Web Site As Metaphor for Overall Business Strategy

During a consulting engagement in the summer of 2002 I discovered the power of using the web site as a tool to keep business strategy discussions on track and make abstract concepts more concrete.

A colleague and I were facilitating a policy and strategy discussion attended by representatives from several divisions of a large insurance company. There was a history of frustration and animosity among some of the participants, and frankly, the meeting was not going well. One of the vice presidents was even threatening to leave, dubbing the meeting a waste of time.

To move the discussion forward, I suggested deviating from our agenda to try a simple exercise. The group would collectively determine what the links on the global navigation bar of the company home page should be. Very quickly the entire group became involved, suggesting links and collectively wrestling with what should be kept and what should be left off. The global navigation bar represented the entire company, and the number of links that could realistically be included forced them to organize and prioritize their possibilities.

Almost immediately the meeting moved to a productive discussion of the important strategic and operational issues as they struggled to meet the constraints imposed by this one element of the web site. Creating the priorities forced them to actively engage in a discussion of the strategy and policy issues that had stalled the meeting earlier, but in a different context. Everyone on the team knew how to visualize a web site, and the web site provided a good model of the overall business.

The purpose of this exercise was not to develop a global navigation bar that would be used on the web site. The global navigation bar simply became a tool to help the team think and communicate with more clarity than the traditional discussion techniques used in their previous business strategy sessions.

Since that time I have used team exercises that involved the design of different elements of the web site with a number of companies. Even though the focus of most of these sessions was to develop and document requirements for the company web site, the exercises always naturally turned into discussion of the key strategic business issues, with the context facilitating rational resolution and agreement.

Executives and senior managers are quick to delegate any discussion of web sites to specialists and implementers. In doing this, they are throwing away what is potentially the most powerful tool in their management arsenal for understanding and modeling their business strategy. Even more significantly, they are ignoring a process that can help their management teams work through the traditional politics and reach consensus on strategic alignment of the business. Web site alignment exercises provide a concrete and powerful

metaphor for the overall business that leaves the more abstract and conceptual approaches in the dust.

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Phone: +1 925-518-9425
Email: info@iorg.com
Web: www.iorg.com