

# Are You Being Afflicted By Strategy Viruses?

by Patrick J. McKenna

In these past months I've been very busy facilitating the strategic planning process for a number of major firms. In every instance the firm has selected a number of well-intentioned partners to serve on their Strategic Planning Committee. And in nearly every instance I have witnessed these Committees, at some point in the process, being inflicted with one of a number of disabling symptoms of what I have come to label as 'strategy viruses.'

Here are six of the most common:

## Inside In

This is the tendency to focus on 'what we do' and not on 'what the client wants'. We structure our firms based on law school subjects and not on the industry focus of our clients. We look forward . . . to our past . . . with foresight firmly stuck in the rearview mirror. We are so afraid of losing our heritage that we don't dare change our culture; we are locked into our habits. Internally obsessed firms, who turn a blind eye to the emerging needs of their clients, the future trends in the profession, and the advancing moves of competitive firms rarely develop winning strategies.

## Not Invented Here

This is a genetic mutant of the 'Inside In' virus, often diagnosed as the "let's kill the messenger" syndrome. It can present itself in a number of different ways: 1) not listening to or learning from others on the committee, quickly discounting their point of view; 2) dismissing what other competitive firms are doing as not meaningful or valuable; and 3) strongly believing that we have to have the perfect answer before we do anything – perfectionism before action. Everything requires the usual glacial response of: We need to form a committee to study this idea.

## False Positive

We engage in "nice-talk," being overly gracious to each other even if we disagree. We quietly and subtly defend our own personal turf often to the detriment of the overall firm's best interests. We think that everyone has to agree before we act, so partners say they agree when they don't. Thus, partners participate in the strategy discussions, in the strategy formulation process, nod 'yes' in the meetings and then leave the boardroom not fully committed - or worse. This is an example of classic passive/aggressive behavior, which is like acid on the skin of your firm's culture and inevitably makes collaboration and implementation very challenging.

## All Things To All

I see this a lot. We like to be busy; our badge of honor is full calendars, even if it excludes thinking and results. We hide behind our "busy-ness. We subsequently get engaged in doing lot's of 'stuff' and thinking it's a strategy. We have a host of priorities; each gets energy and attention; we can't ever say no; and we are not focused on the critical few.

There is nothing we love more than the latest ‘flavor of the month.’ Our strategy is that we jump from program to program; without having any integrated initiatives; even though the partners all have a bone-deep cynicism about any “new” program.

### **Who Else?**

This may be the most insidious virus of all. It is quite natural, upon hearing a new idea, for any of us to inquire as to who else is doing that. When some partner asks that question they want reassurance that some other law firm (and hopefully a firm of some stature) has already blazed the trail, so that they are likely to be making a mistake by doing something novel. When an entrepreneur asks that question they also want to know whether someone else has already blazed that trail, because if they have . . . that entrepreneur is no longer interested! We need new ways of thinking to thrive in the face of intense competition.

### **Marking Territory**

My favorite, this virus presents itself in the form of each partner needing their own personal fire hydrant - insisting on being allowed to micromanage some little change (wordsmithing various documents), all in an effort to 'mark' the final work product as his or her own. It's one thing to customize the strategy output to your firm's culture, it's quite another to get continually bogged down with partners needing to mark every step or initiative before it is allowed to move forward. Developing a winning strategy requires new mindsets, not just new skills.

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