

DO YOU NEED A STRATEGIC RETREAT?

By Neville Lake

Five simple tests to show if your organisation is crying out for a strategic retreat

Is your organisation travelling towards its best possible future? Do your senior people share the same vision? Do your key managers make the day-to-day choices that will deliver your organisation's full potential?

If you answered those questions with an unreserved and enthusiastic 'yes' then maybe you can skip this year's retreat.

However, if you know that your organisation can achieve more, be more focussed and become a better version of itself - then it could be time.

There is no other event like a strategic retreat. It is the only opportunity for senior people to gather together in their weekend clothes and think about the medium and long term future of their organisation. Take these five straightforward tests to see if your organisation is crying out for a strategic retreat.

Test one – The 'best future' test

Have you ever tried to hit a target when you are wearing a blindfold? It is, of course, more a matter of luck than skill. You probably don't do this too often because it is plain annoying.

Now, have you ever tried to point your organisation to a medium/ long term end position without knowing what it looks like? That is a far more common

experience, and it is just as wasteful and frustrating.

Be in no doubt that your organisation is travelling towards its future. Every day hundreds of decisions and thousands of actions take it another step closer. But, are you on the pathway to your best possible future?

To achieve your best possible future you have to have a good picture of what your organisation could become. Just like planning a journey, you need to know the destination before you can plot a course. Without this definition, you are just meandering around, hoping for the best – which is obviously not a winning formula.

So, how well defined is your best possible future? Score your organisation out of five using the following four criteria (5 is the maximum):

	Score (1 – 5)
Clear view of the customers we should have in 5 years' time	
Clear view of the types of products/ services we should provide in 5 years' time	
Clear view of the processes, systems, locations and logistics we will need in five years' time	
Clear view of the financial position we should achieve in five years' time	
Total:	

Test two – The 'line of sight' test

The organisations that achieve success know where they are going. They have a tightly defined destination, and a clear line of sight between everything they do now and everything they want to become in the future.

Consider your organisation. Does every senior manager with key decision making authority have a clear

line of sight between what they are doing today and where your organisation is going in the medium to longer term?

Give your organisation a score out of five for the line of sight experienced by your senior team and key managers:

	Score (1 – 5)
Line of sight for senior team	
Line of sight for key managers	

Test three – The ‘one mind’ test

Your group of senior managers were probably chosen because they have a point of view, because they can make decisions, and they know how to do what it takes to get results. They are probably all different people who bring their own unique talents.

This kind of mix and diversity is healthy – most of the time. However, when it comes to your future direction all the divergent opinions need to converge on a common set of objectives, and a common emphasis.

If they are of one mind then they will be like a team of horses all pulling together. If not, they will be using their effort against each other, and your organisation will become slower and weaker in ways that are hidden and subtle.

Consider your senior management group. To what extent are they of one mind? To what extent are they all equally passionate about an agreed future? Once again, create a score out of 5 for being of one mind, and another for the level of passion, and add them together:

	Score (1 – 5)
Same picture of the future	
Same level of passion	
Total:	

Test four – The ‘current performance’ test

Examining current performance may not seem like a strategic activity, but if you do not know where you are, then it is very difficult to set a course for where you want to be (no matter how well you have defined your end point).

A pre-retreat (or even during the retreat) strategic examination includes assessing where your organisation is now. The tools used by strategists include several remarkably penetrating and amazingly useful frameworks to consider what delivers value to your organisation today.

If your current performance is lacklustre, and you suspect that it is below what you know is possible then you are in for a treat when you produce the insights that lead to the opportunity to introduce some instant changes that will put you on the path to a brighter future.

Give your organisation a score out of five for two criteria:

	Score (1 – 5)
Extent to which your organisation is optimised	
Extent to which the drivers of this sub-optimisation are known	

Test five - the ‘saying no’ test

If you are having trouble accurately assessing your organisation using the previous four tests, then this one is a form of ‘ready reckoner’ to give you an idea about the strategic health of your organisation.

This test is summed up in the question “When did you last say ‘no’ to an opportunity that you knew right from the start was outside your organisation’s capability to deliver?”

You see, organisations with a clear picture of what truly produces value for themselves and their customers focus their energies on delivering the right kinds of benefits for the right kinds of customers. They make sure that all their resources are concentrated on high pay-off activities by deliberately steering themselves away from ‘opportunities’ that destroy their capacity.

Organisations without this strategic clarity end up with all kinds of projects and activities that soak up valuable resources, create frustration and extra costs, make too little money and probably do not produce high customer satisfaction. If this kind of situation sounds painfully familiar, then it is an alarm bell that is ringing in your organisation.

As before, assess your organisation using the following table:

	Score (1 – 5)
Extent to which your organisation says no to opportunities that are truly off-strategy	
Extent to which managers have the right information to make that decision	

Combining the test scores

Now put your scores together:

	Score
Best future test	
Line of sight test	
One mind test	
Current performance test	
Saying no test	
Total:	

Out of a possible total of 60 how well did your organisation score? If you achieved 55+ then you are to be congratulated. If you scored 45-55 then you should seriously consider a strategic retreat in the next six months.

If you scored less than 45 then you are overdue.

Achieving your best possible future will not happen by accident. Success is deliberate. You urgently need to go away with your senior team and get your organisation on track.



Neville Lake is the author of six books including “The Strategic Planning Workbook,” which is an international bestseller and part of The Sunday Times series of management books.

He has developed an intensely practical approach to strategy and strategic planning and his methodology has been used by thousands of businesses around the world.

Neville has visited over 100 world best practice organisations, advised over 150 businesses and has been applauded by over 500,000 people around the world.

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