



SIX COMMON ERRORS IN STRATEGIC PLANNING

Planning is a little like eating broccoli: you either love it or hate it, or on a good day you might even feign liking it but see the necessity of it. As a leader you may understand the value of planning with a team but can quickly call to mind the glazed-over look you get from your staff every time you try to engage them in this endeavor. This can cause many a leader to want to reduce planning to a one-person effort behind closed doors.

Having been an organizational leader in this ministry for many years, I have seen several planning paradigms come and go. Some emphasized numbers; others emphasized strategy objectives; most seemed to consume a lot of paper and really didn't change in their essential nature from year to year. Now we uphold something we call the Strategic Planning Process and the groans have only grown louder. But I genuinely believe that the current planning process we use is the best one yet. And I believe that if we work a little to understand it and use it wisely we can greatly benefit from it for God and His glory.

In the past several years we have experienced a wave of models in the USCM—the Strategic Planning Process being just one of them. We must keep the models in proportion to where our focus should be and in proportion to how we lead our teams. The USCM models exist to help you lead your team to accomplish our mission and the vision that God has given you for your campus. But our dependence must always be on the Lord. Models, in and of themselves, cannot make up for the shepherding of our staff, nor can they compensate for intimacy with our Lord and day-to-day spiritual wisdom. Let us be Christ-centered and people-sensitive as leaders, using the tools that God has entrusted to us as servants to this end.

WHY ENGAGE IN THE PLANNING PROCESS?

In my mind there are two primary reasons for engaging in any planning process: celebration and stewardship. Ultimately the “plan” for any spiritual endeavor should reflect what we are trusting God for and not simply how we consume our human energy. When we trust God for something specific and He accomplishes that, we should celebrate His glory. I believe God often does not receive the worship He deserves because we have not prayerfully thought well enough to trust Him for anything specific. Celebration also lifts the eyes of our teams so that they grasp a sense of God's work in

their midst. While plans begin by focusing on problems and barriers they should always end with celebration before the Lord.

Stewardship is the other primary reason we must plan. The concept of stewardship has built-in implications. Most certainly it implies that we do not really own the resources that have been entrusted to us; they are on loan from God and therefore must be utilized wisely. Also, our resources are limited and therefore must be invested carefully. Ultimately planning is about the allocation of resources (people, money, time), and if we do that thoughtlessly, then why should God entrust more of His resources to us?

I think there are at least four values making our current strategic planning process (superior to other processes we have used in the past). First, this is a team-based planning process. It works best when we engage our teams in the process, gleaning their wisdom and building their ownership. Second, it is dynamic not static. In other words it is a plan that should change regularly as God accomplishes what we are trusting Him for. Third, it is vision-focused but thoroughly anchored in reality. (More on this later.) And finally, it aims to be a living, guiding, document that can aid you in providing day-to-day direction for your team. It can and should serve to inform every staff meeting, every student leadership meeting, every planning session, every decision about the focus of your team and the wise use of your precious resources.

Having said all of this it can still be a somewhat cumbersome process to get your arms around and implement effectively. I think this comes primarily from making some common mistakes and giving up on it too quickly. As I have experienced the process, taught the process, and observed it being used, I have seen common errors associated with each of the six steps of strategic planning.

IN THE VISION: NO COMMON DIRECTION OR PASSION AMONG THE TEAM.

Vision, in my mind, comes from the intersection of four things—passions, dissatisfactions, a strong knowledge of your situation, and calling. Your spiritual passions are those aspects of the ministry that naturally excite you. It maybe laborers for some, changed lives through discipleship, or seeing students come to faith. It is easy to have a vision for what gets you naturally excited. Dissatisfactions are



those things about the movement, the campus, or students in general that bother you. I am not talking about the annoyances of ministry, but those things that you want to see changed. This may include things like the wounded nature of students today, apathy of Christian students, certain administrative barriers on your campus, or possibly the lack of ethnic diversity represented in your movement. Both of these areas are fertile ground for vision because you already desire change and you can ask God to reveal to you and ponder what that change would look like lived out on your campus.

Constantly being a student of your students, your campus and the collegiate culture in general is another place where vision is fueled. Vague or fuzzy knowledge does not inspire, but knowing specific statistics, stories, or people does. Finally, calling is crucial. I define calling as a spiritual sense of “oughtness” tied to an audience. It is that Spirit-empowered heart’s desire with college students as the backdrop. Let’s review and begin to make some personal application:

What are you personally passionate about?

How does that connect with scope?

What are you troubled about?

What are you learning about your setting?

What has God called you to do?

Many teams are simply a collection of personal ministries under the same banner, where there is nothing in which the whole team believes or feels passionate about and therefore nothing for the team to rally around. Vision can be cultivated—it must be. Let’s make some team applications:

1. Connect your God-given passions to the mission and to the scope. In other words, if you are already passionate about raising up laborers, could you believe God for more laborers in the current un-reached parts of your campus and let that act as a motivation to go there?

2. Regularly have the rest of your team share elements of their passions or dissatisfactions for all to hear—it will rub off on others.

3. Begin to pray through a “vision wish list,” asking God to cultivate within each member of the team a growing sense of passion and dissatisfaction about other areas.

4. The goal is not to arrive at a jointly-agreed-upon, “word-smithed” statement; it is to become of one mind and heart towards God’s desires for your campus, which happens through a strong sense of spirituality and through a strong sense of mission community.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS LACKS A BRUTAL ASSESSMENT OF THE FACTS.

Our knowledge is often way too vague to make good, strategic decisions. We rely instead on our “sense” of what students are like and how the movement is doing. Yet the reality is this: students are a moving target. We need to constantly be assessing the key elements of our ministry. Do you know enough to know what you don’t know? What must we know?

1. General cultural trends as it relates to college students. There are many great resources for this, including current periodicals, educational journals, web sites, and books.

2. The makeup of your campus: all the hard and soft data that paints the picture of that local setting. This includes statistics about your campus and the movement as well as current attitudes among lost students and students involved with Campus Crusade.

3. The makeup of the current movement and past and current ministry effectiveness.

We can only have confidence that we are trusting God to solve the right problems to the degree that we thoroughly know our current situation.

CRITICAL MASS: LITTLE INTENTIONALITY ON INCREASING MOVEMENT CAPACITY.

It is very easy for leaders to not give attention to this “below-the-line” category, which includes fund development and other spokesperson responsibilities. But it also includes leadership development of staff and student leaders—and we forget that. As leaders you must have double-vision. You must keep one eye on Critical Mass and one eye on the Critical Path. You can only go up the Critical Path to the degree you have resources to take you there. Here are some observations worthy of reflection:

1. The Critical Path will always scream for your attention.

2. Leadership is primarily about increasing capacity in critical areas: funding, leadership, and tools.

3. You cannot outgrow your capacity.

4. As a leader you must give a significant amount of your mental, physical, and spiritual energies to Critical Mass.



LACK OF CLARITY IN DEFINING PROBLEMS ON PATH STEPS.

The Critical Path is about identifying and solving the current, specific, problems you are facing today that are keeping you from making significant progress toward the vision.

Most strategic plans I see are largely philosophical plans that simply could be re-labeled win, build, and send. Win, build, and send is our ministry philosophy, but not our strategic plan. And while every critical path step could probably fit into one of our philosophical categories, they should not be nearly that broad in nature. Here are some tests for good Critical Path Steps:

Can you envision this problem being solved within a year to a year and a half? (The regional level should have path steps that can be solved in 1-3 years; the national level should have path steps that can be solved in 2-5 years).

With the solving of this problem there should be a corresponding increase in Critical Mass, and increase in your capacity to fulfill the vision.

Are the path steps defined well enough that every member of the team can be guided by them? Can they see how their individual contributions fit into the plan?

AN ABSENCE OF TACTICAL PLANNING IN RESOURCE RELEASE.

Every path step and mass need must be tactically planned identifying roles, goals, tools, and time. Identifying the role means that there is someone or some group who is placed in charge of that particular tactic or strategy. Identifying the goal means that there is a defined and measurable objective established that will help determine the effectiveness of that particular strategy. Identifying the tool or tools means that the necessary means are either created, gathered, or made available to pull off the particular tactic (including funding). And identifying the time component means that there is a time frame for completion (a specific date if it is an event or an ending date if it is a process). The steps again are as follows: roles, goals, tools, and time.

This part of the process (Resource Release) will provide a good check as to the sequence of Critical Path Steps and will highlight Critical Mass resources still needed. It will help you determine how far and how fast you can move up your Critical Path. Don't outpace your capacity. This step is crucial because it keeps strategic plans from being just good thoughts and ideas, and gets them into specific faith strategies that will be executed. This is what makes the plan practical.

EVALUATION AND LEARNING: SEASONAL EVALUATION RATHER THAN AN ONGOING PROCESS.

Historically, we have evaluated only in a seasonal manner—at the end of every quarter or semester. We must learn to evaluate in an ongoing way, evaluating each and every tactic as soon as we have determined it has been completed (event or process). The evaluative process does not have to be a long one; many tactics can be evaluated in a few minutes if handled well. This ongoing evaluation will greatly enhance our learning and allow us to respond and make changes more quickly. Plus, the team will be evaluating things while they are fresh, and, therefore, the evaluation will be more specific and helpful. Often, during seasonal evaluation, we have only vague recollections of what went well or didn't go well back in September, and, as a result, no corrective measures can be taken and the people implementing the plan are not held accountable. Ongoing evaluation will also allow us to better give God glory and depend on Him more specifically.

I believe that we can make planning an effective and valuable experience and one that honors the Lord if we will correct some of these errors and seek Him for the guidance we need. Soli Deo Gloria!

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PLANNING TIME.

1. Better a thimble than a Big Gulp. Don't kill your staff by trying to have a two day, sixteen hour planning time. Maybe use several half days over the course of a week to accomplish the same thing.
2. Better a little chaos than sheer boredom. Vary the time, location, and activities of your planning. Aim for a comfortable, relaxed setting that will allow people to move around. If you use part of the time for sheer planning, maybe use some of the other time for information gathering or for group discussion over a current book or periodical that will better inform the team about your mission or your audience.
3. Better to jump start than to keep working a dead battery. When it comes to thinking through specific strategies to accomplish your Critical Path Steps, work by proposal. Assign two to three staff to come up with some initial ideas that the whole team can interact over and that might later spawn even more ideas. This will save time and keep your team from getting worn out in the process. This might be the afternoon assignment where the group can go off to a Starbucks and be as creative as they can in dreaming up strategies for the next day's discussion.



SCRIPTURE THAT CHAMPIONS PLANNING.

I encourage you to look at these passages in context. See how they might inform you about planning and then select a few to go over as a team before you begin your planning time.

Ex. 26:30 Set up the tabernacle according to the plan shown you on the mountain.

1 Chron. 28:12, 19 He gave him the plans of all that the Spirit had put in his mind for the courts of the temple of the LORD and all the surrounding rooms, for the treasuries of the temple of God and for the treasuries for the dedicated things. "All this," David said, "I have in writing from the hand of the LORD upon me, and he gave me understanding in all the details of the plan."

Job 42:2 I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

Ps. 20:4 May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed.

Ps. 33:11 But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.

Pr. 14:22 Do not those who plot evil go astray? But those who plan what is good find love and faithfulness.

Pr. 15:22 Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. Pr. 16:3 Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.

Pr. 16:9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

Pr. 19:21 Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails. Pr. 20:18 Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance.

Pr. 21:5 The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.

Is. 14:24 The LORD Almighty has sworn, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand."

Eph. 1:11 In him we were also chosen [1:11 Or, were made heirs] having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.



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