



I've Been Thinking about... Strategic Planning

Is there still a place for long-term planning in an ever-changing world? How does an effective leader balance competing interests from diverse stakeholders?

By Martha Golensky

When trying to cope with the crisis of the moment, a harried CEO might be forgiven for thinking that stepping back to consider the organization's long-term needs is an unaffordable luxury. However, I would argue that strategic planning is a necessity, not an indulgence, and more important today than ever before. The real issue is not *whether* to engage in this type of planning but *how*.

First, I want to make a distinction between *strategic management* and *strategic planning*. The former refers to the organization's efforts to remain true to its mission while responding to the external environment. The latter is the process to achieve these desired ends. The key to success is commitment by organizational leaders, managers, and the board, to producing a living document that addresses immediate concerns along with future opportunities and challenges.

One of the biggest differences between past and present-day strategic planning is the time period covered. Although plans for five years and longer used to be common, today two to three years is more the rule. Even then, it's important to review the plan yearly and make adjustments to fit current circumstances. Such flexibility ensures that new, exciting service avenues can be pursued without sacrificing viable programs.

Preparation is also important in producing good results. For in-

stance, think through why you want to strategize, taking into account the often competing interests of internal and external stakeholders. Is the ultimate goal growth, by introducing a new program or service, or market concentration, with a focus on using resources to promote what the organization does best? Is the highest priority increased efficiency or greater effectiveness, or are both equally important?

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Set aside time to research planning models, and then choose one that will help you meet your goals while also being compatible with your organizational culture. Recently, a colleague shared an experience where these two factors weren't in sync, leading to a less-than-happy outcome.

She was engaged by a rather traditional nonprofit to facilitate its planning effort. The CEO and board president wanted to use a process different from the one used for their previous planning effort, which had consumed many months of reviewing great amounts of documentation and convening several town meetings with people served by the organization.

The consultant outlined a more intuitive approach requiring a few pre-planning meetings but with the

bulk of the work occurring during a day-and-a-half retreat attended by a representative group of key stakeholders. This seemed just the ticket.

Midway through the pre-planning, however, the CEO began to question the fundamental assumptions of the new approach. By the time of the retreat, other participants knew of her ambivalence and some chose not to follow the consultant's directions. Not surprisingly, time ran out before the agenda could be completed. The final version of the plan, developed subsequently by organizational members, was noticeably short on measurable details.

This incident raises a final point: Know your audience. If the strategic plan is being developed solely for internal use, a broadly stated set of goals and objectives may be sufficient. But if you're doing this to demonstrate the organization's strengths to funders or regulatory bodies, such a lack of specificity will send just the opposite message.

In truth, even as a guide for the organization itself, a plan isn't worth much if it doesn't set priorities to allocate resources in the most effective, efficient manner. You may still call it a plan, but there isn't anything strategic about it. ■

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