

The Pony Express: Lessons for Modern-Day Restructurers

Roger Kaufman

The year is 1861, and the Board of Directors of the Pony Express calls a strategic planning meeting for June 4th, a nice warm day. Although the mail service has been operating for 14 months—the envy of the modern world—there are rumors of problems, even competition!

"There is talk," the chairman of the board announces, "perhaps more than chatter, that cities will be linked by some contraption that a certain Sam Morse has been playing with, called the 'telegraph.'" Our task, before any of us leaves, is to recognize threats to our operation and plan to overcome them. Strategy!"

He looks over to their consultant—a professor from a prestigious university—who slowly uncoils from his slouch and explains about "SWOTs": Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. "But before we identify these," the academic notes, "we have to create a vision, a broad statement of our purposes and direction. Then we must have a mission statement."

Creating a Vision

The board breaks into small groups to brainstorm ideas for the mission statement. Before lunch, they agree on one: "Excellence in Delivering the Mail." They break for lunch.

Returning to the boardroom, they examine their SWOTs. They find their *strengths* easy to list: letters between St. Joe and the coast in 10 days, reliability, positive image. *Weaknesses*? Well, being made up of two operating companies, there is some loss of efficiency in trying to serve two masters. *Opportunities* include the possibility of turning the Pony Express into a public utility and doing some research to develop faster horses. They might get into a new business, one person suggests, or convert the current horse stops into a franchised chain of boarding houses. *Threats* are tough for them. After much soul-searching, they admit that the new competitor with wires and poles could possibly deliver messages in less time (if, of course, this just wasn't a flash-in-the-pan). Cautiously, one board member remarks that they might want to consider going out of business while they're still making a profit. He is ignored.

The group turns to developing a strategic plan based on the SWOTs. The creativity blazes, ideas flow. "Six-legged horses." "More rest stops to increase energy and cut down on fatigue." "More riders." "Streamlined harnesses and saddles." "Expand service to New York." "Get rid of the unions." "Higher wages." "Get a law passed that restricts communication services to the Pony Express." "Increase options: let clients select their rider, the routes, time of pickup and delivery."

Deciding to Restructure

After generating all these ideas, the board decides to *restructure*. This will help them make a better future for their com-

pany. Within two days they generate a restructuring plan. It includes (1) the immediate addition of services to New York and Boston, (2) more riders and support staff, (3) mandatory attendance at a highly recognized "quality" seminar, (4) improved whips, (5) more frequent departures, (6) more options to clients, (7) incentive bonuses to workers for higher productivity, and (8) the new banner "Unlimited Pony Service (UPS)."

The board votes almost unanimously for the plan; only one person dissents, saying that "the restructuring plan fails to account for the changed realities of the world . . . the idea of horses delivering the mail is as dead as, well, as dead as high-buttoned shoes and celluloid collars."

On June 15th the restructuring plan is put into operation with vigor, energy, and hope. In October the Pony Express closes as a result of the overwhelming pressure of the competition from the Pacific Telegraph Company, which had strung wires along the paths where their horses raced.

This restructuring was well-intended, but the planners assumed that all that had to be done was to make the operation work better and people work harder. They failed to consider new realities and opportunities, so they couldn't generate fresh goals, objectives, and missions.

Fighting the War at Hand

One hundred thirty years later, schoolchildren still read the romance of the Pony Express. Others wonder if there are lessons to learn from that historic experience. Well there are a few:

1. Missions should be related to reality and results, not just to ringing rhetoric.
2. Working smarter is much better than working harder.
3. Restructuring, or change, should be based upon the realities of the future, not just the facts of the past (most generals fight the last war, not the one at hand).
4. No amount of good intentions can substitute for useful consequences.
5. Create the future you want, not the one that already is.
6. Don't keep riding a failing horse until it drops dead under you.

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do you give, what do you get? Key to this process are the skills of preparing measurable performance indicators and writing mission objectives for specified results at appropriate (and selected) levels (Kaufman 1991, Kaufman and Herman 1991).

The next step is to identify SWOTs: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The planners use internal and external scanning to unearth the system's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and then analyze them. It is important to ensure that

scanning includes all the SWOTs. So that all partners in the system have the same marching orders, the planners derive decision rules, that is, results-referenced policies such as "all course objectives will link to school, system, and societal objectives." These deci-

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