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Ten Rules to Avoid Planning Foul-Ups

STATUTORILY EXEMPT

Editor's Note: This paper was awarded Second Prize in the 1988 Human Resources Management Association Literary Contest.

Every organization in the Agency does planning. We have staffs of highly paid and qualified people devoted to projecting requirements for years into the future and examining all aspects of potential problems. We still have operators and analysts who must set aside essential projects to plan for the next few weeks, months, or years. In some cases we plan well, in some cases our plans are hopelessly unworkable, and in the majority of cases we come up with something that's either acceptable or that doesn't hurt too much.

Years ago, Frederick Taylor engaged in a process of industrial task analysis that came to be promoted as "Scientific Management." For a time this was a thriving field, the province of the now almost extinct "efficiency expert." Since the late 1940s, a more humanistic approach has been taken, the writings of Chris Argyris being a notable example. To be a science, something must be quantifiable; people are not, intangible benefits are not, and sometimes even resources are not. All of these have to be considered and balanced by managers, so by extension, management is not quantifiable. This conclusion does not negate the damage done to industrial relations by twenty-five years of scientific managers.

Nothing of similar scope has ever been done with planning, to the benefit of us all. There have been many different approaches recommended, and nearly as many taken, especially in the area of budgeting. Structured, automated project management, probably the closest thing we have to a planning framework, is applicable in some cases but useless in others. There has not been a great amount of significant and usable research done on the actual planning process itself.

All this does not mean that there are no rules that apply to planning. If Matisse and Beethoven adhered to rules, why should we be any different? On a less lofty plane, if a carpenter does not adhere to the rules of his trade, the house will look ugly and there is a good chance it will fall down. Carpentry is not a science either. Plans have to be made under different circumstances to meet different requirements.

TEN BASIC RULES OF PLANNING

What distinguishes good planning from bad? Why do some plans go off like clockwork while others flop from the first attempt at implementation? I believe that good plans conform to a few basic rules. Adherence to these rules will not necessarily make for a good plan but will make for a plan that can be implemented with some chance of success and a reduced likelihood of damage.

I. The Iron Rule of Costs

Before all else, *planning itself, has costs*. We can pay hard cash to have a consultant do it for us, which is an overt cost, or we can do it ourselves, which results in in-house costs. Still, the time people spend on planning is not spent on production, so the return from the planning undertaken should visibly outweigh the loss to operations before it is begun.

II. The Rule of Reality

There must be a problem to overcome before planning is begun in the first place. This seems like a statement of the obvious, but there is a subsidiary principle that comes into play as well – the difference between an initial impression and a studied conclusion. Planning is always started in response to an initial impression, and the first stage of good planning is to define the problem and map its constraints. In some cases this will determine that the initial impression was wrong, that things are better than they seemed, and that nothing further need be done. In these cases the action is to discontinue the planning. In the remaining cases, the initial study will suggest the scope of the solution that is needed. Determining scope will put a limit on the amount of work that needs to be invested.

III. The Rule of Scale and Budget

The bad planner's worst enemy is the budget process, and often budgeting is none too friendly even to a good planner. There is a certain amount of joy to be found in working out the best of all possible solutions to a given problem (unrestrained by funding or personnel considerations), but there is a corresponding amount of sorrow in seeing hard work go into a bottom drawer because there is no money. Projects are – sometimes ruthlessly, sometimes sorrowfully – killed or bottom-drawered with every realignment of the budget. It is to the advantage of both the planner and the initiator to ensure that what is developed is on a small enough scale to be practical.

The actual practice of planning follows a pattern. The initial study is done to define the problem, then a plan is drafted which will cover every aspect at once, using the most efficient means. This is the joyful part of planning, but it applies only to the first draft of a successful plan. The next step is much harder and is often avoided – revision. Money constraints are always there, and personnel constraints are often more severe than those imposed by dollar shortages. The planner must step back for that second draft, viewing what was done the first time around with a hostile eye. This is a hard thing to do since we tend to love our own work above all others, but by taking a critical approach to that second draft we can make it better by asking the following hard questions before someone else does it for us:

- First and foremost, is there a gain associated with the solution? Is there a savings in money? in time? in people requirements? in paperwork? Is production increased? Is more data processed? If not, stop right here and go back and reconsider whether a plan is needed in the first place. It probably isn't.
- What would be the result of taking the most cost-effective approach instead of the most efficient approach?
- What will the impact be on "the" budget, whether a formal Agency document or an informal balance of the requirements for sound operations at the team level? In other words, what other projects will putting our own work into effect cause *not* to be done? Will these things not getting done outweigh the value of our own work? If so, stop right here and go back and rescope.
- Do *all* aspects of the problem have to be covered now? Will the solution of a percentage of the problem do as well, or nearly as well, as a solution to the whole problem? Is "nearly as well" good enough? This point derives from the Law of

Diminishing Returns, which states that getting the first half of something done is generally cheaper than getting the second half done. The last 20 percent of a solution will often cost as much as the first 80, and the last 5 percent may cost as much as the first 95.

IV. The Rule of Elasticity

This rule might also be called the Rule of the Risen Murphy and is closely tied to the old aphorism about the best-laid plans of mice and men. It states that

> The likelihood of unforeseen circumstances having an adverse effect on our work increases in geometric proportion to the complexity of the project; and the more rigid the plan, the less room there is to fudge and recover.

What these add up to is a requirement for planners to adhere closely to one of the basic laws of engineering – KISS (Keep it Simple, Stupid!). Never use three parts when one will do, because there will be three times as much chance of failure.

V. The Rule of Increments and Feedback

If we acknowledge the requirement of flexibility in planning, the next step is to take an incremental approach. *Implementation is usually better done in increments, and as each increment is being executed the planner should be taking the lessons learned and applying them to both the overall plan and to the next increment.*

Modularity is the ability of the different segments of a plan or program to stand alone and to be available to other plans or programs. The principle is sound – despite the imminent danger of its adoption as a meaningless buzz word – even though not always practicable. A plan has a better chance of succeeding if it is put together this way, so that if at any time the money or the people are cut off, what has been done to that point can remain in effect, giving at least a partial benefit.

VI. The Rule of Coordination

No one supports a policy that hurts him. Period. No one ever gets around this rule, but the number of wheeler-dealers who try continues to astound.

The implementation of any idea will have an effect on other people or organizations. Not to coordinate with all possible interested parties before attempting to implement a plan is to invite anyone whose concerns *are* affected to view the brain child with hostility and to misinterpret motives. Coordination can be a tedious matter of waiting for the Great Man (or Woman) to deign to see you and graciously part with an initial, but it saves time in the long run because it is always harder to repair damage already done than to avoid it.

VII. The Rule of Turf

The Rule of Turf is closely related to the Rule of Coordination, but distinct. *Turf concerns should be respected during the draft of a plan, not waiting until the coordination process, or worse still, until implementation.* This is another application of the principle that it is cheaper to avoid damage then to repair it.

Turf should never be dismissed as just a "political" concept, because it comprises much more than politics. Like Roger Rabbit's wife, it's not bad, it's just drawn that way. Any

organization which is broken down into subunits responsible for a portion of the overall mission has legitimately assigned "turfs." This allows specialization and the growth of a deeper level of expertise than does an anarchic approach. Where lines of responsibility do not adjoin or overlap there are no turf battles; where they do, there is the potential for friction because the edges may be connected to two or more middles.

Turf is not something for a planner to readjust unless he or she is planning a reorganization, and even then attention has to be paid to the people involved. In the vast majority of cases it is part of the context within which the planner has to work.

VIII. Humpty Dumpty's Law

This law, named after the infamous egg, says that both planner and management should always think twice, or maybe three times, before implementing a new plan. *Once an existing set of circumstances is modified, chances that it can be reconstructed are next to nil.*

When a situation is modified, so are the expectations and requirements of the people and organizations concerned. Even if a program or project doesn't do what it was originally intended to do, it will do something, and that something will provide a benefit to someone. The withdrawal of that benefit will be resisted, even if it is accruing to a different person or organization than originally intended. Additionally, there will almost certainly be jobs involved, skills allocation, budgeting and bookkeeping considerations, and probably a hundred other factors. This is why it is always easier to do nothing – in this case not to correct a mistake – than to do something.

IX. The Law of Unintended Side Effects

The benefit accruing to the wrong people described under Rule VIII is an example of unintended side effects. *No function is entirely independent of any other; a change in one area will have an effect – good, bad, or neutral – on other areas.*

An example: We've had a parking problem for years at the Agency. Recently we bought more land and turned a part of it into an additional parking lot. As a side effect, the existing shuttle bus service had to be stretched to cope with the strain of expanded routes. Result: We have to wait longer for shuttle buses. A further, more detailed examination will reveal other side effects – some of them good, some of them detrimental to the mission, and some of them neither. In addition, each of the side effects will have its own side effects, and a neutral side effect may in itself have positive or negative fallout.

This is very confusing, of course, but planning should be thought of as correcting mistakes before they occur. Planners must make the effort to foresee as many side effects as possible before implementation and during the feedback process and make provisions for dealing with them.

X. All Planners Should be Sentenced to Execution

This rule does not mean that all planners should be shot; that fate should be reserved for bad planners only. What is does mean is that *planning should never be separated from implementation.* This is the way to avoid the "ivory tower" syndrome, in which lovely, detailed, non "sanity-checked" plans are made that are either bottom-drawered after being duly admired, or in which implementation is begun in good faith and a project or program gobbles up money, time, personnel, and other essential resources until either the bank is broken or the project is dropped, along with a lot of sunken costs and a career or two. Knowing that he or she is going to be the person who has to "tote the weary load" of

execution is the best possible incentive to make the planner as realistic as possible in approach. Further, since we learn from our mistakes, this is the best way of ensuring that experience is gained in implementation, to be retained for application in the next plan.

Admittedly, this cannot be done in every case, but even in those cases where it is impossible there must be some mechanism in place to tie the planner into the feedback process. Otherwise there is no experience gained and the same mistakes and false assumptions will be made over and over. Planning which is divorced from execution is also divorced from reality.

FINALLY

The 10 rules listed above are not exhaustive – look a little bit further, think a little bit more, and their number can be expanded to 20, or 30, or more. But the list should not be shrunk. If, when we plan, we ignore the principles above, then we are also shrinking the prospects of coming up with a workable plan. A brilliant plan is a product of intellect; some planners are intelligent and skilled in their fields. But a brilliant plan is not the same thing as a *workable* plan, and good plans must be both intelligent and workable. Coming up with a workable plan is the product of a methodical approach and the application of a sound understanding of the environment in which the subject of the planning will have to exist.

That is the paradox of the planning process; good planning is the result of good planning.

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