

Strategizing for Life

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Ravi Kumar Ahuja is the Head-Strategy of a large corporate house. He has been working in the field of strategy for last 15 years and has rolled out vision, mission and action plan for half a dozen companies. Besides, he keeps working on the detailed goals of each department and tracks their progress. He has been awarded as excellent performer many times in his role as strategist. He keeps emphasizing the importance of vision, mission and strategy to his own department as well as to his counterparts in other divisions. He strongly believes that without a well deliberated, clear and concrete strategy document, a company cannot move in the right direction. He ascribes success of his organization to the vision of promoters, detailed strategy by top management and goal setting & periodic review by head of departments.

Ask him what is his vision and mission in life; what is the direction he wants to take; what are his values; what are his long term and short term goals; what is his strategy to move forward; how frequently he reviews his goals and progress? He looks a little bewildered. He has to take a minute and then gives an answer, which leaves us wondering if he had ever thought about it, as sincerely as he worked on the company's strategy.

Is it the story of one Ravi Kumar Ahuja? If we look within and around, we find that this is true for most of us. As management professionals, we always highlight the vision and mission statement, whether it is the company's website or a presentation about company. However, when it comes to our own lives, these concepts find no role, or the least consideration.

The results are not unobvious, if we take a clear and unbiased look at the life of people around (including ourselves). How many people do we come across, who are truly excited about their work and look forward to going to their workplace? On the other hand, what is the proportion of people who drag themselves to the office everyday, glaring at the weekend - which takes too long to come and disappears too fast?

Have we ever wondered, why do companies find it so hard to get real performers, despite spending heavily on recruitments? On the other hand, so many graduates and post graduates keep struggling to get a decent job or a career rise?

The answer to these and many other questions lies in the grim fact that most of the people choose their education and profession based on flawed reasonings, rather than choosing the path, where their heart, passion and real strengths lie. Our education system as well as

social system gives least importance to understanding self, finding out the areas of passion, understanding our values and exploring areas of strengths and weaknesses. As a result, when a person is required to make choices about his life, he is not equipped with the proper logic and he takes decisions based on the way he is programmed by parents, teachers, friends and society.

School students are pressurized by parents to choose medical, engineering, Chartered Accountancy, etc, because these professions have got good 'scope'. Graduates want to pursue MBA, not to become excellent business managers, but under the lure of glamour and packages portrayed in the media.

Even if you speak to MBA students, you will find the similar trend. Most of the students select their specialization or profession based on the education and experience they have already received (as deviating from it would be dent on their resume). Next parameters are 'scope' and possible package. Some students choose finance specialization because they do not want to travel, and so avoid marketing (They should take a glimpse on the travel schedule of an investment banker). Students with marketing as specialization say, as they are not good at numbers, so finance is ruled out. Choice is not about what they love, but what is left after shunting away the so called uncomfortable areas.

All these decisions are taken with very superficial understanding of subject, profession and the life ahead. Only on entering the industry, they realize what lies in those 9-10 hours (if not more) of daily routine. It is not surprising to find people feeling disillusioned with the life they chose with lot of fanfare, excitement and struggle. By that time, they have reached a juncture, where it becomes difficult to take any different road. Then starts the struggle to keep yourself motivated on daily basis. HR department keeps inventing new ideas to motivate people, but is mostly disappointed with the outcomes.

Though most of the people remain stuck in the monthly paycheck and status trap, few people are fortunate enough to realize their real passion at some point later and they dare to take the path of their calling.

What is common among Shankar Mahadevan, Nagesh Kukunoor and Chetan Bhagat, besides the bollywood connection? All three of them are engineers, who left their lucrative careers to pursue their dream. Shankar Mahadevan was working as software engineer on Oracle Version six, before he began his full time career as singer and composer. Nagesh Kukunoor was a chemical engineer working in Georgia as environment consultant. He has directed movies like Iqbal and Dor. Chetan Bhagat, a chemical engineer and masters in management from IIM Ahmadabad, is now a well known author.

If we dig little more, a number of such personalities will emerge, who have given up their career to follow their heart. Some of them are publicly known figures, some are not so well known. We read about investment bankers leaving the jobs to grow vegetables in countryside. An IIM graduate starts food business and then contests elections to make difference to the underprivileged.

If we compare the level of success and satisfaction of these individuals with the traditional employees, there will be stark difference. It is even more striking to note that their success was despite losing initial years in a different arena. They had to make extra efforts to bring themselves back on the track. BomanIrani entered the film industry when he was forty four, but has created a niche from himself. This is testimony to the power of passion. Can we imagine, where these people would have been if they had the opportunity to start on the right platform from the very beginning (Think about Sachin Tendulkar and Lata Mangeshkar).

The earlier we get clarity about the vision, mission and strategy of our lives, the better it is. We cannot live on the chance that this insight will somehow dawn on us someday, and that we will have courage and opportunity to take major deviations from a constant life. Every person, irrespective of his profession and position, must draw his / her life strategy and document it with utmost sincerity.

There are a few standard excuses for not making life strategy. Few people explain that their mantra is to live the moment and they do not worry about future. It should be understood that strategizing does not imply worrying. On the contrary, knowing our destination helps us to enjoy each moment of the journey. Another excuse - "Future is not in my control, things will keep changing and new challenges will keep coming. So I cannot plan for future". It should be noted that if have plans, we would know where to make corrections, when situations change. Without plans, we will be swayed away by the currents of life, with no control from our end.

Before strategizing and making life plans, a few misconceptions should be cleared. First is about the static and dynamic nature of goals. Most of our goals are static, e.g. becoming a CEO or earning certain amount of money or building a business worth billion dollars. These are static goals because achievement and success is for a moment, an hour or a day, it is not continuous. Somebody becomes CEO after years of struggle. He can celebrate for a day or a week, but the struggle to next step begins immediately. Thus the life becomes majorly a struggling episode, with few spurts of happiness.

The real success lies in enjoying each and every moment, and this is possible only with dynamic goals. Take example of a person who takes up a job to reach package of certain amount. He will work hard and may get some results. However, he would mostly be under pressure and job will be a struggle. If the stress is high, he may not perform well. Another person works for own learning & development and to contribute his best to the company. He would enjoy each moment of his working hours, irrespective of the situations and will have better chance to get high appraisal.

It should be noted that static goals are also very important. They are the milestones, which provide measurement to our success. However, it should be remembered that milestones cannot become destinations and journey should not get ignored in anticipation of reaching a milestone.

Second misconception is that strategizing life is all about career planning. Planning our

professional life is very important (as it occupies more than half of our active hours), however, it is not the end. A holistic plan for life must include the vision for all aspects including, health (physical, mental and emotional), relationships, self development and spirituality.

Next misconception is about the duration of life plan. Most of the people can plan for a short duration, but are not comfortable with plan for whole life. This results into piecemeal planning and the final outcome may not be the desired larger picture. In the words of Stephen Covey¹, "Always begin with the end in mind". While strategizing for life, we must take the longest duration possible, so that all our short term goals are aligned with the final goals.

Fourth misconception is about the flexibility and firmness of goals. Many people want to make one time goals, which are freezed for whole life. As they find it very difficult to do that, they lose motivation to set any goals. Goals should not be made as rigid aims, but need to be flexible to accommodate new developments. At the same time, goals must be firm enough so as not to get affected by a few failures, disappointments or undesirable developments.

The final point to be noted is that a goal or plan remains only a wish, till it is written. As a Company devotes focus, time and efforts towards finalizing its vision, mission and strategy, every person must clearly document the vision, mission and strategy for his life. This is the most important step on the path of success and happiness.

Reference

(Endnotes)

1. Covey, S. 1989. Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. Free Press