

*This article by Jane Logan was published in the January 2005 issue of
The Canadian Association.*

MAKE STRATEGIC PLANNING A WAY OF MANAGING, NOT AN ANNUAL EPISODE

The word “strategic” is used in strange ways. First, strategic planning is frequently employed to describe a one-time or isolated event. Strategic planning then becomes a noun and not a verb. Second, sometimes “strategic” is a substitute for “unpopular” or even “money-losing” as in, “Well, George, all I can say is that it was a strategic decision.”

Wait a minute! There is nothing strategic about investing considerable time and resources to create a plan and then parking it on a shelf for 12 months – unless your strategy is to avoid accountability. And there is rarely anything strategic about long-term programs with sub-optimal results. However, you can improve your accountability and results by making strategic planning a way of managing, instead of an annual episode.

Why strategy should be an ongoing process

1. **Without ongoing adjustments, the wrong things get done.** Or, in the words of Yogi Berra, “I’m lost but I’m making good time.” Constantly evolving external and internal events may require that strategies be fine-tuned.
2. **Actively respecting the plan enhances problem solving.** Resources are used more effectively when day-to-day decisions are held up against the criteria of whether the choices fit an organization’s strategic plan and its mission, vision and values.
3. **That which is measured gets done.** Otherwise, that which is easiest often gets done – and these projects may not be essential to moving your organization forward to achieving its goals.

Three ways to manage strategically, year round

1. **Ongoing information gathering:** Current data helps an organization assess the changing circumstances that may dictate that its strategy should evolve. Associations should be on top of the latest industry data at least quarter by quarter, and understand its implications. For some industries, Statistics Canada

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data is badly out of date by the time it ever sees the light of day. In these cases, there may even be a role in investing in other sources of current data and supplying it to members.

Many associations take a grassroots approach with regular regional reports from members. These can provide excellent early warning systems on key trends across the country. Good data will strengthen not only an association's decision-making, but also that of its members.

2. **Holding people accountable for strategic planning results at every Board meeting:** there's no better way to reinforce commitment to the strategic plan and ensure faster results than monitoring progress. If the top agenda items at every Board meeting are the Key Results Areas set in your strategic plan, these regular progress reports are sure to yield results. After all, that which is measured gets done.

Objectives from the strategic plan should roll out as departmental and individual targets. Performance targets are meaningless if no one is expected to achieve them and the strategic plan sits on the shelf, ignored until the next annual planning event or even forever.

Naturally, the follow-on to holding people accountable is to celebrate and reward progress. Is your organization providing recognition for the right achievements?

3. **Making adjustments to the plan when needed:** being open-minded and flexible will reap better results than an inflexible Soviet-style, seven-year plan. It's important to leave room not only for changes due to shifts in the external environment, but also for organizational learning. Planning and assessing results should be a continuous learning process.

In many organizations, it's easier to sweep an objective under the rug and "lose" it, than to face the Board and say, "we didn't set the right target". But this can be tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Airing the reasons to adjust an objective may help salvage its intent and should lead to a more appropriate and achievable target.

What stays the same

Thinking strategically, year round, does not mean that everything decided in a strategic planning session is up for adjustment. Most strategies evolve slowly over time. More importantly, mission, vision and values will have longer shelf lives than the strategic thrusts and tactics to achieve them. They anchor the organization as it adjusts to new circumstances.

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Make planning a verb, not a noun

Thinking of strategic planning as a verb, and not a noun, allows a consistent and coherent way of managing. Assessing the impact of new external developments on an ongoing basis; evaluating progress against the objectives of the strategic plan at all levels of your organization; and making necessary corrective adjustments to the plan will boost your organizational effectiveness and deliver results. These steps allow a solid return on investment in the planning process. They'll help make "strategic" synonymous with "smart" in your organization.

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