

The Futility of Planning?

Why do we bother to plan, when a sudden dip in the stock market or the loss of a leader could make our plans simply go up in smoke? Is that an incorrect question? Perhaps a better question is what are we planning for? What is the end we seek? If we can get clear about that, perhaps a number of different strategies could be explored. But then we ask which strategies would work? So we are once again in a quandary. Why bother? The answer lies in the power of the process rather than the outcome.

I sometimes use scenario planning as a strategic planning process because I like the evolutionary nature of the process. The unrestrained approach allows organizations to give up dichotomous thinking, and to embrace a "both/and/all" way of thinking. Undergirding the process are experimentation, trial and error, multiple perspectives, aligned employees and leaders and organizational legends, all of which are spun from the foundation of core beliefs and values.

So why is the process so important? "Process" implies movement and energy. Whenever there is energy, there is life, so the process of planning has an opportunity to give life to the organization. But, life often takes interesting twists and turns, so our planning can reflect the circuitous, undulating nature of life and the global community. Suppose organizations had as a goal to expand, evolve and come alive. What would organizations be with such a goal?

You might say that driving toward greater market shares and bigger profit margins make happy shareholders in for-profits, or better programs and reaching a larger portion of the community make happy stakeholders in nonprofits and government agencies. But, there's more to organizing as a company than the location of the next new product or service. Emotions such as compassion, gratitude and joy, as well as enjoying a sense of value or worth in the world community come to mind as drivers of change. The process of planning can have heart.

A fascinating man whom I met in a training program a few years ago, reported that as a 30 year veteran in sales, he's never sold anyone *anything*. He said he was only a responsive problem-solver! Some may say that was a creative reframing of the sales process, but I say that the salesman enjoyed the process and invested life into his work: a responsive problem-solver has heart.

Sometimes planning can be "heady," fraught with tables and reports that provide gleeful moments for the analytical types. To the extent that the analyticals come alive in the process, planning from that perspective is working to benefit the organization. Tables and reports are only part of the story, no matter how important they may seem to be.

Other perspectives may build on the analysis or offer a departure from it and "blink" toward innovation. (For those who may be wondering, the "blink" terminology references Malcolm Gladwell's wonderful book [Blink](#), which explores an inexplicable knowing that we all have that can provide remarkable insights) Intuitive or innovative perspectives also bring life to the planning process, providing yet another thread of excitement. But, innovation requires method

and structure. Countless good ideas never get translated into viable products or services, because there is no one willing and able to "put legs on them."

So much planning stays at a dream state, never giving way to method and structure. Implementation is the practicality of planning. Even though strategy may be the protagonist in the drama of planning, the lack of implementation planning can be an unfortunate antagonist. Often implementation is seen as the next step after the sexy work of strategic thinking is complete. There is a symbiotic relationship between strategy and implementation, much like the relationship between sales/marketing and production, or the board retreat planning and the executive director's staffing resources for implementation. It is critical that one feeds the other in a life-giving way, requiring mutual respect, understanding each other's organizational or departmental cultures, *listening-based* communication and interpersonal trust. Embracing multiple perspectives allows for an enlivened planning process.

If there is an investment in enlivening the process with heart and multiple perspectives, planning can be built on the foundation of essential beliefs and values - we sometimes call them core beliefs and values. If we strip away all the ups and downs of business and examine what is consistently true for that business, the core values and beliefs appear. Uncovering core beliefs is a spiritual experience, since the spirit of the organization, from which the mission and vision and plans take life, is grounded or held stable from the core.

Futile? Planning can be a journey to the core of the organization, allowing the joy of experience and expectations to coalesce into a focus that reflects life and the process of living. From my perspective, that's vital!

Eleanor Hooks, Ph.D., *president of The Smart Change Group, Inc., is an organization development consultant with over 24 years experience working with nonprofit and for-profit leaders. Please visit her website at www.smartchangenow.com or call 770-364-6785.*