

The Birth of a Strategy at DAI Fast Growth Comes With Its Own Issues- Like the Need to Expand and Diversify a Client Base

The business need

In the last decade, Bethesda-based DAI, which implements international development projects in 60+ countries, has experienced an impressive growth. DAI works to improve governance, infrastructure, agriculture, business, health care, the environment, and other areas vital to the progress of developing countries. The U.S. Agency for International Development has historically provided the bulk of the firm's revenue. In the past few years, the agency has been heavily focused on rebuilding Afghanistan. DAI has rapidly become the number-one firm working in the country on various stability, governance, agriculture, and economic development projects.

However, such fast growth comes with its own issues. The challenge facing DAI became the need to expand and diversify its client base.

The solution

With the help of Root, DAI leaders took the first step: defining its current reality. The Root team helped define the marketplace and DAI's position in it. Part of this process included an assessment of potential game-changers on the horizon, such as a reduction in foreign aid caused by the worldwide financial crisis and a major shift in how development work gets funded.

The next step of the process was to develop a compelling plan for the future, followed by aligning priorities to reach that future. It was clear that DAI needed a strategy to translate the excellence of its work for USAID into a broader market presence.

In the past, DAI had created other strategies that looked great on paper but were challenging to execute. Leaders realized the need to focus not only on creating a strategy, but also on alignment, engagement, and measurement. "The crucial difference between this strategy and those of years past is that strategy used to be approached as homework. Once they were finished and studied, they all turned into dusty documents," said DAI's Dan Hogan, Vice President of Business Development. "Kudos to management for getting us here. We are grounded and able to determine what needs to change about us to move forward."



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For the next few months, DAI worked to establish a vision – a concept of what it means to be a global development company. Although a client base including the U.K. Department for International Development, the European Commission, the Gates Foundation, and others was in place, DAI had been pigeon-holed as a project implementer for USAID. They now wanted to offer its diverse services to an expanded, more locally driven client base from offices around the world, proactively selling and positioning solutions to new buyers in different ways.

Implementation

Leadership and the Board of Directors were involved in the process from the start. Eventually, DAI engaged more than 1,000 employees across the world in two Strategic Learning Map® modules: one on the marketplace and one on strategy.

For each module, a rollout was held in Bethesda, where many employees are based. Each employee was invited to a live session, going through the marketplace module first and then the strategy module. This was later extended to include video conferences with the international offices and training sessions with employees who regularly travel to project sites and corporate offices to serve as facilitators and share the modules there.

Results

The modules got people engaged in how the new strategy will meet the challenges to come. They brought to life the story of the marketplace and DAI's strategy.

“The hardest thing to do, both for an organization and an individual, is to look in the mirror and determine what we need to change about ourselves,” said DAI's Jim Winkler, Chief of Party, Vietnam. “And we are doing just that. Two key elements I look for in a strategy are inspiration and aspiration. The strategy should leave you inspired, and aspiring to the very clear view of where we are headed. This strategy does both.”

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About Root

Root is a strategy execution company that helps organizations engage people as a catalyst for change using a proven framework that consistently achieves clarity, ownership, and results.

