

When is a Strength Not a Strength?

It is common, pretty early in the strategic planning process, to consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of the organization. Most often, this is done as part of a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) review. Many of us, it seems, have difficulty picking out true strengths from the (perhaps) long list of things we like about the organization.

At times like this, it helps to go back to basics – like definitions. In this case, “what is a strength”?

In strategic planning (or *strategy alignment*, as we prefer to call it) a strength is an attribute, characteristic or asset that helps you win. However you define “winning” (and let’s leave Charlie Sheen’s view of winning out of this discussion), a strength is something that gives the organization a tangible advantage and promotes or secures victory. A strength allows you to:

- close more sales to customers
- provide better and/or higher quality products and services
- manage and/or reduce costs to increase margins

and so on. Most importantly, in a competitive marketplace – where winning matters – a strength helps you *beat the competition*.

Let’s consider a couple of examples:

Is “great people” a strength?

Well, it depends on what about them is great, and what you are doing with that greatness. Did they start off great, or did you do something with them that has made them great?

Anyone can hire great people – what are you doing with them to make them, and keep them, *greater*?

How about “great products”?

Maybe. But remember that today’s “category killers” can wind up in tomorrow’s bargain bin, especially in tech-heavy segments. Great products can help you win today; sustaining that success requires the ability to bring innovative, value-laden products to market efficiently, effectively and quickly.

Look beyond the products themselves to the processes and practices you use to imagine, design, engineer, produce and market them. This is where true strengths – and weaknesses – can be found.

Differentiate between true strengths and “table stakes”. Compare yourself objectively to the best of your competitors. And always incorporate the customers’ perspective.