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BUSINESS ADVANCEMENT INC.®

The Harper Report:

3 Ways To Sharpen Your Strategic Focus

It's that time of year again. Along with the new season of Fall television shows, football, and autumn leaves, it's time for our annual visit to the optometrist.

"Which is clearer?" the doctor asks as he flips the lens back and forth on the refraction instrument, "Choice one or choice two?" Sometimes the answer is obvious. But after a few rounds, it becomes difficult to tell the difference between the two choices.

It's only after looking through a series of contrasting lenses and seeing the fine distinctions that the most appropriate choice becomes clear.

Likewise, as the business environment is changing so rapidly in so many subtle ways, it can be hard to distinguish – let alone agree upon – what is changing and how this is likely to impact your vision, mission and strategy.

We've found that bringing out contrasting points of view during strategic thinking and planning has enabled our clients to put fine distinctions into sharper focus and clarify the best choices for moving forward.

Create contrasts to sharpen focus

Here are 3 examples of contrasting "lenses" we've used to help companies of all sizes sharpen their focus to increase their competitiveness, partnering effectiveness, innovation and other issues that impact top and bottom line growth.

- Identify factors that are inside and outside the bounds of what you're considering. For instance, ask a series of "W" questions: What, Why, Who, When, and Where? Often, these seemingly straightforward questions shake out lurking

assumptions that can lead to unexpected insights.

- In advance of your meeting, find out from a variety of stakeholders inside and outside your organization what does work and what doesn't work about your product and service – and why. Going beyond the surface to get the reasons why people hold their views can inspire entirely new ideas.
- Look at issues from both the "half –full" and "half-empty" perspectives. There are going to be people who have a tendency toward one stance or the other, but neither perspective is universally good or universally bad. Tapping into both views gives you the greatest chance to develop innovative yet grounded opportunities.

Using these and other lenses provides a frame for any situation, gives you and other members of your team a focal point for discussion, and choices become easier to make.

Tips for successfully using contrasting lenses

While encouraging contrasting viewpoints creates a more powerful strategic focus, it can also seem risky to participants. It's critical to create an environment that reinforces trust before, during and after meetings, so that participants are willing to speak up.

The more tangible evidence they have that voicing contrasting views is supported in your organization's culture, the more fruitful the discussions will be.

Also, just as with making fine distinctions during eye exams, recognizing and appreciating the fine distinctions of *how* people are communicating their opinions (i.e., tone, inflection, and body language) enables you to

gauge whether they are really engaged and committed to the strategic focus and to making these plans happen.

Looking at strategic issues through contrasting points of view in an environment where people feel that contrasting ideas are welcome allows you to see differences and make decisions that would otherwise

not be possible. When you do this, you may be amazed at how much clearer your path forward becomes.

For particularly high-stakes issues, [contact us](#) to see how we can help you sharpen your strategic focus and get more of the outcomes you need.



About the authors:

Pamela S. Harper is the Founding Partner and CEO of Business Advancement Inc. (BAI), based in Glen Rock, NJ. She is an internationally known business performance expert, author, and professional speaker with over 20 years experience in internal and external consulting to entrepreneurial, middle market, and Fortune 500 companies in a wide range of industries, all going through extraordinary growth and change. Pam is the author of the critically acclaimed book, *Preventing Strategic Gridlock®: Leading Over, Under & Around Organizational Jams to Achieve High Performance Results*. She has published and been quoted in prominent media outlets including: *BusinessWeek*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *Red Herring*, *Entrepreneur*, *Forbes.com* and major global newspapers.

D. Scott Harper, Ph.D. is Sr. Partner at BAI. He is a globally recognized expert in innovation processes and systems with a unique ability to translate technical insights into desired business results, gained from over 20 years of leadership experience in Johnson & Johnson Consumer Company, Pfizer Consumer Healthcare, and Warner-Lambert Company. Scott has been published and quoted in prominent business media including *Chief Executive Magazine*, *CEO.com*, *CEO World Magazine*, and the *IndUS Business Journal*.

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