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360° strategy in the 21st century

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4 Secrets of Success

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1. Involve staff through the whole process

When I joined Sightsavers people were used to strategic frameworks that simply arrived on their desks every few years. Not surprisingly, internal ownership of these frameworks was largely limited to the senior management team. I knew from my stakeholder discussions there was broad support for change. Sightsavers needed to move from focusing solely on healthcare solutions for blind and sight impaired people in developing countries, to addressing wider disability issues.

But to do that, I felt it was essential to move away from top down planning to an approach that would involve and engage everyone – from project workers on the ground, to administrators, to drivers in the field. So we began our strategic review with a global consultation process led by a project team from across the whole organisation. This consultation involved not just staff but partners, donors, beneficiaries and even governments.

The outcome suggested this would be such a big and ambitious project it became clear we'd need external help as well as dedicated staff and senior management time. We asked The Management Centre (=mc) to help our cross organisation project team develop the initial overall strategy map using a customised version of the Balanced Scorecard. Once we had this 'global' map, we then ran a workshop in every country to enable them to build the strategy map for that country.

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This regional approach was expensive and carried risks. However, the payoff was very high degrees of engagement – and feedback that said it didn't feel like the old 'top-down' approach. Each workshop included an alignment exercise to make sure that the regional and global maps dovetailed. Importantly we piloted the workshops in countries where staff were most sceptical on the grounds that if we could convince them to take part it could work anywhere. People who had previously said, "Balanced Scorecard? Yuck. That's just for corporates," became our strongest advocates.

2. Make your strategy easy to communicate

Our sceptics did have a point, though: the Balanced Scorecard did sound corporate, not something INGO people would be particularly interested in helping to create. We needed to come up with a way of describing the process that would grab – and more importantly hold – their attention. Which is when one of our colleagues came up with the idea of the Sightsavers' 'SIM' (Strategy Implementation and Monitoring) card. Everyone knows the SIM card as the 'brain' that drives their mobile phone. Sightsavers' SIM card would be the 'brain' that drove our strategy. We no longer talked about the Balanced Scorecard, just Sightsavers' SIM card.

We also used the KISS principle (Keep It Simple Stupid) to develop our organisational strategy map. I've seen other organisations create maps that are intellectually fabulous and capture everything, but are so complicated that they're not actually usable – and no-one really understands what they mean.

I, on the other hand, can draw our strategy map on a napkin in a restaurant – and have done on a couple of occasions. It's very simple way to communicate exactly where Sightsavers is going. Most important, the proof of the pudding is that other staff can also draw it – and explain it.

Sightsavers' SIM card: simple, but not easy!

One last point. The map is simple, but it's not easy. It makes crystal clear the demands of our new strategy, but asks difficult questions. That keeps us on our toes.

3. Have strong leadership

One of the challenges I find in Sightsavers – and one that is very common in the INGO world – is that people never seem to know when to stop analysis. Issues are so complex, 'working groups' or whatever can go on for what seems like years honing a document to get the content and language exactly right. It's the leader's job to say "No, we've discussed this enough, this is the decision, this is what we're doing," – and in extremis, "If you really don't agree so strongly then maybe you better work somewhere else." It's hard. But if you can't provide strong direction when it's needed, you can't provide the strong leadership that's key to getting on track and delivering results for beneficiaries.

4. Use the right consultants

When I first set out on this journey I was clear I didn't want to use consultants. My experience in the private sector had taught me, if you'll pardon the expression, that the relationship was often parasitical. Consultants, experience told me, come in and talk to all the staff, then tell the senior management what the staff told them. Their overriding goal seems to be to get 'follow on' work. But I knew we couldn't carry the process on our own. We needed, and as the CEO I especially needed, a trusted advisor who could also 'do' when necessary. Like it or not, I decided I'd have to find a consultancy to help me, which is where =mc came in.

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=mc's knowledge of the INGO sector was invaluable. First the fact the consultants could tell us "CAFOD did it like this... the Soroptomists did it like that..." put what we were trying to do into context. The other thing about them – something that's unique in my experience – is that they didn't patronise us. I've sat through so many sessions by the end of which I've wanted to throw my coffee at the facilitator. This was one of the few times when I didn't.

It's also good to get a consultancy who can bring in a team of people. =mc looked at what we wanted and matched the right consultants to specific bits of the work. Bernard Ross, a Director, is very good with big audiences – getting people to laugh, get excited and learn without realising it. He is also very good at one-to-one coaching. He listened when I just had to vent – which I did quite often! – and gave me the advice I needed. The two other consultants, Will Campbell and Ian Vale, helped us think through how we would structure the whole process, and were very down to earth. The balance of different skills and the team approach worked superbly.

About Caroline Harper

Caroline Harper is CEO of Sightsavers International. Before Sightsavers, she had a long career in the corporate sector, including many years in the oil industry, where she gained experience of growing organisations from scratch. After a career break in her forties and a year spent traveling in the developing world she decided to dedicate her career to the not-for-profit sector.

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If this article has interested you and you wish to discuss it further, please contact Bernard Ross at The Management Centre on +44 (0)20 7978 1516, or [click here](#) to send him an e.mail.

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