

DOING FEWER THINGS BETTER

As a leader, you hope organizational planning is more than wishful thinking; you want plans to actually produce high performance. I find that while many of us plan abundantly, we pay too little attention to setting priorities and following through.

In order to clearly communicate strategic plans and ensure that everyone implements them throughout the organization, you need to make a few wise choices from among many goals your organization could pursue. When you have a long list of what you *could* do and it is time to make these tough choices, two dangers arise. First, the excitement that characterizes early stages of planning may temporarily turn to disappointment. Secondly, an agony of decision-making may cause delays.

When somebody on a planning team asks, "Do you mean we can't go for all these goals?" I think of the sensible advice of colleague Debra Howard (Debra Howard Communications), who reminded a mutual client, "Focus doesn't mean doing more things better; it means doing fewer things better." Nevertheless, many groups resist bringing focus to an initial outpouring of ideas. I watch for impatience, silence, or more subtle signs of resistance, such as when a group fools itself by stuffing all their goals into giant categories that mask the breadth of work these goals require.

If you face an agony of decision-making, many tools can help you choose. One effective way of setting priorities uses a scatter plot on which you make a *y* axis continuum *least to most important* and an *x* axis continuum *least to most done now*. First randomly assign each goal a letter. Each team member decides where all the goals belong on the chart and writes the goal letters on the chart. For example, "pursue international business" might be placed high on the *y* axis, meaning that it is most important, and near zero on the *x* axis, meaning that it is not done now. When the group discusses the chart, you'll see that goals that are most important and least done now suggest your priorities.

Once groups identify several goals, leaders need to create an organizational structure that will make sure implementation stays on track. Twice this year I helped a non-profit client and a board of directors to reorganize committees so that each committee headed up one goal area. A for-profit company made a new leadership structure. We composed small, cross-functional implementation teams with representatives from top manager and supervisor levels.

The next step is to insure that these teams have what they need in order to realize the plan. Some teams will need training or coaching in project management and holding effective meetings. To facilitate communication and create accountability, all teams must include a member from top management. The job of top leadership is to monitor and support the implementation teams.

Communicating about and celebrating the progress of the plan and tying the plan to department and individual performance goals are two final jobs that will seal the plan's success.

Please copy this article with complete copyright notice.

Copyright © 2001 Merryn Rutledge

During the Gold Rush...

those who prospered were tool and mapmakers, not prospectors. I imagine that these toolmaker merchants had the shrewder business plans. I am reminded of the importance of making plans that reflect our values, make the most of what we do well and take a patient, long view. May the New Year bring you peace and prosperity.

Sample projects

- Human Performance Improvement training for Blue Cross Blue Shield of VT, with Tim King of Partners in Performance
- Strategic planning for New England regional arts consortium
- Operational planning for a section of the VT Health Department
- Leadership development for Rutland, VT Educational Alliance Leadership Academy

A client writes...

"Thank you so much for guiding us...I'm most impressed with...how much work you were able to get us to accomplish."

Claudia Istel,
Professional Development Committee,
New Hampshire School District 60