

Developing a road map

How to set goals and priorities for the New Year **Interviewed by Meredith McKenzie**

The beginning of the year gives you a chance to reflect on what your company did over the past year and what it wants to accomplish in the coming year. You may be looking at shifting your focus from internal matters, such as cost-saving measures, to external matters, such as building client relationships.

Taking the time to set goals and priorities for the coming year can help your company have a stronger focus and give you a sense of direction.

“You generally don’t get in your car and drive without knowing where you’re going,” says Darci Congrove, CPA, managing director with GBQ Partners LLC.

Successful businesses know exactly what they’re trying to accomplish, where they’re going and when they hope to get there, says Congrove, and they have a plan to help them stay on track.

Smart Business spoke with Congrove about how to set goals and priorities and how to get employees on board to achieving these items.

What risks do you face by not establishing priorities and goals each year?

You continue to do what you’ve always done, which generally leads to the same results. Complacency is one of the first steps to killing an entrepreneurial spirit and leads to mediocrity. Mediocre businesses generally don’t thrive or even survive. Setting goals and being forward-focused is a necessity to staying competitive.

How do you develop goals and priorities and turn them into actionable steps?

Begin with the end in mind. Goal and priority setting can be extremely overwhelming when you think of all the big things that need to be done. Break big goals into action steps and small pieces, set milestones, and then celebrate those along the way. It’s not fun to wait two years to decide if you’ve accomplished something or not.

Figure out where you want to go, what you need to do to get there, how long it will take, who can do it, what the steps are, and by when you want to accomplish it. You have to be realistic about the pace of your goal setting. A lot of times, businesses will choose an artificial timeline, and a lot of times, big goals or changes often take more than one calendar year. You need to decide if these are short- or long-



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term goals and set a realistic time frame to achieve them.

How can you get employees on board with goals and priorities and use their feedback to implement change throughout the company?

Make employees part of the process. Share the plan in draft form, ask for feedback and actually listen to it. Assign tasks to employees at all levels, so people see the alignment of what their efforts will do in terms of accomplishing goals. Don’t throw out goals as if only the management team is responsible for them. You’re more likely to achieve the goal if you can get ownership throughout the company.

Your changes need to make sense. A lot of times, businesses change just for the sake of change. Employees need to understand that changes are in everyone’s best interest, not just in management’s or ownership’s best interest. You also need to be systematic. Focus on a few things at a time and get them right so employees know you’re moving forward together.

Communicate success and reinforce the message to all employees so they believe in the change. Listen to input when you ask for it, and demonstrate to employees that you’ve actually done something with the input. The worst thing is to ask for input and ignore it.

How can you make sure your goals are working, and what do you do if they’re wrong?

Be honest and open if you’ve chosen the wrong goals. If things are off track or not accomplished, maybe the goal wasn’t right in the first place. Go back to the beginning and get everyone pointed in the right direction. Maybe you need to take a different path or start somewhere different, or maybe you just need to do something totally different. Go through the systematic process and break it into those chunks — where, why, who and when — and then recommunicate the new goal.

This can be a challenge, because goals often are not adjusted as situations, facts and people change. You then have goals that are not accomplished by the end of the year. There should be a process in place to catch the goal when it goes off track and reset it. Otherwise employees will know a goal hasn’t been accomplished, and will feel like they’ve failed.

You have to make failure a learning experience so that everyone feels like the issue has been addressed and the company took a different direction for good reason. Employees need to know the reasons behind key decisions. It’s hard to feel part of the solution or team if you don’t know why decisions are being made.

How can you make sure you are following these goals and lead the company to reach the goals?

Be consistent and set a good example from the top down. Create an environment where everybody feels accountable for the goal, not just some employees while others watch from the sidelines.

Quantify the impact of achieving goals, either by measuring profit improvement, looking at cultural changes or determining strategic outcomes.

If you achieve the goals this year, where will the company be at the end of the year? What will it do for the business, employees and owners? You need to be results-oriented and focused on change, and then delegate and empower others to actually take care of the small steps along the way. Talk to employees about results the goals will produce and what they will do for the business, which will motivate everyone to accomplish the goals. <<

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