



Focus

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Shift from Planning to Preparation

The future belongs to those who prepare for it, not those who plan for it.

Reggie McNeal

Strategic planning is vital, but you miss big opportunities if your leadership effort stops there. In fact, a plan has little value unless it's used to prepare for possible future events.

Imagine spending vast resources to predict exactly where and when a natural disaster would occur, then ranking the results by those most likely to create desirable "business" for your organization, and then focusing all your energy on planning for the Top five (Topeka March 15, Riverside June 6, Metairie September 12, etc.) Crazy? Sure, in this context. But that's pretty much the same as the venerable "push" method of selling to customers: Business decides what product the customer will want and then produces it and pushes it out to the stores.

Instead of trying to predict the future, savvy leaders gain a deep understanding of what their "customers" value and then develop capabilities (prepare) so the organization can meet customer needs when and where the customer decides to "consume" the product or service. This is a pull model, in contrast to the push method previously described. Building an organization that is "prepared" means the leader creates a more flexible organization that responds quickly and efficiently (less waste of time and resources and "inventory", among other things) to customers.

Ask yourself, "Of the planning efforts I've been involved with, what was the ratio of planning to post-plan preparation and action items?" Too often the answer is skewed to the planning part, with not much actual preparation. Ideally, the planning part should consume only a small part of the effort. Recall that plans seldom turn out exactly the way you anticipate, so the work invested in preparing for what might happen accounts for most of the value.

Nowadays, the only certainty is more change, more often. As a leader, then, how do you adjust to a

constantly shifting environment? First, plan. Review your environment, assess opportunities and threats, and then create a plan for the next few years. Include more detail for the coming year, less for the out years. Just don't obsess on perfection!

Most importantly when planning, think outside your literal and metaphorical walls. Ask how your products or services could be more appealing to your consumers? Really think about this. If you are not discussing crazy and "impossible" ideas, then you're being too cautious. Attracting good employees is important too, since "good customers" tend to seek out and patronize companies with good employees.

Next, use your plan to identify the most important opportunities. Focus first on people - employees and customers, then other assets, processes, or areas of competitive advantage. Would training or experience in a new area accelerate an employee's development? Could a core competency you now possess be used to enter a new market or expand services you currently offer? Are there leadership or other people gaps that need to be resolved by new hires? In these areas of preparation you build more organizational capacity - more potential to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities.

Finally, focus on strengths, not weaknesses. Don't look for or try to produce "perfect" employees; the best you'll get is perfectly mediocre. Instead, exploit people's natural talents and make their weaknesses irrelevant by changing job duties or limited remedial work for important shortcomings. For example, there are more contented clerks who love to keep records than there are great sales reps who hate paperwork!

Actor and television director Richard Kline summed up my thinking when he said, "Confidence is preparation. Everything else is beyond your control." So be smart, prepare wisely, take advantage of opportunities as they arise, and enjoy the ride we call life.

Tom Wagner

I think to 80/20 rule makes sense when strategizing for the future.

**Spend 20% of your effort planning
and 80% on actually doing things
to prepare the organization for what might happen.**

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