BIZCOMMUNITY

Five lessons in strategy from the non-profit world

By Nicola Tyler

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Nestled in the heart of the Austrian Alps, Tyrol is home to some of the world's best wines (yes, who knew?), heritage architectural sites and, of course, ski resorts. Innsbruck, the state's capital, is the only city to be found within the Alps. Innsbruck is also home to one of the world's most diverse organisations – SOS Children's Villages. This 1.2 billion euro non-profit supports over one million parentless and homeless children around the world and lives for it's mission that “no child should grow up alone”. During a recent trip to Innsbruck to work with SOS, I learned a lot about the parallel workings of the for-profit and not-for-profit worlds.



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Serious about strategy

It was clear to me as co-facilitator that this is a non-profit with a very clear plan. Child care isn’t a short-term plan; it requires long-term thinking, particularly when you are working with children from the age of nine-days-old to 19. During the first week of February, more than 100 leaders from around the world gathered in Inssbruck, representing more than 15 countries from all continents. It became a knowledge incubator for sharing best practice, lessons on advocacy and children’s rights. A veritable feast of case studies were prepared, shared, consumed and cross-referenced. The goal? To kick off the 2030 Strategy and to ensure that SOS is sustained beyond 2030.

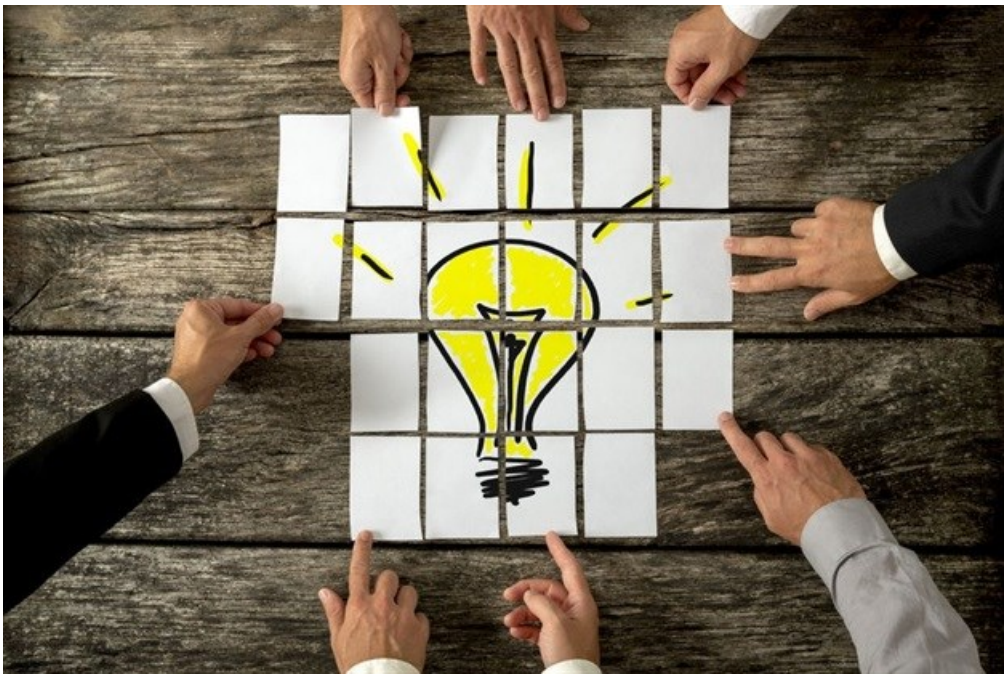
Lesson learned: *Strategy, good strategy, not only requires clear planning, but also a serious investment in engaging leadership to take ownership and implement that strategy. Great strategy involves the people. Awesome strategy ensures that people own the strategy beyond the leadership team.*

Democratic decision-making

The SOS Children’s Villages operate a federal system. Long-term decisions are made in the senate, comprising

representatives from member associates, who are made up of country members that meet a specific set of criteria. A quality assurance model is in place to ensure appropriate governance and practices for child care within a country or region. Members have a vote in the senate, and these votes are used to appoint a president, vice-president, and 'a board' for a finite period of time. The senate meets every four years to decide and plan on the future leadership team, and to sanction a strategy for both fundraising and child care. National associates are also present, but do not have a vote. These aspirant members participate vigorously in the debates but a vote is only granted once they have met the criteria for inclusion.

Lesson Learned: *While democracy often appears to be a slow wheel to turn, there is much to be said for the level of debate that occurs among equals, giving rise to higher levels of engagement and transparency, not often seen in a typical "for profit" environment. While potentially flawed, the voting system of this working world ensured vigorous and non-adversarial debates. A welcome sight indeed.*



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Knowledge sharing

The world of this NGO, like any typical organisation, is broken down into regions, with directors appointed to work and lobby governments and organisations, NGOs and communities. When it comes to child rearing, everyone is involved. For three days, Innsbruck became home to a brains trust of skills, experiences and case studies on child care, and everyone had a voice. A powerhouse of insights were garnered by participants through a carefully planned and well-orchestrated event, allowing knowledge sharing and debate.

Lesson learned: *When you invest that heavily in getting the right people in a room, invest as heavily in having them lead the learning. This was not about leadership and "at you" presentations, this was about questions, answers and engagement. The presentations from leadership were not only brief, but encompassed carefully facilitated Q&A sessions that were entirely interactive with the audience.*

Programme review and undo

What in business we might call a 'strategic initiative', in the world of NGOs is often called a 'programme'. These are specific projects to which specific funds are allocated. It is an incubator of ideas and opportunities. External organisations sponsor the research programmes, conferences, interventions, development programmes, and more. What is clear is that these funds are respected, and protected, with careful monitoring and review processes in place from the outset. Programmes may be funded for short periods of time, or over the longer-term. Those that are considered successful may then be

integrated into the ongoing care programmes.

Lesson learned: *We could take a leaf out of this world when it comes to innovation in business. It would be nice to see more frequent strategy testing programmes, where initiatives are first funded and tested, before being implemented. A real incubator for strategic initiatives, instead of full steam ahead with ideas that may end up in file 13. Worth thinking about. Worth considering. Worth doing!*

Strength in diversity

The group of thinkers was diverse, with participants from more than over 15 countries. Diversity is often seen as 'colour' or race in South Africa, but here we witnessed the true power of diversity. Diversity of race for sure, but also diversity of expertise, of culture, economic background and age. Diversity of experience (some had been in the organisation for a few weeks and others for two decades), diversity of information, perspectives and outlook. The mix was electric. It was also respectful and inclusive and brought about new insights, creativity and a considerable drive toward a common purpose - no child should grow up alone. People from all walks of life came come together to achieve a common objective.

Lesson learned: *Diversity can be difficult, causing discomfort, a lack of trust and communication challenges among other things, but the commitment to a truly diverse team can bring profound value. Diversity works! It encourages the consideration of alternatives, drives creativity and a thirst for innovation. I cannot overemphasise the value of a clear strategic goal that goes beyond the numbers and unites a team. What could be achieved if everyone in your organisation woke up as committed today as they were yesterday, to the goal of your organisation? I've said for years – people don't get out of bed for a number. Don't have a mission, create a movement.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicola Tyler is CEO of Business Results Group and a highly respected strategic thinker. With over 20 years of experience in Strategy, Consulting, Leadership, Development and Coaching, she is an Associate of the Gordon Institute of Business, a Master Trainer in a full range of de Bono Thinking tools. Working both locally and internationally, she delivers her own "Strategic Conversation" methodology to senior teams committed to innovation and driving sustainable results. Nicola has shared the stage with world renowned thought leaders such as Tom Peters, Robert Kaplan, Ricardo Semler, Edward de Bono, Dave Ulrich, Martin Seligman, Richard Koch and Martin Lindstrom.

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