

WHEN A CORPORATE LEADER CEASES TO be effective, it is time to retire. However brilliant they may once have been, there will be a moment when their value has diminished and they need to step aside. For sports professionals past their prime, the same holds true. We retire clothes that we once considered elegant, but which now have lost their shape and no longer serve the purpose for which they were bought. This is the natural course of events.

The word has been used so often that it's become almost pointless, says Brunswick's **EDWARD STEPHENS**

Strangely, we are reluctant to apply the same discipline to the words we use in business, which can have a dulling effect no less profound than a doddering CEO at the helm. Business today is replete with words that either have lost their meaning or are so bland and shop-soiled that they convey nothing. Take the word "strategy."

A search for "strategy" on the Harvard Business Review website produces more than 30,000 results, while a writer for the digital news outlet Quartz

The more you write
STRATEGY,
the less likely it is you have one



ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN ELFMAN



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found more than 725,000 results when searching LinkedIn for job titles with “strategy.” According to Google’s Ngram viewer, which shows how frequently a word or phrase appears in the 30 million books scanned by the company, strategy appeared in writing six times more often in 2008 than it did in 1940, controlling for the difference in the number of books scanned from each year.

“Strategic” charted a similar rise in literature – and on LinkedIn. For the past five years, it has made the site’s list of the top 10 “overused buzzwords,” coming in at No. 4 in 2017.

Why the overuse? Part of the answer is a desire to impress. The assumption is that a “strategic budget” sounds more thought-out and important than a budget – that a “strategic plan” is more compelling than a plain-old plan.

Why have a Hiring Plan when you can have a Human Resources Strategy? And who could resist a strategic review, or being appointed Strategic Adviser, or being asked to consider strategic options, or opening a strategic location?

But are budgets and plans and options and reviews only strategic if we say they are? In almost every instance, deleting “strategic” sacrifices nothing except nine letters. Beverly Gaskin, Executive Director of Global Purchasing for General Motors, said it well: “Strategic buying is an oxymoron. If you’re doing anything in the buying field that isn’t strategic, you shouldn’t be doing it.”

This overuse of the word has led to a kind of chronic fatigue from which there is unlikely to be a recovery. The term now communicates precisely nothing, in much the same way that companies who proudly profess their allegiance to Excellence, Integrity, Respect and Customer Satisfaction manage only to communicate that they share the same values as any half-decent business, anywhere, throughout history – exactly what you would hope any business would do. So why brag about it as if it is something distinctive or special?

Other once-useful words have also been drained of their meaning and now face the same inexorable decline to nothingness.

“Literally,” for example, has seen its definition altered beyond repair – even in the venerable Merriam Webster dictionary – to reflect modern misuse. Now, literally can mean “an exaggerated way to emphasize a statement or description” – in other words, “literally” can now mean not literally at all.

The overuse of “strategy,” though, is starting to bear negative consequences – hence the need for its retirement.

The first is that it promotes a general confusion around what a strategy is and what it isn’t. A vision is where you want to go, a mission is what you want to achieve, a strategy details how you’ll get there, and tactics are how you’ll enact the strategy. They can overlap and reinforce one another, certainly, but these words – vision, mission, strategy, tactics – are not interchangeable. We know that strategies are important – hence all the books and job titles – but they become laughably meaningless when everything and anything is called a strategy or labeled strategic.

Business-strategy guru Michael Porter concluded that a key part of any strategy is “about making choices, trade-offs; it’s about deliberately choosing to be different.” That adds a touch of irony: Where “strategy” implies a choice to be different, its overuse implies the opposite.

The “strategy” and “strategic” flood is also typical of the inauthentic, woolen language that pollutes and weakens corporate communications. That’s the second problem. For far too many consumers and employees, straight talk remains elusive and business speak, all too common. Not a good approach to build trust and credibility – which everyone agrees is both valuable and in short supply.

“The great enemy of clear language is insincerity,” George Orwell wrote in 1946. “When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms.”

Progress, on any meaningful scale, is unlikely while “strategy” remains unchallenged in its current role.

In her best-selling book, *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, Marie Kondo writes of the liberating moment when you look at clothes or possessions you no longer need or want, thank them for their good and faithful service, and part ways with them. It is difficult, even painful, she acknowledges, but critical if one is to move ahead, free of clutter.

“Strategy” has become part of the clutter of business. It no longer serves the need for which it was intended. It is time to part ways, as it seems Southwest Airlines co-founder Herb Kelleher has already done.

“Strategy is overrated, simply doing stuff is underrated,” he said. “We have a strategic plan. It’s called doing things.”

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