

The Two Sides of Strategic Planning

How the Holy Spirit Inspires
Our Vision and Our Planning



By James C. Galvin

I've been talking to a number of ministry leaders in the past year about strategic planning and I'm troubled by what I hear. Everyone agrees strategic planning is important—even an absolute necessity for nonprofit organizations, but few are doing it.

They might hold a retreat and talk about problems the organization is facing, or set some goals. But they tend to quickly revert to operational planning or budgeting for the next fiscal year. Essentially, their strategic planning time doesn't produce any new strategy.

This condition isn't caused by a lack of passion for the future of their ministry. It isn't because leaders dislike planning, or don't want to be strategic in their use of resources, or don't care about accomplishing their mission. In many cases, it's simply caused by lack of time. They want to plan, but life is moving so fast and becoming so chaotic that it's harder and harder to find the time.

So planning ends up being driven by the budget. The board requests a budget. The staff has to submit a budget. They have to plan the year to figure out how much it will cost. They finish planning the year and then hurry back to work.

The Time Is Now

Unfortunately, it won't become any easier in the future. Our ministry environments are increasingly more turbulent. It's only going to become more difficult in the future to find the time to think strategically about our ministries.

Why is it so difficult to find the time to plan? Some don't consider planning as important as taking action, so they don't set aside the time for strategic planning. After awhile, they have to fix problems that emerge because they haven't taken the time to look ahead and plan. Finally, they become caught in a trap of fighting fires, feel crushed by the demand on their time and believe they have no time to plan.

Some organizations make time for true strategic planning and benefit greatly from it. I've asked the leaders of these organizations how they go about their strategic planning and I've been surprised to observe two very different approaches. They are using the same words but going about it in very different ways.

■ **Visionary Thinkers.** On the one hand, you have the visionary thinkers. In the strategic planning process, they deal with vision, mission and core values of the organization. They craft vision statements. They talk about ways to cast the vision. They make plans to communicate it widely and effectively. They may not know exactly how they're going to get the organization to this new place, but the vision is certainly exhilarating. This group is weak on implementation, claiming to have a strategy but really have only a new vision. They often lack a clear plan to get there.

■ **Detailed Planners.** On the other hand, you have the detailed planners. They start with a long-range goal, determine milestones, define major objectives, departmental objectives, goals, and tactics, and then assign a date and name to each one. They plan realistically and hold people accountable. But they struggle with a nagging sense of uncertainty—like packing the car and leaving on time for a long trip with everything you need, but wondering if you're heading in the right direction on the freeway. They have a plan, but fail to critically assess their old, existing strategies, and therefore lack strategic priorities.

Some staff teams lean one way or the other. One organization will spend the bulk of its time in a strategic planning retreat working on vision, then wrap up by setting a few goals. Another will start by pulling out the official five-year plan, add a year to it by extending the projections, then spend the rest of the time nailing down the details. Though very different in process and results, both groups say they're doing strategic planning.

Strategic Planning Has Three Parts

Why are the two approaches so different? Which is better? The answer lies in understanding that strategic planning has three main parts:

- Where do we want to go?
- Where are we right now?
- How do we get from here to there?

Answering the first question of where you want to go requires visionary thinking. Answering the third question of how to get there requires detailed planning. The two

approaches are different because leaders are emphasizing different parts of the strategic planning process. The visionary thinkers emphasize the first part and lack motivation to nail down the specifics. The detailed planners get tired of wandering in the wilderness and rush to the third part, where they feel more comfortable and know what to do.

So strategic planning essentially has two sides and a middle—the visionary thinking side and the detailed planning side, linked together by current reality. Both sides are important and necessary. Like planning a family vacation, you have to decide on a great destination everyone will enjoy, but you also have to make lists and pack the car.

There's a dynamic tension between these two sides. Most of us tend to emphasize one and neglect the other. Few leaders can do both well. In reference to living a spiritual life, Martin Luther wrote that we should keep our head in the clouds and our feet firmly planted on the ground. This is a helpful image to keep in mind when we work on strategic plans for our ministries.

Where is God?

But where is God in this process? How does the Holy Spirit work in us and through our planning? We can clearly see the two sides of strategic planning in 1 Chronicles 28. David wanted to build a temple in Jerusalem but God disallowed it. He said Solomon would be the one to build it. In response, David decided to do what he could by making plans for the temple, preparing the priests and Levites for the project, and collecting needed materials.

David summoned all the officials of Israel to assemble at Jerusalem: the officers over the tribes, the commanders of the divisions in the service of the king, the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, and the officials in charge of all the property and livestock belonging to the king and his sons, together with the palace officials, the mighty men and all the brave warriors. King David rose to his feet and said: "Listen to me, my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house as a place of rest for the ark of the covenant

of the Lord, for the footstool of our God, and I made plans to build it. But God said to me, "You are not to build a house for my Name, because you are a warrior and have shed blood." (1 Chronicles 28:1-3, NIV)

Look at the visionary thinking in this passage. David wanted to build a large structure that would house the very presence of God. He wanted to create an architectural masterpiece that would endure for centuries. This was a passionate desire that came from his heart. David certainly wasn't short on vision. But he didn't neglect the other side of

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strategic planning either.

Then David gave his son Solomon the plans for the portico of the temple, its buildings, its storerooms, its upper parts, its inner rooms and the place of atonement. 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. He gave him instructions for the divisions of the priests and Levites, and for all the work of serving in the temple of the Lord, as well as for all the articles to be used in its service. He designated the weight of gold for all the gold articles to be used in various kinds of service, and the weight of silver for all the silver articles to be used in various kinds of service: the weight of gold for the gold lampstands and their lamps, with the weight for each lampstand and its lamps; and the weight of silver for each silver lampstand and its lamps, according to the use of each lampstand; the weight of gold for each table for consecrated bread; the weight of silver for the silver tables; the weight of pure gold for the forks, sprinkling bowls and pitchers; the weight of gold for each gold dish; the weight of silver for each silver dish; and the weight of the refined gold for the altar of incense. He also gave him the plan for the chariot, that is, the cherubim of gold that spread

their wings and shelter the ark of the covenant of the Lord. "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" (1 Chronicles 28:11-19, NIV)

David had planned out the purpose of each room, the furniture required, how the worship and sacrifices would be carried out, the utensils needed, and how much gold and silver would be required to make them all. And he had it in writing.

David had a vision for an enormous project. But he was also capable of envisioning the mind-numbing details. This guy could think! But he didn't plan because he heard it was a good management technique. He didn't plan because the kings of Israel had always done it this

way. He simply did the planning required to get something important done.

David also said to Solomon his son, "Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the Lord is finished." (1 Chronicles 28:20, NIV)

This passage about David's plan for the temple clearly illustrates the two sides of strategic planning: the visionary thinking side and the detailed planning side. There is a spiritual point as well. Just as God was at work in David's heart as he planned, so he is able to work in the hearts of those who make plans for churches and ministries today.

So here's how to strengthen your strategic planning. As you prepare for your next strategic planning session, put together a team that can cover both sides. Arrange the schedule so your team spends enough time on each side. Then pray for insight, wisdom and the courage to move ahead.

James C. Galvin, president of Galvin and Associates Inc., Winfield, Ill., is an organizational consultant specializing in faith-based nonprofits focusing on strategy, structure, and leadership. Galvin is CMAA's lead consultant for designing and developing its new Executive Leadership Program. You may contact him at jim.galvin@bigfoot.com.