

MWANGI WANJUMBI

## A good strategy leads to positive change

“**ARE** you still there?” asked the caller after identifying himself. Taken aback, I replied, “Yes and still doing the same things.” “When do we meet for that thing we spoke about?” he asked.

I was mildly amused by his vagueness. The “thing” he was referring to was his business strategy. I had met him in a hotel where both of us were relaxing after a hard day’s work. We had introduced ourselves and exchanged business cards. He was a business man with a small manufacturing firm. He casually briefed me about it and asked if I had any idea how it could be improved.

I told him I had but couldn’t any conclusive statements. We agreed to meet again. When we did, I discovered that he was well educated and experienced. He was previously the production manager of a large household products maker.

The more we spoke, the more convinced I became that what was bothering him was a perception that his professional background was not making a difference to his business. One of his main competitors didn’t have half his experience or education. “How can I be competing with people who never went beyond Form Four?”

At the end of our discussion, I outlined my conclusions. He didn’t seem surprised and I realized that like many smart people, he already knew where the problem was but had either not put his finger on it or didn’t know how to solve it. I told him I would be of greater help, if we entered a formal contract. He hesitated and I knew he wasn’t ready to work with an outside consultant. For a consultant to be of any help, the client must be frank and open. It is almost like going to see a doctor: he will only diagnose your problem if you tell him where you are ailing and allow him to examine you. Most entrepreneurs don’t like being examined.

“Tuesday 10a.m is OK with me,” I said and after his confirmation of the meeting, I put the phone down. I was glad he had called about his business strategy for it is something many people ignore. No firm can survive without a strategy. Successful organizations are those able to tweak, review and retool their strategies to match their environment.

Strategy is one of the many concepts that business and management have borrowed from military organisations. It refers to a plan of action applicable to a given situation. The importance of strategy gained prominence during the second World War. Thereafter, it was found

that war tactics could be applied to business. In fact, a business is constantly at war with competitors and forces of change. Like the military, it has to guard against laxity in its ranks and continuously boost troop morale.

Tuesday came and I went to see the manufacturer. This time, he had no qualms about inking a contract. I took him through an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of his business. Then we looked at his company structure, operations, staffing and marketing among others. By lunchtime, it was clear the firm faced a crisis and it was his personal presence that was holding it together. He was for instance, responsible for all aspects of the business. If he didn’t turn up for work, there would be no petty cash to buy milk!

A week later, I gave him the evaluation report. It highlighted the firm’s strengths and opportunities and addressed its weaknesses as well as ways to mitigate the threats it faced. It also emphasized delegation, marketing and staff development.

For almost a month, I didn’t hear from him. Rather than call, I decided to pay him an impromptu visit. He was absent but I could see the place had changed. The reception had been cleared of all files and it now had a sparkling clean look. Where some old promotional posters used to hang, there was now an impressive display cabinet containing the firm’s products. I asked the cheery receptionist if I could walk to the factory floor. Rather than beckon me to proceed, she said, “Excuse me, I will get some one to show you around.” She wheeled around and pressed the intercom.

It was the assistant manager who turned up. As she ushered me into the factory, I commented on the new reception area. “We have been through a lot lately,” she said. “Since you were last here, the boss has really been on our case. I don’t know what you told him, but he is all fired up. Last week, he sent me to a management seminar. That has never happened before. This week our sales team is being trained and he is presently at the Coast meeting our key suppliers. I am surprised this place is running in his absence.” We both laughed. The one year wait and the report had not been in vain. Another firm would survive.

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