



---

## THE STRATEGIC PLANNING GROUP

*Strategic Advisors to Executives Since 1992*

---

### It's So Dull Out There: Where Have All The Corporate Mavericks Gone?

*Sam Cukierman  
Partner*

**June 2009**

---

*The late nineties saw corporations promote risk-taking to reach higher goals. Employing maverick teams empowered to take charge, CEOs realized that they had to marshal resources in a way that married charisma and personal style to new ways of solving problems and creating real value. Innovation thrived. Creativity exploded. The strategic planning process was imbedded in the CEOs' management process.*

*If the MBA class of today is any indicator of tomorrow's leadership, expect vanilla products delivered by organizations that just may be successful in spite of themselves. There is no evidence that their management teams are following a strategic plan, or any plan for that matter. If a business plan even exists in the companies they work for, my students say that they don't know about it.*

---

In the winter of 1992, I co-wrote an article on Maverick Teams. It was published in Focus magazine, a publication put out by University of Toronto's Institute of Market Driven Quality. We pointed out then that maverick teams sounded like a contradiction in terms – teams are groups of persons joined in some action; mavericks are individuals who stand apart from their associates. Mixing them seemed risky. And yet it worked!

What's changed? The marketplace

is still exploding and splintering. Consumer tastes continue to change and evolve in a flash as the “right now” generation wants instant gratification. New kinds of media clone themselves daily as advertisers seek to plug slots and niches for an aging population. But everything looks the same.

I keep asking my MBA Marketing Strategy class at The Rotman School of Management to name one new fresh innovation in finan-



**Sam G. Cukierman  
Partner**

---

#### The Strategic Planning Group

258 Adelaide Street East, Suite 201, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5A 1N1

Phone: 416-366-4774 Fax: 416-366-4775

[www.tspg-consulting.com](http://www.tspg-consulting.com)



cial services of note in the past five to eight years. They can't. I ask them to name one new product or service in the company for which they work or worked that has made a difference to consumer needs and positively impacted the bottom line in the last few years. They can't. All of their success stories (save Apple and *iPod*) are from the nineties! And so yet again, as we close on the first decade in 2009, we ask where and how will future business leaders develop the skills to position themselves for success?

### **It's high time to bring old hat ideas back to the corporate boardroom!**

Old hat ideas can still be very successful. Some CEOs have made great strides in "empowering" their management teams to succeed. Unfortunately, discretionary powers often land on managers' laps as a patchwork of limitations and exceptions. When Managers end up confused, they start to work at cross-purposes.

Some CEOs have thrown money at the market, hiring high-priced talent to deliver results, while crossing their fingers and hoping that sales keep pace with the high-priced salaries they are paying.

Unfortunately, these high priced managers are quickly discovering that the talent pool in the organization is motivated not so much by money as by quality of life, life-balance, and the need to reinvent themselves

I ask my students to name one new product or service in the company they work for that has made a difference to consumer needs and positively impacted the bottom line in the last few years. They can't.

every few years – the staff are not necessarily on the same page as their hard-driving boss.

Today's successful CEOs have realized the benefits of strategic planning, followed by organizational alignment. A CEO that leads by providing a clear vision and mission statement for employees to embrace is positioning their organization for more accountable results. Taking this to the next step, the CEO who is able to diffuse his or her personal values throughout

the organization, motivating others and spurring activities that fulfill the new vision will be the *next* clear winners. This will take Maverick Teams to get it done.

### **The Maverick Team – its characteristics defined**

A Maverick Team is created when resources are marshaled in a new way, stirring together diverse kinds of personalities, but providing them with crystal-clear guidelines. Managers with charisma and highly personal styles - mavericks – suddenly find themselves solving problems with individuals used to "playing by the book." Sometimes the fit at inception is uneasy – some maverick teams seem as volatile and contradictory as the new marketplace they are trying to capture. More often that not, however, this strange mixture of talent produces noteworthy results. CEOs learn to mix restlessness with patience, conformity with individualism, and cooperation with creativity. Morale soars. Re-

Some maverick teams seem as volatile and contradictory as the new marketplace they are trying to capture. More often than not, however, this strange mixture of talent produces noteworthy results.



sults improve. Work becomes fun again. And organizations leap forward.

Necessary to this model of course is setting rewards by team-playing measurements. Often these indicators do not adhere to “normal” corporate behavior, but more often than not, they do produce important breakthroughs.

## Characteristics of Maverick Teams

### 1. Passion

Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric once said that he likes to hire executives who take issues personally. He considers them more committed to success.

Anthony Robbins said: *“It’s passion that causes people to stay up late and get up early. It’s passion that people want in their relationships. Passion gives life power and juice and meaning. There is no passion without a passion to be great, whether it’s the aspiration of an athlete or an artist, a scientist, a parent or a businessman.”* (Anthony Robbins, **Unlimited Power**, New York: Ballantyne Books, 1987, p 16).

By showing passion, maverick teams reflect their CEOs’ values. All members of the team assert themselves. Maverick teams are passionate about making the changes to achieve corporate goals. They involve the team in setting strategy.

To hidebound organizations, they bring a fresh assumption: Everybody has the potential to be inventive. They count on people to find new ways to make positive contributions. They are tolerant of others’ differences but intolerant of their indifference. They help individuals improve

their performance. Maverick team members believe that raising questions and offering new answers is a healthy way to behave.

Maverick team members are tolerant of others’ differences but intolerant of their indifference.

Paul Starita, former President of Royal Trust Investment Services, saw passion as meaning constantly setting new goals. *“A lot of super-achievers talk about going over budget to achieve goals. We did it differently. We*

*achieved a goal early and went out and set another goal instead of reveling for months about overachievement. We just drove on to something else.”*

### 2. Creative Cooperation

Members of maverick teams share their skills and learn from one another. They believe that anybody can have a good idea – including competitors. Tom Peters used to say that effective management teams should steal ideas, as long as they adapt them to their own circumstances. (Tom Peters, **Thriving on Chaos**, New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1987, pp 234-5). Adapting these principles, maverick team members are avid note takers, askers, listeners and learners.

Insight precedes discovery, and maverick teams know that creativity is applied insight.

They carefully examine opportunities, advantages, strengths and risks. They probe continuously. They encourage disagreement. They discuss problems with associates and subordinates. They strive to find original solutions because they believe

creativity makes them independent, self-directed and assertive.

Maverick teams strive to find original solutions because they believe creativity makes them independent, self-directed and assertive.



### 3. Exceptional communications

Maverick teams have great oral and written skills because they know words transmit energy, and that what they say or write can energize others. To get the electricity to begin flowing easily, maverick teams build mutual trust. Trust in turn builds interaction, while deflecting confusion, tension and resentment.

Maverick teams also know how to communicate without words. Every team member gives off “positive energy” that produces work synergy greater than the sum of individual contributions.

Importantly then, when team members follow the corporate strategic plan, it is the maverick teams that are quick to celebrate not only each others accomplishments but also accomplishments of other teams the moment they happen. This leads to an “accomplishment attitude”, where mutual trust keeps communication out in the open, and where teams never give up, and keep trying something until it works.

### 4. Crisis Cool

A crisis is a turning point, for better or for worse, but they all have a decisive moment. Organizations, like empires, crumble in crisis, or survive and thrive. Maverick teams know how to exercise a lot of control on destiny even in “worst case scenarios.”

One prime reason for this is that they have their strategic plans at the ready. When a crisis hits, team members act in coordinated fashion. They will immediately put into ac-

Mutual trust keeps communication out in the open. Teams never give up and keep trying something until it works.

A solid strategic plan will add immensely to success. When the CEO dictates less and coaches more, managers stop becoming soldiers and start becoming “players.”

tion a crisis management plan instead of acting arbitrarily. They will avoid making decisions in a vacuum. They will employ strategic brainstorming techniques to search for alternative solutions. They will challenge themselves to find an effective solution instead of

just seizing on the first one. And finally, maverick teams exhibit confidence in the actions that they take.

Like slam-dunking a basketball, effective decision-making is a technique. Maverick teams understand decision mechanics. Not only do they take charge, often they find gold in the rubble to see a new and more profitable day.

### 5. Manage Risk

John Scully of Apple once said: “People who take risks are the people you’ll lose against.” (*Joe D. Batten, Tough Minded Leadership, New York: AMACOM, 1989, p. 90*)

When fostering and working with maverick teams, CEOs will take risks. Assembling a maverick team may rock or endanger the old corporate culture. CEOs must be prepared to

return to the dynamic of building new dynasties that create consumer value and positively affect share price before the next competitor does. This may make stakeholders edgy.

The successful CEO will employ the art of effective board management and get the buy-

in from his or her leadership team in order to positively transform the company metaphor. A solid strategic plan will add immeasurably to success. When the CEO dictates less and coaches more, managers stop becoming sol-



diers and start becoming “players.” All are forced to dig down for skill sets not used often enough. The coach must project a winning attitude. Ordinary players then often rise or inspire each other to the extraordinary. Not to be over-used, the sports metaphor taken from the most successful of teams teaches us in business that maverick teams lever good individual performance into resounding team victories. Don Rolfe, CEO of Central 1 Credit Union, said: “In merging Credit Union Central of B.C. with Credit Union Central of Ontario, a big challenge was demystifying risk as seen by two different cultures while simultaneously solving some key balance sheet issues to make the merger work. One challenge was to ensure that at the end of the day nobody on the team wore past practices as an albatross around their necks, but rather sought new solutions that could make a difference to the members we serve every day.”

### **More than a trend**

Are maverick teams a model for tomorrow’s business architects? I believe that what goes

round comes round. The maverick teams of the eighties and early nineties are about to return, albeit with Machiavellian leadership being replaced by CEOs who understand how the human spirit can better respond to team play in new effective ways. Some will consider maverick teams as the latest fad. I don’t believe the maverick team play ever left – they have just been hiding. Good teams more often than not win games. Great teams win championships. How often have we heard the expression “on paper, they’re a great

I am hopeful more companies will bring maverick teams back to lap the competition in the race for tomorrow’s fickle customer.

team?” To become a great team means having to learn “how” to win. I am hopeful more companies will bring maverick teams back to lap the competition in the race for tomorrow’s fickle consumer.

*Sam Cukierman, Dobri Stojsic and Stephen Kroll participated in the research leading up to the original article Maverick Teams, which has been refreshed and re-edited in its current iteration. Sam Cukierman is a Partner, The Strategic Planning Group, and part time Professor of Marketing Strategy, Rotman School of Management, MBA program.*

### **About Sam Cukierman**

Sam has combined over 25 years in executive officer line and staff positions in some of Canada's major organizations (Bank of Montreal, Royal Trust, Cantel, CIBC) where he held senior executive positions. As a consultant he founded two of his own consulting companies. Combining practical knowledge, hands-on leadership, strategy, a qualitative research focus group expertise, proven, tested packaged goods processes, and coaching skills, he brings discipline and senior strategic acumen to us. He has helped build businesses (strategy, products, sales management), develop and change brands, handle turnarounds, and been recognized with awards including the American Marketing Association's McCaskill Award for Marketing Excellence. He has published major research, including The Aging Baby Boomer, Canada, On-Line Brokerage, Canada, and On-Line Banking, Canada. Sam is a faculty member of the Rotman Business School, University of Toronto, where he teaches Advanced Marketing Strategy in the MBA program. He is a graduate of McGill University and has an MBA degree from the University of Western Ontario.



*About*  
**The Strategic Planning Group**

The Strategic Planning Group (T.S.P.G.) is a full service consulting firm that can provide organizations with a wide range of advice, business tools and solutions. At T.S.P.G. our focus is on helping our clients solve their complex issues to realize their ultimate business potential, whether we are helping to set the overall strategy for the organization or assisting in a particular functional area. Our practical-results-oriented approach to solving business problems, combined with our personal commitment and dedication to providing great value for our clients, makes us the consultants of choice to blue-chip executives across North America.

We aspire to be more than just consultants. For us to be successful in helping you we need to understand how you operate and what challenges you are currently facing. We want to help you achieve your goals and your ultimate business potential. To accomplish this we must be trusted and objective advisors by contributing our knowledge, experience and thinking in ways that have a positive impact. We want to be *your* consultants of choice – as we are for other senior executives – for all of your strategic business needs.

*How to Reach Us*

The Strategic Planning Group  
258 Adelaide Street East, Suite 201  
Toronto, Ontario M5A 1N1  
Tel: (416) 366-4774 Fax: (416) 366-4775  
[www.tspg-consulting.com](http://www.tspg-consulting.com)