CHAPTER 6

The Executive Summary

While we have already seen an example of a summary slide at the end of each phase of STRATEGY, it is worth stepping back to touch on alternative structures before drafting an overall summary. Regardless of the length and structure, a clear and cogent summary of the major components of your strategy is essential. It will help to clarify your own thoughts and can provide better understanding for the members of your audience who are less familiar or even entirely new to the exercise.

The summary should be as brief as possible and to the point. The less verbiage obscuring the recommendations, the better. The summary should be succinct and direct, but not be so brief as to obscure the richness of the strategy, nor to reduce excessively the complexity of your proposals. As Albert Einstein also said, “things should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler.”

No doubt there will need to be multiple iterations on the final summary, an exercise well worth the time that it demands. To be realistic, in some busy companies the summary is critical since it is all that may ever be read or remembered by senior executives or board members.

Long and Short Versions

Essentially there are two types of executive summary. A long version can reprise the salient points of all phases of the entire strategy from diagnosis to implementation and often attaches a number of key illustrative charts from the full presentation. A shorter version usually focuses on a short summary of the diagnosis and design phases, attaches a timetable for implementation, and raises any expected challenges of exceptional significance. As a rule of thumb, the longer version can be up to ten pages long, while the short version should be a few pages in length, usually only two or three.

The long version may be best employed in situations where the key audience may be new to the business, may need more convincing on a major change program, or may operate in a culture where thorough and
comprehensive discussion is valued. These longer summaries demand a very clear summary of the most important points in each of the three stages of STRATEGY and may expand on selected points made in the summaries inserted after each of the three phases in the full presentation. This discipline of one summary page per phase, as embedded in the example above, may be useful to focus debate on the most important elements in the flow of logic as you go through your presentation. This more comprehensive summary can ensure that all parties have understood and signed on to all elements of the STRATEGY program.

The short version may be best employed in situations where executives are familiar with the business situation and are used to short, action-oriented summaries. A one-page summary, as shown in the example, has the advantage of capturing all elements of the strategy on one page which can remain up on the screen or turned to for common discussion at the end of a presentation in a paper version. This single-page summary can provide a framework to focus active debate and to gain consensus as point after point is either agreed or sent back for further analysis or refinement.

With either long or short form of summary, there should be no hiding or blurring of tough conclusions, no pulling punches on the actions recommended, and no obscuring the degree of envisioned change.

**In the Beginning is the End—Sometimes**

The US Army has a simple rule on how to communicate in order to be remembered which requires the speaker or presenter to make the same point three times:

First, tell them what you are going to tell them  
Second, tell them  
Third, tell them what you told them.

This means that each member of the audience will have heard the key message three times rather than once, and is thus far more likely to remember accurately the content of the communication. Applying this rule to a STRATEGY presentation would require the presentation to provide an overall Executive Summary up front, followed by another summary slide at each phase in the body of the presentation and another copy of the same initial Executive Summary at the end. In most cases, this is the recommended format for a STRATEGY presentation.