How did that work out? strategic planning versus strategic purpose and priorities

Show me an organization that invested time and money back in 2019 to create a 3-5 year strategic plan that factored in a global pandemic followed by the George Floyd tragedy, and I will tell you to hire that consulting firm immediately!

The reality is that work (and external environment) flows like a river. A strategic plan that attempts to map every rock, bend and eddy can be rendered obsolete by a single flood event. Rigid plans carved in stone do not allow any room to adapt to and take advantage of challenges and opportunities as they unfold.

Does that mean we throw caution to the wind and make it up as we go? A river without some kind of guidance, natural and constructed, can cause destruction beyond its banks. What organizations need to strategically guide their workflow and be effective is a strongly held set of shared values and purpose. These in turn inform the drafting of strategic priorities designed to achieve mission objectives. Under this design, plans evolve in response to internal and external shifts, all funneled through a strategy filter.

So how do strategic priorities take the place of strategic planning in directing and evaluating day to day operations? A trained and supported staff will use your organization's values and guidelines to solve simple to moderately complex issues in real time. For significant matters of concern, successful organizations utilize a star model* to break down a proposed change or problem using five key components of mission, structure, process, people, and rewards (ROI).

There is a third S that leads to success. In addition to strategic priorities and a star model guiding decision making, succession planning is critical to maintain momentum and build resiliency. Strategic plans that call out specific people crumble when that person leaves for whatever reason- good, bad, or indifferent. Quantifying and defining roles, cross-training, and mapping the transition process (onboarding and offboarding) are essential to sustaining priorities and the good work that supports them.

Our sometimes chaotic and complex world creates the need for a safe space organizations can retreat to when times are tough. Strategic priorities aligned through the star model combined with solid succession planning are far more effective than a static strategic plan when you want to change our world.

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* Modified: Jay R. Gallbraith, *Designing Organizations: An Executive Briefing on Strategy, Structure, and Process* (San Francisco: Jossey Blass, 1995).