



Dear Friend,

Planning for Results

I heard a statistic over the summer that initially startled me. However, since then, I've launched my own (very unscientific) test and, to my surprise, found it largely true.

Okay, here's the assertion -- while many of us plan (for our organizations and/or for ourselves), approximately 80% of those plans fail. A remarkable figure, isn't it? Also remarkable to me was the fact that (whatever the actual failure rate is), we continue plan, year after year, despite the fact that we often do not achieve the desired results.

So, as I said, I began to test this theory in conversations over the last few months with executives and business leaders. Most of the people proudly acknowledged that they had organizational strategic plans. (Interestingly, the number with a professional/personal strategy tended to be much lower.) They wore the existence of an operating strategy like a badge of honor with me and, I'm sure, with the boards of directors, owners, or shareholders to whom they answer. Yet, that badge quickly lost its luster when considered in light of the actual or projected accomplishments of the plans that had been so carefully crafted. To my results-oriented questions, instead of more pride, I got scores of averted eyes, nervous laughs, or strings of explanations.

In the [November edition of EA Insights](#), we began our focus on strategic thinking by examining the importance of knowing where your plan stands on an ongoing basis, but definitely before you reach the end of the project or plan year. For the next two months, *EA Insights* continues the discussion regarding strategic thinking by focusing on why so many planning efforts are unsuccessful. It's my hope that you find this material thought-provoking and instructive as you seek to plan, yes, but also to see more of your plans -- organizational and personal -- become reality.

All the best,

June

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Strategic Thinking (Part II): The Top 10 Reasons Plans Fail

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We all know that most people and businesses truly value the development of strategy. After all, many of us annually create strategic plans outlining the direction for the organizations we lead. As individuals, many of us make New Year's resolutions to set the tone for personal changes we expect by year's end.



So, strategy development is a good thing, right? (After all, if you consider the level of effort that goes into strategic planning annually, most of us certainly must think that it is.) Then, why does something so positive produce such limited results?

I believe an underlying reason why planning frequently misses the mark is that we approach it incorrectly. We often view strategic planning as an annual exercise -- one largely restricted to our retreat or planning sessions and then discarded until the following year while we "go back to the real work." However, a more productive approach is one centered on strategic thinking. Under that model, there is an ongoing process that is informed, thoughtful, inclusive, and focused on developing realistic, measurable outcomes and keeping those outcomes at the forefront throughout the plan period.

As we consider the shift from traditional "strategic planning" to "strategic thinking," let's consider 10 key reasons why planners may not achieve their expected results. This month, we examine Reasons 10 - 6 in the countdown.

Reason #10: Failure to pay attention to logistics

Believe it or not, a lot of strategic thinking should be done before the formal "planning" process ever begins. I call these preliminary matters "logistics." Though preliminary, logistical matters are critical to the success of the strategy development process and to the accomplishment of the resulting goals.

Although not an all-inclusive list, among the logistical considerations is:

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Quotes

"Man is a goal seeking animal. His life only has meaning if he is reaching out and striving for his goal."
-- Aristotle

"Strategy is: A style of thinking, a conscious and deliberate process, an intensive implementation system, the science of insuring future success."
-- Pete Johnson

"Determination without discipline is dreaming."
-- Dr. Paul E. Sheppard

"Perception is strong and sight weak. In strategy it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distanced view of close things."
-- Miyamoto Musashi

- **Site Selection:** This is identification of a location that is conducive to strategic thinking -- quiet and private so that typical workplace or home distractions are kept at bay -- and that offers sufficient space for full-group discussion and small-group conversations, as needed.
- **Session Structure and Plan Duration:** It's important to set a strategy development schedule that permits both the usual brainstorming as well as an opportunity to consider the broad implications of options and to think through matters related to implementation. Also, be sure to settle on the specific period to be covered by the planning (e.g., 12 months, 18 months, 3 years, etc.), and to understand the relationship of this period to the longer-term vision.
- **Participants:** Who are the right people to be involved in strategy development? That is, think about how to engage key stakeholders and strategic thinkers in your organization or life most appropriately in this process.

Reason #9: Lost mission

Another reason strategy development efforts can derail is that the resulting plans have little relationship to the person's or the organization's mission -- its reason for being. I can't count the number of times over the years that I've heard team members make comments like, "When we started, we were an X company, but I'm not sure what we are now!"

Keeping mission front and center is vital in successful strategy development. Planning that takes you away from your central mission can cause frustration and confusion for the implementers of the strategy. Committed participation is of the utmost importance for goal achievement; however, people become less committed, and less effective in achieving results, if they can't grasp the direction or if it seems to have veered away from what they initially signed on to do.

Reason #8: Lack of information

Would you ever get out of bed in the morning, get dressed, and head out for work without once looking in the mirror and also somehow determining what the day's weather is projected to be? I hope the answer is an emphatic "No!" Yet, some organizations and individuals do just that when planning. They move forward without the equivalent of a mirror or weather check.

For strategic thinking to be effective, the individual or organization must engage in an unbiased assessment of where he or it is currently. That's the mirror check. As we discussed in the [November edition of *EA Insights*](#), information is needed about the status of accomplishments from the prior project or year. Additionally, it's critical to shine the light on one's self -- personally or organizationally -- in order to identify and examine strengths and challenge areas that exist now and those that are likely to arise in the near future.

An evaluation of what's happening externally -- the weather check -- also is crucial for strategy development. Such an external assessment permits a critical view of one's environment as it currently stands and where it is likely to move over time. With such information in hand, planning can take place to determine realistically where the person or the organization should be going and how to get there. This type of information gathering provides the basis for realistic planning.

Reason #7: Unrealistic planning

Effective goal-setting strikes a careful balance between what is achievable and what encourages continued development. Accordingly, goals are likely to be ineffective when they are set so low that they neither grab the interest of the implementer(s) nor offer a healthy challenge. Similarly, though, goals that are set so unreasonably high that they couldn't be reached...ever...are just as likely to find themselves on the "Incomplete" list at the end of the year. So, successful planners seek to stretch and to grow but do so at a realistic pace.

Reason #6: No specifics

Loosey-goosey planning is another reason why organizations and individuals don't see the desired results. To be achievable, a plan must contain goals that are specific. In other words, the plan should be crafted so that anyone examining it understands what success looks like with respect to each goal. Assigning responsibility for each goal and, ultimately, for every action item under each goal, further increases the likelihood of goal completion.

Also related to specificity is setting timeframes around goals and action steps. People generally have the best of intentions when it comes to planning. And then, life happens! With the busyness of daily responsibilities, goals just get lost in the shuffle when they lack exact due dates (and when those dates are not transferred to the person's calendaring system).

Those are Reasons 10 - 6 for why strategic plans fail. Next month, we'll review the remaining reasons.

Key Words: Strategy, strategic planning, plan, planning, strategic thinking, organizational development, mission, outcomes, results, success, goals

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