

Mission, Strategy, and Tactics

6-8 minutes

Originally posted internally at Facebook on December 27, 2013

As organizations grow they run the risk of becoming hopelessly disjointed. Teams end up working on projects that overlap or conflict, individuals struggle to see how their work fits into the bigger picture, people fail to see meaning in what they do and overall progress grinds to a crawl. Our ability to fight this entropy determines our ultimate capacity, both in terms of bandwidth (how many things we can work on) and velocity (speed at which work gets done). Thankfully, we have many communication tools at our disposal to help us remain connected while we grow.

MISSION

A long entanglement with corporate jargon has given mission statements a bad name but a dense statement of the goal you are working to achieve over the long run can be immensely valuable if you choose your words wisely.

- A mission statement should be short. It isn't answering **how** or **why** but just saying plainly **what** you are trying to accomplish. (In fact the why is never really addressed as it should be implicit.
- A mission statement should take a stance. It should not be an unobjectionable, empty slogan. It should assert a point of view strongly enough that it is a useful tool in planning and prioritizing work.
- A mission statement should inspire people. You should be able to use it to recruit.
- A mission statement should probably start with a verb.
- A mission statement should describe something aspirational, hard, and probably not even obviously possible
- A mission statement should stand the test of time. Mission statements change very rarely and may never actually be achieved or even achievable.

Consider the mission of Facebook itself: "To give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" These aren't obviously good things. Does everyone want the world to be more open and connected? Taking a stance on those is no small part of what has enabled us to have tremendous focus even as we have grown, avoiding much of the random project investment that has bogged down so many of our competitors at different times.

STRATEGY

A strategy prescribes a path to achieve the mission, answering the question **how** in the most minimal way possible. Effectively we are mapping out a path from where we are today to where we are trying to go in very broad strokes with diminishing granularity we look further into the future. The standard for something to be strategic is quite high; it means in order to succeed at our mission we must do it and we cannot succeed at our mission without doing it.

Strategy rarely describes a straight line path to the goal. We may have to take detours that appear to be orthogonal to our goal but are, in fact, the only way to ever arrive there. The ads organization is a great example; Facebook's mission says nothing of revenue but we accept it would be impossible to accomplish it without any. Revenue is a strategic imperative.

Strategy is generally created assuming good (but not perfect) execution. As a consequence it is common to see a step in the strategy whose sole purpose is to ensure execution. For example, if your mission is to build a platform then it is common to include building an app on top of that platform as part of the strategy because it just isn't believable that someone would build the right platform without this work.

Strategic risks are things that could cause you to fail you to achieve your mission despite perfect execution. External forces rarely invalidate the mission but they could have a dramatic impact on strategy in a very short period of time, for example a new competitor entering the marketplace, changes in geopolitics, shifting market conditions, or even changing priorities within the company. Thus, the strategy to achieve a mission changes over time.

Even without external forces, strategy may change as execution gets under way — if you aren't executing well enough in an area you may re-evaluate the strategic assumptions you have made about what is possible.

TACTICS

Tactical concerns are those which aren't likely to prevent us from achieving the mission or enable it, but relate instead to how quickly we are able to do so. If an ads team builds the wrong ad unit and nobody adopts it, that doesn't necessarily mean they can't later get those revenues, it just means it will take longer as they build something different. Developing a tactical approach involves setting roadmaps and creating tasks in order to realize the strategy. Teams establish goals and milestones along a timeline to track progress and measure how well they are executing relative to expectations.

Tactical decisions aren't unimportant but there are many orders of magnitude more of them which is why it is critical that everyone involve agree on the strategy.

When the goals set are not being achieved, or are not being achieved in a timely manner, teams may have to revisit the strategy and develop new tactics. Execution risk exists in areas where if failing to execute has consequences to how soon teams can achieve our mission, but not necessarily jeopardize their ability to eventually achieve our mission.

VISION

The word vision is thrown around often can be easily confused with mission statements and strategy. I have come to see vision as any description of a desired future state. For Facebook, if I were to describe what the world would be like when we achieve our mission that is an example of vision. If I describe the state of the user experience after a given set of strategic work is done that is an example of vision. Well articulated and widely shared mission and strategy should create vision that is broadly shared.

When someone asks you a question of the form “what will it look like when...” or “how will it feel if...” or “how do you see this playing out after...” they are asking you about your vision. When you say “imagine a world where...” or “I think the way the market will react is...” or “I think it should feel like...” you are describing a vision.

DEFINITIONS

Interestingly, this post is an example of something even more paramount than having a mission: providing a common language for the team to use that everyone understands. Ensuring people use terms consistently isn't just pedantry, it is potentially critical to scaling execution.