

A man with dark hair, wearing a brown button-down shirt and dark pants, is smiling and gesturing with his hands while holding a marker. He is standing in front of a whiteboard. On the left side of the whiteboard, there is a flowchart with several circles connected by lines. The background is a bright, indoor setting.

Improving your camp's **planning** process

by James C. **Galvin, Ed.D.**

Got Strategy?

Have you ever seen this happen at a board of trustees meeting? The director presents the annual budget, and one of the board members objects, saying the budget is based on “doing the same thing in the same old way.” The director says he or she has several improvements in mind; the camp board says they want to see strategic change, so they decide that some strategic planning is in order. (At a smaller camp, they might set aside strategic planning for the next board meeting. At a larger camp, the director would most likely offer to come back with a completed strategic plan for the board’s input and approval.)

Eventually, a strategic plan is written. The board approves it, and the document sits on the shelf.

But there is more to this problem. Most long-range, traditional strategic plans contain little, if any, real strategy. They read more like long-range operational plans.

Most written strategic plans follow a predictable pattern with pages on mission, vision, critical factors for success (which may also be called key result areas or strategic initiatives), strategic objectives and strategic goals. Staff and boards can spend entire retreats on this and make no fundamental shifts or significant changes in how they operate. They may find improvements to the current system instead of changing the system. Or, they might create a large document with no reference to how their market is changing.

Do you even have a strategy?

I’ve asked many ministry leaders this question, “Do you have a strategy?” Many have no idea how to answer it. Of course, some people make an attempt, but often they don’t like the answer when they say it aloud. Sadly, the default strategy for most organizations is to do the same

things the same way, but try a bit harder the next year. Effective or ineffective, every organization has a strategy of one kind or another. What is your default strategy? How can you clarify your preferred strategy and make needed changes?

Effective strategy is about developing a coordinated response to what is changing outside of the organization. If something is changing quickly (kids bringing new tech gadgets to camp), it can be hard to develop a coordinated response. If the culture is shifting slowly (like a growing preference for day camps that cost less), trends can be easy to miss. Strategic thinking has to start with understanding the relevant external environment. It has to get board members and staff thinking and interacting outside the boundary of the organization. What is changing in our market, and how are we adapting? What do we have to let go of? What are donors concerned about? What do younger children, our future clients, want?

To get a strategy, first deliberate on how the world is changing, then take strong action to defend your programs and explore new opportunities.

The Schlieffenplan

Before World War I, Germany wrote a detailed document on how to conduct combat operations on two fronts. They couldn’t attack Russia and France at the same time and win. General Schlieffen came up with a master plan for keeping one or two divisions on the border with Russia and sending five or six divisions to invade France. Instead of charging into the fortified towns on the French border, the plan called for heading west through Belgium and Luxemburg to outflank the French army. Then they would capture Paris and attack

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the fortified cities from the rear. After defeating France, they would rush troops by newly laid rail to attack Russia. The official document was called the Schlieffenplan.

When Germany launched the attacks, Belgium put up strong resistance. But that wasn't in the plan. Then German troops got bogged down in western France. Russia wasn't expected to be able to mass troops for about two months. They responded quickly and were ready to fight Germany in less than three weeks. Again, that was not in the Schlieffenplan. German generals kept trying to make the plan work instead of adjusting to changing conditions on the battlefield.

In order to obtain victory, they should have changed the plan. Why did they keep trying to adjust back to the plan? Why didn't they ask General Schlieffen what they should do differently? Unfortunately, Schlieffen couldn't help them—he was dead.

Creating battle plans has a very different side when compared to the combat we've witnessed in recent years in the Middle East. Oftentimes U.S. and Allied forces will build large tables and create scale models of a town they intend to enter. They will identify entry and exit points, reinforcing troops and known locations of terrorists. They have a clear battle plan in mind, but as they launch the attack, they track real progress on the sand table and adjust or abort the strategy as they go. They have a plan, but once the shooting starts, the plan goes out the window as they adjust to real-life events.

Like the soldiers carrying out Schlieffenplan, are you still trying to make an old model work by trying harder

and harder every year? Or are you ready for some new tactics to help your camp thrive?

Fortunately, there is a better way to move forward strategically. Instead of a traditional, written, long-range strategic plan, you can make use of a more robust strategic process with these three steps:

1. Get a strategy

Strategy considers how you will adapt to changing conditions in your relevant external environment in order to bring about desired results. Here are some essential questions to ask as you build your strategic plan: Do we need to make fundamental shifts in our business and ministry model? What old strategic goals do we need to pursue more aggressively? Which should we eliminate? Is our market share eroding? Why or why not? What new clients or customers might be emerging? What changes are our donors experiencing? Answering these questions can help you better understand the environment in which you are operating and how to build a plan that helps you respond to these external changes.

2. Conduct strategic reviews

In addition to long-range planning that helps you build a strategic plan for three to five years, develop near-term goals and conduct strategic reviews once a quarter on a cycle that works with your camping season. Use these questions to organize your strategic review, keeping in mind your mission and big-picture goals:

1. What did we intend to accomplish this quarter?
2. What actually happened?

3. How is our strategy working?
4. What do we need to adjust in our strategy?
5. What changes do we need to make to our activities?
6. What has to happen next quarter?

3. Carry out surveillance

Be on the lookout for what's happening outside your camp or conference center. Survey campers, parents and church leaders. What new observations do you make by looking at camps similar to yours? What do your strategic partners want? What is happening in technology that might impact you? How is youth culture changing? How is society changing?

You can unearth some of these insights by reading key publications (see sidebar for more information). You can also assign staff to explore certain topics. The board might want to survey donors. Surveillance is carefully watching your donors, customers, potential customers and the culture for how they are changing so you can ascertain what they want, need and expect.

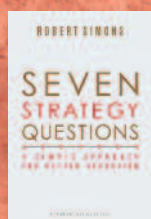
Instead of waiting for that awkward time when a board member asks you for a long-range strategic plan (just like they may have done at his or her company many years ago), get a strategy and execute it. Then, keep the board updated on changes and how your organization is adapting. ✨

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Related Resources



Seven Strategy Questions: A Simple Approach for Better Execution by Robert Simons (Harvard Business Press, November, 2010)



Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't by Jim Collins (Harper Business, October, 2001)