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Gleanings

Top Ten Lessons of Strategic Planning



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Do you identify with the person in the story below?

I decide to wash my car. As I start toward the garage, I notice that there is mail on the hall table. I decide to go through the mail before I wash the car. I lay my car keys down on the table, put the junk mail in the trash can under the table, and notice that the trash can is full. So, I decide to put the bills back on the table and take out the trash first. But then I think, since I'm going to be near the mailbox when I take out the trash, I may as well pay the bills first. I take my checkbook off the table, and see that there is only one check left. My extra checks are in my desk in the study, so I go to my desk where I find the can of Coke that I had been drinking. I'm going to look for my checks, but first I need to push the Coke aside so that I don't accidentally knock it over. I see that the Coke is getting warm, and decide I should put it in the refrigerator to keep it cold. As I head toward the kitchen with the Coke, a vase of flowers on the counter catches my eye and I notice they need to be watered. I set the Coke down on the counter and discover my reading glasses that I've been searching for all morning. I decide I'd better put them back on my desk, but first I'm going to water the flowers. I set the glasses back down on the counter, fill a container with water, and suddenly I spot the TV remote. Someone left it on the kitchen table. I realize that tonight when we want to watch TV, I will be looking for the remote, but I won't remember that it's on the kitchen table, so I decide to put it back in the den where it belongs, but first I'll water the flowers. I splash some water on the flowers, but most of it spills on the floor. So, I set the remote back down on the table, get some towels and wipe up the spill. Then I head down the hall trying to remember what I was planning to do. At the end of the day: the car isn't washed, the bills aren't paid, there is a warm can of Coke sitting on the counter, the flowers aren't watered, there is still only one check in my checkbook, I can't find the remote, I can't find my glasses, and I don't remember what I did with the car keys. Then when I try to figure out why nothing got done today, I'm really baffled because I know I was busy all day long, and I'm really tired. I realize this is a serious problem, and I'll try to get some help for it, but first I'll check my e-mail. Source: unknown

I don't recall where I found this story so I cannot properly acknowledge the author—please accept my apologies. Nevertheless, the story illustrates a life driven by making decisions based on what looks best at the moment as opposed to living strategically. A person who lives strategically makes every decision in light of his or her long-term objectives.

Hopefully, you recognize the myopic nature of making decisions based on what looks best at the moment. Such decisions will generally be based on what seems urgent, with little sense of a bigger overarching purpose in life.

Learning to live strategically is not easy. It requires, among other things, the willingness to sacrifice for the greater good of achieving the long-term goal of alignment with the will and ways of God. Furthermore, living strategically requires vision, honesty, commitment, and discipline.

Throughout the past year, one of my associates assisted me in facilitating numerous strategic planning sessions. This was his first exposure to a structured planning process. As an educational exercise, I asked him to summarize the lessons he learned from the process. Below are his thoughts, with a few modifications and edits.

I had the privilege of participating in five planning sessions with Dr. Chester



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and have personally seen the power of strategic planning in helping people and organizations align with the will and ways of God. Here are the top ten lessons I learned.

1. **The Nature of Strategic Planning.** According to James 4:13–17, strategic planning is the process of discerning the will of God. Scripture indicates that God will fund his will (for example, Matthew 6:33). Therefore when an individual or organization adroitly discerns God's will, there will be enough resources—time, talent, and treasure—to accomplish it.
2. **The Requisite Attitude for Strategic Planning.** In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve displayed their pride by rebelling against God and disobeying God's commandment. Scripture is clear about God's attitude toward pride—he opposes people who display pride (James 4:6). Therefore we should approach strategic planning with great humility.
3. **Strategic Planning Is a Community Exercise.** No one is all-knowing or all-seeing, though we tend to act as if we are. No one sees reality clearly or completely. We need each other (1 Corinthians 12–13). Because interdependence is a principle of human existence (Genesis 2:18), planning should be done as a group exercise (Proverbs 12:15; 13:10; 15:22; 19:20; 20:18).
4. **Strategic Planning Is About Discerning God's Timing.** If you are prone to impatience, you may have sought to do work that God wants done, but you may have sought to execute too quickly and therefore outside of God's timing. When people act outside of God's timing, the consequence is predictable: failure (Numbers 14:29–45). The strategic planning process should include not only discerning God's will but also God's timing for executing his will.
5. **Strategic Planning Is about the Right Problem-Solving Methodology.** There is a divine problem-solving methodology given in Matthew 7:7–11. It is "ask, seek, knock." The process begins with *asking*—prayer. *Seeking* means research to determine options. And *knocking* is prayerfully walking through the doors that God opens. Efficacious strategic planning requires adroit application of the divine problem-solving methodology.
6. **God Speaks Through Numbers.** There are three ways to price products, services, and wages: cost, market value, and perceived value. Scripture does not provide an absolute approach; therefore one must seek discernment from the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). Discerning God's will on matters of pricing is a deeply spiritual exercise that requires a humble heart, prayer, and godly counsel. Furthermore, it is important to diligently guard against the wrong motives (Proverbs 16:2) and carefully seek guidance from applicable Scriptures such as Matthew 22:39—the Golden Rule.
7. **God Speaks Through Customers.** A corollary of the principle of community is to listen to customers. Customers who tell you the truth about their experience with you and your product or service are some of the best sources of counsel. But not every customer will tell you the truth. It is important to discern the customers through whom God is speaking. Wise strategic planning will carefully consider customer feedback.
8. **Build a Culture of Discipleship.** Supervisors have one of two relationships with every worker: a relationship marked by sin management or one marked by discipleship. Sin management is inefficient and only marginally effective. Discipleship is the only sound way to build an organization. People who are humble, submitted, and teachable can be disciplined into the will and ways of God. Organizationally, strategic planning requires a culture of discipleship to maximize the opportunity to successfully execute the strategic plan.
9. **Goals Are Tools of Transformation.** After an organization identifies its vision and its current condition, the next step is to establish goals. The purpose of goals is to effect transformation. Effective strategic planning must include goals that are measurable and to which the leaders of the organization are accountable.
10. **The Nature of Success.** To be strategic requires a definition of success. Success is often defined by power, influence, or money. Jesus had many opportunities to achieve this definition of success, but his only agenda was to do the work assigned to him by his heavenly Father. Jesus defined success as obedience to the will and ways of God.

I want to thank my associate for sharing these powerful lessons.

God created man to work (Genesis 1:26–28). But we must keep in mind that our work does not define who we are, but who we are defines what we do and how we do it. Strategic living flows from the reality of our relationship with Christ.

Living strategically, however, is very difficult for all of us. It requires discipline, sacrifice, and divine empowerment. But living as a moment-to-moment opportunist will lead to a life misaligned with the will and ways of God.

Jesus was clear about living strategically and defined success accordingly: obedience to the

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will and ways of God.

May the Lord grant us all the grace to take these lessons to heart and learn to live strategically for the glory of God both as individuals and organizations.

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