



Strategic Leadership: The art of staying on-purpose

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Ministry organizations are vulnerable to a common affliction, perpetual triage. It is easy to diagnose but difficult to treat. Organizations suffering from this malady never seem to get out of the emergency room. As soon as one problem is solved another rushes in. Decisions are based on what will die, what is salvageable, and what can wait. The organizational agenda is dictated by the environment rather than vision and planning. Leaders are caught in a whirlwind of daily acts of survival.

If undiagnosed and untreated, the disease can be fatal. It not only strikes weak and poorly run organizations, fast growing ministries are especially vulnerable.

What is the remedy for perpetual triage? Strategic leadership. The remedy doesn't take effect over night. It works like a good diet and regular exercise. Its power is contained in the disciplines of strategic planning, results management, and evaluation.

In the context of Christian ministry, strategic leadership is the art of staying on-purpose with God. It applies on the organizational level what the Apostle Paul applied on the personal level. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Paul used the figure of running a race to represent the Christian life. He did not run aimlessly, but disciplined himself in serving Christ. Similarly Paul instructed Timothy to exercise the disciplines of the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer (2 Timothy 2: 1-7). The benefits of the ministry of the gospel, indeed, the Christian life are realized most through diligent attention to the purposes of God in the world.

Many of us are familiar with how God leads on the personal level. We are less informed about how God leads on a corporate level. The tools and techniques of strategic leadership afford many opportunities to listen to God and to one another, check progress, and make changes. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, strategic leadership becomes an ongoing activity in which staff members and board members are encouraged to think strategically and to focus on long-term, "big picture" issues as well as short-term operational issues.

Figure 1 shows the six major components of the strategic leadership process and the corresponding key questions. The power of strategic leadership is not writing the perfect plan it is asking the right questions. The questions we ask move us toward or away from the purposes of God and that makes all the difference. Strategic leadership raises the kinds of questions that get us out of the emergency room and back on-purpose.¹

Figure 1. Components of the Strategic Leadership Process.



Mission, Vision, and Values

The first step of strategic leadership is to establish the mission, vision, and values of the organization. The **mission** defines the organization's purpose and answers the question, "What ministry or ministries are we in?" It identifies the organization's reason to exist, as well as its scope of operations. Establishing a statement of mission is the first, and one of the most crucial, elements of strategic leadership. It forms a foundation from which strategy decisions can be made.

The **vision** moves beyond the mission statement to clarify where the ministry is headed and what the organization can become. Vision answers the question, "What is God inviting us to do?" Although the terms mission and vision are used interchangeably, the vision statement ideally is a picture of the future you seek to create, described in the present tense, as if it were happening now. Such a vision creates a sense of purpose that binds people together and propels them to achieve their deepest aspirations.

Creating vision is a continuous process whereby people in an organization articulate their common stories around hopes, dreams, values, why their ministry matters, and how it fits in the purposes of God. In fact, the discipline of strategic leadership is the surest way to foster shared vision.

Defining the organization's mission and vision forces us to identify our underlying **values** and assumptions. What are the moral imperatives of leadership, stewardship, and work? What is important about how an organization should be run? What makes a ministry biblically faithful and missionally effective? Such explicit values establish boundaries within which the organization can carry out its mission.

Strategic Analysis

The next step is analysis of the critical external and internal forces that will impact the mission and vision of the organization. Effective strategic leadership depends on a clear and complete picture of external opportunities and threats, and internal strengths and weaknesses. **External analysis** involves explaining factors such as social and religious trends, political climate, public and regulatory policies, economic conditions, donor markets, and other organizations with a similar mission. The purpose is to identify factors that present opportunities (which you can take advantage of) and threats (which must either be neutralized or avoided).

At the same time external analysis is underway, the strengths and weaknesses of the organization are assessed. **Internal analysis** involves explaining the organization's resources such as people (individual skills and knowledge), culture (reputation, beliefs, norms, and accumulated learning and experience), operations (ministry programs, production or service delivery), finances (past performance and future requirements including capital and operating needs), and other internal resources such as technology, information systems, marketing, fund raising, and donor services. The purpose is to identify resources that are either strengths (which you can build on) or weaknesses (which you can make stronger or eliminate).

A comparison of the external and internal analyses helps leaders identify the strategic issues confronting the organization. The comparison is called **SWOT analysis** because it brings together the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The result is like a financial balance statement that measures the various "assets" and "liabilities" of the organization, as it exists at the present time.

Strategy Formulation

From the SWOT analysis managers derive a series of statements that identify the major gaps between the mission and current realities. Such statements answer the question, "What should we do to fulfill

our mission and vision?” Strategy formulation moves from analysis to defining the direction in which the organization needs to move to fulfill its mission. Strategy formulation is complete when leaders have a clear statement of where the organization is headed, what initiatives will be needed to get there, and why these initiatives are compatible with the mission and vision. For instance, a ministry I worked with some time ago came up with the following strategy statement:

In order to multiply the effectiveness of strategic Christian ministries in the majority world, we will adopt an aggressive growth strategy and develop a range of services in organizational capacity building. For this to happen, the following initiatives need to take place:

- Promote the understanding and practice of capacity building through teaching, speaking, and writing.
- Provide Christ-centered, results-oriented capacity building services to strategic ministries in the least Christian and most impoverished places of the world.
- Implement innovative fund raising strategies that include education of donors to the long-term benefits of capacity building.
- Install a state-of-the-art information management system.

Long-range Planning

Having formulated the strategy, leaders are in a position to establish long-term objectives and action plans. **Long-term objectives** answer the question, “What results must we have and when?” Objectives should be specific enough to measure and flexible enough to allow variations. When appropriate, objectives should also be linked to a time frame. For example, a long-term objective for a ministry might be “to have in place a strategic leadership process involving all co-workers in the organization by (year).” Naturally, for this to happen, a series of short-term results must be achieved as part of the action plan.

Because long-term objectives identify where you want to be at a point in the future, it is necessary to work backward to the present in order to determine short-term accomplishments along the way. These accomplishments (or results) constitute the **action plan** for each long-term objective. Each plan is then made actionable by spelling out the timeline, resources, person responsible, and feedback mechanism for each short-term result within a long-term objective.

This is also where the integration of different organizational functions takes place in the planning process. Some of the short-term results needed for one objective may show up as short-term steps of another. For instance, a short-term result of grant funds for the information technology objective may also show up as a short-term result needed in the fund-raising objective. In the end, action plans must answer the question, “What actions will we take to achieve the results that will move us toward each long-term objective?”

Results Management

As with any plan, formulating objectives and action plans is not enough. Leaders also must ensure that the strategic plan is implemented effectively and efficiently. No matter how clear a strategic plan is it cannot succeed if it is not enacted properly and evaluated regularly. Whereas the first four steps of strategic leadership address planning, **results management** is concerned with the implementation of the plan. In general, results management involves five related activities:

- Ensure that the right people are responsible for specific short-term results.
- Coordinate the information, resources, and support people need to get things done.
- Monitor progress toward short-term results and long-term objectives.
- Modify the plans in order to meet the desired objectives.
- Provide feedback to the leadership team, co-workers, and other stakeholders of the strategic plan.

This process, though straightforward, does not always go smoothly. Contrary to what some people think strategic leadership is not following a blueprint without deviation. It is more like sailing a ship on the high seas. Although the destination may be set, it takes many variations to stay on course. Results management is a living, ongoing process that requires control and flexibility, caution and speed, risk and restraint. By paying close attention to how things get done, leaders and co-workers play an important role in making sure that the strategic plan is actually carried out.

Evaluation

Evaluation is the last step in the strategic leadership process. No matter how effectively leaders carry out plans, activities mean very little if we don't know what they produce. In this final stage, leaders review what they have learned and identify areas in which they want to do things differently, based on the feedback obtained through results management. It is here that leaders decide what they have actually accomplished and what it means to the work of the gospel. With the lessons learned from the strategy implementation, evaluation is the first step in the next cycle of strategy planning. It is the beginning, not the end, of the process of strategic leadership.

At the end of the day it is not whether we have achieved all we hoped for that matters, but whether we have stayed on-purpose with God. Noble plans come and go, but the purposes of God endure. The question we must ask ourselves again and again is “Are we serving the purposes of God?” How will you know the answer? The disciplines of strategic leadership can help you check your course and continually steer toward God’s agenda for your ministry. ■

Reference

¹ Below, Patrick J., Morrisey, George L., and Acomb, Betty L. 1987. *The Executive Guide to Strategic Planning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Source

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