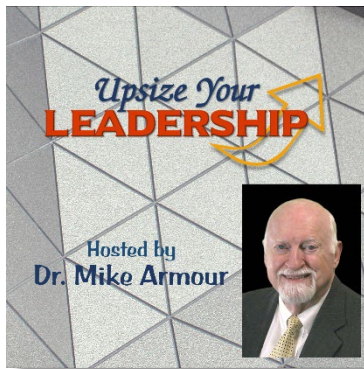


# Don't Waste Your Time Planning

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

## Episode UYL2203

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Are you or your organization rethinking the future in the aftermath of COVID? Thousands of businesses, institutions, and non-profits are doing so right now. The pandemic has thrust a great discontinuity on us. We can no longer plan on a future which is merely an extension of the past. Never has good planning been more urgent than it is at this very moment. And that's the topic for today's episode.

Currently I'm working with several clients to help them completely overhaul their strategic plan. The assumptions and trendlines which once shaped their strategic thinking are no longer relevant. And the pandemic so disrupted their corporate routines and working relationships that there is no going back to the past.

Yet, the planning process is fraught with dangers. It can easily be done poorly, which makes it a waste of time. The last thing you need to be doing today is wasting your time on plans that will bear little fruit. In today's program we're looking at planning with an eye to doing it well.

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Over the entire sweep of human history, the single largest endeavor ever undertaken in a compact period of time was the D-Day landing at Normandy during the Second World War. That operation involved over 156,000 troops, nearly 7000 ships and landing craft, and over 3200 aircraft. Imagine the planning which was required for such an undertaking.

And the man who was ultimately responsible for that planning was General Dwight Eisenhower. The success of the mission is a testament to great planning as much as it is a testament to bravery and self-sacrifice.

Yet Eisenhower himself is often quoted as having said, "Plans are worthless. Planning is everything." Actually, he wasn't quite that succinct in his statement. What he said was, "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable."

Why would he say that plans are useless? Because in battle, few things go according to plan. There's a common statement in military circles that a battle plan becomes obsolete within five minutes of contact with the enemy.

Many commanders on the beaches of Normandy learned that lesson first hand on D-Day. One of them was the only general who went ashore that day with his men. He was General Theodore Roosevelt. Not President Roosevelt. But his son. Young Theodore had been severely

injured in the First World War, but persuaded the Army to let him remain in its ranks as a career officer. Nevertheless, his wounds had taken such a toll that on D-Day, he was not able to carry a rifle ashore with him. He walked with a cane, and he was armed with only a pistol on his hip.

### **Innovating When the Plan Fails**

As fate would have it, the landing craft that put his men ashore made a navigational error, and they ended up on the wrong beach – hundreds of yards from where they were supposed to be and face-to-face with obstacles which they had not anticipated. Roosevelt's senior officers gathered around him on the beach and asked, "What do we do now?" Roosevelt famously stabbed his walking cane into the sand and said, "We start the war from right here."

So, what do you do when the battle plan is obsolete almost from the outset? You improvise. You innovate. You take whatever resources are at your disposal and you channel them into pressing forward to contribute to the overall mission of the endeavor.

As Roosevelt stood on that beach, the battle plan was (to use Eisenhower's term) useless. But the weeks and months of planning gave Roosevelt the know-how that he needed to take the battle to the enemy anyway. Because of the planning, he knew the overall objectives of the operation. He knew the general location of other units with which he could link up and join forces. He knew their capabilities. He knew their expertise. He knew the training which they had undergone. He knew their lines of supply. He knew their timetable for reinforcements.

In a word, planning gave him the power to make judicious decisions about how he could best further the cause. Yes, he improvised. But it was highly-informed improvisation.

I find that few leaders recognize the importance of broad-based planning, done in such a way that the goals and elements of the plan, as well as the rationale for these goals and elements, are thoroughly understood everywhere in the organization.

Because I've helped so many companies and non-profits with long-range planning over the years, I know how often an executive team decides to hole up at a retreat center some place for a couple of days to fashion a new strategic plan. Virtually no one outside their circle is involved. There's no dialogue with the rank and file, many times not even with key managers.

"Nobody else knows the overall business the way that we do," they argue. "We need to draft the plan ourselves." What they overlook is the opportunity to use planning as a learning opportunity for the entire organization. When people have to lend their effort to serious planning on a large scale, they not only learn how to plan better. They also become more knowledgeable of aspects of the business whose inner workings have long eluded them.

### **Golden Opportunities In Planning**

Not just executive teams, but managers at every level can hold planning close to their vest and do almost all of the major planning for their part of the organization. And I'm talking here about longer-term planning, not short-term, day-to-day operational planning. By failing to enlist broad participation in planning for the months or years ahead, managers miss out on several golden opportunities.

First is the opportunity to uncover a gem of an idea from people who might not otherwise be consulted. Nothing brings out individual creativity more fully than struggling to find solutions to

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serious challenges. By engaging people in probing discussions of issues which the plan must address, managers create a setting with the potential of sparking breakthrough ideas from people who have never seriously confronted the issue before.

Second, is the opportunity to trigger greater buy-in for the final plan. Not everyone fully agreed with everything which went into the final plan for D-Day. General George Patton was vocal in objecting to the role which he was assigned in setting the stage for the invasion. But when people have had a meaningful hand in crafting a plan, they are far more likely to be an advocate for it and to support it once it is promulgated.

Third – and this brings us again to our theme today – broad-based involvement in planning allows the participants to know the thought process which went into the plan so that they are better equipped to innovate at moments when unanticipated developments elude the parameters of the plan.

Now, it will come as no surprise to you that when I present concepts like this, a recurring objection occurs. “What you’re suggesting takes too much time,” I’m told. “The more people you involve, the longer it’s going to take. And we’re all so busy already that we just can’t give an undue amount of time to planning.”

### **Time Well Spent**

Granted, broad participation in planning does take extra time and effort – lots of it. After decades of guiding planning exercises, however, I’m fully convinced that the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. The planning for D-Day took two years. Stalin, meanwhile, was demanding that the Allied forces should open a second front to press Germany from the west since the Russians were suffering such massive civilian and military casualties pushing back against Hitler from the east. But the landing was too crucial for the planning to be rushed.

Right now I’m helping TCU’s College of Nursing and Public Health develop a new five-year plan. The dean and his department heads could probably put together an adequate plan in rather short order with just a couple of extended meetings. Instead, the dean is visionary enough to realize the benefit of a more protracted, broader-based planning process. Our schedule allocates a year to developing and finalizing the plan. Along the way there will be input from and dialogue with a wide range of constituencies – faculty, students, donors, local medical institutions, alumni, and higher management within the university, among others. I can already see that this process will pay tremendous dividends in terms of support that the final plan will receive.

Planning, of course, must take place within the context of other considerations. It must maintain close alignment with the organization’s core values and its vision and mission statements (which sometimes need to be rewritten as part of a strategic planning effort). And in the case of smaller components of an organization, the strategic plan must align with the plans of the parent entity, in the case which I just cited, the strategic plan of the university.

I like to think of all of these elements as analogous to the process of planning a long road trip. The strategic plan equates to your roadmap. Your vision statement identifies your ultimate destination. Your mission statement spells out the nature of the journey. Is it a business trip? A vacation trip? A sight-seeing trip? The nature of the trip – that is, your mission statement – determines the type of preparations you need to make before you embark.

Extensive road trips are meant to accomplish something of value to you. Maybe you want to build some cherished family memories. Or you may want to attend a certain convention. If the value behind your trip is removed, the trip loses meaning. In the same way, your mission statement (which lays out the nature of your trip) has meaning only to the degree that it fully accords with your corporate values. Values must therefore be reiterated and reconfirmed as part of any strategic planning process.

And as your trip proceeds, there are certain things you want to accomplish along the way. Perhaps it's taking a side trip to a particularly scenic spot. Or dropping in on a longtime friend whose town you will pass through. These "must not miss" opportunities as you travel are the equivalent of the Operational Priorities which feed out of your strategic plan. And the Goals and Action Plans which ensue from the strategic planning process equate to the route you take on your road trip.

The strategic planning process should therefore strive to integrate values, vision, mission, operational priorities, goals, and action plans. But there is a danger in this level of planning.

### **Plans Put on the Shelf**

As we have noted, done thoroughly, extensively, and appropriately, this type of planning takes time. Neurological research, however, has shown that our brains make little distinction between prolonged thinking about an activity and actually performing the activity.

I think this is one reason that so many strategic plans are relegated to a shelf somewhere shortly after they are completed. Those responsible for implementing the plan are probably the very ones who had the greatest role in developing it. As they lived through the fashioning of the plan, they simultaneously lived out the plan vicariously. At a certain emotional level, it's almost as though they have already accomplished it.

It thus quits being a roadmap. It's not communicated broadly and repeatedly. It's not referenced frequently when announcing new initiatives. It's not reviewed routinely to assure that things are still on course according to the plan. It's not consistently used as the framework for major decisions and goals and for maintaining accountability. In a word it languishes. All that work and effort. And in the end, it basically proved to be a waste of time.

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