

# venture 1:9

## 5 Steps to Forming & Leading Your Strategic Planning Team

When strategic planning, an organization shouldn't develop its own plans and then simply ask God to bless those plans; organizations must determine His plan. The following is a suggested (but not exhaustive) process that will help direct a God-centered approach to determining His plan, as well as direct your team in the following areas:

- (1) The formation of the strategic planning team.
- (2) Leading the strategic planning team through praying, fasting and reflecting.
- (3) Determining vision through the drawing of pictures.

It is important to note that the strategic planning process will look different for different organizations, according to their structure, needs and leaders. Although the following steps are proven, they are flexible and adaptable. Their primary purpose is to jumpstart your thinking and lead you to the place where you can more effectively discern God's plan for your organization.

**FIRST**, the strategic planning team must be formed. Organizations are of differing opinions on who should be involved in the strategic planning process. There is no cookie-cutter approach to forming this team. Each organization is different with different personnel in place and will need to decide the make-up of this team. This team, however, must be comprised thoughtfully. We are reminded that Jesus spent 40 days in the desert fasting and praying (and overcoming temptation). It's no coincidence that, immediately upon leaving the desert, Jesus begins calling his disciples. Jesus gained direction from God – through fasting, prayer and reflection – on who was to be chosen to lead the change effort.

As you seek to form your strategic planning team, the model you should use is to pray, fast, and ask. Do not haphazardly “throw out” invitations for people to be involved in this process. Seek God's specific direction (over the course of a few weeks or more) and form this team through His leading. These individuals will be helping to determine God's direction for the future of the organization – assessing the systems, identifying next steps, working to plan the future, and more. The right people must be identified and placed in these leadership positions.

A few characteristics to consider:

- Utmost spiritual maturity and integrity
- Appropriate history with the organization
- A trust in this ministry's potential to change lives and make Kingdom impact
- The ability to think big, creatively, out of the box, detailed and specific
- Unafraid to make change
- Unaccustomed to phrases like, “We can't do that”, “That might offend someone”, “We've never done it that way before”, etc.
- Time to devote to the strategic planning process

Also, character, competency, and chemistry must mark this team.<sup>1</sup> As stated in *Courageous Leadership*, “Character first. By this I mean that I need to have confidence in a person’s walk with Jesus Christ.” The individuals on the strategic planning team are not perfect, however, they must have an unwavering commitment to Jesus Christ (first and foremost), and to the organization they will be helping to lead through the strategic planning process.

Next, strategic planning team members must be competent. The question, “What will it take for this team to reach its full potential?” must be raised. Individuals on the strategic planning team must possess a certain amount of proficiency concerning the inner workings of the organization. The strategic planning process could be a significant change process, and changing organizational culture is complex, challenging and oftentimes problematic. Having members on this team that understand overall organizational systems will greatly benefit the strategic planning process. Furthermore, valuable team members are thinkers, doers, and influencers; they must have the ability and courage to assess and analyze, as well as knowledge in how to move an organization forward in (possibly) new directions.

Finally, chemistry is extremely important to consider when forming the strategic planning team – team members need to connect well with one another. Team chemistry does not mean having a group of individuals who always agree. (Ultimately, that works against a team producing its best results.) The team should consist of individuals who bring various opinions, mindsets, and dreams to the table with the understanding that the group is working together – under God’s direction – for a unified cause.

No matter how difficult the process of identifying the strategic planning team becomes, compromise is not an option. Again, at no time should this selection process be simply open to anybody who is willing. Compromise in the early stages of the strategic planning process will lead to leadership challenges later; these challenges can be avoided by placing the right people in the right positions, through God’s specific leading and direction.

**SECOND**, after the strategic planning team has been recruited and is in place, an initial meeting should be called; in many cases, this will be the first time the strategic planning team is physically together. Time should be spent explaining the context of this team (how and why team members were chosen), the overall context of the strategic planning process (why? why now?) and the task at hand (outlining the overall process). Strategic planning team members will have clarifying questions and time should be spent addressing each one. This team must be on the same page and moving forward in concert.

The tendency at this point is to jump in and begin work by asking and answering the first major strategic planning question: “Where is God calling us to go as an organization?” But the team is not ready to answer this question – not yet.

The team first needs to pray, fast, and reflect – individually. As the strategic planning process is further clarified in this initial meeting and as the question, “Where is God calling us to go as an organization?” is introduced, the strategic planning team should be given further direction. For a

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<sup>1</sup>The concept of character, competency and chemistry as essentials for an effective team come from *Courageous Leadership*, 80-85.

minimum of two weeks, each team member is to commit time each day to pray for God's direction for this ministry. The amount of daily prayer time will be up to each team member but should be no less than 15 minutes per day. In addition, each team member should be asked to fast in connection with this effort to determine God's future vision. (One approach would be for team members to fast one full day each week, on the same day, as part of the team effort. However, fasting will undoubtedly play out differently for different team members.) In addition, team members should be instructed to specifically write down their thoughts, reflections, and leadings from the Lord no less than three times per week. As an example, one 14-day scenario could look like this...

- A team of six leaders (as an example)
- A combined 21 hours of prayer (6 people, 15 minutes per day for 2 weeks / 14 days)
- A combined 12 days of fasting (6 people, one day per week for 2 weeks)
- A combined 12 pages of written thoughts, reflections and leadings (6 people, one page per week for 2 weeks, assuming writing three times per week turns into a minimum of one page per leader)

Another critical instruction point for team members prior to leaving this initial meeting is that, during this two-week time period, team members are *not* to discuss their "assignment" with one another. No sharing of thoughts, leadings, progress, promptings, or direction of any kind. This searching and seeking process is an individual process.

James 1:5 states: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." Although, in this context, James is encouraging Christians to seek the specific wisdom that will allow them to further understand their trials and will ultimately enable them to face their trials with "pure joy" (1:2), the concept here is a timeless truth, that God graciously gives wisdom and direction to those who earnestly seek it. James 1 makes clear that: (1) We should ask God for wisdom; (2) We should ask in faith and without doubt; and (3) If we ask God, "it will be given to [us]" (1:5).<sup>2</sup>

Two other potential questions for team members to consider during their searching and seeking time: (1) Why was our organization originally founded and for what specific purpose? Many organizations stray far from their roots and end up focusing on things they were never intended to focus on. So, for what reason were we founded and what did this ministry start out accomplishing in its beginning days? (2) What does this (our answer to #1) mean for the community we're located in today? In other words, based on our birth/founding vision, what is God calling us to do today, in our specific community? Organizations should seek to understand, "What is God calling us to do *here and now?*"

**THIRD**, after the two-week time period (or longer, depending on the schedule set), the strategic planning team gathers together to share their individual learnings. Here is where the team will be literally asked to draw pictures depicting where God is calling this ministry to go and what this ministry should look like in the future.

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<sup>2</sup>Paul Cedar, *The Communicator's Commentary*, 27-29.

Remember, vision is not a statement; it's a picture.<sup>3</sup>

James Kouzes and Barry Posner, in their book, *The Leadership Challenge*, state: "All enterprises or projects, big or small, begin in the mind's eye; they begin with the imagination and with the belief that what's merely an image can one day be made real."<sup>4</sup> (Jesus painted pictures for people all the time.)

Asking this team to draw pictures as they engage in discussion serves multiple purposes.<sup>5</sup> Drawing pictures...

- Encourages creativity in communication and spurs on team members to think in terms of specifics.
- Creates a casual and relaxed atmosphere in which team members can enjoy one another's company and have fun (especially given the fact that most will not be very artistic) as they work together to discern God's ultimate picture.
- Produces an end product that the team can continually refer to as they move forward in ministry.

Thinking in imagery, rather than in technicalities, comes naturally to people. For example, Kouzes and Posner suggest that if a group of people were asked to think about Washington, D.C., images such as the White House, the Capitol, the Washington Monument, the President of the United States, and perhaps traffic jams would come to mind. People would not describe numbers, such as square mileage, population, or the gross domestic product of Washington, D.C.

Because people naturally create images, they first develop mental pictures of the future before they begin to think in terms of specifics.

"When we invent the future we need to get a mental picture of what things will be like long before we begin the journey. Images are our windows into the world of tomorrow. When talking about going places we've never been – whether to the top of an unclimbed mountain or to the pinnacle of an entirely new industry – we imagine what they'd look like."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>This process assumes a few beliefs: Vision originates from God; God empowers leaders to discern the vision so that, together, they have a clear sense of identity and direction concerning the future; and involvement of a team allows vision to be "worked out" in a way that builds commitment to a shared vision. (Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem and James Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, 53).

<sup>4</sup>James M. Kouzes & Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 93.

<sup>5</sup>Large sheets of paper (even 3' by 6' or larger) should be set up and each team member will draw out and explain his or her thoughts in front of the entire group, resulting in everyone's ideas displayed in one place.

<sup>6</sup>Kouzes & Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 102.

Creating imagery provides a picture upon which to focus; in turn, this picture then creates inward excitement and motivation to move in new directions. Furthermore, a picture of the future sustains individuals and teams, keeping before them their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. These images will become real for the entire strategic planning team as individuals begin to draw and imagine the possibilities.

Kouzes and Posner state, “All new ventures begin with possibility thinking... that anything is possible... that something better [is] attainable.”<sup>7</sup>

As each team member draws out his/her leadings from the Lord, each individual should be given the chance to explain his/her two-week searching and seeking process and how this specific picture came to be. Furthermore, each picture (and idea) should be specifically examined and questioned (for clarification) by the additional strategic planning team members. As an individual explains his/her picture, other team members will come to understand the specific vision connected with the specific picture.

Some ideas and concepts will be brought up once; some more than once; some may create instant energy in the room while others may appear to drain energy out of the room; common threads and priorities for ministry may surface, or they may not. **This is key:** This part of the process is for listening. Strategic planning team members are to listen to one another share their leadings from the Lord (only asking questions of clarification) and begin to process these leadings internally.

**FOURTH**, the strategic planning team continues to pray, process, draw and drill down, consolidating multiple pictures until, ultimately, the Executive Director is able to share his/her final picture. (This part of the strategic planning process may be difficult, challenging and even painful to some as various ideas and concepts are embraced and celebrated, while others are deemed unessential and ultimately cast aside.) This part of the strategic planning process must result in **THE** God-inspired future picture of the organization.<sup>8</sup>

**FIFTH**, once **THE** picture is determined, the strategic planning team must outline their continued approach to finalizing the overall plan – a great deal of work remains. The team must begin assessing and analyzing current programming against **THE** picture (“Where are we right now in comparison to this vision?”) and begin the intense work of detailing how the organization plans to advance toward the vision. This will involve developing mile markers, measurables, goals, tactics, timelines, and more. A properly set-up strategic planning timeline reaches from where God is

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<sup>7</sup>Kouzes & Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 97-99.

<sup>8</sup>It may take more than one gathering to determine this picture. One-day or weekend retreats can provide extended periods of time and a focused environment in which to work and should be considered. Again, it cannot be stressed enough that the strategic planning team must consist of trusted leaders that understand the heartbeat of God and the heartbeat of this specific organization and its leadership. There is nothing more important than determining **THE** picture. Organizational leaders must have full confidence that those on this team are open to the leading of the Holy Spirit and can provide Godly ideas and direction throughout the overall strategic planning process.

calling you to go, back to where you are right now, identifying next steps and when they need to be taken.<sup>9</sup>

The House of Refuge Sunnyslope engaged the above-described process during a “Strategic Planning Day.” For an outline of their day, including time-stamps, see the Venture 1:9 downloadable resource: [A 5-Hour Strategic Planning Day with House of Refuge Sunnyslope](#).

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<sup>9</sup>As mentioned up front, the strategic planning process will undoubtedly look different for different organizations, according to their structure, needs and leaders. However, “...whatever the approach, the ultimate objective is the discernment of God’s vision for the [organization] and a high level of commitment [to the vision by the people.] If a deep, *shared* commitment cannot be achieved, true transformation [in an organization] is not possible.” (Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem and James Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, 54).