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Planning for Efficiency

IT HAS BEEN PROVED under all conditions of war and peace that people succeed best who form definite ideas of what they are going to do before they start to do it. But no precept is more generally neglected. We drift into situations, and find ourselves at the mercy of circumstances.

Planning is not a virtue in itself, but it brings many virtues in its train. It is one way to avoid entropy, which is the tendency of all created things to seek rest, to "run down". Planning — which involves looking ahead — takes us out of the complacency that accompanies seeing things only as they are, not as they might be. It protects us from thinking that this is the final chapter in our business career, our personal relationships, or our happiness.

People who set themselves to succeed in a project by planning its course are greatly helped because so many have no aim or plan. The planners take the measures necessary to influence and make sure of the fulfilment of their aims. The only link between a desire and its realization is the blue-print showing the parts needed, how they are put together, and the order in which to handle them.

Every sector of industry involves planning. If you are going to build a new railway you cannot send your engineers out to survey a stretch of land; they must know where the terminus is to be and at what towns you wish your trains to call on the way. If you are operating a factory you need to schedule every process, from delivery of raw materials through the machines to laying down your product at your customer's doorstep.

Planning develops poise

These are the practical necessities that demand planning. But there are many other benefits accruing to the person who looks ahead and anticipates events and decides how to handle them. He develops an harmonious adjustment within himself. He has poise. He has such a command of himself and his projects that his tasks are performed easily. He keeps his head when others around him are losing theirs.

Consider the difference between a "big" man and a "small" man in business. The big man has a big view, comprehending not only his own job but all the surrounding jobs that contribute to it and stem from it. The small man is wrapped up in his specific chores: if he is a works foreman he wants to standardize on a few long runs to keep down costs; if he is a sales manager he wants many short runs to give him variety with which to appeal to more customers. The big man sees not only the immediate effects of a policy on a special group, but inquires into the long-run effects of that policy on all groups that may become connected with it.

These are days when long-term good workmanship, as well as long-term leadership, demand constant improvement applied as a policy and not merely the meeting of needs and coping with crises piecemeal. The wise person will plan so as to be a bit ahead of the generally advancing state-of-his-art.

This requires that we be creatively-minded. Having trained ourselves to be sensitive to problems, present and future, we must then develop fluency with ideas for solving them. This tends to give us flexibility, one of the beneficial results of planning.

The creative mind is not governed by the laws of mechanics or physics. It doesn't start to function when you press a button marked "on". It must first sense a problem to be solved, and then dig up the facts, mull them over, recognize a possible solution, plan how to apply it, and try it out.

The routine mind waits for a button to be pushed. It is hurried by events into finding immediate answers to immediate questions. Crises come upon it bumper-to-bumper. It is never out of trouble, and has no time to catch a glimpse of the future. It doesn't know ahead

what problems are coming up, and consequently it does not know what can be by-passed or postponed safely. Confucius was wise when he said: "We should make plans so that we may have plans to discard."

The alternative to any plan which fails to work is always another plan. To prepare for the expected is also to prepare against the unexpected. Then the worst that can happen will not throw us for a complete loss. Hurry and surprise are the two most dangerous situations in business and personal life. If we look ahead we can avoid them, because we shall then be prepared to take a new course or to gain the time needed for rearrangement of our plans.

Having made our plans to accommodate various contingencies, we need owe nothing to fortune except opportunity. The "breaks" come to many of us, but the advantage goes to the person who is ready for the breaks.

Make sure of your ground

The person who wishes to plan ahead will first of all make sure of where he is now, and where he wishes to go. Then, if he takes the advice of Field Marshal Montgomery, he will work backward from his objective to ensure that he starts his advance in the way best suited to the needs of the master plan. He will foresee difficulties, and he will not minimize them. He will keep track day by day or week by week of how fast he is going, in what direction.

The planner will keep his vision clear. He will not become so enamoured by devices and gadgets and paper work that he loses his perspective. Too many of us become hypnotized by methods. Like the philosopher in Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, we gaze upwards to the stars and fall into the water. If we had looked down we might have seen the stars in the water, but looking aloft we could not see the water in the stars.

The executive in particular, but all of us in general, must cultivate the habit of paying attention to one project at a time. We may develop this habit along the lines used by a filing clerk. When we plan something, file it away under the date when it is to be taken up, close the file drawer on it, as it were, and go on with a clear mind to something else.

Every plan should have two parts: strategy and tactics. A comprehensive scheme is needed, within which you may manoeuvre to meet changing circumstances. If you are an executive, you may assign responsibility for various actions, but you must not allow any subordinate to tinker with your master plan. If your plan is a personal one, you have great liberty in shifting ground tactically, but you should think seriously and thoroughly before allowing your grand strategy to be upset.

Perhaps no blunder is so common as that which arises from missing the proper moment for action. But how are we to recognize the moment unless we have prepared our minds by looking ahead? A Greek orator of two thousand years ago put it to the men of Athens like this: "Philip, knowing his own designs, pounces on whom he pleases in a moment; we, when we hear that something is going on, begin to bustle and prepare."

Planning allows us to make a wise alliance with circumstances. When our plan brings success, we are in position to follow it up; if it fails, we are ready to screen retirement while we put an alternative plan into action.

Planning in detail

It may be said that, as a general rule, any event succeeds or fails in proportion to the thoroughness of the preparation given it. Sketchy suggestions and half-baked plans do not appeal to the wise executive, and they should not find a place in the planning of persons or committees engaged in education, church work, service associations, or any other sort of responsible activity.

When a group is struggling toward a decision, the man who will take the pains to think out and elaborate his plan in a clear consistency is likely to have his suggestion gratefully embraced. His planned ideas will dominate the undisciplined thoughts of his co-workers. He has examined the facts, he tells what they mean, and he recommends what should be done about them.

Consider the planning done by Captain Gabe Bryce, former pilot in the King's Flight, who took the 122-foot-long Vanguard airliner off its 1,260-yard runway for the first time in December and guided it through the only gap in the encircling hills. For two years he rehearsed every move, did his finger exercises in the cockpit of the prototype every day, invented emergencies and met them.

Only after planning in detail is a man ready to take the risks of important actions. Troubles are less if we have anticipated them and planned how to meet them. Even if we seem to be surrounded by difficulties, looking ahead enables us to balance alternatives. We say to ourselves: "If I take this road, or that road, such-and-such issues will confront me; if I stand still, these other things will come upon me." Then we make a choice based upon exact knowledge.

The mere act of putting things down on paper — the what, when, where, why and who of any problem or project — will of itself give us guidance and generate ideas. Our personal analysis of adequate facts, brushing

aside the non-essentials, will give us a clear-eyed view, so that we may plan our course and estimate the time and energy and material needed. In this appraisal it is most necessary to ask repeatedly: does this really matter? The question tends to sharpen our opinion about the relative importance of factors.

Nothing can be more significant in planning than assurance that the facts are accurate, properly interpreted, correctly linked together, and free from bias. To make this judgment, we need background. Before entering tomorrow, let's turn on the light in the back room and look at what useful records and memories we have stored there. A business man compares today's assets and liabilities with yesterday's, and makes plans for tomorrow by studying the movement thus indicated in conjunction with the conditions of today.

Choosing facts upon which to base plans is not a matter of pecking like fowl in a barnyard, finding a grain of fact here and there. We must be selective, to isolate essential actualities from the opinions and rubbish in which they may be imbedded.

Some facts are incidental, unimportant: merely good for casual conversation. Others are vital to our master plan. If they are part of or affect anything within the circle of our strategy, we must pay attention to them. If they are outside that area we should not dissipate energy and attention on them.

Putting plans to work

And then, having collected facts, analysed them and considered various paths that might be followed, and formed a plan from it all, there remains to make something of it: action.

Just as plans for the city beautiful will never see the light of day as buildings, parks and roads without physical effort on the part of countless people, so plans for a business project or for happiness in life will come to nothing unless we use our energy to carry them out. An objective to which we have planned our course is something to work toward, and the emphasis now is upon the word "work." Ella Wheeler Wilcox remarked wisely in one of her poems: "The fault of the age is a mad endeavour to leap to heights that were made to climb."

Any highly successful executive will tell you that he has to do more than bring forth ideas. He has to plan how to make the ideas effective, but, most important, he has to push the plans through to successful completion.

In this part of his work he will meet many frustrating experiences. His assistants may be unimaginative, unable to catch the spirit of his plan. His workmen may be incompetent, lazy or careless. Many unhappy occurrences, business and private, may discourage him. But his master plan will have included the bringing of all controllable circumstances up to the peak required for satisfactory performance of the duties needed for success of his plan.

Just as soon as the plan is launched it must be ready to sail. Much trouble was caused during the war by what the naval experts called "teething troubles" in gun mounts, whereby ships went into action with incomplete firepower. A new plan, like a new ship, must be ready to fire at once and with all its armament. As Captain Russell Grenfell remarks in *The Bismarck Episode:* "It is no use a ship steaming into action flying a kindergarten flag meaning 'I am still in the infancy stage. Please only fire half your guns at me'."

Any plan we launch in business or private life is subject to the full fire of competitors and adverse circumstances. We must feel intensely in the value and practicality of our plan, and this feeling must be backed up by complete preparation and abundant energy.

The executive as planner

The man who is content to sit back and pass judgment on ideas submitted to him is not qualified for today's executive function. It is true that the man at the top must possess judicial ability in a marked degree, but he also needs imagination and enterprise if he is to survive. He must be able to deal with complexity, and this necessitates skill in thorough-going and patient analysis.

The man in management today, whether he be shop foreman or chairman of the board, will grasp quickly the essentials of a problem, apply his imaginative mind to finding a solution, decide swiftly and surely what is to be done, make it clear to all concerned what he expects of them, and then see that his subordinates get on with the job. The management man will have vision, and will find it quite unthinkable that he should follow outworn paths, content merely to criticize.

All this means that the executive must sketch his plans with a broad brush, and fill in only such details as are necessary to guide his people and keep the plan on the tracks. He will delegate the tactics, having laid down the strategy, and keep his mind on the progress that is being made toward his goal.

Business would dry up if it did not have leaders who believe in ideas, with the courage to launch them, draw up the charts, and adventure upon unsailed seas.

To help him, the executive will surround himself with the best in brains and skills. Some of his assistants will know more than the executive himself in their

special fields. Only the man who feels himself to be inferior will be happy in the midst of subordinates who are content to take orders and punishment.

These helpers are an essential part of the executive's planning. He will determine what is to be done and the best way of going about it, and then select the people to carry out the necessary duties.

Field Marshal Montgomery held to this as a cornerstone of his planning. He spent many hours in quiet thought and reflection about the major problems. If a commander gets involved in details, Montgomery wrote in his *Memoirs*, he will lose sight of the essentials which really matter, and will be led off on side issues and routine which are the province of his staff.

Seeking efficiency

Everyone knows of his own experience how often a plan is held up while someone or some process is delayed waiting for something to get done. One essential factor in efficiency is completeness, and this demands that the parts of a plan fit together with a minimum expenditure of energy, time and space.

An engineer knows that the secret of making an effective machine is the degree to which we can get harmony into the engine. Our blue-prints must tend to reduce stresses and resistances to the lowest ratio. Nature itself shows us that increased result comes from lessened effort.

Efficiency, therefore, does not mean hustle. It means that work toward carrying out a plan will move steadily. Too many people and organizations operate at fifty per cent efficiency because of the dead weight of routine unconnected with the job in hand. Too many offices are bogged down in sheets of paper. Plans are delayed because desks are made storage places for documents and records.

What is the cure for these obstacles to progress in bringing a plan to fruition? First of all we need a healthy self-evaluation. We should look upon improvement as a commonplace necessity. H.R.H. The Prince Philip said to the National Union of Manufacturers: "Healthy self-criticism and an abiding willingness to learn seem to me to be the most important requirements of any manager."

Then, having put our own house in immaculate order, we need to convey the spirit of betterment all down the line. Assistants and supervisors must become imbued with the spirit of the top executive, so that they seek new techniques and methods that will help them to do their jobs more efficiently. Their efforts must mesh with the executive's planning.

On looking ahead

Many things have already been set down in the book of the future but not yet precisely dated. Thinking people are trying to put dates on them, to anticipate them, and to work toward them. They are determining what to do now by looking at the world of ten or twenty years hence. Unthinking people are buried in today's work, without planning for the next stage of their progress.

It is a truth known to every one of us that we are tempted to procrastinate planning for the future by the sheer burdensomeness of the prospect. But if we can, through planning, divide the accumulation into small units, the task becomes a great deal easier and the prospect less frightening.

Some people are tempted in the other direction: they over-organize, thus strangling their prospects. When the Korean war broke out in June, 1950, certain people in the United States recalled what had happened upon outbreak of the preceding war. The editors of *Fortune* reported that one hotel announced that it had laid in a 10-year supply of liquor; one government agency bought a 247-year supply of loose-leaf binders.

That is not rational planning any more than is the action of a highly trained specialist who becomes preoccupied with the secondary issues of methods and techniques and has lost sight of the aims and purposes for which his company is planning.

Every plan that involves the work of a number of people is sure to gather barnacles. It is the job of the efficient planner to scrape them off and get his plan back to the fine steering it requires.

Even in personal planning, it is necessary for a person to turn his attention now and then to close scrutiny. Are his goals still precisely defined, so that he really knows what he is trying to do, or have they become misty, befogged by immediate problems and transient things? Has he found out his strengths, so as to make the best of them, and, even more important, his weaknesses, so as to compensate for them? Has he taken inventory from time to time so as to check his progress, improve his performance, and assure his success?

The man who plans well and tackles his plan with courage, intelligence and energy is on the way toward becoming a superior man. He will gain his ends because his beginnings are made with the assurance that comes of knowing the facts, the processes, the hazards and the reward.

Under an orderly plan there will be more problems solved, fewer trials necessary per problem, fewer false reactions per problem, less time used, and no random work done.

The planning itself can be an enjoyable experience, even though its purpose is only to reach something else. If it were not so — if the meanings and enjoyment of things were only in ends — composers of music would write nothing but finales.

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