 2.0 or no Web 2.0, all organizations over time choke on the growing complexity of their systems. Systems: Can't live without the. Can't live with them. My advice: Literally, not figuratively, create a "War Department"—an "official" arm of the organization dedicated to making war on our own systems! We must work as hard at de-organizing as we do at organizing. Measure it!

49. **Simplify. One page. Max. Everything.** Become a fanatic about 10-word summaries, and one-page plans and policies. Etc. The art of boiling things down is an art of the utmost importance. Strategic plan? Sure—but no more than one page long. (You can have 10,000 pages of Appendices—but the "it" goes no more than a page.)

50. **Simplify.** Period.

51. **Practice decency. Put "We are thoughtful in all we do" in the corporate values statement—then live it!** Here's my view:
    Thoughtfulness is key to customer retention.
    Thoughtfulness is key to employee recruitment and satisfaction.
    Thoughtfulness is key to brand perception.
    Thoughtfulness is key to your ability to look in the mirror—and tell your kids
        about your job.
    Thoughtfulness is key to speeding things up—it reduces friction.
    Thoughtfulness is key to transparency and even cost containment—it abets
        rather than stifles truth-telling.
    "Thoughtfulness is free."

52. **The calendar *never* lies!** Your espoused priorities of ten or not run afoul of the "real world" you. Time is indeed your only true resource. And the way you divvy it up is the only true statement of what really matters to you. Hence: Manage your calendar religiously and rigorously. Little or nothing is of greater "strategic" importance.

53. **You need a "calendar buddy."** Aligning your time with your priorities—in the face of a zillion distractions—is hard work and calls for a straight-shooting accompanist. This is true for all of us, not just the top dogs.

54. **Master "To don'ts."** Distractions—invariably "important" distractions—kill. You (and that "calendar buddy") must work assiduously on "to don'ts"—it ain't easy, it is essential.

55. **We all need a "truthteller."** It's true of the President and the General—but also of the 26-year-old supervisor. We need a pal who will tell it like it is. And does tell it like it is. This is true X100 after the second or third promotion!

56. EXCELLENCE in all we do. In my not unbiased view the value of relentlessly pursuing EXCELLENCE per se is literally infinite. My Mantra:

EXCELLENCE.
ALWAYS.

IF NOT EXCELLENCE, WHAT?
IF NOT EXCELLENCE NOW, WHEN?*

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*This idea is far more important in tough times than in good times. "Excellence" is not a "discretionary expense." It is what we are. Or aren't.

Appendix ONE

The "Have You 50"

While waiting in the Albany airport to board a Southwest Airlines flight to Reagan, I happened across the latest Harvard Business Review, on the cover of which was a yellow sticker. The sticker had on it the words "Mapping your competitive position." It referred to a feature article by my friend Rich D'Aveni. His work is uniformly good—and I have said as much publicly on several occasions dating back 15 years. I'm sure this article is good, too—though I didn't read it. In fact it triggered a furious negative "Tom reaction" as my wife calls it. Of course I believe you should worry about your "competitive position." But instead of obsessing on competitive position and other abstractions, as the B-schools and consultants would always have us do, I instead wondered about some "practical stuff" which I believe is more important to the short- and long-term health of the enterprise, tiny or enormous.

Hence, rather than an emphasis on competitive maps or how blue your water is, I am urging you to pay attention to my "Top 50" "Have yous," as I shall call them. The list could easily be three times longer—but this ought to keep you occupied for a while. Of course the underlying hypothesis is that if you do the stuff below your "competitive position" will improve so much that mapping will become a secondary issue! Some will rebut with the tired old saw (and silly idea) of "doing the right things" versus "doing things right." I, for example, believe that if you do even a smidgeon of what's below you will wildly enhance both "do the right thing" and "do things right." (Admission: As an engineer by training and disposition, doing things right is priority #1. I am an admitted "implementation nut.") In any event here's my list, in no particular order:

1. Have you in the last 10 days … visited a *customer*?
2. Have you called a customer … *TODAY*?

Have you called a customer … TODAY?

3. Have you in the last 60-90 days … had a seminar in which several folks from the customer's operation (different levels, different functions, different divisions) interacted, via facilitator, with various of your folks?

4. Have you thanked a front-line employee for a small act of helpfulness … in the last three days?

5. Have you thanked a front-line employee for a small act of helpfulness … in the last three *hours*?

6. Have you thanked a frontline employee for carrying around a great *attitude* … today?

Have you thanked a frontline employee for carrying around a great <u>attitude</u> … today?

7. Have you in the last week recognized—publicly—one of your folks for a small act of *cross-functional co-operation*?

8. Have you in the last week recognized—publicly—one of "their" folks (another function) for a small act of cross-functional co-operation?

9. Have you invited in the last month a leader of *another function* to your weekly team priorities meeting?

10. Have you personally in the last week-month called-visited an internal or external customer to *sort out, inquire, or apologize* for some little or big thing that went awry? (No reason for doing so? If true—in your mind—then you're more out of touch than I dared imagine.)

11. Have you in the last two days had a chat with someone (a couple of levels down?) about specific deadlines concerning a project's next steps?

12. Have you in the last two days had a chat with someone (a couple of levels down?) about specific deadlines concerning a project's next steps … and what specifically *you can do to remove a hurdle*? ("Ninety percent of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to get things done."—Peter "His eminence" Drucker.)

13. Have you celebrated in the last week a "small" (or large!) *milestone* reached? (I.e., are you a milestone fanatic?)

14. Have you in the last week or month revised some estimate in the "wrong" direction and apologized for making a lousy estimate? (Somehow you must publicly *reward the telling of difficult truths*.)

15. Have you installed in your tenure a very comprehensive customer satisfaction scheme for all *internal* customers? (With major consequences for hitting or missing the mark.)

16. Have you in the last six months had a week-long, visible, very intensive *visit-"tour"* of external customers?

17. Have you in the last 60 days called an abrupt halt to a meeting and "ordered" everyone to get out of the office, and "into the field" and in the *next eight hours*, after asking those involved, fixed (f-i-x-e-d!) a nagging "small" problem through practical action?

18. Have you in the last week had a rather thorough discussion of a "cool design thing" someone has come across—away from your industry or function—at a Web site, in a product or its packaging?

19. Have you in the last two weeks had an informal meeting—at least an hour long—with a frontline employee to discuss things we do right, things we do wrong, what it would take to meet your mid- to long-term aspirations?

20. Have you had in the last 60 days had a general meeting to discuss "things we do wrong" … that we can fix in the next *fourteen days*?

Have you had in the last 60 days had a general meeting to discuss "things we do wrong" … that we can fix in the next <u>fourteen</u> <u>days</u>?

21. Have you had in the last year a one-day, intense offsite with each (?) of your internal customers—followed by a big celebration of "things gone right"?

22. Have you in the last week pushed someone to do some family thing that you fear might be overwhelmed by deadline pressure?

23. *Have you learned the names of the children of everyone who reports to you?* (If not, you have six months to fix it.)

24. Have you taken in the last month an interesting-*weird* outsider to lunch?

25. Have you in the last month invited an interesting-weird outsider to sit in on an important meeting?

26. Have you in the last three days discussed something interesting, beyond your industry, that you ran across in a meeting, reading, etc?

27. Have you in the last 24 hours injected into a meeting "I ran across this interesting idea in [strange place]?

28. Have you in the last two weeks asked someone to report on something, anything that constitutes an act of brilliant service rendered in a "trivial" situation—restaurant, car wash, etc? (And then discussed the relevance to your work.)

29. *Have you in the last 30 days examined in detail (hour by hour) your calendar to evaluate the degree "time actually spent" mirrors your "espoused priorities"?* (And repeated this exercise with everyone on the team.)

Axiom: Calendars never lie.
Axiom: You = Your calendar

30. Have you in the last two months had a presentation to the group by a "weird" outsider?

31. Have you in the last two months had a presentation to the group by a customer, internal customer, vendor featuring "working folks" 3 or 4 levels down in the vendor organization?

Have you in the last two months had a presentation to the group by a customer, internal customer, vendor featuring "working folks" 3 or 4 levels down in the vendor organization?

32. Have you in the last two months had a presentation to the group of cool, beyond-our-industry ideas by two of your folks?

33. Have you at every meeting today (and forever more) re-directed the conversation to the practicalities of implementation concerning some issue before the group?

34. Have you at every meeting today (and forever more) had an end-of-meeting discussion on "action items to be dealt with in the next 4, 48 hours? (And then made this list public—and followed up in 48 hours.) And made sure everyone has at least one such item.)

35. Have you had a discussion in the last six months about what it would take to get recognition in local-national poll of *"best places to work"?*

36. Have you in the last month approved a *cool-different training course* for one of your folks?

37. Have you in the last month *taught* a front-line training course?

Have you in the last month <u>taught</u> a front-line training course?

38. Have you in the last week discussed the idea of *Excellence*? (What it means, how to get there.)

39. Have you in the last week discussed the idea of *"Wow"?* (What it means, how to inject it into an ongoing "routine" project.)

40. Have you in the last 45 days assessed some major process in terms of the details of the "experience," as well as results, it provides to its external or internal customers?

41. Have you in the last month had one of your folks attend a meeting you were supposed to go to which gives them unusual exposure to senior folks?

42. Have you in the last 60 (30?) days sat with a trusted friend or "coach" to discuss your "management style"—and its long- and short-term impact on the group?

43. Have you in the *last three days* considered a professional relationship that was a little rocky and made a call to the person involved to discuss issues and smooth the waters? (Taking the "blame," fully deserved or not, for letting the thing-issue fester.)

44. Have you in the last … *two hours* … stopped by someone's (two-levels "down") office-workspace for 5 minutes to ask "What do you think?" about an issue that arose at a more or less just completed meeting? (And then stuck around for 10 or so minutes to listen—and visibly taken notes.)

> ### *Have you in the last … two hours … stopped by someone's (two-levels "down") office-workspace for 5 minutes to ask "What do you think?" about an issue that arose at a more or less just completed meeting? (And then stuck around for 10 or so minutes to listen—and visibly taken notes.)*

45. Have you … in the last day … looked around you to assess whether the diversity pretty accurately maps the diversity of the market being served? (And …)

46. Have you in the last day at some meeting gone out of your way to make sure that a normally reticent person was engaged in a conversation—and then thanked him or her, perhaps privately, for their contribution?

47. Have you during your tenure instituted very public (visible) presentations of performance?

48. Have you in the last four months had a session specifically aimed at checking on the "corporate culture" and the degree we are true to it—with all presentations by relatively junior folks, including front-line folks? (And with a determined effort to keep the conversation restricted to "real world" "small" cases—not theory.)

49. Have you in the last six months talked about the *Internal Brand Promise*?

50. Have you in the last year had a full-day off site to talk about individual (and group) aspirations?