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Timing

From the Editor

This month, our team at LIVE is getting together for a strategic planning meeting. We will do a situation analysis which will define the significant changes in our environment, the opportunities we have, and where we are vulnerable. From there, we will confirm or modify the definition of what business we are in, our vision, and our values.

All of this sets the stage for the more challenging phase of strategy formation. Like every other organization we will wish we could fund more strategies, protect against every contingency. But eventually we will choose the strategy that will win success.

Our meeting will include the whole team. Every person will be expected to share their insights, their hunches, and their perceptions. Our experience has helped us understand that full participation not only produces a better plan, but also a plan that is owned by the people who serve our clients.

Here at LIVE Consultants, we help other organizations get the most from their strategic planning time so they get a plan that is both *valuable* to the business and *valued* by the team.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Most people think that the only way to get faster is to hurry. You've seen them scurrying from meeting to meeting, trying to get more done in less time. They're constantly checking their watches, feeling pressured by time, acting and deciding in ways driven by the time on the clock instead of their own wisdom.

Turn that notion inside out. What if you were to slow down to get faster? Stephen Baetz asserts that the premise behind this paradox is to work on your own terms, instead of watching the clock. Common sense, because as Stephen writes, "Driving any activity by what time it is causes you to lose focus."

The author offers five suggestions to help managers and organizations use their own time, not that of the clock, to make their moves.

Stephen Baetz is a principal of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization sponsoring this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Be There

Knowledge is like a spider's web. Touch one strand and every other part moves. It seems like all knowledge is connected somehow. I suppose universities know that too, but they divide it up into neat subject matter areas to make it easier for them to understand and keep a focus.

I guess that's to be expected. Knowledge, wisdom, and insight can't be boxed or confined by a single discipline. But I do enjoy being surprised when somebody else — with much different training and experience — knows something I thought was confined to my disciplines.

The last time that happened to me was mid-June. We were in small town somewhere between Detroit and Toledo in a fieldhouse on a typical college campus that smelled of honest sweat and resonated with the odd, new-age rhythmic percussion of squealing Nikes and hollow balls. This was another shrine to Naismith's ingenuity of making a game out of a ball and peach baskets.

The game was over, post mortems were being conducted, competition was being sized up, and on a side basket a coach was working at the foul line with a post-player.

"Shoot on your own terms, not the clock's. If you play by the clock, you'll hurry your shot and reduce the percentage that'll go in for you." Pretty good counsel, I thought. Driving any activity by what time it is causes you to lose focus. But the coach didn't stop there.

"The way to get faster as a big man is to hurry less." This Zen of coaching didn't seem to be lost on the player, despite the complexity of the apparent paradox. "To be faster, anticipate how the play is developing and be where you need to be. Then you'll have all the space you need for your shot."

WOW! What incredible lessons for a player and every manager. For that matter, every organization!

- Watch the play.
- Anticipate where you need to be.
- Go there.
- Hurry less to be faster.

Those lessons teach what ought to be done but the toughest challenge for me comes in figuring out *how*. How do you watch the play so you can anticipate where to be?

So after some reflection, here are my suggestions. They are offered as a starting point, not as a conclusion.

Suggestion #1: Stop, look, and listen.

Stop telling yourself that you know your business and your customers because that kind of confidence is but a few seconds away from an arrogance that can stop you from learning. If you tell yourself that you still have a lot to learn, you are more likely to see something new.

Look for what captures the attention of your customers and what drives their decision making. If you imagine that customers are fickle, illogical, and scattered, you'll never look for the patterns that are there. Assume that what they do is logical and done for good reasons. If you do that, you'll increase your chances of seeing patterns.

Listen to what the people who talk to your customers the most are telling you about your customers. And make sure that at least once a month you are face-to-face with customers talking about what is important to them. Sure enough surveys, statistics, and summed averages are important. But nothing can replace person-to-person contact. Listen to their problems, their challenges, their vulnerabilities, and their understanding of the future.

Why is listening so vital to success? Because Peter Drucker was right: the purpose of any business is to find, serve, and keep customers. And the only way an organization can do that is to listen to them on their terms. They will tell you — whether they know it or not — where you need to be as an organization.

Suggestion #2: Scan the environment.

Develop a disciplined process of doing environmental assessments. Determine what

changes are happening and how they can affect you and how business gets done. Look at changes in education, labour, government, family, industry, entertainment, law, medicine, technology, innovation, science ... in essence, every sector of human endeavour. Then ask, "If those changes do happen, how will we have to do business differently?" and "Where do those changes tell us we ought to be going?"

Many of our clients push themselves to do this assessment every six months and they compare and contrast the information they get each time. That helps them to see trends and determine what is a temporary blip and what is a signal worth heeding.

The organizations that I have seen do well through tough times are the ones that have learned to read events in a disciplined and systematic way.

Suggestion #3: Take timeouts.

Coaches know that some gains will happen with chalktalks in the dressing room. But the Xs and Os are no replacement for action. Learning for the athlete is a combination of action and reflection. The game is played and timeouts are called in which the coach talks about opportunities taken and opportunities missed. Players are asked where they could have been and what they would do differently the next time.

Managers ought to use the same learning process: take action and then reflect. Planning meetings and retreats should not be seen as a luxury or perk but as a necessity. If experience is going to turn into education we need think-time — timeouts if you will — to ask and answer this question: What would we do differently the next time so we can be where we need to be?

Suggestion #4: Learn from the other team.

Assume that your competitors are as wise and as insightful as you are. After all, you can't

have the only corner on the truth and they can't all be dummies. It is always wiser to overestimate their strength and wisdom than to underestimate it.

Figure out by the pattern of their actions what they know that you don't know. Then predict by reading their past behaviour what they are most likely to do. Finally, determine for yourself whether you should be there first or not at all. *Where you need to be* could be where your competitors are heading, or it could be anywhere but where they are going. Your answer to that issue will be driven by factors such as your respect for their judgement, your current position in the market, and the cost.

Suggestion #5: Avoid the efficiency seduction.

There is a tendency in many organizations to pay too much homage to the memory of Frederick Taylor, the father of the scientific school of management. He believed that every job and every task within that job could be measured and standards of performance could be set. Taylor's holy grail was to make production quicker and more efficient.

How could anybody ever be against such a noble intent? After all, efficiency was the path to profitability or so we thought.

But Taylorites often fail to ask the question of purpose: Is this the right thing to be doing in the first place? As a result, we have ended up being standardized and efficient at the wrong things.

The management maxim ought to be to get smart about purpose and intent. That will allow us to be where we need to be and there we will have more space to deliver our best shot.

Developing the ability to shoot on our own terms means that we have to lose the habit of checking the clock to tell the time. Instead, we have to figure out ways of how to read the times. Organizations that have figured out how to do that stay calm and focused when others are frantic.

Measure Your Growth

Imagine the result if manager's could measure their skills and abilities before and after attending a program.

Imagine the enthusiasm, dedication, and energy this simple tool could create.

As a pre-program readiness tool, we have developed a survey to help participants become familiar with and prepared for an upcoming education event. This Management Development Survey shows what areas participants should focus on, so they can get the most out of their learning time.

Participants are asked to complete a survey of up to 100 questions on areas to be covered in the program. Six co-worker surveys are included to be completed by peers and direct reports. Scores are tabulated and a detailed report is produced.

The recipient of this confidential report can see

- their own rating,
- the combined rating of their co-workers,
- the average rating of other participants, and
- the average rating of co-workers.

As a post-program tool, participants can track the difference the program has made and once again be focused, energized, and dedicated in developing and executing action plans for growth.

If *proven* results are what you're looking for, Management Development Surveys may be the tool you need.

For more information about our services, contact us at (519) 664-2213.