



THE PRESIDENT OF A CHRISTIAN university was asked recently, "Where is Christian higher education headed over the next 15 years?" Without skipping a beat, he replied, "I don't know, but that's what keeps me up at night!" He then added, "I know one thing: It will not look like what we have now. We just cannot afford to continue to do what we have been doing."

"All of us in ministry are asking the financial questions," admits Steve Doggett, director of international ministries with Converge Worldwide. "Yet what we are really trying to figure out is, 'Where is God going?'" Answering this question for your own organization will require you to move from strategic planning to strategic foresight, and back again.

Strategic foresight is a core practice that leadership teams use to learn about the shifting forces shaping their ministry landscape three to ten years out. It engages them in critical thinking and "what if" debates. It takes a team beyond budgets and policy assessment to allow open learning

and strategic conversations to craft a long-term adaptive strategy.

Australian educator Richard Slaughter defines foresight as "the ability to create and maintain a high-quality, coherent, and functional forward view and to use the insights that arise in organizationally useful ways." Useful ways in a faith context might mean leveraging outreach through strategic alliances, being proactive in light of demographic changes, reaching new generations through a diverse team, reinventing aging institutions with new stakeholders, or engaging the community through private-public partnerships.

To put it another way, strategic planning projects your past programs into the future, while strategic foresight allows you to stand in the future and look back to your present with new eyes. You end up with a more adaptable strategy, matched to a longer, deeper, and broader view of your organization's future. Here are two ways to cultivate long-term foresight to strengthen your strategic plans.

# Strategic Foresight

LOOKING  
TO THE  
FUTURE  
TO PLAN  
TODAY

by Jay Gary

## LET HORIZON SCANNING UNDERGIRD YOUR SWOT ANALYSIS

A great way to test your strategy over time is to create a formal horizon-scanning program with both senior and middle managers in your organization. Most leaders are familiar with formal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis, which weighs an organization's internal strengths and weaknesses against possible future conditions, framed as opportunities or threats. A SWOT analysis lets you assess where you are as an organization. But a SWOT analysis is only as good as your strategic assumptions.

James Dewar, author of *Assumption-Based Planning: A Tool for Reducing Avoidable Surprises*, notes that unwelcome surprises in the life of an organization can often be traced to the failure of an assumption that was forgotten or not anticipated. Every ministry plan is undergirded by a dozen or more unnamed strategic assumptions. A strategic assumption is like a leg on your kitchen table. If the leg wobbles or collapses, your plan is compromised.

Horizon scanning tests your strategic assumptions. It acts as an early warning system. Scanning generates a strategic conversation comprising data, trends, and ideas that could potentially impact your ministry's viability. Managers document an "insight" in a standard template, and then comment on how it either confirms or disconfirms the shelf life of your present strategic assumptions.

In noting how each new event or insight can shed light, Adam Gordon, author of *Future Savvy*, instructs scanners to ask, "Does this fit a pattern? Is this suggestive of a trend? Is this part of a bigger phenomenon, a growth or decline of significance that will change . . . what is required of organizations in order to be successful?"

As president of One Mission Society USA (OMS), David Long sets his organization's long-term direction. When asked what strategic decisions are shaping One Mission's new decade, he first mentioned *internationalization*, how the various OMS-sending countries are related to each other, and *globalization*, the rise of the church in the Global South.

A horizon-scanning program in Long's context would gather insights from cross-cultural research, technology, communications, social entrepreneurship, and NGO alliances, and consider whether new models

of partnership would be viable at the global, regional, and local levels. When a robust strategic conversation is built through continuous scanning, decision makers have a solid basis to ensure that their structure is serving strategy, rather than the other way around.

## CREATE AN ISSUES-MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

In addition to horizon scanning, another way to cultivate strategic foresight is to start an issues-management program. We live in a day of 24-hour news cycles, fed by scandals, product recalls, natural disasters, and legislative reversals. In this context, a nonprofit's stability can change overnight. Unless your organization is future-ready, your brand equity can plummet.

Strategic-issues management is a proactive process that builds on horizon scanning. Rather than weighing trends against strategic assumptions, an issues-management program monitors and manages a set of issues that will likely surface over the next 10 years to challenge or constrain the organization. Emerging issues are often more in flux due to levels of subjective uncertainty, while established trends normally have some degree of objective certainty.

The story of the American missionaries who were arrested in Haiti in January on charges of kidnapping created issues for their home church in Idaho as well as the U.S. State Department. Whether the legal grounds for arrest were solid or not, the incident called into question whether missionaries were protecting or plundering the Haitian people. What started out as a local incident became an international debate on adoption, child smuggling, and organized crime. It demanded an immediate response from other relief and development agencies. Nonprofits who deal with international child services had to reassure their stakeholders that their policies are ethical.

Rather than be subject to the winds of change, Christian organizations can get ahead of likely changes and handle them proactively. An issues-management program allows an organization to sort anywhere from 30 to 60 issues into three categories: (1) issues to manage, (2) issues to maintain, and (3) issues to monitor. Category 1 issues demand the most attention, as they have not been adequately addressed through policy or training. As sticky wickets, they must be framed, assessed, and evaluated in terms

of strategic options. Category 2 issues are maintained through existing policy and risk-mitigation strategies. Category 3 issues are monitored to see if their perceptual, legal, or liability parameters have changed, elevating them to policy action.

I recently worked with three doctoral students to conduct an Emerging Issues Audit among top leadership at Regent University. Together with the director of institutional research, we identified 75 scanning categories relevant to the future of higher education. Out of those categories, we pinpointed 15 issues that might disrupt the educational landscape by year 2020. These included mobile technology, artificial intelligence tutors, genetic enhancements of students, for-profit Christian university competitors, Hispanic demographic growth, global youth/student bulge, and changing workforce competencies in a molecular economy, to name a few. The audit helped Regent benchmark their leadership's starting perception of these issues; gauge where they felt existing policies and strategies could adapt to address them; and inquire into the degree to which they should and could address each issue from now until 2020.

## LEADING FROM THE FUTURE

Our world is rapidly changing to the point where traditional planning based on budgets and program reviews is no longer sufficient to propel organizations into the future. Scanning the horizon and reframing issues are but two ways to turn from static strategic planning to dynamic strategic foresight. Some nonprofits are turning to scenario planning to further stress-test their plans. What's important is to begin the journey upstream to spawn long-term creativity and innovation, rather than just target near-term downstream results. This may not cure your losing sleep over whether your business model is future ready, but it will generate a way for your strategic team to make the journey with you. ●

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