Arguably, the one critical component required for the successful launch of any new business enterprise is getting the strategy right. Your bank or your investors will demand it, your employees will need it and your confidence will be bolstered by it.

While strategic planning has become a corporate obsession, very few organizations are truly strategic. A mountain of evidence and a wide spectrum of respected theorists confirm this fact. The H a r v a r d B u s i n e s s R e v i e w recently reported that "Strategic planning...perpetuates the status quo and ...reduces peripheral vision and flexibility in adapting to uncertain and rapidly changing circumstances."

Indeed, t h e exercise of developing a business strategy seems to have lost its fundamental purpose. For the most part, it has become a cookie-cutter, fill-inthe-blanks and follow-the-crowd process. Hence, in terms of its essential objective, it is now largely a waste of precious time and valuable resources.

The current abysmal state of strategic planning is a consequence of a fatal assumption: that a decent strategy is "the answer" t o i n c e s s a n t c h a n g e and increasing complexity, volatility and unpredictability. Therein lies it fundamental Achilles heel - it's not the final answer but rather an ongoing process of thinking about your business going forward.

General Dwight Eisenhower, before he became U.S. president, observed that "plans are useless but planning is everything." It follows that the fundamental purpose of strategic planning may well be to learn how to think strategically about your new business enterprise.

The reason most strategic plans don't work that well is that they are primarily goal-setting exercises - and goals are not strategies. As the renowned management guru Peter Drucker once advised: "Whats without hows isn't planning, it's merely wishful thinking."

Those who acknowledge the limitations of current efforts recognize that planning should be:

\* Less about directions and more about problem-solving;

\* Less about prediction and more about experimentation, learning and achieving resilience;

\* Less about top-down directions and more about engaging the entire organization in the process.

A good business strategy should establish priorities and timeframes, identify alternatives and options, allocate resources and specify accountabilities. Michael Porter, acknowledged as the originator of the term "competitive advantage," suggests it should also include a list of the "things we won't do."

In other words, your business strategy should be aimed at solving real problems - namely their diagnosis, and the proposed execution of solutions - instead of simply replicating the vague, high-level, generalized intentions found in most business plans. The key question for the leader of a start-up venture therefore is this one: Does your strategy meet this test?

Strategy should not be about here's where we want to go; rather, it should delineate what's stopping us from getting there. Being strategic is being less myopic than your competitors and knowing the difference between what's important and what's actionable. It means making hard choices in a disciplined manner and f inding a genuine point of difference in the marketplace.

Most new business entrepreneurs tend to assume that failed strategies are due to circumstances beyond their control. This kind of thinking is a self-serving rationalization, if not a delusion. Failure is more likely a consequence of not building disagreement and constructive conflict into the formulation of the strategy in the first place.

In most new enterprises, understandably, there are few mechanisms in place to detect the "red flags" that denote impending failure. Sufficient time has not passed to enable the building of a culture that encourages the asking of tough questions. While reading the literature on past bus i n e s s f a i l u r e s c a n b e instructive, often the best source for detecting the inevitable speed bumps is to heed what outsiders are saying about your business - your customers, the media, analysts and industry experts. These are the conversations that can shock-proof your evolving strategy from unanticipated surprises.

Developing "what if " scenarios as a method of challenging critical assumptions, especially about what could go wrong, is also instructive. Too often, organizations blindly follow their chosen strategies in the name of "vision" and "opportunity" without undertaking the necessary thorough and independent due diligence. This course of action is foolhardy.

Research tells us rather convincingly that most new businesses underestimate the complexity that comes wi th growth, fai l to adequately identify and evaluate all of the options and risks, and overestimate the hold they have on their customer base. A recent study from management consulting firm Bain, for example, noted that 80 per cent of executives said their company's products were superior to their competitors, even though only eight per cent of their customers agreed.

These cognitive biases are compounded internally by managerial group-think and a fear of robustly questioning the new business leader. Very few start-up organizations put in place an agreed-upon process for challenging and reconsidering their strategic priorities - in a survey of 500 executives, fewer than 10 indicated that such a mechanism for sober analysis was in place within their own organizations.

So, as a new business leader, what can you do to lessen the risk of creating a strategy that is destined to fail? Here are some suggestions:

\* Institutionalize healthy skepticism in your managerial ranks and legitimize the role of devil's advocate;

\* Before you even begin, decide how you will decide - determine the critical criteria and the framework that will govern the strategicthinking process and the outcomes;

\* Ask yourself if you would do what you are proposing to do if your (and your family's) own money were at stake - this usually makes one think twice about overtly risky initiatives;

\* Develop contingency plans for the worst-case scenarios - a realistic assessment of key assumptions and risk factors will prove quite sobering; and

\* Ensure the proposed new business strategy contains oversight mechanisms and incentives for monitoring feedback (like customer and employee surveys) that might prove useful in making midcourse adjustments.

At the root of every failed business plan or strategy is a set of assumptions about the future that proved false. You can't predict the future, so don't even try. Rather, seek to build a healthy, resilient enterprise by building in mechanisms, rules and systems that can withstand the inevitable stressors to your business. Then regularly revisit your priorities and reorder the agenda accordingly.