

Gut Check on Working Strategically

About a year ago, Stanford Business School professor Bob Sutton, [blogged one of my favorite rants](#). He wrote:

Big hairy goals [don't mean much](#) without thousands of small wins. My colleague Jeff Pfeffer and I have [argued for years](#) that implementation, not strategy, is what usually separates winners from losers in most industries, and generally explains the difference between success and failure in most organizational change efforts, sales campaigns and so on.

[Atul Gawande](#) drives this point home even further in his remarkable book on high-performance medicine, [Better](#). He opens his book by explaining that every year, two million people in the U.S. get an infection while visiting hospitals, and 90,000 of those people die. Doctors have known the stunningly simple solution to this problem for 150 years: wash your hands. There are strict guidelines for how to wash your hands and how often, yet according to Gawande, almost no one follows them.

Having a good strategy doesn't mean much if you're not implementing it well. Knowing this has strongly influenced how I work with clients. Developing strategy is not enough. You need to help clients work strategically.

Two weeks into 2012, I and my colleagues at Groupaya are experiencing first-hand how difficult it is to work strategically. Last year, we spent several months [developing our 2012 goals and strategy](#). I'm confident that our goals and strategy are good and that we're strongly aligned around them. And yet last week, we realized that we're not even a month into the new year and that we're already doing a mediocre job of implementing our strategy. We've been okay at doing what we

said we were going to do, but we've been poor at *not doing* what we said we wouldn't do.

Realizing this has been a great gut check, and although we need to improve, it's not time to panic. Working strategically is hard, and it requires... well, hard work. If 90,000 Americans die every year because doctors don't wash their hands frequently enough, we can forgive ourselves (at least a little bit) for not working as effectively as we could be.

That said, there are structural things that we've done that have helped us a lot. For starters, we had a good strategic planning process, one that resulted in a good strategy and strong collective ownership.

We also talk about our goals relentlessly, almost religiously. We have a standing weekly meeting to discuss our goals as a team, we have a dashboard that tracks our progress, and we mention our goals often in the context of our every day work.

Finally, we've created space for ourselves to assess and reflect on our progress. Without that space, it's impossible to learn and to act on that learning.

With these structures in place, I feel confident that we have the support we need to implement our strategy effectively. Now we just need to do it!