



Secret to Sustaining Success

By Jeff Zakaryan

This morning I was having breakfast at a local coffee shop when one of the movie posters that cover the walls caught my eye “Escape to Burma” starring Barbara Stanwyck, Robert Ryan and David Farrar. If you’re old enough, you recall Barbara Stanwyck and Robert Ryan had long and illustrious careers as Hollywood movie stars. But David Farrar...who was he? Farrar was a British actor who enjoyed enough success to get the call to Hollywood and share top billing with Stanwyck and Ryan. For whatever reason he failed to capitalize and Farrar retreated to his native London.

In acting as in business, one “big” picture (or quarter or year) is no guarantee of long-term success. So what is? From my experience, one of the biggest constraints on a senior executive’s ability to achieve and sustain consistent success is preoccupation with current performance. There is no question—especially in publicly traded companies—that most chief executives are on a “perform now or you’re gone” short leash.

The evidence presented in the best selling book “Built to Last” by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras—is clear, and all too soon forgotten. According to the authors, “managers at visionary companies simply do not accept the proposition that they must choose between short-term performance *or* long-term success. They build first and foremost for the long-term while *simultaneously* holding themselves to highly demanding short-term standards.”

The secret to sustaining success is the ability to consider the present and the future simultaneously while managing and leading the enterprise. I equate managing with current performance and leading with future performance. After all, the leader’s primary job—in my opinion—is to be the chief architect of the organization’s future.

The pressures on the 21st century executive (24/7 communications, constant change, global competition, economic turmoil) make it hard, if not impossible, to consistently put this “simple” secret to work. If you buy the theory that sustained success comes from both short- and long-view leadership, how can you do it and still survive this year?

HERE ARE THREE IDEAS TO CONSIDER:

1. THINK LONG TERM

Spend 30 minutes a week alone outside of the office thinking and planning about topics and issues that have absolutely nothing to do with current activities. Brainstorm your company’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and explore what implications they have on your long-term objectives.

2. PURSUE NEW PERSPECTIVES

Dedicate one lunch per month to a person outside of your organization or industry who comes at things from a different perspective than yours. It’s amazing how just one new idea or insight can yield a significant breakthrough not otherwise possible.

3. CONTEMPLATE THE FUTURE

Gather your best and brightest and define what things will be like when your organization achieves its full potential. In other words...design your own future. Knowing precisely what you’re creating provides a powerful guide for every decision that needs to be made.

If David Farrar had invested some time thinking and planning about how to succeed in Hollywood beyond “Escape to Burma,” he may still be sharing top billing with Stanwyck and Ryan as a Hollywood icon!

Jeff Zakaryan works with CEOs to optimize their effectiveness as leaders.