

# Skating to Where the Puck is Going to Be

A WHITEBOARD SESSION ON STRATEGIC

THINKING WITH A LITTLE HOCKEY

THROWN IN...

BY RON COX AND CHRIS COX



**W**hen asked about the secret to his success, Wayne Gretzky, one of the greatest hockey players of all time, said, "I skate to where the puck is going to be, not to where it has been." According to Gretzky, this level of awareness and anticipation is a key differentiator between a good hockey player and a great hockey player. As we'll discuss in this article, the same holds true for business.

At Tailwind, we often use this metaphor when discussing business strategy with executives because it provides a simple framework that illustrates a number of key points about what it takes to really make strategy happen.

Think about the quote for a minute and imagine that where the puck is going to be is really the goal state for your business several years out. Goal state is an aspirational term that includes, for example, the markets you hope to be reaching, the size you hope to be, the culture you hope to build, and the capabilities you hope to have...the sum of positive descriptors of the future state of your organization. Think of your organization's people as the players in the middle of the

game. How well has your company defined where the puck is going to be and how effectively are all of your teammates skating to that spot?

Your business strategy should clearly define where the puck is going to be for your company several years out. After all, this is the key to having a good strategy. We've drawn this with a simple model.



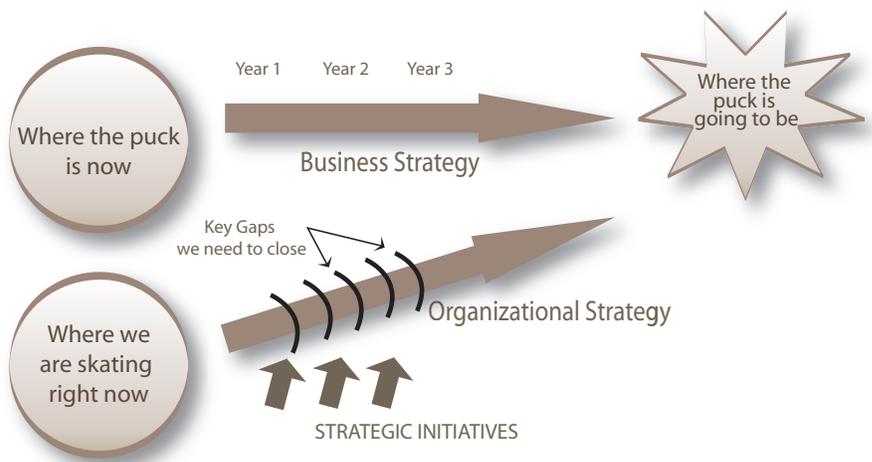
Notice we've also added the element of time, which is a key factor in business strategy. Once you've identified where the puck is going to be several years out, the next step is to figure out what your company has to do in order to skate there. This brings in another dimension of strategy that gets into your skaters, and how and where they need to skate—this is your Organizational Strategy.

Your whole business strategy is the two taken together—where the business needs to go and what the organization needs to do in order to make it happen. If we wrote it as a formula, it might look something like this:

$$\frac{\text{Business Strategy} + \text{Organizational Strategy}}{\text{Time}} = \text{Whole Business Strategy}$$

Note in the model that we've also drawn in the key gaps that need to be closed within the organization like the development of key talent, skill and competency building programs, as well as the realignment of critical resources, new systems or capabilities, etc. This, in effect, is what's involved in the organization actually skating to where the puck is going to be. Systematically closing the gaps and making it happen within a specified time-frame is what the skating is all about.

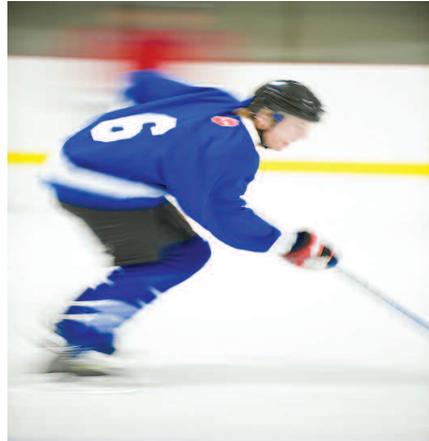
Obviously, the more clearly we can define where the puck is going to be, the better off we are. Any ambiguity at all causes problems for the organization because people are trying to skate to a



precise spot. They are also involved in identifying those gaps and working on solutions that help them change things so they can make the strategy happen. This includes launching major initiatives to help drive the necessary changes.

Initiatives are critical to helping us skate to where the puck is going to be. A typical problem is that organizations often don't do a good job of separating their vital few from the trivial many. Said differently, they often have too many initiatives, and many or most of them are not critical to making their strategy happen.

Too many unfocused initiatives can be a huge waste of scarce resources. Unfocused initiatives take up your people's time and mindshare, not to mention your company's cash. These can crowd out other, more relevant initiatives that could accelerate your organization's ability to deliver on your strategy. Since initiatives can come from many different parts of the business—Operations, Accounting, Human Resources, IT, Marketing, Safety, etc.—it's important to make sure that someone is taking the strategic view and auditing initiatives from a whole business perspective.



Building on this perspective, it's vital that key executives and managers throughout the company have a clear vision of where the puck is going to be. Otherwise, they can't lead their teams in skating there. They need the end frame on your whole business strategy. They also need to personally be able to complete a

mini-version of the model above for themselves and their units. They need to be able to narrow down their priorities to their own vital few that reflect their portion of making the strategy happen. They need to assess the key gaps in their department, division or unit and determine what their team needs if they're

going to be able skate to where the puck is going to be. And they need to own and manage the plan to make that skate happen.

We hope that this metaphor and model framework will stimulate your thinking and serve as a platform for strategic discussion and analysis. For many organizations, better execution of their strategic intent is vital to both short term success and long term sustainability. Getting everyone on the same page and executing the strategy can transform short term performance and help your company create a different, more successful future.