

The importance of creating a strategic plan for your career

by Keith Washington, contributing writer

While hopes and dreams are key elements of business success, leaders of successful companies understand that more is required. Additionally, they recognize that the conditions within which the business operates are ever-changing. Each year, business leaders assemble key personnel to develop a roadmap to success for the business. This annual event is important because it attempts to account for the factors that can directly or indirectly impact the business. Those factors that may have been benign the year before can now be a major threat to success. Hence, it is necessary to identify these factors while taking measures to mitigate their impact. For these reasons, and others, it is critically important that a plan — a strategic plan — be established.

A strategic plan is a well-developed summary of actions necessary to achieve a specific goal. These time-sensitive actions are designed to advance the purpose and mission statement of an organization.

When it comes to one's profession, I often tell my clients that their professional career is THEIR business. Correspondingly, I encourage them to develop their professional or career strategic plan. Some of the most comprehensive strategic plans contain the following elements:

1. **A well-defined performance objective**
2. **A candid assessment of the professional's current position**
3. **The development of the strategy (the planning phase)**
4. **The assembly of the plan (the execution phase)**
5. **The management of one's performance against the plan**
6. **The awareness of when it is time to pivot or revise your plan.**

As you contemplate each of the elements above, I want to encourage you to consider them through the lens of your professional career plan. Below are some thoughts to consider when developing your plan.

What exactly are your goals and career objectives?

Perhaps you aspire to land that ideal job after college. You may be an entry-level professional who has been in your field of interest for a couple of years, and now you may be ready to transition to the mid-manager level of the organization. Perhaps you are a mid-level manager, who's now ready to take the leap into the senior management ranks, or even the C-suite echelon of leadership. Whatever your ambitions might be, it is of paramount importance that you clearly define those ambitions. Remember, if you do not have a specific destination in mind, any route will work! Be able to clearly articulate your short-term, mid-term, and long-term career objectives. This step of your planning begins with a vision...Your vision!

Where are you now in relation to where you want to be?

Recall a time you were asked by someone, by phone, for directions to a specific location. What was the first question you asked? It was likely, "Tell me, where exactly are you now?" The reason this information was needed is clearly obvious because you cannot lead anyone to any location without, first of all, knowing their starting location. It is from this point that concrete

directions to their desired destination can be adequately shared. The same applies to your professional strategic plan.

You must honestly and transparently determine where you are today in relation to where you want to be tomorrow. For instance, you may be good at Excel, but not so strong in formal presentations. If where you want to be in a role later this year requires the capability to speak before groups and make formal presentations, then you have to "grow where you are planted". In other words, make the commitment to find creative ways to develop this skill where you are today. In addition to the self-assessment of your skills, it is also beneficial to get objective feedback from a friend, a colleague, or even a former manager, whose opinions you value and trust. This may just be the feedback you need to begin making your professional vision a reality.

What is the optimal strategic approach to achieving your goals?

With your professional vision and self-assessment clearly defined, decide what approach should be taken to accomplish your career objectives. For instance, is the

What series of steps or action plans will move your career forward on your decided strategic career path?

The best word to describe this phase of your career strategic plan development is EXECUTION. This is where we take our vision from paper to reality. This is where you make the transition from planning to action. This is where you decide, with great specificity, the time-sensitive actions to be taken that will drive your plan towards reality. Planning without execution does nothing for your ambitions.

FINISH



You must then hold yourself accountable to those actions. To illustrate an example, you should list that "by April 1st, a meeting will be held with the manager and HR business partner to

discuss your interests in advancing your professional ambitions". Another example of this phase in practice could include "by April 15th, enroll in a public speaking class with a mission of learning at least two new skills related to persuasive communication". In each case, the aforementioned actions are specific and measurable.

How are you performing against your plan?

Throughout my career, I have always embraced the management maxim, "what gets measured is what gets done". This principle of metrics also applies to your career strategic plan. It is for this reason that the action elements of your plan be measurable.

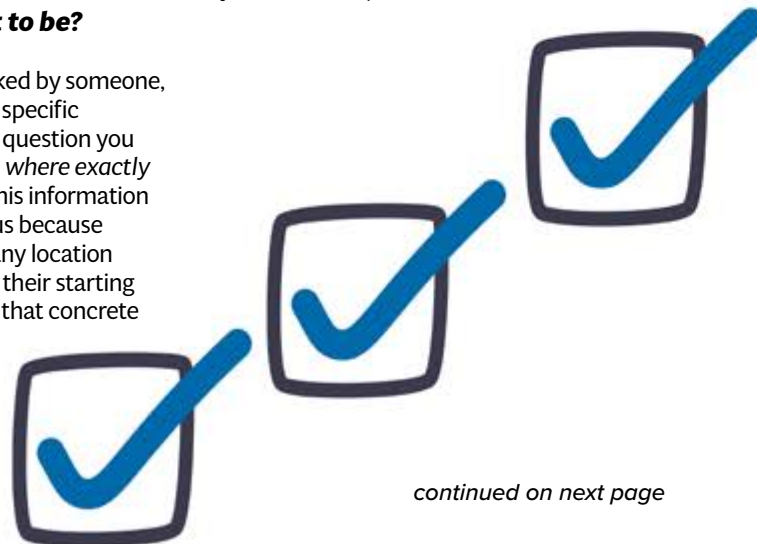
In the previously shared examples, it will be very easy to assess your performance

against your plan: Did you schedule the meeting with your manager and HR business partner BEFORE April 1st? By April 2nd can you say, YES, I had the meeting as planned? Similarly, did you, in fact, enroll in the public speaking class BEFORE April 15th? If neither has occurred, it should be due to extenuating circumstances beyond your control rather than a lack of initiative and tenacity!

Are you prepared to make changes to your plan?

If you find that your career is not moving along as quickly as you think it should, before you abandon your career ambitions, you should consider revising your strategic plan. The area for improvement and refinement may not be in your vision; it may be in your planning. You may also need to seek the opinions of others who are more willing to tell you what you NEED to hear rather than what you WANT to hear. This could make the difference between stalling and accelerating your career.

Best wishes to you as you ENVISION, DEVELOP, AND EXECUTE your career strategic plan! **TE**



continued on next page

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Keith Washington is the Founder and CEO of Next Level Coaching, LLC dba Next Level Professional Development, LLC which is a business, career, and leadership coaching firm. Leveraging over 30 years of diverse corporate experiences, he provides career coaching, leadership development, and business consulting services to businesses, non-profits, sports teams, and colleges. Throughout his multi-industry career, and most recently as a supply chain executive, he has coached countless professionals and corporations - domestically and internationally. If you would like more information about this article or business assistance, please contact Keith Washington at nlcareercoach@gmail.com or visit www.nlcareercoach.com. PHOTO BY RED ANGLE PHOTOGRAPHY