



## A Strategy Development Process

(The following paper was condensed from “Set the Journey: A Strategy Development Process for Associations” by Hugh Townsend of the Association Strategy Team and adapted to apply to churches with the author’s consent.)

Many of our early concepts of strategy were derived from the military. The word “strategy” literally means “what generals do,” referring to the mapping out of military strategy in order to create the best opportunity to win the battle. Or, in other words, strategy can be defined as, “the art of bringing forces to the battlefield in a favorable position to win.”

Strategy development helps establish a framework for setting direction, and helps you determine the criteria for day-to-day decisions. It helps answer the questions: “Where are we going?” and “How are we going to get there?” When there are clear answers to these two questions, the path you take can be specific and purposeful.

The strategy must be set in current reality. Often, people try to use yesterday’s solutions to cope with today’s challenges. Michael E. Porter stated, “The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.”<sup>i</sup> What he suggested is that the most difficult decisions in strategy development are not deciding what to do, but rather deciding what you are not going to do. Once objectives are determined, they must truly become priorities. All of the church’s resources should be committed to supporting the determined objectives.

Your strategy builds on your understanding of the interdependence and relationship between your core values, your mission, and your vision. Everything you do should be based and identifiable in one or more of these three essentials. Strategy development then leads you into determining your objectives, setting goals, and determining what specific steps you will take to accomplish your goals. The tactics become the activities, projects, and events you determine to be the best to help you achieve the desired results.

Strategy answers the question of “How?” “How are we going to accomplish the things that we have determined need to be accomplished during the strategy period?” Strategy maps out where you are going and also outlines the specific steps you need to take to get there. Take a few minutes to review the foundational elements of a strategy. How many of these have you done for your church? Which ones, if any, are missing and need to be developed? Do any of them need to be revised to meet your current needs? In light of this material, do all of your events and activities support these essential elements?

We claim that almost everything we do today is strategy; in reality, it may have nothing to do with strategy. Listed below are some of the ideas we sometimes ascribe to being strategy development, but which are not:

1. **Budget Planning.** A strategy needs a budget. It must have the necessary resources for successful implementation, but simply planning a budget is not strategy development.
2. **Calendar Planning.** Calendar planning is not strategy development. You must plan your calendar, but moving calendar dates around from one year to the next does not constitute strategy. At best, it perpetuates the past.
3. **Long-Range Planning.** “Long-range planning” is an old term that was used to imply that you were planning ahead for several years, usually seven to ten years. Strategy helps you position for the future. Although it has a future focus, it must help with current decisions. It becomes our decision-making guide for both now and the future. Strategy development sets the direction for the future, but does not try to plan the details beyond twelve to eighteen months.

## Strategic Thinking

In order to accomplish successful strategy development, you must begin with “strategic thinking.” Strategy development challenges you to think in a different way. There is nothing magical or mystical about strategic thinking. It does, however, challenge you to think in a different way. It calls for you to have the courage to risk reorganizing your problem-solving and thinking patterns. Many people tend to organize data and information in linear, logical thinking order, using concrete steps to formulate answers. The tendency is to look at only one answer rather than pursuing multiple possibilities. For example, instead of looking for one answer to a problem, you need to look for a variety of alternatives, possibly five to ten for each problem.

It is easy to get stuck in the same old ways of thinking and problem-solving patterns. And it’s not uncommon to be confronted with so much data that you experience information overload. In fact, you may need to set aside time to sort through all the information before you make any decisions.

Because you may be accustomed to thinking only one way, you may place your brain on “autopilot” and make many decisions without expending a lot of mental energy. In reality, you have chosen to avoid thinking—you are just moving along the treadmill, convincing yourself that you are moving toward your desired goals. The truth is, you’re just carrying the past with you. You repeat the same behaviors, the same thought processes, and the same programs. It should not be a surprise, then, when you fail to make progress and wind up in the same place year after year.



Sometimes the need for a strategic change is obvious! In the 1800's, the British army faced a new problem. For the first time, they were confronted with a crude but effective machine gun. At that time, British battle strategy was to have the soldiers—who wore brightly colored uniforms—present a united front by marching forward toward the enemy in long, straight rows. This had been effective in times past, for the approach of many rows of highly visible soldiers was intimidating to the enemy, sometimes resulting in confusion and fear for those who were unprepared for such a formidable sight.

However, with the invention of the machine gun, that kind of strategy made it easy for the enemy machine guns to mow down the British troops. In their initial confrontation with these machine guns, 500 British soldiers were killed or seriously injured in a matter of a few minutes. When the British field commander saw the devastation, he sent the following communication back to headquarters: “Send me 500 more men!”<sup>ii</sup>

The military leader obviously needed to change his strategy! What was the wisdom of sending another 500 men to their deaths by using the same strategy that had cost others their lives? However, the commander knew only one way to fight. He was not challenged to seek a different solution to a very serious problem—even though 500 of his men had just died! Today, many people are still trying to solve tomorrow's problems with yesterday's solutions, and it's not working.

To move beyond simply perpetuating the past, you must be willing to think differently and often move outside boundaries to which you have become accustomed. Jesus also lived outside the box. This is why He was so often in trouble with the Pharisees and the other leaders. Jesus did not think like other people. He broke all the rules the Pharisees considered important, and He was constantly upsetting the status quo.

When you talk about strategic thinking and thinking outside of the box, you are not talking about positive thinking, but possibility thinking. You are not talking about dreams, but vision. You are not talking about wishful thinking, but realistic, doable actions. Your thinking becomes full of “what if's” and “why not's,” instead of “we can'ts.”

Remember that strategy helps you focus on objectives that provide you with maximum leverage. Strategic thinking is not trying to be creative for creativity's sake. Its design is to help you know how to capture the future and help create it, not just observe what others are doing. Strategy leads you to know how to position your resources in a way so that you are moved to new frontiers, to the front lines. Although there is a measure of risk, Jesus instructed you to take risks for the sake of the kingdom. You cannot be afraid to fail, but be afraid of failure.



The following chart suggests the basic elements of strategic thinking in contrast to maintenance thinking:

## Basic Elements of Strategic Thinking vs. Maintenance Thinking

Strategic Thinking	Maintenance Thinking
Effective	Efficient
Success Seeker	Failure Avoider
Proactive	Reactive
Dynamic	Static
Flexible	Inflexible
Innovative	Traditional
Confronts	Avoids
Coordinated	Fragmented
Interdependent	Independent

Jesus modeled strategic thinking when He said, “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost. . . or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand” (Luke 14:28-32, NKJV)? Strategy is not a buzzword; it is a powerful tool to help you become effective doers of the Word.

### Strategy Process

One critical element in developing an effective strategy process is getting the right people involved. Too many churches have failed in the implementation phase because the key people of the church were not involved in the process initially and never gained ownership of the process.

Some churches prefer to use a planning team. This is usually a select group of people chosen by the pastor. If this approach is used, the wise leader should be certain that the group represents the full constituency of the church. If not, certain groups of people may feel left out and have no sense of ownership. Often, those left out represent various age or socioeconomic groups. A planning team can be very effective by limiting the number of people who need to commit significant amounts of time. Too many people can sometimes slow the process down. Additional people can be invited to serve at various points of the process.



To achieve the most success with your planning team, choose the following kinds of people:

- Involve people who care.
- Include broad-based participation.
- Enlist program or ministry leaders.
- Involve people with a passion for missions.
- Involve people who are future-oriented.

Enlisting the right people—and the right kinds of people—will help provide a solid foundation for building a relevant, contextual, church-owned strategy. Do not short-circuit this part of the process.

Too many strategy planning activities have been left on the shelf to collect dust because the people involved saw the effort as a project rather than a process. Unfortunately, many thought of strategy planning as an activity that could be completed. Once the action was completed, that was the end. Strategy development must be seen as an ongoing process, not the end result of a project.

Process implies ongoing activity. Although there may be an end to the formal part of a strategy development process, remembering that this is a process allows the strategy to stay flexible, relevant, and current to adjust and respond to emerging strategies. Strategy sets the direction by determining direction, outlining objectives, and establishing appropriate goals, but it does not go beyond twelve to eighteen months in developing action plans. Even when action plans are developed for this period of time to accommodate calendar and budget considerations, there must be flexibility to adjust them as needed.

A variety of approaches and processes could be used. However, any effective process will answer three questions:

1. **Where are we going?** (This question focuses on objectives and direction. This process presupposes Mission, Vision and Core Values statements are in place.) Some churches have chosen to set aside a special time of emphasis to identify objectives and goals in a retreat or other setting determined by the church. The objectives are determined based on the list of critical issues that have been identified by the church members.
2. **What is the environment?** (This question addresses contextual issues.) The church identifies major forces and trends in the region by studying appropriate data. The participants identify and prioritize the critical issues that the church must address. Consideration is given to the implication of the critical issues and what impact they will have on the church during the next three to five years.



3. **How do we get there?** (This question reminds you that strategy determines tactics.) During the Strategy Development Meeting, the church explores possible actions that will provide the best leverage in fulfilling the intent of the objectives and goals that have been determined. Church leaders must exercise restraint in making final decisions, avoid choosing actions that are low leverage activities, and also avoid trying to do too much.

The strategy development process should be based on valid data that leads to solutions for the future. The deeper the inquiry, the more useful the answers will be. “The more honest the answers, the more powerful your solutions.” Ask the following questions as you proceed:

- What are things really like?
- Why are things the way they are?
- How are we going to change?
- Is our plan realistic and deliverable?
- Are we really change-oriented?
- Do we sanction incompetence? (Or do we ignore the problems?)
- Have our ideas been formed into a vision?
- Do we have people on the team with ability?
- Are we prepared to see this through to the end?

After you have answered the basic questions above, four phases of strategy development can be identified and included. The timing and length of each phase depends on the church and its leadership. Somewhere in the process, however, these four phases will occur:

1. **Phase I – Preparation**

Before any process can begin, basic preparation must be made. This includes making a commitment to planning, enlisting appropriate personnel, gathering data, getting necessary commitments, setting aside appropriate calendar time, and determining the process to be used.

2. **Phase II – Planning**

During the planning phase, or the actual development phase, the strategy is formulated. Various meetings are held that lead church members to process the data and make decisions concerning strategic objectives, goals, and action plans. The direction for the church is set with specific actions that lead to fulfilling the desired intent.

3. **Phase III – Resource Development**

Once the plan has been completed, necessary resources for implementation must be identified. This phase includes identifying both existing resources and new resources that must be secured, as well as determining how these resources are to be allocated. All of the resources will not be available at the beginning of implementation. These resources will include:



- The allocation of personnel to staff ministries, programs, activities or events planned
- The development of a budget that resources the objectives, goals and action plans
- The development of a calendar reflects the objectives, goals and action plans

#### 4. Phase IV – Implementation

The final phase of strategy development is implementing the vision, taking action, and making it happen. One of the most frustrating experiences in life is getting to the goal line, yet failing to score. History reveals that the most common point of breakdown of strategy development is at the point of implementation. Horror stories are legendary, both within the corporate world, as well as among associations and churches, of organizations that started the process but never completed it.

In some cases, the process of strategy development becomes an end in itself rather than a means to an end. In *Productivity Power*, Jim Temme described a typical scenario:

- A strategic planning committee is assembled.
- The committee meets frequently and at great length.
- Committee members never focus on the payoff. They just concentrate on “something” so that they can say they did their job.
- After many hours and lots of conflict, the committee publishes a plan.
- Then, politically, they push it through the ranks.
- No one will admit that the plan was developed for the sake of having a plan—not to accomplish something meaningful.
- Upper management [church leadership] adopts the plan.
- It is assembled in a book with a nice cover.
- Everyone goes back to what they were doing before. <sup>iii</sup>

Scenarios like this have caused many church leaders to become disheartened and approach strategy development with a less-than-enthusiastic attitude. As church leaders, your challenge is to be sure that such a scenario is not played out in your church.

The Implementation Phase has three primary elements:

1. **Implementing the Plan.** This means faithfully executing the strategy as planned by the church personnel. Carry out the plan! Do the work!
2. **Evaluating the Plan.** Evaluation is not a one-time occurrence. Ideally, you will constantly evaluate the plan. (Annual coordinated planning is a basic minimum.) Constantly evaluating your plan allows you to keep the plan fresh and relevant. It allows you to make necessary adjustments in redefining your mission and strategies in relation to your ever-changing environment. Be certain you are staying on course and not beginning to drift away from desired outcomes.



Reggie McDonough, executive director for the Virginia Baptist Mission Board, has suggested the following criteria for evaluating strategy:

- a. Direction Factor. Is the strategy aimed toward a definite, clear objective or goal?
  - b. Potential Factor. Does the strategy promise an unusual benefit in the event that it is fully implemented?
  - c. Risk Factor. Does the strategy carry unacceptable risk in the event it is not successful?
  - d. Timeliness Factor. Does the strategy relate to a specific “window of opportunity”?
  - e. Challenge Factor. Does the strategy call for a significant commitment of time, money, and effort?
  - f. Feasibility Factor. Can the strategy be implemented through existing structure, or will a new structure be required?
  - g. Plannability Factor. Can specific action plans be developed to implement the strategy?
  - h. Evaluation Factor. Can ways be devised to test and monitor the effectiveness of the implementation plan? <sup>iv</sup>
3. **Celebrate! Celebrate! Celebrate!** Keep church constituents continually informed about the progress of the plan. Include updates in every newsletter and at every speaking opportunity, pastors’ meetings, and scheduled conferences. Celebrate every achievement. Lead the people to rejoice at every victory that God brings to your church, and be certain to give God all the glory.

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<sup>i</sup> Michael E. Porter, “What is Strategy?” Harvard Business Review, Business Classics: Fifteen Key Concepts for Managerial Success (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corp., 1996), p. 83.

<sup>ii</sup> Nate Booth, *Strategies for Fast-Changing Times: The Art of Using Change to Your Advantage* (Rocklin, Calif.: Prima Publishing, 1997), p. viii.

<sup>iii</sup> Jim Temme, *Productivity Power: 250 Great Ideas for Being More Productive* (Mission, Kan.: SkillPath Publications, 1993), p. 39.

<sup>iv</sup> Used with permission of author. Unpublished paper presented to Mega Consultants.

