How Avoidance Destroys Strategic Initiatives

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Avoidance is an extremely common response to strategic initiatives that makes executives put off critical issues. To overcome it, look out for some crucial signs.

By definition, a strategic initiative is an "experiment" and, as Jeff Bezos once said, "If you know it's going to work, it's not an experiment." Wherever there is uncertainty there will be anxiety. But a common way to deal with anxiety is to avoid it. This highlights a conundrum that strategic initiatives present: in situations where greater awareness is most needed there is a powerful force at play that compels people to lose their awareness and "dance around" in order to avoid critical issues. This behaviour is part of a sophisticated protection mechanism that renowned psychologist Edgar Schein refers to as "survival anxiety."

We all "avoid" to varying degrees. It is part of our human nature. The problem is that when pursuing a strategic initiative, we often need to deal with difficult issues in order for the initiative to succeed. Avoiding these difficult issues can undermine the initiative and, in the worst case, lead to its

failure.

By gaining awareness of the act of avoidance, people in leadership roles can minimise this dysfunctional behaviour. We say "minimise" to emphasise the fact that avoidance is not something that leaders should strive to suppress or eradicate. It is a deeply ingrained human behaviour and an important signal to keep us alert to what is going on. This "signal" quality of avoidant behaviour can be harnessed to make us more effective.

Don't avoid it

When avoidance in a group is low, it is because the leader is aware of this dynamic and knows how to address it. By acknowledging the fear associated with the strategic initiative, the leader encourages people to acknowledge their feelings, express their concerns and, as a result, to be able to move on in an informed manner.

If the leader fails to spot or acknowledge the existence of avoidance, it doesn't just go away. Rather, it continues to operate subversively below the surface, becoming detrimental to the strategic initiative. But it's not easy. For those who are "avoiding", their behaviours seem rational and justified. The "illusion of rationality" is one of the pernicious dimensions of avoidance.

In a real life example, we saw how an unconscious or semi-conscious push to avoid dealing with challenging issues undercut a strategic initiative.

Avoidance in action

Tom, the programme director of a US$25 million-a-year strategic initiative for a North American multinational company, was recruited internally to replace the previous director who was deemed to be failing to deliver. He's been in the role for two years now and has 110 people around the world.

In the two years of his tenure, Tom's manager has changed three times. The most recent change was because the programme was moved to a different department.

These changes have been attempts by upper management to address the organisation's inability to realise its strategic goals. Instead of dealing with the silo culture and inter-departmental fighting happening at the senior management levels, executive management made organisational design changes under the auspices of "becoming more efficient". We would

suggest that these moves are a classic example of "avoidance in action". Misdirected action and activity helps us avoid uncertainty and anxiety. These conditions make it very hard for Tom's programme to succeed.

Although Tom has good people skills, he is largely a technical manager. He is likeable, honest and works very hard. He is the key decision maker and many issues are escalated to him. But it is difficult to get a meeting with him because his calendar is completely full. A recently hired product manager said, "I should speak to Tom more often, but he is not available…literally, he is not physically present." This sentiment is echoed by many of Tom's staff. Here again we would suggest that being overly busy is potentially another example of avoidance.

Although better than before, the programme is still perceived to be struggling. Tom often finds himself having to manage outbursts from a senior stakeholder about the programme's failures. His team is continually blamed for missing deadlines. This has put Tom's leadership team into a defensive position. Change processes, sign-off gates, additional governance committees and KPIs have been put into place as a response. We would consider all of these "rescue measures" as a response to the organisational avoidance of the core underlying issues that the programme is facing. Tom's leadership team pushes him to enforce these processes. Where once "team" and "collaboration" were the operative words, now process, roles and responsibilities dominate. The more processes put in place, the more coordination needed.

Tom's team is becoming increasingly frustrated and is starting to burn out, but this isn't discussed. In spite of the new processes, the programme delivers through heroics and fire-fighting. Tom's programme could now pass an external process audit, yet its ability to achieve strategic goals remains significantly below expectations, partly because expectations are not being examined and challenged at the top.

Team members working on the programme are becoming more defensive and accusatory in the way they respond to and ask questions. Factions are developing. Some members in the group are becoming openly cynical.

People on Tom's team waver between despondence and hopefulness. One day they talk about how problems could be resolved, while the next day they wonder openly if such efforts are a waste of time. Talk of leaving the programme and the organisation is becoming more prevalent. Some staff of

the suppliers are requesting to be transferred to other projects.

Breaking the cycle

The first step is to recognise when avoidance is happening. Remember, avoidance is an almost imperceptible pressure and it is often completely outside of our awareness. But asking key questions can help us to identify its presence:

- Are things getting done in your group through heroics and fire-fighting?
- Do you get the feeling that you and your team are "dancing around something" or "walking on eggshells"? Do you experience this feeling when interacting with your managers?
- Do you find yourself becoming agitated, frustrated or easily upset? Are members of your team becoming agitated, frustrated or easily upset? Are you seeing this behaviour in your managers?
- Do you feel you are working towards unrealistic expectations or being exposed to ungrounded thinking?
- Are blame and/or cynicism becoming more prevalent in your team? Are factions developing in your team?

Becoming sensitive to avoidance will put you in a better position to open up a conversation on the issues that are being avoided. At first, it will most likely feel uncomfortable, but simply remaining present and listening to what others have to say can go a long way in helping to reduce avoidance.

This knowledge can foster a better understanding of the anxieties that drive avoidant dynamics in your team and how to deal with them. Crucially, it will also put you in a better position to effectively engage with senior management.

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