

A Diagram is Worth a Gazillion Words

(Especially In Strategic Planning)

Fred Nickols

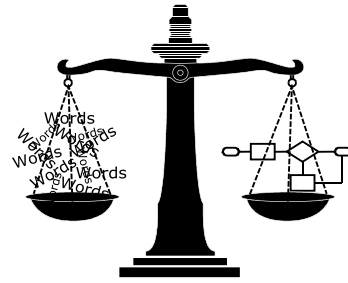
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One of the admonitions offered by Harvey Bergholz, an accomplished designer and facilitator of strategic planning sessions is a caution against producing too much documentation or, as Harvey put it in an interview, "Don't write too much." This paper explores Harvey's caution by way of some representative diagrams he uses in lieu of too much text.

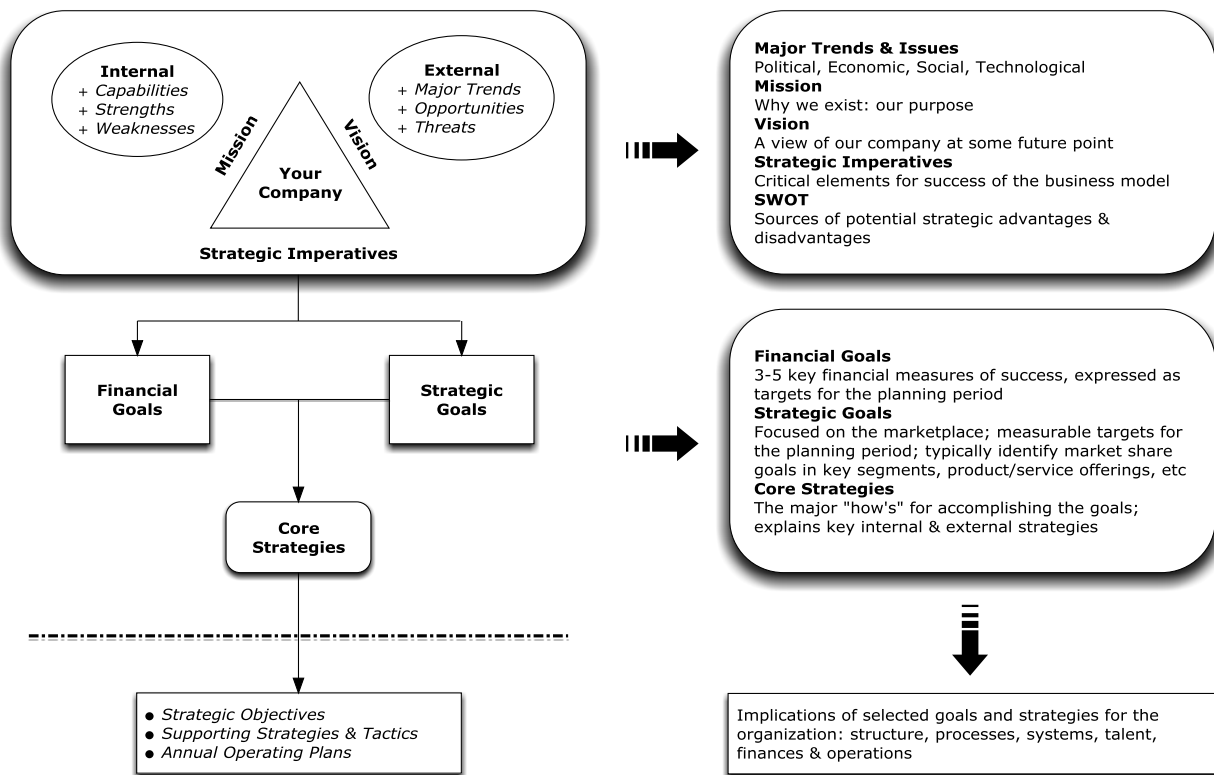
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The title of this piece stems from an interview I conducted with Harvey Bergholz, a consultant with a long track record of helping his clients craft and carry out successful strategic planning efforts. An earlier piece ([“Stacking the Deck in Favor of a Successful Strategic Planning Effort”](#)) laid out five tips for raising the odds of success of a strategic planning effort. This piece elaborates on one of Harvey’s admonitions or cautions; namely, “Don’t write too much.”



Harvey’s caution is against more than just writing too much (i.e., over-producing documentation). It is also a caution against relying too much on the written word for communication purposes and, at the same time, it is an admonition to make good use of diagrams and other visuals. Some examples will serve to illustrate.

Consider one of Harvey’s diagrams below, which depicts and outlines the major content areas of a strategic plan.



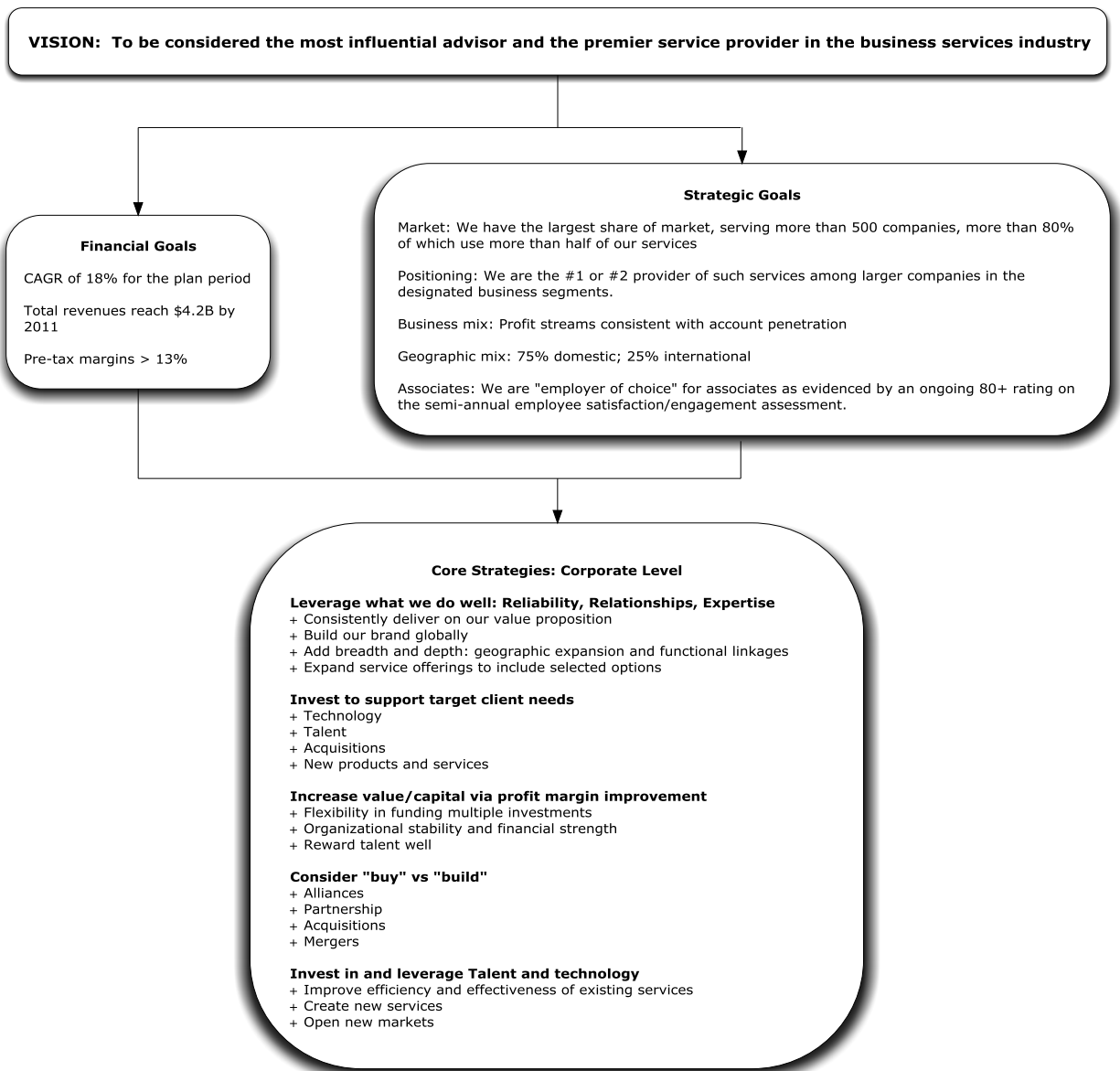
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Describing these elements of a strategic planning effort could (and often does) fill page after page of dull, boring and all too often redundant text. However, the diagram above communicates the essential elements with a minimum of text and, at the same time, depicts the relationships among those

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elements in a way that would tax the abilities of the best of writers. On the left side of the diagram are the elements; on the right are brief definitions or descriptions. And it's all captured on a single page. This kind of visual display is useful in presentations and it also makes an excellent handout that can be taped or pinned to the wall of an office or cubicle as a reminder and a visual representation of the effort.

Let's look next in more detail at some live examples of the elements on the left side of the diagram above.

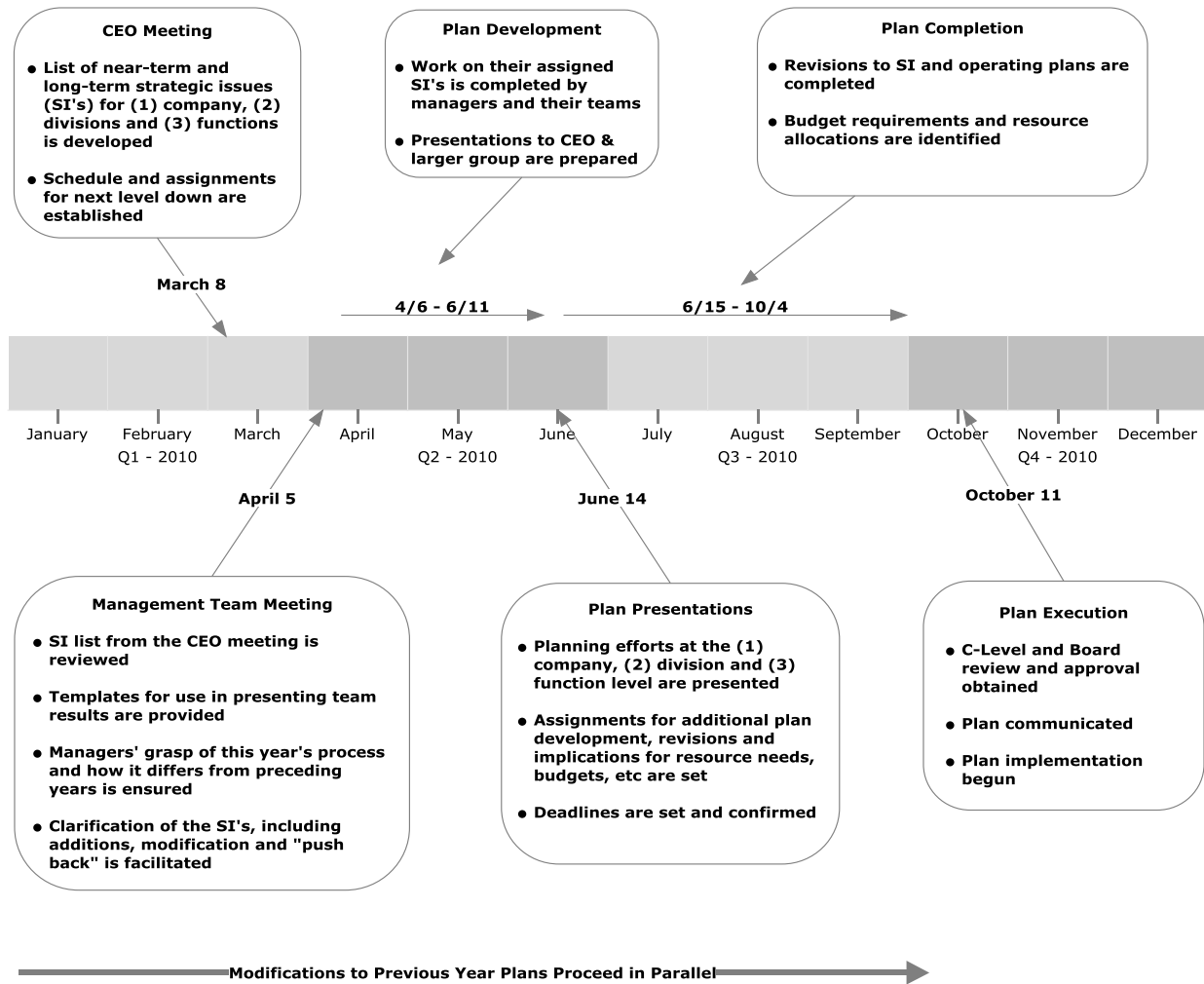


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The diagram above contains the actual financial and strategic goals produced during a strategic planning engagement with one of Harvey's clients, as well as the accompanying strategies. If they were packed into dense and far from easy-to-read text, they might elicit a yawn or a roll of the eyes and, in text form, they would not and could not visually support a presentation or discussion of these very important items. But, in diagram form, that is exactly what they do.

Consider now the diagram below. It presents a timeline for an actual strategic planning effort.



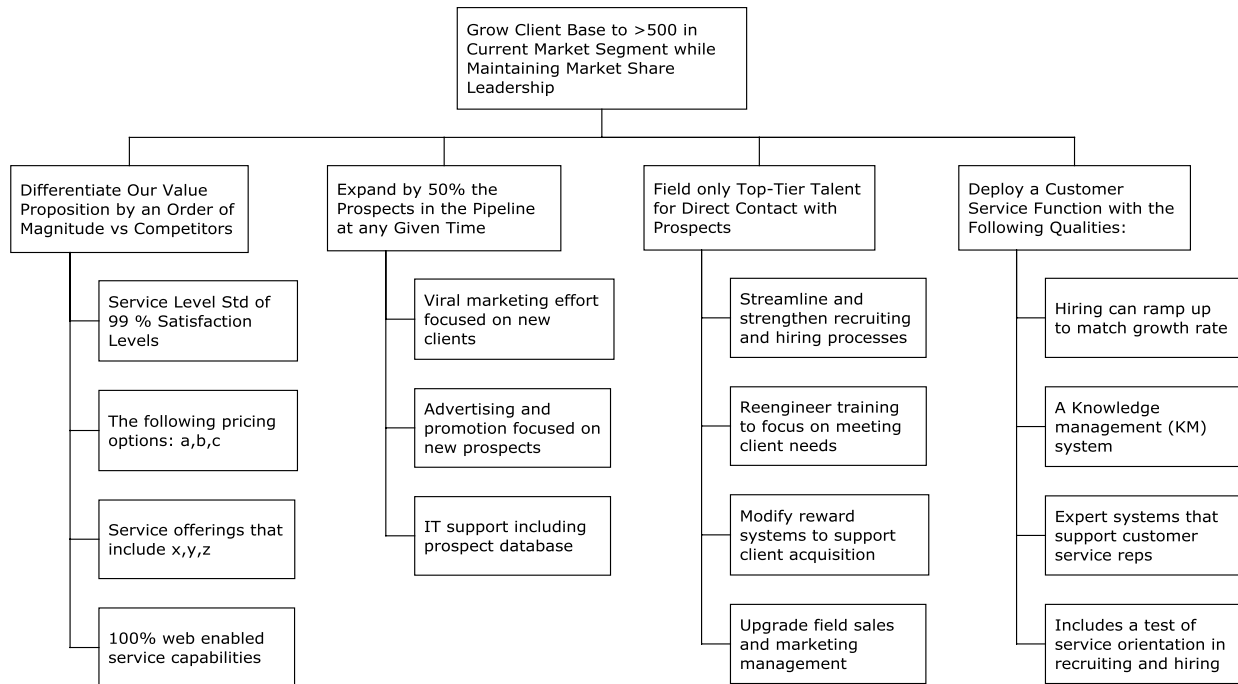
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This simplified timeline conveys the activities over time in a way that words alone or even a Gantt chart or project schedule cannot. It also clearly illustrates the important distinction between elapsed time

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and actual time expenditures. Although the effort spans roughly 8 months, the entire 8 months is not devoted to strategic planning only. Formal meetings are few in number and separated by working assignments. In addition, there is a business to operate and day-to-day matters to be tended to as well. The horizontal line along the bottom of the diagram also reveals that such planning efforts are rarely undertaken from scratch; instead, there are plans from previous years to be updated and modified.

As a final example, consider the diagram below, which is an interesting use of the classic organization chart. It shows how “drilling down” into goals and objectives can be illustrated in diagram form instead of text or outline, making relationships much clearer and easy to grasp. It is also useful in helping the implementers see where their piece of the action fits into the larger picture.



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So what’s the message? Well, it’s in the title: “In strategic planning, a diagram is worth a gazillion words.” One very important way of improving the quality and value of your company’s strategic planning efforts is to make effective use of diagrams and other visuals in place of dense, hard-to-read or never-to-be-read text. Such visuals can serve to support presentations, to guide discussions, to highlight

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and emphasize issues, as visual reminders and, most important, to improve the quality of the communications that are so vital to critical organizational efforts such as strategic planning.

About Harvey Bergholz

[Harvey Bergholz](#) is president of [Jeslen Corporation](#), a successful consulting firm he has headed for more than 35 years. Harvey's typical clients are C-level executives in a wide variety of companies and industries, ranging from large and small closely-held family enterprises to multi-billion dollar global corporations with tens of thousands of employees. Much of Harvey's work over the years has centered on helping his clients craft and carry out their strategic planning efforts – and with implementing those plans.

About Fred Nickols

[Fred Nickols](#) is a writer, consultant and former executive who is also managing partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). Fred's many articles and other publications are available free at www.skullworks.com. He and Harvey have worked together on many projects during the roughly 30 years they have known one another.