

# *The Executive Guide to Strategic Planning*

by Patrick J. Below, George L. Morrisey & Betty L. Acomb

(Book Review by Gary Tomlinson)

*The Executive Guide to Strategic Planning* is an incredible resource on the strategic planning process. And although this book was first published 25 years ago, it's as relevant today as it was the day it was published.

**Premise of Book:** “Strategic planning is the single most important function of the CEO in any organization. If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.” Strategic planning determines where your organization is heading and paints a clear picture of the target for all employees to aim for.

“In order to embark on a successful strategic planning process, the CEO and the planning team need to agree on the following:”

1. *Terminology.* The exact meaning and interpretation of terms and concepts must be understood and applied consistently.
2. *Approach.* There needs to be complete understanding and agreement on the approach you'll use in your strategic planning process.
3. *Separation of strategic from operational planning.* These are two distinctly different thinking and planning processes. Strategic planning requires visionary and directional thinking. Whereas, operational planning, requires short-term, specific thinking.

According to Below, Morrisey and Acomb, “a strategic plan is a framework for carrying out strategic thinking, direction and action leading up to the achievement of consistent and planned results.” There are seven key elements that comprise this framework. They are: organization mission, strategic analysis, strategy, long-term objectives, integrated programs, financial projections and executive summary.

Gary Tomlinson (reviewer) recently had the opportunity to interview the lead author, Patrick Below.

## **Reviewer: What was the "tipping point" for writing this book?**

**Patrick Below:** The tipping point back in 1987 was to describe, for CEOs and executives, a straightforward, simple, clear and practical approach on how to undertake a meaningful and relevant strategic planning process. Twenty-five years later, much to my surprise and delight, this book remains the definitive "Handbook" for CEOs and executives to develop and/or update their strategic plan. Despite the "hundreds" of books on strategy and strategic thinking & planning, our book remains the "Gold Standard" for CEOs willing to invest their time in

producing a "real" strategic plan that will make a significant difference in their organization's ability to think strategically and execute operationally.

**Reviewer: Why is this book still relevant today?**

**Patrick Below:** It's relevant today because there still remains much confusion on terminology, concepts, strategic planning models and how all these elements inter-relate. For example, what exactly is a Mission Statement, how is it developed, and what is its purpose, and how does it relate to Vision, Strategy, Strategic Analysis, and Core Values?

This book continues to be one of the clearest, most comprehensive approaches for developing or updating a strategic plan. Our book contains a unique and innovative planning model known as the "Integrated Planning Process." This model shows the relationship between strategic planning, operational planning and results management (plan execution). Despite all the advances in information technology over the past twenty-five years, this book continues to serve as the "Operating Manual for Strategic Planning." It includes the basic tools and techniques and provides a real "beacon of hope" for CEOs who are serious about elevating the thinking and planning of their executive team in today's rapidly-changing global environment.

**Reviewer: What are two or three key messages you'd like the executives to take away from this book?**

**Patrick Below:** The first key message is that the "process" of planning is as important as the plan itself. It's the process that gets the buy-in, the understanding and ultimately the believability and credibility of the entire organization to understand and commit to this plan.

Most CEOs focus their attention on the creation of their Strategic Plan. In my view, CEOs need to pay at least equal attention to the *process* they are using to create this plan. I cannot emphasize enough how powerful the process of planning is for achieving superior and consistent results and at the same time building a higher-performing executive team.

The second key message is that most organizations don't spend enough time and energy on strategic analysis. Often companies will bring in outsiders to do their strategic analysis for them. The people who should be doing this strategic analysis are the CEO and his/her executive team. They understand their business better than anyone else. This book provides a common sense approach for instructing and guiding strategic analysis teams to conduct their own analysis.

A final key message is our book provides a clear and practical approach for CEOs to follow in terms of strategic plan implementation and execution. The big misconception about strategic plans is that they don't get implemented and they sit on shelves. The reason they sit on shelves is that the CEO and his/her team have not followed an integrated process which links their strategic plan with an organization-level operational plan (Reference attached diagram entitled "Strategic Management System located below"). This integrated process then provides a results-management methodology for ensuring the plan remains a "living plan" throughout the whole organization.

A strategic plan takes time to create, "cook" and develop. Forget the 2-day planning retreats. Forget the expensive "outside" approaches. Read this book and adapt it to your own organization's history, culture, and needs!

**Message from Gary Tomlinson (Reviewer):** *The Executive Guide to Strategic Planning* provides CEOs and their executive teams a concise "how to" guide for this very important and crucial process of strategic thinking and planning. This book should be a must read for every CEO and executive team member. There is a reason this book has been a classic best-seller for 25 years. It always works if you work the process!

For more information or to purchase a copy of *The Executive Guide to Strategic Planning*, contact Patrick Below at: [patrickjbelow@ceoconsultingservices.com](mailto:patrickjbelow@ceoconsultingservices.com) or (608) 239-3622.

**About Gary Tomlinson:** Gary is a business consultant and motivational speaker. As a business consultant, Gary specializes in strategy-execution. He works with CEOs to help establish a culture of knowing how to plan and execute while overcoming the daily surprises that always seem to get in the way. As a motivational speaker, Gary's key presentations are the *Art of Telling* (professional speaking education for professionals) and *Top Ten Messages from Ten Top Books* (great business education). Regardless of his topic, Gary's guiding coalition is that the golden rule not only makes good moral sense, but it makes good business sense too! You can engage Gary at [gary@gary-tomlinson.com](mailto:gary@gary-tomlinson.com). If you like this book review and want to read his others go to [www.gary-tomlinson.com](http://www.gary-tomlinson.com).

