



Productivity

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Create Your Own Future or Live with Someone Else's

The other day I heard on a business news show someone say something to the effect that you can't really do any kind of long-term planning because things change so much all the time that you would not know what you would be facing in the future. I'm sorry, but that is just pure bunk! Sure, we don't know what changes the future might bring, but if we just sit back and do no planning at all then we will be stuck with whatever the future gives us with no say in the matter.

Take, for example, the current economic situation that we are facing. Over the past year or so, it hasn't tended to matter much what industry your organization is in or how large it is; chances are your organization has had to deal with the unexpected in some form. And if your organization is typical, it probably didn't have "economic crisis" as part of its five-year strategic plan. Yet, whether a part of the plan or not, you are now faced with a vast number of decisions that have to be made in order to help your organization successfully maneuver through these challenging times and see it successfully emerge on the other side in the next year or so.

So, yes, in some ways having a five-year strategic plan isn't going to help you much in dealing with the unexpected. But does that mean that you have to leave what happens to your organization totally up to chance and allow others to dictate what you will do and how you will react to the external pressures that are placed on your organization? It doesn't seem to me that this is a really great alternative, either.

So how do you deal with making decisions and creating your own future? It starts with crafting a long-term strategic plan that isn't a typical five-year plan, but rather a two-stage plan that begins with discovering what is at the very core of your organization. This core is comprised of your organization's "purpose" -- why your organization exists (other than to make money) and your organization's "values" - the things you need to do in order to insure that your organization will achieve its purpose.

Yes, I know, most organizations have Mission, Vision, and Values statements, but if your organization is typical, those statements are ones we'd like to believe in, but are basically regulated to being a poster that is hung on the wall or placed on wallet cards so we can memorize and recite them later on. The problem is that often such statements are crafted from desires about their altruistic worth, rather than from needs of the organization in order to survive.

On the other hand, purpose is all about why an organization exists in the first place. It gives the organization focus for the things that are being done on a daily basis. It gets people excited about what they are doing and gives them a connection between their daily activities and the ultimate achievements of the organization. It can be highly motivating and unleash discretionary power that can drive the organization's success. It can help everyone determine if the things that are being done on a daily basis are contributing to the achievement of that purpose or not.

The same is true of values. Values aren't nouns describing things that we think are lofty and nice, but rather they are verbs; they are actions that are displayed each and every day in our own behavior. It is how we are going to act as we operate in our organizations on a daily basis. They place a boundary on our actions as we strive to reach the goals of the organization, which leads to the achievement of the organization's purpose. When lived, they insure that we don't stray into areas of questionable ethics.

The second stage is defining the long-term goals of the organization. When I speak of long-term goals, I do not mean the typical five-year goals that are included in most five-year strategic plans that change each and every year. These goals do nothing to focus energy and resources and give people a tool to help make better decisions for the future. Instead, what we need are a set of goals that are grounded in the long-term success and sustainability of the organization for the next 20 to 30 years. These goals contribute to achieving the purpose of the organization and are enduring (see *Driving Performance – First Define It*; http://cob.jmu.edu/icpm/management_world/bpjuly09.pdf).

Having these long-term goals gives the organization clarity and focus and also lays the foundation for consistency of action. How often have you experienced a situation where you were working on the assumption that one set of goals were important to only find out later on that they were no longer the top priority for the organization and that a new set of goals had taken their place. But when we use enduring and sustainable goals, we keep the organization focused on the ongoing things that are important for achieving the purpose using consistent measures year after year.

By having a clear understanding of the organization's Purpose, Values, and Goals, each manager and employee has a clear roadmap for making decisions on a daily basis. It doesn't matter if things are running smoothly or in crisis mode. The decisions that are being made will support your "new strategic plan." As they work through the problems and find solutions they can test those solutions against the constant of the "strategic plan" by asking a few questions:

1. Does the course of action help us achieve our Purpose?
2. Is the course of action in support of and in alignment with our Values?
3. Does the course of action help us positively impact or limit the negative impact on our Goals?

By asking these three simple questions each and every time we make decisions about the organization we can insure that the solutions to whatever crisis we are dealing with will benefit the organization and continue to move it forward towards achieving its purpose in a manner that is ethical and sustaining.

So we can easily utilize our strategic plan to help guide our current and future actions, no matter what external forces impact our organization. As Michael Woodhouse, CEO of Cracker Barrel, shared: "We try to look ahead in terms of economy, but we don't rely on things outside of our control. Our focus is really on things we can manage inside our own business." Obviously, they are doing a good job of controlling what is inside their control despite the economy, as the organization continues to be a leading performer in the hospitality industry. The key to their success, according to Woodhouse, is their core values which allow Cracker Barrel to insure consistent performance and focus.

So your organization does not have to live with someone else's future. It doesn't have to settle for whatever happens to it based on the many varied external forces being exerted against it. You can plan for the long-term by focusing on those things that really matter for the long-term. You can control your organization's future despite the ever impending crisis that may loom over the next horizon. Your managers and employees can overcome each crisis they face and continue to advance your organization towards achieving its goals and purpose. All you have to do is create the "strategic plan" for achieving what you want. Remember, the best organizations don't just do things differently; they do different things.

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