

Seven Principles of Planning

By John C. Maxwell

If you've ever gone whitewater rafting, then you know the importance of planning. Whenever the raft approaches rapids, the guide has to plan the best route to navigate safely through them. If the guide fails to plan, then the raft can easily smash into a rock or capsize.

Four Types of Planning

1) Passive planning happens when leadership allows the raft to travel downstream at the mercy of the current rather than steering, rowing, and turning. This kind of non-planning eventually leaves you unprepared to face whitewater rapids. Worse yet, in the absence of a plan, the current may take the raft over the edge of a dreaded waterfall.

2) Panic planning happens only after the raft is in trouble. At this point, all of the organization's resources are scrambled in a reactionary pattern in an attempt to solve the problem. With panic planning, you may or may not come out alive and well, but you are guaranteed some bumps and bruises.

3) Scientific planning is viable, but can be laborious, mechanical, and often ends up abandoned in the process. Imagine if a raft guide constantly tried to measure the depth of the water, the distance between rocks, the wind speed, and the water current. Although the information might be helpful, oftentimes the water would be moving too swiftly to take the measurements. In a like manner, leaders often have to respond to change in an instant. There's no time to collect scientific data on all of the variables before deciding which course of action is best.

4) Principle-centered planning is the key to effectiveness. It is the artistic or leadership approach. Principle-centered planning recognizes that life in general (and people in particular) can't be graphed on a chart, but sees that planning still remains essential.

Reasons Why People Don't Plan

You don't have to be in leadership very long to learn that planning pays off. Even so, many people don't plan. Here are four reasons why people neglect planning.

They don't possess planning skills or knowledge.

Some people don't have an innate ability to project themselves into the future. They've never been taught to prioritize their day or to prepare for tomorrow.

They're caught in the tyranny of the urgent, and they believe that they don't have time.

Some people allow themselves to be pulled into the vortex of minutiae. As a consequence, they end up buried under a sea of details, and they can't pull their heads above water long enough to plan.

They don't like the perceived hassle of planning.

Instead of planning one event at a time, they become overwhelmed by the mountain of things to plan.

Many people don't plan because the outcome varies greatly.

"After all," they say, "When I do make a plan, it normally doesn't end up happening, so why bother?"

Why Planning Is Essential

We all have desires and dreams, yet we'll never accomplish our dreams in life just by wanting them bad enough. Planning bridges the gap between our desires and dreams by calling us to action. As noted by William Danforth, ""No plan is worth the paper it is printed on unless it starts you doing something." A concrete plan supplies us with tangible steps to take in the direction of our dreams.

Qualities of Principle-Centered Planning

- * Principle-centered planning allows us to be flexible without losing focus.
- * Principle-centered planning allows us to be creative without losing concentration.
- * Planning is the structure. Principle-centered planning is the flesh.
- * Planning is the roadmap. Principle-centered planning is the movement.
- * Planning is the idea. Principle-centered planning is the action.
- * Planning is the paper. Principle-centered planning is the power.

Summary

It's been said, "By failing to plan, you plan to fail." I wholeheartedly agree. People who ignore planning handicap themselves and stifle their effectiveness.

The good news about planning is that it's a relatively simple discipline. Anyone can do it. No PHD is required to make a solid plan - only a window of uninterrupted time for focused thought.

Seven principles to guide your planning process:

You may have heard the expression, "Rome wasn't built in a day." Well, Rome wasn't built on accident, either. The coliseum, the pantheon, Saint Peter's basilica... these architectural marvels weren't the offspring of happenstance. They were created only after architects had spent countless hours developing blueprints of the buildings' foundations and structural frameworks.

A blueprint, as the outline of the building plan, is a vitally important document. Even so, the blueprint only represents a small step in the planning process. Before a building can be constructed, its planners must also budget expenses, consider what raw materials to use, and determine how to recruit labor. A good building plan starts with a blueprint, but extends far beyond it.

It's hard to achieve anything consequential without a written plan. However, putting a plan on paper isn't enough. Regardless of how thorough, concrete, or ingenious a plan may be, it won't happen unless additional ingredients are injected into the planning process. In my experience, I've observed seven principles that are absolutely critical to successful planning.

1) The Principle of Passion

When we're passionless, we procrastinate on the plan or burnout trying to execute it. With passion, we approach our plans with excitement and a sense of urgency. Passion gives planning energy.

Passion also gives planning focus. As Tim Redmond says, "There are many things that will catch my eye, but there are only a few things that will catch my heart. It is those I consider to pursue." Passion narrows our vision so that the plan dominates our attention and distractions fade into the background.

2) The Principle of Creativity

Of the seven planning principles, we violate the principle of creativity the most. By gravitating to concreteness, we sacrifice creativity. We settle for what's easy to wrap our minds around, and we neglect to wrestle with harder, more difficult dilemmas.

I'm convinced that leaders are too busy doing to think and provide ideas. Even the rare leaders who think creatively often neglect to encourage the people around them to do the same. Consequently, a majority of teams rely on one person for creative thought and end up starved for good ideas.

3) The Principle of Influence

When you prepare your plans, ask yourself the question, "Am I able to influence the resources needed to fulfill my planning and mission?" To accomplish your plan, you'll need influence over people, finances, and your schedule.

The support of people, especially other influencers, can make or break your plan. Make a priority to build relationships with them. In particular, find the key to their lives by learning what matters most to them. If you continually add value to the influencers around you in meaningful ways, then you'll be more likely to receive their assistance when you need it.

4) The Principle of Priorities

I'm amazed by the amount of people who begin to plan their careers before taking the time to prioritize their lives. You have no right, nor any reason, to start planning your life until you know what you're living for and what you're willing to die for. It's important to find your purpose so that you run, not on the fast track, but on your track.

The key to a prioritized life is concentration followed by elimination. As Peter Drucker observed, "Concentration is the key to economic results. No other principle

of effectiveness is violated as constantly today as the basic principal of concentration. Our motto seems to be, let's do a little bit of everything." We must cease to dabble in everything before we can become excellent at anything.

5) The Principle of Flexibility

In leadership, be mentally prepared that not everything will go according to your plans. Then, when plans unfold unexpectedly, you'll be prepared to see new opportunities. Some of the best things I've received in life have been surprises that I could never have planned in advance.

When plans go awry, don't just stand there. By staying in motion, you create movement. Be resourceful enough to improvise when circumstances push you off course.

6) The Principle of Timing

I credit Robert Schuller for teaching me a lesson about timing-the peak-to-peak principle. Most of the time, our decisions are based on our emotional environment rather than reality. When we're in the valleys of life, we don't see clearly. Our perspective is limited, and all we see are the problems around us. In the valleys we make decisions, not to better ourselves, but to escape our problems.

Never make a major decision in the valleys. Wait until you get to the peak where you can see clearer and farther. By reserving big choices for the peaks, you'll avoid making rash decisions that you'll regret later.

7) The Principle of Teamwork

A worthwhile plan ought to be bigger than your abilities. You shouldn't be able to accomplish it alone. Each of us has areas of weakness, blind spots, and shortcomings. Unless we rely on a team to help us, our plans succumb to our personal limitations.

A sign in Coach Bill Parcells' office stated his philosophy plainly, "Individuals play the game but teams win championships." What we can do alone pales in comparison to the potential we have when we work together.

Review

Putting a plan on paper is easy; putting a plan into practice takes leadership. I trust these seven principles will aid your efforts to translate written plans into reality.

Let's review them:

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| 1) The Principle of Passion | 5) The Principle of Flexibility |
| 2) The Principle of Creativity | 6) The Principle of Timing |
| 3) The Principle of Influence | 7) The Principle of Teamwork |
| 4) The Principle of Priorities | |