



Your Deck of Cards

By Rebecca A. Morgan
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Meeting business goals in the short and long term takes consistent and constant communication of those goals to employees.

Saddam Hussein was the Ace of Spades. A total of 52 cards, each with the name, title, and when possible, picture of a most-wanted member of Hussein's regime. Hussein was assigned the deck's highest card. Others were ranked and assigned to cards befitting their relative significance. The Jokers? One listed tribal titles, the other Iraqi military ranks, both providing valuable information.

Why a deck of cards? Soldiers often spend free time playing cards. Military and political leaders deemed finding Hussein's high level cohorts a key short-term objective. Realizing that virtually any coalition soldier could come across the high-profile targets, it was important to find a way to ensure that the soldiers would recognize them when they did. What better way to nurture top-of-mind awareness than through tools the soldiers would see regularly? The common understanding and simplicity of the metaphor meant the deck of cards could also be used in civilian communications as a surrogate for progress. Nightly television news programs updated audiences on which, if any, of the cards were crossed off each day.

Now think about your business. Think about your key near term objectives for it. What is your primary daily question, that single issue for which pervasive and constant vigilance is essential? Once you determine that, the challenge becomes how to cultivate top-of-mind awareness and focus in all the employees most able to impact it, and then to inform stakeholders. First identify the focal objective; then create for it an easily understood and omnipresent metaphor.

What is your deck of cards?

Every organization has more than one important objective, but for those seeking quick, significant improvement focusing attention on one objective at a time may be most effective, even if only for a short while. For example, a company with high costs, lousy delivery and intermittent quality may well be better off focusing employees on only one

of those challenges initially. As the first problem is brought under control, the company can begin to highlight its second objective, all the while keeping a watchful eye on the first.

In many cases, especially when a company is operating fairly well, it may be effectual to emphasize a small handful of key daily questions. The term "dashboard" is often used to describe a collection of visual signals for critical issues. As in a car, the dashboard should communicate timely status of key metrics to those in a position to influence them. This is about focus, so don't give in to the temptation to incorporate a lengthy wish list. A succinct easily understood image that conveys important "how we're doing" information can be very powerful. Something long and complicated will only add to confusion.

Now think longer term. We no longer hear about the deck of cards on the nightly news. Its effectiveness as a surrogate for progress is long obsolete. In an environment with a vast and complex array of factors to consider, there is no broadly accepted proxy for short term or for long term condition. The audience now hears a cavalcade of conflicting arguments as various factions debate which information best reflects actual conditions in Iraq.

That same confusion and turbulence can exist for a business. A carefully defined and simple metaphor communicating the progress of long-term strategy is again valuable. Tying it to the short-term objective metaphor can display the connection between short term priorities and long-term goals. Helping personnel understand the reasons for and implications of changing

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priorities can bring focus, calm and confidence. Alternatively, a cacophony of managerial bickering about what inferences should be drawn from the numbers or anecdotal evidence is likely to create destructive ambivalence.

Your company, your competitive environment and your markets change over time. It only makes sense that the best indicators of short- and long-term condition may change as well. If the metaphor is no longer appropriate, replace it with something that is. For instance, a picture of a tree, each branch identified as a component of the longer term objectives or strategies, and

leaves on each branch communicating the related near term objectives or tactics can be effective. Showing the flora evolving from “dead-leaf brown” to green can communicate progress. More green, more progress. Of course each company will need to develop its own metaphor that will be meaningful to its employees.

Examine your strategies and tactics until you have conviction that they are the right ones. Metaphors are meaningless if the strategy is wrong. The only thing worse than poor execution of a great plan is perfect execution of a lousy plan. What hand are you dealing?



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