



The secret to successful organizational change

By Jon Lokhorst

IS STRATEGIC PLANNING DEAD? Not likely. But traditional strategic planning alone is insufficient in today's rapidly changing, global environment. Instead, strategic thinking is essential to navigate and drive organizational change.

Strategic planning usually ends with a static report in a three-ring binder on a bookshelf. Strategic thinking is continuous, nimble and dynamic.

Strategic planning is often rigid. Strategic thinking is agile and flexible.

Strategic planning easily becomes a destination. Strategic thinking is more akin to a journey.

Strategic planning is typically a scheduled event. Strategic thinking is an ongoing process.

Consider the impact of technology for organizations with communication needs across the globe. Not long ago, video conferencing required a substantial investment in hardware and telephone resources. More recently, Skype and FaceTime enabled users to communicate via video chat at little or no cost. Now, communication platforms such as Google Hangouts, Periscope and Blab emerge with amazing regularity and quickly attract millions of users. Technological changes like these represent just one of the many types of changes that leaders face today.

In most organizations, the strategic planning process is an annual exercise at best. It ensures that leaders pause at some point to take stock in their organizations, look out over the horizon, assess the external environment and establish their team's priorities and goals. It's a valuable process. However, it doesn't typically happen frequently or fast enough to address the challenges and complexities of the present-day ministry world. That's why leaders with strategic thinking skills have the edge in navigating organizational change.

UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIC THINKING

Whether you lead in a mature organization or an entrepreneurial start-up, developing strategic thinking skills is essential to ensure that your organization remains vibrant and relevant. In *Leading with Strategic Thinking: Four Ways Effective Leaders Gain Insight, Drive Change, and Get Results* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), authors Aaron K. Olson and B. Keith Simerson write that strategic thinking is found at the intersection of three fields of study: cognitive psychology, systems thinking and game theory. Olson and Simerson suggest that strategic thinking is comprised of three activities: assessing situations, recognizing patterns and making decisions.

Nehemiah stands out as a biblical example of strategic thinking in leading the effort to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. After being in the city three days, Nehemiah goes out during the night to examine the walls and gates, which are broken down and burned. Once the rebuilding process is underway, Nehemiah continues to assess the situation, noticing patterns of fatigue and discouragement among the workers as they face opposition. He calmly responds with a decision to place half the workers in

positions of building, with the other half equipped holding weapons to protect them. Under Nehemiah's strategic leadership, *"the people worked with all their heart"* (Neh. 4:6) and remarkably, rebuilt the walls in just 52 days.

STRATEGIC THINKING MEETS ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Strategic thinking is critical as leaders guide their organizations through a constant sea of change. Here are several ways for leaders to develop and apply their critical thinking skills.

- 1. Reconnect with the vision.** A compelling vision provides direction and informs the strategic thinking process. Effective leaders keep the vision front and center as they guide their people through organizational change. The vision is a steadying force through the vast majority of change efforts, which are evolutionary in nature. However, at times of revolutionary change, even the vision may be questioned.
- 2. Scan the horizon.** Strategic thinking forces leaders to examine what stands between the current situation and achieving the vision, both in terms of threats and opportunities. Consider emerging changes in the external environment: regulatory issues, business climate, competitive landscape, technological advances and cultural issues. Leaders who calibrate their organizations with the pace of change of their external environment position them to thrive in the midst of still more change to come.
- 3. Challenge assumptions.** In a sea of change, status quo is the antithesis of strategic thinking. Here, leaders must have courage to lead organizations in a vigorous evaluation of their business model, ministry programs, organizational and staff structure, customer or constituent base and assumptions about future growth. Asking hard questions leads to discovery of faulty assumptions that could lead the organization down the wrong path.
- 4. Review systems and processes.** Organizations can no longer afford to be locked into outdated or inefficient systems and processes. Leaders must evaluate whether the right systems and processes are in place to accomplish their goals and objectives. In doing so, attention must be given to systems and processes that are dependent on a certain person, or people, within the organization. Technological resources likely offer suitable alternatives that are more transferable among staff, an important consideration, given the changing workforce.
- 5. Execute change.** Without action, strategic thinking leaves the leader with nothing more than a collection of good ideas, similar to many well-intentioned strategic plans that gather dust on an executive's bookshelf. To combat this inertia, successful leaders lean into a preferred style to ensure that strategy formed is strategy executed. Olson and Simerson assert that leaders choose between a directive style that is predominately

top-down and unidirectional, and a participative style that involves others in a multidirectional process. Either way, they emphasize, strategic leaders create tremendous value and impact when they excel at both strategy formation and execution.

SPIRITUALLY INFORMED STRATEGIC THINKING

Like Nehemiah, Joseph's strategic thinking was informed by divine insight. Pharaoh calls Joseph to interpret a troubling dream, for which God provides the meaning. Egypt is about to experience seven years of great abundance, followed by seven years of famine so severe that the season of abundance will be long forgotten. Joseph suggests that Pharaoh *"look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt"* (Gen. 41:33). Pharaoh looks no further than Joseph himself to fill this critical leadership role.

During seven years of plentiful crop production, Joseph demonstrates strategic thinking by viewing the abundance in light of Pharaoh's dream. Rather than allowing the bumper crop to be fully consumed, Joseph collects and stores quantities of grain so large it cannot be counted. Once the crisis of famine arrives (talk about change!), Joseph opens the storehouses, selling grain to the Egyptians as well as to neighboring countries. In the end, Joseph's actions save entire nations from starvation, create incomparable wealth for Pharaoh and lead to reconciliation between Joseph and his father and brothers. And Joseph attributes his success to the Lord's purpose and direction (Gen. 45:5-8).

WHERE TO START?

Becoming an effective strategic thinker requires a shift from operating in a reactive mode to a proactive one. This is virtually impossible for ministry leaders who continually get caught up in the fray of their daily, tactical duties. To overcome this, consider the disciplined approach of LinkedIn CEO, Jeff Weiner. After finding that his schedule was quickly filling with back-to-back meetings, Weiner discovered what he calls "the importance of scheduling nothing." He blocks out 90 to 120 minutes on his calendar each day for high-level activities such as strategic thinking. At times, he invites other senior leaders to join him as a means of coaching and collaboration. Protecting this uninterrupted time enables Weiner to think about the big picture, process information, look into the future, consider the changing environment and develop strategies to thrive in the global marketplace.

Do it now: Schedule blocks of strategic thinking time on your calendar. Treat these blocks among your highest priorities. Prayerfully seek wisdom to think and lead strategically. The long-term viability of your organization is at stake. ●

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