

Working *On* Your Business

By Stan Pohmer

You spend an awful lot of time working *in* your business doing all the things necessary to keep the business humming along from day to day.

These are things like working with suppliers on assortments, paying bills, managing your inventories, interviewing and hiring new employees, training, building and motivating your team, setting up displays and signage, and taking care of customers. Every one of these tasks and activities is absolutely essential and



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critical to your survival in the uber-competitive marketplace in which we operate today.

Putting out unexpected fires that continually crop up and keeping your business moving forward on a daily basis saps most of your time and energy ... two of the most valuable resources you can invest in your business (right up there with your other resources such as money, effort and people).

But working *in* your business only keeps you operating, not making the changes that help you grow your business. What you do every day is tactical thinking; what moves you forward requires strategic thinking. And strategic thinking is not something many of us engage in as frequently as we should. Most of us recognize we need to spend more time working *on* our business, thinking about it more strategically and longer-term, but all of the pressing daily activities and interruptions force us to work *in* our business preventing us from devoting the time for strategic thinking and planning.

Getting Your Workout On

Sometimes we need to be forced to carve out the time to work *on* our businesses. A great example of this is the winter Owners and Managers meeting hosted by the Colorado Nursery and Greenhouse Association, a two-day retreat where their leader members can get away to talk about their common challenges and external factors that will impact their businesses during the following year, and, more

importantly, allows them to do some strategic thinking and planning, and work *on* their individual businesses so they can continue to change and grow.

In 2012, my esteemed friend and colleague Charlie Hall from Texas A&M University led this group through a strategic planning process, setting the stage for each of the leaders to start developing their individual plans for their own companies. I had the pleasure of building on the foundation Hall helped these leaders develop at their November 2013 CNGA leadership retreat held in Vail, Colo.

By having the meeting in a location far removed from their businesses definitely helped to create the needed distance from their daily activities to allow them to work *on* their businesses more strategically. I led the group through a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) assessment process that each company performed on their own businesses. After this exercise, each attendee used the results of the SWOT assessment to identify three initiatives that could help improve or enhance their existing business model and one BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal), a major initiative that could fundamentally change the way they do business or come to market. And

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they all fleshed out detailed action plans that listed the sequential tactical steps needed to accomplish these strategic initiatives, established milestone dates, and identified who on their teams would be responsible for each task in the process, and identifying measurements that would benchmark success.

It takes considerable time and energy to switch from the tactical thinking we're all so used to, to strategic thinking, and I was amazed at how much this group accomplished in such a short time period. While most still needed more time "back at the ranch" to finish their action plans, they all left with a good road map and a renewed focus on strategic thinking, and I personally believe most of them will carve out the time from working *in* their businesses to start working *on*

their businesses.

Props to CNGA staff and leadership for recognizing the benefits of strategic thinking and creating the opportunity for their members to practice it.

Innovative, Applicable Practices

Those of you who have followed my columns over the many years I've contributed to *Lawn & Garden Retailer* (and for tagging along with me on this journey, I thank you!) know that I am a student of management and business philosophies and processes. There are, and have been, some great thinkers who have postulated some unique and innovative production and management practices that have revolutionized businesses and even industries. Among them are TQM (Total Quality Management), Six Sigma, CRM (Customer Relationship Management) and LEAN



production and manufacturing. And while many of these have had their roots in application to very large, multi-faceted companies, by studying and understanding the philosophies that are behind these thought processes, we can find ways to apply them to the specifics of companies within our industry.

I'm also a huge fan and a student of the leadership and management philosophies, and both the strategic and tactical approaches and training, that our military branches provide to their officers.

Key to this is teaching them not strict, rigid policies, but rather principles so they can quickly and efficiently react to constantly changing environments, field conditions and tactics of their opponents. Essential to this is the teaching of strategic thinking, an

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understanding of the mission and objectives, being able to assess the capabilities of your opponent, identifying potential barriers to accomplishing the mission and knowing the internal resources you have to utilize. Only after the strategic thinking is completed do they start

developing the tactics required to achieve the goal, all the while training not only for what they think is going to be needed, but also for potential eventualities based on the need to be flexible and responsive to the changing environment.

Any of this sound familiar? It's essentially the same critical thinking process businesses like yours can employ by creating a strategic plan and conducting a SWOT assessment.

Remaining Constant

Though management philosophies may evolve and morph, the principles they are based on remain constant, many of them based on the ancient teachings of the brilliant Chinese general, strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu. Living in the 500 B.C. era, he authored a book entitled *Art of War* that is still actively studied today by military leadership, sports coaches and business tycoons for the strategic principles that have stood the test of time and can be applied by today's leaders. Many authors have written interpretations of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, which is essentially a series of quotations. Some of my favorite quotes from Sun Tzu are:

- *Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.*
- *Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.*
- *Opportunities multiply as they are seized.*
- *The general who wins the battle makes many calculations in his temple (mind) before the battle is fought. The general who loses makes few calculations beforehand.*
- *An army may be likened to water, for just as flowing water avoids heights and hastens to the lowlands, so an army avoids strengths and strikes weakness.*
- *Speed is the essence of war. Take advantage of the enemy's unpreparedness; travel by unexpected routes and strike him where he has taken no precautions.*
- *When one treats people with benevolence, justice and righteousness and reposes confidence in them, the army will be united in mind and will be happy to serve their leaders.*

Some pretty timeless principles that should be considered the next time you carve out the time to work ON your business... **LGR**

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