Management
Ask SCORE

The Business Goblins

On Halloween evening I was watching all the scary ghosts, witches, monsters and all sorts of masked figures parade to our house. As I waited for the next attack of “tricks or treats”, I found myself reflecting about some of the SCORE conversations that I had the past week with start-up business clients. One common theme was the fear and trembling with which they approached their planning process. Some were afraid of all the details (“dragons”). Some were afraid of all the writing (“witches”). Some were concerned about the money (“monster”). Others reflected on all the stories of successes and failures (ghosts) that they have been told about their business ideas.

My first reaction to all of these business “tricks” usually was, “great!, you are beginning to really deal with the important parts of starting your own business”. A business plan is like “unmasking” the hidden issues that you must address before you start. In fact, the process of going through the building of a business plan is the most important aspect of the plan. It helps you see your business future without the unknowns. That is the “treat” of doing the business plan.

In addition to the business plan templates that we share in our business planning seminar, we also suggest other tools like Business Plan Pro which is a commercially available software that assists in writing a business plan. I just read a business blog written by Tim Berry, President and founder of Palo Alto Software, who publishes that product. He built Palo Alto Software from zero to 40 employees and 70% market share without outside investment. Here are five tricks Tim says will help you make business planning a part of managing your business better:

1. Keep the planning simple and practical.
Your plan should be measurable, and include strategy, dates, deadlines, metrics, and basic projections, plus a review schedule. This is critical: when will we review and revise? The goal is to keep the plan alive.

2. Grow it organically.
The worst thing you could do is avoid taking any action until you've developed a complete plan. Don't put anything off for planning; plan as you develop your business.

3. Think it, plan it, test it.
Stay on top of your quickly-changing plan and manage your assumptions as the reality emerges. You'll continually be going back to the plan, looking at how everything is related, and making adjustments as needed.
4. **Use agile planning.**
Real-world business planning, particularly in periods of rapid change, should be pretty darn agile. And rapid. Plan it, build it, revise it, plan it again. That's the planning process, and without it you don't control your destiny.

5. **Lather, rinse, repeat.**
Planning has to be like steering - a matter of constant small corrections within a broad navigational plan. The details change, but all within the context of the long-term direction. You're always reviewing and revising.

If you need help in your business, contact SCORE, mentors to America’s Small businesses. They provide free, confidential counseling as well as informational seminars.

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