Anticipating Change

A wise person once said: “Nothing is constant except for change; it is the only constant we can count on.” If the statement is so true and accepted as such, why is change so difficult to deal with, anticipate, and plan for? If it’s such a certainty, then why does it always catch us off guard and upset or ruin our plans?

Contingency plans are good and necessary in many things we do, but I think that the most important lesson to be learned is that you must to flexible. We obviously don’t always know what changes are coming so we need to be able to step back, review the situation, and alter our strategy. If we are too rigid in our thinking and planning, we will fail to seize those unforeseen opportunities that change can bring.

Developing a plan, or having a strategy is about the way in which an agency can operate successfully **in the environment** in which they find themselves. We all know that the business environment for agencies is subject to change – whether due to markets, the economy, regulation or other causes.

Plans or strategies which assume that business environment is either unchanging or completely predictable can often lead to disappointment. However, change does not negate the value of planning. In fact, just the opposite is true. Having a plan can be like having a rudder to help navigate the currents of change – even when those currents appear to change into raging rapids.

We need to develop a very flexible idea of strategy. It is no longer the fixed five year plan - but a vision of a way ahead that is capable of being modified at every twist and turn of events and still allow progress towards our goal. By analogy it is like making the step from a ballistic artillery shell to a guided heat seeking missile. The latter can **deal with a moving target**; the former cannot.

In facing the dilemmas of the future it is important to take a strategic view and to plan for **long term survival** and success whilst at the same time acknowledging that the environment can change, so that that almost any **forecast** or plan could easily be overtaken by events. Do we, therefore, abandon forecasting and live on a day to day basis? This leaves us vulnerable like a ship which simply runs before the wind and ignores where its destination is. Do we, instead, try to second guess the future in the hope our plans will work out given enough effort? This leaves us vulnerable like a ship which heads in the right direction but runs aground on an uncharted shoal.

Planning should not be viewed as a guarantee to future success. Strategic Planning has limitations, such as the following:

Planning is not a way of making future decisions. There is no way anyone can predict the future. It provides overall guidance and direction based on what we think will happen.

Planning is not a blueprint for the future. There are too many changes taking place - marketplace is changing, customer preferences are changing, new competition, new technologies, new opportunities, declining financial condition, etc. Strategic Planning is a dynamic process, which is receptive to change.

Planning does not always identify all critical issues related to the agency. Rather, it attempts to identify the most significant issues that will confront the agency. By focusing on major issues, plans emphasis what is truly important and thereby improve the chances for successfully reaching goals.