

A general counsel faced with a wealth of benchmarking data told me that reading the report gave him plenty of ideas for strategies that he was sure could save “at least many hundreds of thousands of dollars; however,” he added, “the real problem is not coming up with strategies, but actually making them happen.”

Ready, Fire, Aim

BY RONALD F. POL

I shared with him an analogy on this issue used by professional services guru David Maister.¹ A few years ago I heard David speak, and it went something like this:

“Lawyers and other professionals are typically incredibly smart people, capable of crafting truly great strategies, with considerable insight. The problem isn’t the strategy itself, often finely honed and well crafted, but its implementation.”

“The issue is like that of the fat smoker. Just look at me.” he said. “Even without turning side on, you can see that I’m overweight. Don’t be polite. The truth is I’m fat. Hearing me speak, you no doubt also caught a pronounced wheeze. Maybe that has something to do with fat too, and constricted airways, but mostly it’s because I also smoke.”

“Are these good things? Of course not. Putting it simply, it means that I will die early. To my mind at least, and to my friends and family, that’s not a good thing.”

“But the fact is, I happen to know what to do about it. For smoking, it’s simple. Not easy perhaps, but simple. Stop smoking. Losing the

weight is a little more complicated, because I need to do two things at once; eat less, and exercise more.”

“OK, so I know the problem—I’m a fat smoker. I know the objective—to live a healthier and longer life. And I know the strategy—give up smoking, eat less, and exercise more. But do I actually do it? Well, just look at me, and I’ve been this way most of my adult life.”

“Many professional services firms are just like the fat smoker. They know the objective, and they know how to get there, but they never quite get around to doing it.”

For professional services firms, this may involve finely crafted business development and client relationship plans. For legal departments, it may mean reducing legal spend and improving the team’s capability for delivering strategic advice tied directly to helping their organization achieve its top goals. These are great objectives, and no doubt countless excellent strategies continue to be developed by law firms and legal departments, but what about getting beyond the “fat smoker” syndrome?

I also shared with this same general counsel an analogy I have used with legal departments and law firms in their quest to develop and then implement their strategies.

Like a marksman taking deliberate aim, judging the wind and countless other variables before squeezing the trigger to ensure the bullet enters its target with precision; lawyers will also typically craft the perfect strategy, with the usual “ready, aim, fire” methodology. Yet with the inevitable delays and logistical difficulties getting busy people together, I’ve known plans to take two years, or more, to be finalized. Nowadays, a couple of years, sometimes even a couple of months, is just too long—the world will have moved on, and

opportunities will have been missed. So we need a different approach.

Unlike the bullet from a rifle, a guided missile needs only to be pointed in the general direction of its target before being sent on its way. The precise adjustments come later, when it’s already in flight. Yet the guided missile is typically just as accurate as a rifle in hitting its target—and has the added advantage of having a much bigger impact on arrival.

After recounting these stories, I sent the general counsel a copy of David’s latest book, *Strategy and the Fat Smoker*.² I suggested that he read it, identify his primary objective and a few key strategies, and then launch the first implementation plan to start making it happen. Other implementation plans can follow and be perfected “in flight.”

Sure there’s a risk adopting the “ready, fire, aim” approach. The business will know you’ve started something and will be keen to see results.

A little while ago I had lunch with David Maister. He was no longer fat—indeed, he was positively svelte—and he no longer smoked either. He was clearly happy and healthy. Like the best actors, this man seemed to be living the part to perfection. He had earlier been living proof of the analogy itself, and was now living proof of the solution.

For the rest of us, any smart lawyer can come up with a great strategy; what counts is actually making it happen. 

NOTES

- 1 www.davidmaister.com.
- 2 David Maister, *Strategy and the Fat Smoker*, The Spangle Press, 2008, available at www.amazon.com/strategy-smoker-doing-whats-obvious/dp/0979845718.

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Email editorinchief@acc.com.



RONALD F. POL is past president of New Zealand’s Corporate Lawyers’ Association, general counsel for public and private organizations, and advises legal departments and law firms. He welcomes comments at ronald.pol@teamfactors.com.