


BarLeader

For the leaders of bar associations

Summer 2000 

Strategic planning

Get in gear
for the future

Strategic Planning

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The goals of the current five-year plan are expected to be completed within three years. To ensure that speed, the group's council met in February to re-evaluate the plan.

While each five-year plan has been revised because of quick accomplishments, the group continues to produce five-year plans to provide the time needed in case of a market downturn, Anders explains. The association hopes to re-evaluate its plan on an annual basis and modify what is necessary.

"How do you get along without a plan? It's like trying to get through life without a roadmap," says Anders.

Corporate perspective

Many companies, including General Electric and Southwest Airlines, no longer use long-range planning. Their plans have evolved into a concept called strategic thinking, says Jan King of El Segundo, Calif., author of the book, *Business Plans to Game Plans: A Practical System for Turning Strategies into Action* (Silver Lake Publishing, 1994). The book details the system King devised to strategize and implement a business plan for California-based Merritt Publishing, where she is president and chief executive officer. (A few years ago, Silver Lake Publishing bought out the trade division of Merritt.)

"In strategic thinking, the process is more important than producing an outcome or plan. It uses a wider base of participation, both by employees and experts outside the company, than traditional planning to get all the best thinking possible and to create commitment to the vision created," King says.

The thinking process is guided by creativity—intuition with a focus almost exclusively on the external environment. Planning focuses on both external and internal environments. Strategic thinking looks at the traditional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and trends (SWOT) analysis, opportunities that lie ahead and pos-

sible threats to the company, she adds.

"The intent of strategic thinking is to further the vision of the company and to look for new partnerships and resources to make the most of their opportunities," King adds.

A Charles Schwab advertisement that gives away a free book on investing is an example of strategic thinking. The ad shows a handwritten note signed by Charles R. Schwab about a vision he had 25 years ago.

"Charles Schwab could imagine a world where people took more control over their financial futures. He probably couldn't imagine the Internet 25 years ago. But the Internet fit perfectly into his 25-year-old vision. So the company was poised to take advantage of what the Internet could offer its clients early in the game," she explains.

Similar to association plans, corporate plans are often two to five years in length, and most are updated annually. "Strategic thinking should look at least five, but not more than 10 years or more out," King says.

The biggest factor to encourage the accomplishment of goals is the accountability of individuals or teams to the organization. Accountability must be in meeting that long-range strategic vision, not in meeting short-term objectives, she explains.

"If organizations reward for short-term results, this is where individuals will focus. Short-term objectives, especially financial objectives, must be within the context of long-term strategic thinking as much as possible," King says.

Corporations start the strategic thinking process with off-site retreats and a facilitator, similar to many associations. Surveys of employees, business partners, suppliers and customers are often used. Financial reports of trends, sales and marketing information are also included.

"A company should not be afraid of shelving or postponing goals. Good thinking and planning require the flexibility to follow intuition and know when to go ahead and when to hold back, even if it means less in the short term. It may be vital to long-term survival." King adds. BL