

Strategy

Exec



# THE FOLLY OF STRATEGIC PLANNING

By Heather Suttie, Legal market strategy and management consultant



Strategic planning is an oxymoron and as real as the tooth fairy.

Look at the roots of those two words: Strategy is a set of choices that position you to win your key objectives. Plan is a measurable action and/or behaviour set to happen within a specific timeframe.

Strategy is one thing while planning is another, yet these words have been paired together as if they're a logical fit. They're not.

Even though the phrase "strategic planning" is bandied about within almost all industries, mostly because it sounds sexy and signals that you might be doing something important, it means nothing and is pretty much guaranteed



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to have no tangible and lasting result.

Still, lawyers love to engage in “strategic planning” because it offers an opportunity to exercise a typical lawyer-like trait of admiring a problem followed by hatching a solution. Due to competing priorities and short attention spans, this exercise usually culminates in a half-hearted execution of whatever was thought to be a good idea at the time, then withers and dies. The result is that nothing much gets done, advances, or changes.

There is, however, strategy development.

## Strategy Development

Strategy development supports your primary objective, which is to win. Strategy develop-

ment has four components: Objectives, Strategy, Development, and Planning.

1. **Objectives** are defined and measurable goals that enable winning a chosen market, field, client, or role.
2. **Strategy** is a set of near-term, yet visionary choices that position you to win your objectives.
3. **Development** enables your strategy to accommodate improvements during the process.
4. **Planning** is a set of actions and behaviors that must happen within a specific time period to support your strategy and realize your objectives.

So, in a nutshell: Objectives are where you want to be. Strategy is how you will get there. Planning is what you will do to make it happen. Development bridges strategy and planning, and enables flexibility to meet your objectives within a set timeframe.

The reason why “strategic planning” is an oxymoron that is predisposed to failure is because it focuses on only two of the four factors that enable you to win.

The process of strategy development, however, is geared for growth and applicable to firms, practice groups, industry teams, and individuals.

Transformational growth and market distinctiveness is crystallized when objectives are supported by strategy along with executed tactics that are clear, measurable, and time-bound.

### **When a Plan is Just a Plan**

Oftentimes, rather than tackling the hard work of strategy development, the default is to focus on planning, which is simply a set of actions and behaviors that need to happen within a specific time period. This type of planning is used primarily for business development, budgeting, and the like because it is safe. Safety is manifested by containment within bounds of a traditional law firm’s framework and comfort zone.

Because this type of planning is safe, it is not usually distinctive or strategic, and almost never converts to achieving a defined and measurable objective that results in rapid and exponential growth.

In his 2013 book, *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works*, [Roger L. Martin](#), writer, strategy advisor, and Professor Emeritus at the Rotman School of Management at University of Toronto, hypothesized that [a plan is not a strategy](#).

He is right. His thinking on strategy is refreshing, not because it mirrors my own, but because he addresses what strategy is and isn’t head-on with clarity and forthrightness.

### **Objectives and Development**

Strategy is nothing without clear and ambitious objectives designed to achieve exponential business growth. (In my experience, the most audacious objectives result in the greatest likelihood of achievement because they require collaboration, focus, and urgency that when combined, results in maximum propulsion.) This is why setting ambitious or audacious objectives requires equal amounts of vision, ruthlessness, and diplomacy. And while this carries a hint of living dangerously, it’s entirely doable.

Development provides flexibility to accommodate improvements and enables course correction. Without flexibility, strategy becomes rigid in structure and non-collaborative in nature with both characteristics guaranteed to lead to failure. That said, development must be tempered with get-it-done timelines and determination, otherwise the risk to achieving objectives is wickedly high.

Within law firms in particular, over-development—often due to over-thinking and the curse of “too many cooks in the kitchen”—can result in analysis paralysis and death by a thousand committees.

A prevalent symptom is when law firms, practice groups, industry teams, and/or individual lawyers have trouble selecting objectives that will rapidly advance and grow business. I could have retired years ago if I had a dollar for every time a managing partner told me, “Our priorities are A, B, and C. Also, D, E, and F. And while I think of it: G, H, and I. And if we don’t include J, K, and L, all hell will break loose.”

Objectives are priorities. You cannot have a dozen priorities. In my experience with restructurings and turnarounds along with helping firms emerge from the pandemic with new agility, the golden number for the successful execution of key objectives is three.

### **The Power of Three**

You can have three objectives or priorities each year, tops. These three objectives must be clearly articulated and supported by no more than three strategies with qualifying and quantifying measurements. Each of these three strategies is supported by three measurable tactics executed within specific timeframes.

Business growth objectives set in this manner with strategies and tactics executed accordingly are the equivalent of being on trial for your life. Objectives are achieved when smart strategies supported by tactics executed within tight timelines convert to achieving goals. Dramatic as this sounds, setting objectives, determining strategies, and deciding on tactics boil down to nailing three factors: 1) making tough decisions and sticking to them; 2) socializing the plan; and, 3) executing with precision on schedule.

This does not mean that success on all three objectives will happen within a one-year period, although that can happen.

In my experience, the achievement of major corporate objectives, such as those required for restructuring, turnarounds, and propulsion-igniting business advances may take up to three years. Advancement will be noticeable within the first year, obvious after the second year, and achieved in the third year. Once objectives are attained, they must be sustained with continuous reinforcement that cements them and ongoing maintenance to avoid backsliding.

Regardless of the timeframe, be it one year or three, the key to achieving major business growth objectives is to remain resolute.

### **Eclipsing Limitations**

Pervasive sameness in the global legal market is due to a number of factors such as, traditional partnership structure, predisposition to valuing the practice of law over legal service business, and risk aversion. These factors result in remaining stuck within bounds of what should be rather than what can be. The difference is contextual: probability versus possibility.

This is when outside expert perspectives can enable mind-wide-open thinking and growth results that extend beyond capabilities, timeframes, politics and expectations.

Often, due to a desire of remaining employed, inside law firm talent ranging from partners to business professionals tends to stay within bounds of what will be acceptable by the firm’s

stakeholders and executive management. This is why lackluster objectives, strategies, and tactics are prevalent and sameness is pervasive.

There can also be rigidity around financing standards and budgetary buckets rather than considering that money can be creatively allocated every year. I once sprinkled a truckload of new money for new hires, equipment, and resources across a proposed corporate budget. At the same time, a colleague slapped a note on a proposed departmental budget that stated, “There’s a chainsaw in here. Find it.” There was, they didn’t, both of our budgets were approved, and the business flourishes to this day.

This is the type of independent consultative expertise and experience that enables expanding beyond the limitations of how most law firms think, set and execute on strategy development that spurs exponential growth. It also enables laser-like focus on the process from start to finish, which is especially effective within a law firm environment that is often populated by people tasked with multiple projects and competing priorities. Not beholden to any one law firm and with no desire to ever be an employee, an entrusted independent expert is geared to support a law firm and its teams in a “high tide lifts all boats” endeavor.

This level of independence combined with deep legal market expertise enables heightening objectives and expanding strategies, both of which enable a law firm, practice, team or individual to remove boundaries and limited thinking. The result is exponential and often explosive growth. Having done this successfully many times, I can tell you from experience that ambitious and audacious “shoot for the moon” strategy development ensures clearing the treetops every single time.

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### About the Author

Heather Suttie is an internationally recognized legal market strategy and management consultant to leaders of premier law firms and legal service providers worldwide.

For 25 years, she has accelerated performance within law firms and legal service businesses — Global to Solo | BigLaw to NewLaw — by providing consultative direction on legal business strategy, market strategy, management strategy, and client strategy. The result is a distinctive one-of-one legal market position and sustained competitive advantage culminating in greater market share, revenue and profits.

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