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## The Pitfalls of Planning

by [Arlene Goldbard](#)

The main pitfall of planning - the one from which all others derive - is falling into the delusion that planning can determine outcome. The error of this proposition is a commonplace. In 17th century Japan, Ihara Saikaku wrote "There is always something to upset the most careful of human calculations." Robert Burns, the bard of 18th century Scotland, put it as follows: "The best laid schemes o' mice and men/Gang aft a-gley." I cannot name the late-20th century wit who coined the resonant phrase "Shit happens," but whatever elegance it lacks in comparison with its predecessors it more than makes up in economy of expression.

If the wisdom of the ages won't suffice to make this point, consider only the top layer of recent human events, the happenings big enough to make banner headlines. Notwithstanding global intelligence operations, including unlimited access to computer simulations, who was able to predict the fall of the Berlin Wall? The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia? The end of apartheid in South Africa? As I write, headlines trumpet the top-speed collapse of the Asian economic miracle, long-touted as a triumph of economic planning. Who would have guessed?

Planning cannot guarantee the outcome you want. Instead, it can help you to achieve something integral to any future success: readiness to face the challenges that chance presents. Rule number one for coping with challenges is to know what you're up against. Allow me to offer some of the pitfalls of planning in the hopes that forewarned, you will be forearmed against them.

- **PLANNING IS ONLY AS GOOD AS THE INFORMATION ON WHICH IT IS BASED.** Too often, groups rely on untested assumptions or hunches, erecting their plans on unsteady ground. Everyone "just knows" there'll be no problem getting a distributor for a video, or that it would be impossible to find funding for a new facility; or it's "obvious" that a half-time person would suffice to accomplish a brand-new and sorely needed task. It's the obvious things that everyone just knows that are most likely to trip you up. We were once called in to help a client who'd gotten into a lot of trouble by assuming it would be a snap to solve a problem that had stymied its whole field for years. The client's optimistic pronouncements were greeted by the field as arrogant examples of unjustified self-confidence that could only have been based on disrespect for other's efforts to solve the same problem. The client had to do a lot of apologizing and fence-mending that could have been avoided if only they'd taken the time to find out how others had attempted to address the problem in the past. Not only that, the basic assumption was wrong: most of the "new" solutions the client had put forward had already been tested by others and found wanting. If you're going to plan, it's worth the extra time to test assumptions and hunches against reality.
- **PLANNING ISN'T MAGIC: YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT.** Frequently, organizations contemplating new initiatives - a program, a facility, staff expansion - begin by writing the last page of their plans, the one where everyone lives happily ever after. But the process of planning is one of research and investigation. Results can no more be predetermined than can the outcome of a scientific experiment. Considering a major expansion of activity means taking stock of organizational readiness in many ways. Is there a need for the new activity? An audience or constituency? Do you have access to the expertise? The material resources? The time required to do it right? Planning is a tool that can help you decide whether to go forward, not just how. If the answers to key questions are "no," then the outcome of planning should be to postpone the contemplated expansion, working toward readiness to tackle it farther down the road.
- **ADAPTABLE BEATS OB DURATE, ANYTIME.** Some planners see themselves as creating a blueprint, building a future the way one builds a house. If things don't go according to plan, they blame other people's failure to "get with the program." But an organization isn't an artifact to be set in place with planks and nails. In contrast to a construction project, organization-building is never complete; like all life-forms, an organization's choices are to continuously adapt or die. Rather than planning as if the future were

pre-determined, plan for flexibility. Plans that can't be changed shouldn't be written.

- **PUT PLANNING IN ITS PLACE AND TIME.** Some groups don't recognize that it takes time and effort to plan well. They want the results, but aren't able or willing to make the investment. They end up in the worst of both worlds: their ongoing work is set back because they took time to plan without thinking through the implications; and their too-rushed plans end up half-baked ideas. Be realistic about what you can invest. Find a way to plan that suits your available resources - time, energy, money.
- **TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING: PLANNING CAN BECOME A SUBSTITUTE FOR ACTION.** Times have been hard for many nonprofit organizations. One of the ironies of funding cutbacks in recent years is that it has sometimes been easier to obtain support for planning than for programming. Some funders evidently believe that merely talking about self-sufficiency - to pick just one example - is a perfectly good way to achieve it. This can lead to an obsessive internal focus: fleeing the indifferent outside world - the "big world" - people retreat to the "little worlds" of their organizations, where they can at least have company in their misery. "They're always having retreats to figure out who they are," someone recently said of a well-funded but aimless organization. "That's a bad sign."
- **WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND: GROUPS CAN BE BLINDSIDED BY THE ISSUES THAT PLANNING REVEALS.** There's a mollifying rhythm to the daily grind, as diligence, deadlines, and distractions keep tensions and conflicts at bay. When an organization pauses to plan, what's been submerged may come up for air. Suppose everyone is asked to dream of future roles or projects, and two staff members' dreams come into major conflict? Suppose there's a discussion of workplace culture, fingers are pointed, defenses mustered, rifts revealed? When an organization undertakes to plan, everyone should be made aware that issues may arise that need talking through, that there may be moments of heat, struggle, even head-on collision. Your planning process should include the time, focus, and talent for the mediation needed to resolve such conflicts, so you can turn to face the future as a team.
- **BOILERPLATES AND COOKIE-CUTTERS ARE THE WRONG TOOLS FOR THIS JOB.** Some planners opt for a "model" approach: all dance companies are supposed to develop this way, media centers that way; here are the seven stages of museum development; follow the ten "best practices" of community arts councils. It's not that other organizations' experiences aren't relevant to your own. Sometimes they're perfectly germane. But not often. Perfect congruence is more likely to be a fortuitous accident than an application of science: even a broken clock is right twice a day. Think about how complex and various individual human beings are. Even if I were equipped with a database of the ways that hundreds of individuals roughly your age and background had behaved in a variety of situations, in competition with your partner or best friend, I could never hope to win a game whose object was to guess your next move - let alone advise you on what it should be. Organizations, multiplying the complexity and diversity of their individual members, deserve to find their own paths rather than being pulsed through an organizational assembly-line. In planning, insist on your right to march to a different drummer.
- **WRITING IT UP IN PLANSPEAK RATHER THAN PLAIN LANGUAGE UNDOES THE GOOD OF PLANNING.** Sometimes organizations have great face-to-face planning experiences: good discussions, moments of profound insight, the excitement of contemplating future possibility, the elation of a meeting of the minds. But feelings don't last long: they need to be carried forward into action, guided by a written plan. Some planning documents are so vague, abstract, and general, they're useless to the people who invested so much in considering their futures. Typically, an aim is listed - "become self-sufficient in five years" - and beneath it, phrases suggesting a range of ways to advance that aim: "expand earned income," "secure individual donations," "develop endowment." As time goes by and the memory of the face-to-face experience fades, the planning document's generalities are drained of any meaning that might once have clung to them. If you are going to take the time to plan, do it right: talk through alternative scenarios for realizing your aims; map out ways to test them; be concrete about guiding values, deadlines, ways to evaluate your experiments. Put enough flesh on the bare bones of your plans to keep the document alive and kicking, or it will be buried in a drawer before the ink has dried.

To speed you on your way, I offer a small selection of sage efforts to describe the future by people who were no doubt smarter, braver, or more intoxicated than

either you or I. They were also wrong - or the truths they hit on were so partial as to be entirely inadequate - which brings us back to the point about planning: not to be right, but to be ready.

"I have seen the future; and it works."

-- Muckraking author Lincoln Steffen on the Soviet Union, circa 1919

"If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face - forever."

--George Orwell, NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR (published in 1949)

"Deer will be grazing in Times Square in forty years."

--Timothy Leary, 1967.

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