

PLANNING IN TIMES OF

UNCERTAINTY

AN OVERVIEW OF FASTFORWARD PLANNING™

BY JAMES C. GALVIN



After the tragedy of 9-11, many non-profit organizations had to shred their strategic plans. Nobody expected what happened that day. Not only was it unexpected, it was unthinkable. Every ministry was impacted in some way, yet no Christian organizations had this event or anything like it in their strategic plan.

Some organizations, like the Salvation Army, reacted swiftly to the disaster in meaningful ways. Others hunkered down, hoping life and their ways of doing ministry would soon return to normal. They didn't know what else to do. This wasn't in their plan.

If your organization has a strategic plan, my guess is you're not 100 percent on plan right now. Too much has changed. You have unexpected problems and perhaps even a few unanticipated opportunities. Perhaps your strategic plan was totally trashed in the aftermath of the terrorist attack. If so, you're experiencing what many high tech companies learned over the past few years: you should do strategic planning but you shouldn't put your faith in the plans you've made.

The Traditional Approach

A traditional approach to strategic planning doesn't work as well as it used to because the relevant ministry environment is changing rapidly and in very unexpected ways. A traditional approach is one that typically: 1) reviews the organization's mission and vision, 2) conducts an environmental scan of some kind that assumes the current trends and patterns now in place will continue, and 3) develops detailed goals and objectives for the next three to five years.

The problem is that the world doesn't hold still after you write your plan. Ministry leaders tell me their written plans are typically off by about 20 percent at the end of the first year alone. Think about it.

The fatal flaw is assuming current trends will continue in a straight-line projection. They never do. The world we minister in can change quickly and in highly unpredictable ways. So how can we plan in times of great uncertainty?

Ecclesiastes brings an interesting perspective to this ques-

tion: "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you do not know what disaster may come upon the land" (Ecclesiastes 11:1-2 NIV).

The author is pointing out that because the future is unknowable, we're wise to prepare for the unexpected. That means building resilient strategies. Committing to a three- to five-year plan built on a single-track view of the future is wrong-headed and dangerous. In turbulent times, nonprofit organizations need a wider base and a robust strategy offering more options.

Need for Humility

James reveals the importance of humility when doing strategic planning. "Look here, you people who say, 'Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.' How do you know what will happen tomorrow? For your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.' Otherwise you will be boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil" (James 4:13-16 NLT).

In our organizations, we don't know what will happen next year, let alone over three to five years. So our strategic planning should also be tentative and humble. We should make plans, but trust God for our future.

Of course, the opposite approach is for leaders to predict what will happen in the near future, build a single-track strategy, and then publicize their resulting plans to donors and others. How much better it would be for leaders to remain humble, admit they don't know what will happen, yet prepare wisely for whatever the future may bring. Developing several scenarios can help organizations do this better and FastForward Planning™ is a proven way to make it work.

FastForward Planning™ is a process based on a simplified version of scenario planning combined with action planning. It can help organizations plan during times of uncertainty. It provides a way to think together about the future without

making straight-line projections of current trends. It allows leaders to consider several ways the future may unfold and prepare for all of them. It helps organizations develop “all-weather” strategies that will withstand turbulent ministry conditions. FastForward Planning™ consists of five main steps.

Determine Strategic Focus

The first step is to determine the key decisions you have to make or a strategy you want to test. What will be the strategic focus of this planning session? For example, “Should we build a new office building?” “Should we expand our ministry beyond our current target?” It sounds easy, but this step alone can take more than an hour. If you don’t get agreement here, you won’t have a way to surface priorities at the end.

Identify Driving Forces

The second step is making a long list of all the forces that impact this decision or area of strategic focus. Start with internal pressures, then move to external forces that have an impact. Last, explore indirect forces that impact the external forces. Examples of internal forces include: “The field staff members don’t want to change.” “We aren’t raising enough money.” External forces might include: “Major donors have stopped giving.” “Local regulations are restricting our work.” Indirect forces might include: “The economy is going down.” “Divorce rates are going up.” You should end up with a long list of driving forces, some more important than others.

Surface Questions that Matter

The third step is finding the critical uncertainties. Look again at each driving force and determine whether it’s predictable or unpredictable. If it’s reasonably predictable, it’s a relevant trend. If it’s completely unpredictable, it’s an uncertainty. Next, take all of the uncertainties and rate them as important or relatively unimportant. Those driving forces that are both highly uncertain and very important provide the raw material for generating “questions that matter.” You can group several driving forces together, pressing on until you have only one or two “questions that matter.”

Explore Alternative Scenarios

The fourth step requires creativity and divergent thinking. Use the questions that matter to frame up alternative ways the future might unfold. Then take each scenario and tell the story of what happens and how the organization reacted to survive and thrive in that future.

I encourage groups to write down their scenarios, dictate them on audiotape and make video presentations. Groups can make the scenarios more

FastForward Planning™

1. **Determine Strategic Focus.** What are the key decisions you have to make?
2. **Identify Driving Forces.** What external pressures impact the organization?
3. **Surface Questions that Matter.** Which pressures are most important and unpredictable?
4. **Explore Alternative Scenarios.** How could the future unfold for your organization?
5. **Commit to Strategic Priorities.** What should you do now to build capacity and form a stronger and more adaptable strategy?

believable by adding significant details and incorporating relevant trends identified earlier.

When the alternative scenarios are presented, the listeners have to suspend disbelief and enter into the story. Discussion after each scenario should focus on how trends and uncertainties interact.

Commit to Strategic Priorities

The fifth step is to bring it back to reality by analyzing what the organization should do now to be prepared for any of these potential futures. Some

strategic actions might show up in all the scenarios. For example, “Strengthen our major donor program.” These are the immediate, strategic priorities.

Other important insights emerge throughout the process and should be sifted and prioritized. Then write down action steps for these priorities and assign responsibility for accomplishing them.

Developing and analyzing several scenarios of the organization’s future can bring deeper insights to a leadership team and help them think differently about current strategy. Several faith-based organizations are already using this to guide their strategic planning.

CMA’s Executive Leadership Program teaches FastForward Planning™ to CEOs and senior leaders as a core skill. The DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative covers scenario planning in depth with emerging leaders. Participants consistently rate this skill as one of the most helpful and empowering in the entire 18-month program.

Peter O’Donnell, President of Healthy Futures Group, a nonprofit consulting firm in Canada, says scenario planning is exactly what nonprofit organizations need today. “There is a natural tendency, after investing heavily in a strategic plan, to keep adjusting back to the plan instead of adapting to a changing world. Some organizations find their security in their plans while others find their security in building capacity for change.” Perhaps a prime benefit of developing scenarios is locating areas where organizations need to begin building capacity immediately.

We should take time to do strategic planning, but avoid putting too much faith in those plans. The world in which we minister is changing too rapidly. Faith-based organizations need to approach strategic planning with humility and build adaptable strategies so they can survive and thrive no matter what happens. That’s the way to plan in times of great uncertainty.

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