

Strategic Planning Perspectives from a Mountain Bike What Mountain Bike Racing and Business Strategy Have In Common

Last fall, I competed in a mountain bike race called the Barn Burner in Flagstaff, Arizona. It was a solo race that reached an elevation of 8,129 feet and covered about 25 miles of rugged, mountainous terrain. At the time of the race, I happened to be leading my organization through the development of our long-term strategy. The two hours I spent alone with my bike on the mountain gave me time to think about creating and executing a successful business strategy. I came to the realization that many of those principles were very similar to the principles I follow to successfully complete an uphill mountain biking race.

As I distracted myself from the crushing uphill climb during the race, some important connections surfaced during the twists, turns and bumps along the trail. The key similarities between business strategy and bike riding fall into three major categories.

1. Understand the Difference Between Strategy and Goals

My personal goal for the mountain bike race was to finish in less than two 2½ hours – and to come out of the race in one piece. To achieve this goal, I had to determine my guiding principles and strategy beforehand. The strategy I used to achieve my race objectives was threefold: 1) ride hard up the hills, 2) take the downhills faster than the average racer, and 3) keep my ego in check for highly technical areas that I might encounter. As I rode in the race I encountered many decision points along the way. Do I want to chase the person just in front of me? Should I go around this rock or over? Should I take the route to the right or the left of this ravine? Can I pick up my pace on this downhill while handling the technical aspects? It was my underlying strategy that served as the compass for the necessary choices I faced along the way.

Much like my mountain bike strategy, our business strategy will govern the many decisions that are made within the organization over the coming months. By answering *how* we will achieve our goals, we will accelerate our decision-making and align on a winning approach to achieve better results more quickly. Without a doubt, the magnitude of our goals will influence the strategies that we select. But it's important to understand that goals are not interchangeable with strategy. As a recent article in *Harvard Business Review* explained, "A real strategy involves a clear set of choices that define what the firm is going to do and what it's *not* going to do. Many strategies fail to get implemented, despite the ample efforts of hard-working people, because they do not represent a set of clear choices." (*Many Strategies Fail Because They're Not Actually Strategies*, by Freek Vermeulen, *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2017/11/many-strategies-fail-because-theyre-not-actually-strategies>).

Most companies are great at setting goals. Executives, board members and investors are really good at establishing targets for their organization. But while targets are useful helping to determine the direction a company should go, they do little to help leaders make decisions about how an organization will achieve those goals. That's where a good strategy comes into play. By outlining a strategy with guiding principles to help you make decisions, you are better able to reach your ultimate goals and targets. Establishing a distinct set of principles allows your team to make clear choices and exponentially increases the probability that your strategy will succeed.

2. Don't Be Distracted by Shiny Objects in View

100% of the time I have fallen off my bike, it was because I had taken my eyes off the trail ahead. Usually I was distracted by wildlife, or sometimes my thoughts, which took my focus away from the trail. And as any Arizona desert bike rider can attest, the penalty for taking your eyes off the trail is high, because every path is full of rocks, cactus, and potentially unfriendly desert critters. I have the chipped tooth, scars, and pics as proof! A few years ago, I asked my training coach what prevented most of her athletes from completing the Ironman or other endurance events. She said the number one reason was that they did not stick to their race strategy. Things like getting distracted by other athletes, going faster than their race plan, or not staying true to their nutrition plan while on the course were all factors that held those athletes back from finishing their event as planned.

In business, it is all too easy to get distracted from your strategic plan by the emergency of the day or the urgency of near-term opportunities and challenges, not to mention the constant diversion of incoming messages from our devices, email, and other workplace tools. If you give into the distractions, the next thing you know, you have easily gone a month or more without advancing your strategy.

As a leader, I know that it is necessary for strategic focus to start with me. What I love about mountain biking is that it requires your full attention. Unlike other training activities, it has a meditative nature and is great practice for clearing my mind and being fully present. I have also found great results in my work life from the practice of creating space for deep thought. One of my favorite articles on this subject, *7 Ways to Refocus on What's Truly Important* (by Chelsea Berler, *Entrepreneur*, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/270734>), outlines some great methods for focusing on priorities and eliminating distractions.

3. Keep Your Strategy Simple and Flexible

As an avid cyclist and racer, I have a lot of experience implementing a variety of different training and racing strategies for myself. I find that the best strategies are usually the simplest – and the most flexible. While I started with a quick, simple three-part strategy to successfully complete the race, over the course of the racing season I continually tweaked my strategy and frequently changed tactics to adapt to the responses of my body, mind, and a variety of external factors that arose in my life unexpectedly.

In business, I have worked for corporations that take more than a year to develop their strategic plans. I've also worked for companies that complete the task in a week. While there is no doubt that all long-term strategic planning requires critical thought, relevant data, analysis, and insights, I have generally found that the quality of the strategy does not improve by spending more time working on it. Typically, companies that spend a long time on their strategic planning process end up trying to create precision out of an imprecise activity (usually by producing a mind-numbing amount of PowerPoint slides).

Instead, I subscribe to General Patton's approach when developing a strategic plan: "A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week." Rolling out a

strategic plan quickly lets your organization gain insights and leverage the ever-important learning cycles about the strategy much sooner. It also lets you shift as needed to fuel your traction against the plan and get ahead of your competition. By adding strategy pulse sessions to your operating system, your organization can review the plan regularly and adjust accordingly. We meet monthly as a leadership team to review what's working, what's not working, and to make decisions on how we allocate our resources and time to accelerate our results.

As I made my way up the mountain on my bike, the key components of a good strategy became crystal clear. Stick to the guiding principles of your strategy, stay focused on those principles to help you make better decisions, be sure to keep the strategy simple, and adjust your strategy along the way to meet the ever-changing circumstances and demands of your business. As you make your way to the finish line, and ever closer to achieving your goals, you will truly appreciate the efforts of creating and using a strategy that helped you get there on time and in one piece.