

THE LONGVIEW

Lasting Strategies for Rising Leaders

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Planning Will Drain the Life from Your Ministry

From the earliest graduate school lectures I heard in organizational leadership theory, through many years of patterning off what the “big boys do” in university governance and business leadership, I bought into the belief that it is impossible for an institution to move forward without a concise, clearly articulated ten-year plan that projects a bold future.

In practical terms, here’s how that theory works: A new CEO, or one feeling the pressure of our “what-have-you-done-for-me-lately” organizational culture, will mount a platform draped with colorful banners and artful visuals to announce a major planning effort. = The complex, multilayered structure, the crowd is told, will be completed in the next eighteen months—usually just in time for a decade marker of the organization’s founding.

The implementation of the process itself includes an array of appropriate subcommittees so that no stakeholder group is left out, and plenty of room is allotted for compromise to ensure that everybody gets a little something. It is especially nice if the plan is written in a theme that allows each point to be summarized with a word beginning with the letter “P” for Progress, or “C” for Courage, or E for “Excellence.” The goals must be graphically presented in smoothly climbing growth projections, and contain initiatives that not only look symmetrical in the brochure, but make absolutely everyone in the organization feel “semi-satisfied” with the outcome.

Finally, the ten-year goals are printed on oversized glossy paper with large pictures of happy, well-scrubbed faces (taking great care to include a picture of the staff

member who was most vocal against the plan). The dozen objectives for the decade ahead will then project a future bold enough to inspire donors and make the board feel they are leading something really sophisticated.

For a quarter century I, too, followed this structure of planning; it is the most secure path for leaders to walk because it is rarely questioned. I've chaired the committees, I've appointed the panels, and I've written the documents. Moreover, I work in an industry where such meticulous planning is not only the norm, but is considered the gold standard of quality leadership.

I began to question this workhorse of leadership by systematically studying the longitudinal outcomes of my planning efforts and probing the issue with dozens of leaders. I became convinced that comprehensive traditional planning models are not only an ineffective use of energy, but the process itself drains the life out of our ministries by distracting us from our core focus. So in what has become my boldest change in all my years of administration, I gave up this type of planning in 2003—and I've never looked back. How ironic it is that perhaps the best way to be a good steward of the future of your organization is to quit reaching for it and instead begin to recognize the opportunities that God brings to you.

We Never Planned for This

This idea crystallized one day in a conversation with a seasoned college president who had totally revolutionized his campus over a long tenure. He'd built buildings galore, added programs and degrees, and expanded the college's reach to become a nationally influential institution. As I talked with him and his director of planning (of all people), he

said to me, “You know, the most significant things that have ever happened to this place were never planned.”

Why do we continue to rely on comprehensive planning models that not only don't help us much, but usually hurt us? Is it the expectations of the business people in our constituencies? The drive for marketplace professionalism? The pressure to create bigger and better in order to raise funds? Or does the structure of planning simply offer shelter from the hard work of doing? No matter what the cause, excessive planning is draining the life from us.

Much Ado About Planning

I think there are at least three reasons for the paralysis that is created by overvaluing and overemphasizing the planning process.

First, the future is unpredictable.

Any meaningful planning process has to be built on a set of assumptions regarding what lies ahead. So either you inspire your stakeholders with orderly growth curves built on what is obviously an unrealistic future, projecting a robust global economy, no terrorist threats, and hurricanes that never hit land—or you raise fears instead of funds by basing your plans on less rosy assumptions that reflect the uncertainties of tomorrow. The entrepreneurial optimists on your board see a wide-open future, and the bankers look at the same data with doom and gloom. Both are right and both are wrong, but based on those assumptions, how are you to look into the future to project a ten-year plan? That is impossible.

Even the professionals can't get it right. A unit in time equal to six months into the future is now referred to as a "Friedman," because over a two-and-a-half-year period, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman predicted on fourteen different occasions that "the next six months" would determine the outcome of the war in Iraq. And while you and I don't have to predict the outcome in Iraq, we do have to live with the consequences of events all around us that are unpredictable.

We must be looking to the future with clarity and purpose. We are not fortune-tellers, and God does not expect us to prepare for what we can't see—or He would have allowed us to see it. On the other hand, most ministries can see one, two, or even three years down the road with some assurance, and a solid plan building on that visible horizon will provide a roadmap into an uncertain future.

Second, the process consumes all the energy.

Have you ever seen an organization bring out its ten-year-old plan to report on the results? I haven't either, because the outcome always falls short of the plan, and the action usually winds up focusing in a different direction than the plan originally outlined. Implementation of the plan is invariably disappointing because most of the fresh energy went into envisioning a future rather than reaching it. And as the unifying spirit of the planning phase gives way to the competition of advocating for resources and priorities during the implementation phase, the process creates division and fatigue among a team.

Moreover, when the planning process is long and drawn out, the board or staff leaders who created the plan have often retired or started to move on to other organizations by the time it is ready for implementation. Not surprisingly, the new

leaders have no desire to implement an inherited plan and so begin the cycle all over again by developing their own vision.

Thirdly, your strengths are homogenized in the planning process.

Planning drains the life from us because when we make planning the centerpiece of our ministry, both the process and the outcomes must be comprehensive enough to satisfy every part of the constituency—and usually the least vital or most off-centered voices are the most aggressive hijackers of a planning process.

If you want to keep peace in your ministry through the planning process, everyone needs to be heard at the table. And any comprehensive planning process must guarantee that all issues are addressed in the end. So while your gifting may be to plant churches in Africa, your planning process is most likely to address the justifiable needs of the information-technology staff, the seminary training component pushed by another faction, the dream of your board chair to take your same model to Asia, and the demand of your finance people to build an endowment. And in the end, the overall plan includes a little of each and not much of anything. You've taken the focus off your strength—church planting in Africa—because the comprehensive planning process screams to your team, “If you don't get your requests in now, the door will be closed for the next ten years.”

The Alternative to Traditional Planning

So while the pitfalls of this comprehensive planning approach are many, the question remains, if you don't follow the tradition of long-range planning, what is the alternative?

Every ministry has to decide what components of planning fit for their own environment, but there are several factors important to me:

1. Developing Stewardship Priorities

It is vital that the key stakeholders agree and articulate the core strengths of your ministry that must remain your focus if you are to be a good steward of what God has given you. These priorities can address whatever is important to you, but they are not operational issues—they are the centerpieces of what you do best. This priority list of three to a dozen items allows you to keep in the center of your thinking those objectives that cannot be compromised. Include it as the top sheet on every board-meeting materials packet. Talk about it often with your team. Use it as your measuring rod. Stray from it cautiously.

2. Differentiating Between Operational Planning and Opportunity Tracking

Because the accrediting agencies require colleges to have extensive written plans, we have developed an “operational plan” that includes the routine and time-tested functions we know must run smoothly in our organization. But we also have created an “opportunity agenda” that tracks new initiatives not projected in our operational plan, opportunities that come to us as God’s wind blows. Keeping them differentiated on paper helps us think individually about these two very different modes that tend to get lumped together in traditional planning models.

For example, you need a solid operational plan for your development, accounting, and human resources departments. But your opportunity agenda may include an

unexpected expansion with a partner ministry, the development of property acquired through an estate gift, or the realignment of responsibilities resulting from an unexpected resignation. Two distinct plans—one for operations and other for opportunities—provide focus to assure the stability functions do not get lost in the new ventures, or the limitations of operational needs do not keep you from capturing opportunities.

Recording the opportunities in this manner prioritizes your initiatives, gives form and focus to your ongoing implementation, and guides the development of your operational plan as these new initiatives become woven into the fabric of your ministry.

To demonstrate the power of seeing opportunities outside the traditional planning mode, after my tenth year at Belhaven I catalogued all that God had allowed us to do during the past decade. And the list of a dozen key accomplishments was a remarkable testimony to the ways in which the Lord had blessed us. In wrapping up that presentation, I wrote, “How fruitless destination planning would have been, for had I taken a plan like that to you a decade ago, I would have been put on the next rocket out of town.”

3. Planning for Opportunities

However trite and cute the saying, the fact remains, “the only constant is change.” Change bombards us daily, and life will continue to change in ways and at a pace we haven’t even begun to imagine. As a leader you can bemoan this fact alongside your most pessimistic coworkers, or you can help your ministry celebrate change and rejoice in new vistas and opportunities, knowing that with every change God opens the door to service a little wider. Look for the blessings in change and share them with others. Make it part of

your ministry's culture to thank God for the abundant possibilities inherent in each and every change.

This means setting aside resources for responding quickly to opportunities. Most ministries are on their heels when opportunity comes because they don't have some cash to respond quickly. Business mogul Warren Buffett bought a 60 percent stake in Marmon Holdings for \$4.5 billion over Christmas break, after only two weeks of negotiation. And I've been in meetings with Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade, and now his successor, Steve Douglass, when they heard a good idea and within minutes committed big blocks of money and staff to the effort. Ministries become strategic when they have reserves that allow them latitude when the wind of God blows.

Similarly, we must develop a team that is capable of handling opportunity. Having the dollars to move means little if you don't have the people with talent, experience, and spirit to tackle a new opportunity. That team won't be prepared for the moment unless the groundwork is laid months and years in advance. I'm convinced the Lord doesn't open new opportunities prayed for by many ministries, because they have not yet made the investment in their people to prepare them to handle the challenge should the opportunity come.

4. Keep Your Planning Local

Planning is most productive at the local, rather than the comprehensive, level. Planning that prepares your ministry by organizing your strengths and people, and anticipating problems and solutions, is critical to success—but those who live closest to

the challenges and the opportunities need to drive the planning process to get the most from the effort.

At my college, of course we don't wait for 2,500 students show up every fall and then figure out what we want to do with them. We have careful, and often, detailed plans created months and years in advance. The difference is that this is localized planning, rather than comprehensive planning.

For instance, specific plans are developed for the athletic department as a whole, and building on those priorities, each coach drills down to develop a plan for his or her team. On a broader level, the athletic plans are coordinated with similar plans that have been created by the campus life department, the academic deans, and the finance department. All these plans must mesh together, but at every step, planning should stay as localized as possible. To do this I have used a the "Facilitation Council," comprised of mid-level administrators from each key area, meets every few weeks to assure that the local plans don't conflict, but complement each other.

In contrast to local planning, ministries typically have comprehensive plans drawn up by their top-level leaders and then spend the rest of the year frustrated when the "local" team can't implement what went together so nicely when they drew it out on the whiteboard. Most often leaders need to be servants to support the planning process, rather than attempting to create the answers.

Be Yourself, Rather than a Benchmark.

Unfortunately, we are developing a generation of leaders who are afraid to make a decision without first benchmarking each issue from every angle. In the 1980s, Xerox

developed the concept of benchmarking, measuring all aspects of their work against the best practices in their industry. Utilizing this concept, they found ways to evaluate each function in Xerox against the best ideas. And while benchmarking can be a useful tool for planning and thinking about our ministry work in fresh ways, it also has the potential to become an albatross impeding our progress.

Benchmarking becomes detrimental when leaders feel they must keep from promoting a new direction until they have “proven evidence” that this is a best practice. This measurement can become a crutch to take the risk out of decision making because a leader lacks confidence in his own judgment or is seeking to create “cover” to hide behind. Secondly, benchmarking is dangerous when a ministry becomes a collection of parts from other organizations, rather than reflecting its own uniqueness. Going to a junkyard to buy the best pieces of many expensive cars and attempting to refit them would not produce anything usable, even though it brought together the best parts of each model.

Dream More and Plan Less

To start where we are and determine what we can do to move our current situation to a new level is a limiting way to look at God’s calling in our lives. Rather, if we will prayerfully, carefully, and regularly seek the Lord’s will for our ministry, we can glimpse a picture of His desires, and then work backwards from that outcome to determine how to get there.

Occasionally we see operational planning in the Bible: Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, Jesus sending the disciples to prepare the Last Supper. But most of

the big ideas God gave to His people in dreams: Jacob, Joseph, Abraham, the Magi, John on Patmos.

Christian leaders need to spend more time dreaming, praying and listening to what God wants for us, rather than huddled around conference tables attempting to plan God's best for us.

It has been long quoted, "He who fails to plan, plans to fail," but don't be so sure that's true. Yes, operational localized planning is vital to a well-managed ministry. But putting too much energy into planning an unknown future will drain the life from your ministry. Instead, longview leaders must look to the future as the wellspring of opportunity and be poised to take advantage of it.