

Luttrell on Leadership
by
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Planning is Everything

“Plans are nothing. Planning is everything,” Dwight D. Eisenhower once said. I often cite this quote to illustrate one of the most fundamental principles of strategic planning: although the written plan itself is a very useful record of information and decisions, there are far more important aspects of a planning process.

First, a dedicated planning process provides a time, place and focus for the organization to consider critical issues. Such issues are often subtle. They may not shout for attention the way urgent issues do. (Urgency implies a pressing demand, in a temporal sense, that requires immediate action, but which may not be important in the long term.) Many of us are consumed by the continuous stream of urgent issues, and often don’t get around to addressing the truly important ones.

By contrast, a strategic planning process allows for time to search out the critical issues facing the organization. An illuminating observation comes from the legendary journalist Edward R. Murrow: “The obscure we see eventually. The completely apparent takes longer.”

A dedicated planning process provides an opportunity for dialogue about these critical issues. Often in the press of

everyday demands, we may have little time or patience to seek out differing viewpoints, explore underlying factors, or resolve any conflicts that may surface.

This highlights another benefit of a structured planning process: the opportunity to resolve conflicts. Many people either fear conflict or lack the skills to deal with it in a constructive manner. Problems or disagreements may go unresolved for months or even years. Unresolved conflicts drain energy and can pose a serious handicap to an organization’s success.

Unresolved problems result in “simmering” situations that may lead to a crisis-by-crisis management approach, certainly not the best way to solve complex problems. Having a structured planning process with a skilled planning facilitator provides a safe forum for conflict resolution. Some degree of conflict in organizations is inevitable. In fact, it is normal and healthy, as it indicates independent thinking. Dealing with conflict in a constructive manner is an essential aspect of good management.

Another major benefit of a structured planning process is its educational value. Participants learn together as they research, study, analyze information and exchange ideas and viewpoints. It is excellent professional development for employees at every level. Younger or newer participants benefit from hearing the experience and wisdom of their senior colleagues. The

veterans benefit from their counterparts' fresh eyes and new ideas. All parties have the opportunity to expand their perspective and make a contribution.

Team building is another outcome of a good planning process. Working together in a positive and constructive manner, addressing critical issues, making decisions by consensus, and charting the future course of the organization are very satisfying and meaningful, ideally even inspiring and motivating. The fiber of a team can be profoundly strengthened by the collaborative experience, emotional connection, and shared sense of responsibility inherent in planning.

Practicing the discipline of thinking strategically is another key benefit. This is the essence of a systematic planning process. It provides a structure and discipline that asks important questions and requires thoughtful answers. Improving people's critical thinking skills has far-reaching benefits; as such skills are transferable to every level and function in the organization. Thinking strategically is truly the fundamental purpose of strategic planning.

A final benefit of planning that is sometimes overlooked is the opportunity for applied creativity. Part of the joy of a good planning process is the opportunity for creativity to flourish. Whether it is used for problem solving, brainstorming new ideas, developing new

products and services, or creating marketing campaigns, creativity is the perfect complement to the analytical aspect of planning. It is the artful combination of analysis and creativity that distinguishes exceptional planning.

In summary, there are many important benefits to investing in a sound strategic planning process: the organization develops a roadmap for its future, problems can be resolved, participants are enrolled in the vision and mission of the organization, new employees receive an education (while veterans receive a booster shot of enthusiasm), teamwork improves, and creativity is encouraged. Strategic thinking becomes the norm, and people learn to love to plan, because they now understand that "... planning is everything."

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Mary Luttrell helps business leaders turn challenges into opportunities that move their organizations to new levels of success. With more than 25 years of consulting experience, she is known for her ability to simplify complexity by creating an inspired yet practical plan of action. Ms. Luttrell is a Certified Management Consultant whose firm was named one of the *100 Leading Management Consulting Firms in North America* by industry analyst James Kennedy. To receive her white paper on *The Four Cornerstones of Business Success*, contact Ms. Luttrell at 707-887-2256 or thecoach@sonic.net.