

Sustainable Growth: The Ultimate Reality

It Requires More Than Activity and Hope

by Jon Craighead

Growing is less risky than not growing. You'll hear people say that growth is about taking a risk, but they are wrong. Personal risk, yes: it takes courage to stand up for new ideas. "A sustainable growth strategy based on tightly defined customer needs is far less risky than rearranging the furniture while the competitor grows at your expense," say Ram Charan and Noel Tichy in their book [Every Company is a Growth Business](#).

Yes, we all would agree that it's a good thing to grow the business. The question is how to get started. The answer to this dilemma could very well be *momentum*. "Most businesses get it at some point: the impression that everything they undertake succeeds effortlessly, as if they're carried along by a tailwind that increases and propels them on to exceptional growth," says J.C. Larreche in his book [The Momentum Effect](#). He continues, "Some hold on to it. Most don't. Slowly, imperceptibly, the tailwind turns around and the momentum disappears, without anyone quite realizing what has happened. The company is still growing, but not as strongly as before, not as efficiently. Everyone's maxing out, but it seems like there's molasses in the works."

Sound familiar? If growth is produced by consistent momentum, the logical question is: How do you generate this elusive phenomenon? One irrefutable fact is that you can't implement something you can't measure, and you can't measure something you can't describe. Any new future must be created, and this is the domain of strategy. While strategy is not a perfect science, it fosters intellectual curiosity, imagination, and a belief in the potential and possibility of people.

Furthermore, strategy creates a climate that empowers taking risks. Taking *calculated* risks is an expression of freedom from the self-imposed boundaries generated by our past experiences and what we already know. Ultimately, strategy provides a roadmap for success and a platform to chart new and unknown paths that weren't going to happen.

Strategy's fundamental role is as an inspirational vehicle that forwards growth and success. It shines a guiding light on the darkness of uncertainty and provides the energy to keep moving forward when there is little evidence to support the vision and the action being expended.

When you get down into the weeds of this conversation, the strategic difference relies unquestionably on successful implementation. Until that is imposed, nothing happens. The dictionary defines *implementation* as: putting something into effect or action according to or by means of a definite plan or procedure. It's imperative that such a plan is in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of actionable tasks to insure they are in alignment with the organizational strategic goals. It is also important to recognize that benchmarks and timelines are better indicators than financial monitoring. They are more dependable indicators of our activities and provide a more accurate indication of actual results that are being accomplished. Additionally, it is easy to fool ourselves by being very busy. A lot of unmonitored activity can lull us into a false sense of security. Activities must be measured and evaluated to insure they are actually producing results and moving toward a designated outcome.

This brings in the three key principles of accountability, trust, and transparency. Accountability calls for all parties to commit to keep their word and accomplish what they say they will accomplish regardless of circumstances. Trust is an absolute prerequisite for any partnership; once jeopardized it is virtually impossible to fully recover that trust in its original state. And transparency makes it essential that the process is completely open and available to everyone. This provides not only inclusivity but also an added medium for validating accuracy. Success is not a mysterious or far-fetched idea or wish. It's about people working together in alignment and partnership, guided by a commitment to achieve something that wasn't going to happen on its own.

Finally, leaders are often faced with a decision whether to grow or not. This conversation for growth is not simply limited to increasing revenue, as important as that is. It also includes technology, new product development, and service. Here are some realities to consider: If you're not growing, the likelihood is that your business will cease in its present form. Growth helps to attract and retain talented people. Growth promotes customer advocacy – what they tell their friends about you. Growth is vital to the health of our nation, providing new products and jobs. Sporadic growth produces fits and starts. Unquestionably, it is sustainable growth that creates the ultimate reality – success.