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## Planning for Results

I heard a statistic recently that initially startled me. However, since then, I've launched my own (very unscientific) test and, to my surprise, found it largely true.

Okay, here's the assertion -- while many of us plan (for our organizations and/or for ourselves), approximately 80% of those plans fail. A remarkable figure, isn't it? Also remarkable to me was the fact that (whatever the actual failure rate is), we continue to plan, year after year, despite the fact that we often do not achieve the desired results.

So, as I said, I began to test this theory in conversations over the last few months with executives and business leaders. Most of the people proudly acknowledged that they had organizational strategic plans. (Interestingly, the number with a professional/personal strategy tended to be much lower.) They wore the existence of an operating strategy like a badge of honor with me and, I'm sure, with the boards of directors, owners, or shareholders to whom they answer. Yet, that badge quickly lost its luster when considered in light of the actual or projected accomplishments of the plans that had been so carefully crafted. To my results-oriented questions, instead of more pride, I got scores of averted eyes, nervous laughs, or strings of explanations.

In the last edition of **EA Insights**, we began our focus on strategic thinking by examining the importance of knowing where your plan stands on an ongoing basis, but definitely before you reach the end of the project or plan year. For the next two months, **EA Insights** continues the discussion regarding strategic thinking by focusing on why so many planning efforts are unsuccessful. It's my hope that you find this material thought-provoking and instructive as you seek to plan, yes, but also to see more of your plans -- organizational and personal -- become reality.

All the best,

June

June Melvin Mickens  
Executive Advantage, LLC



## Strategic Thinking (Part IIA): The Top 10 Reasons Plans Fail

June Melvin Mickens  
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## Quotes

*"Anytime emotions are involved, you cannot come up with an impartial and objective assessment of any given problem."*

~Benigno Aquino III

*"I'm a very goal-oriented person, so I look at the specific demands of a certain race and tailor my training towards that."*

~Lizzie Armitstead

*"Man is a goal seeking animal. His life only has meaning if he is reaching out and striving for his goal."*

~Aristotle

*"Make each day count by setting specific goals to succeed, then putting forth every effort to exceed your own expectations."*

~Les Brown

*"There's no point considering something which is very unrealistic."*

~Zbigniew Brzezinski

*"I believe that people make their own luck by great preparation and good strategy."*

~Jack Canfield

*"I have been very hard on myself and strived for unrealistic goals of perfection."*

~Shibani Dandekar

*"People say, 'Dream big!' - but*

We all know that most people and businesses truly value the development of strategy. After all, many of us annually create strategic plans outlining the direction for the organizations we lead. Also, as individuals, many of us make New Year's resolutions to set the tone for personal changes we expect by year's end.

So, strategy development is a good thing, right? (After all, if you consider the level of effort that goes into strategic planning annually, most of us certainly must think that it is.) Then, why does something so positive produce such limited results?

I believe an underlying reason why planning frequently misses the mark is that we approach it incorrectly. We often view strategic planning as an annual exercise -- one largely restricted to our retreat or planning sessions and then discarded until the following year while we "go back to the real work." However, a more productive approach is one centered on strategic thinking. Under that model, there is an ongoing process that is informed, thoughtful, inclusive, and focused on developing realistic, measurable outcomes and keeping those outcomes at the forefront throughout the plan period.

As we consider the shift from traditional "strategic planning" to "strategic thinking," let's consider 10 key reasons why planners may not achieve the expected results. This month we examine Reasons 10 - 6 in the countdown.

### **Reason #10: Failure to pay attention to logistics**

Believe it or not, a lot of strategic thinking should be done before the formal "planning" process ever begins. I call these preliminary matters "logistics." Though preliminary, these logistical matters are critical to the success of the strategy development process and to the accomplishment of the resulting goals.

Although not an all-inclusive list, among the logistical considerations are:

-- *Site Selection:* This is identification of a location that is conducive to strategic thinking -- quiet and private so that typical workplace or home distractions are kept at bay -- and that offers sufficient space for full-group discussion and small-group conversations, as needed.

-- *Session Structure and Plan Duration:* It's important to set a strategy development schedule that permits both the traditional brainstorming as well as an opportunity to consider the broad implications of options and to think through matters related to implementation. Also, settle on the specific period to be covered by the planning (e.g., 12 months, 18 months, 3 years, etc.), and understand the relationship of this period to the longer-term vision.

-- *Participants:* Who are the right people to be involved in strategy development? That is, think about how to engage key stakeholders and strategic thinkers in your organization or life most appropriately in this process.

### **Reason #9: Lost mission**

Another reason strategy development efforts can derail is that the resulting plans have little relationship to the person's or the organization's mission -- its reason for being. I can't count the number of times over the years that I've heard team members make comments like, "When we started, we were an X company, but I'm not sure what we are now!"

Keeping mission front and center is vital in successful strategy development. Planning that takes you away from your central mission can cause frustration and confusion for the implementers of the strategy. Committed participation is of the utmost importance for goal achievement; however, people become less committed, and less effective in achieving results, if they can't grasp the direction or if it seems to have veered away from what they initially signed on to do.

### **Reason #8: Lack of information**

Would you ever get out of bed in the morning, get dressed, and head out the door for work without once looking in the mirror and also somehow determining what the day's weather is projected to be? I hope the answer is an emphatic "No!" Yet, from my experience, some organizations and individuals do just that in connection with their planning. They move forward without the equivalent of a mirror or weather check.

*you have to think about the logistics. It's not just coming up with a great idea[.]"*

~Marley Dias

*"Stay focused on your mission, remain steadfast in your pursuit of excellence, and always do the right thing."*

~Mark Esper

*"Strategy requires thought, tactics require observation."*

~Max Euwe

*"Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated; thus, everyone's task is unique as his specific opportunity to implement it."*

~Viktor E. Frankl

*"The more specific and measurable your goal, the more quickly you will be able to identify, locate, create, and implement the use of the necessary resources for its achievement."*

~Charles J. Givens

*"Balancing hopes, desires, and an appreciating of the possibilities with a clear-eyed assessment of the limitations: that is the art of choosing."*

~Sheena Iyengar

*"Stay focused on the mission."*

~Naveen Jain

*"Strategy is: A style of thinking, a conscious and deliberate process, an intensive implementation system, the science of insuring future success."*

~Pete Johnson

*"You can't look at the problem and say, 'I want them to do more, better, faster miracles - and not invest..., and have those miracles delivered to me free.' It's unrealistic."*

~Dean Kamen



For strategic thinking to be effective, the individual or organization must engage in an unbiased assessment of current status. That's the mirror check. As we discussed in the [December 2023 edition of EA Insights](#), information is needed about the status of the organization's or person's accomplishments from the prior project or year. Additionally, it is critical to shine the light on one's self -- personally or organizationally -- to identify and examine strengths and challenge areas that exist now and those that are likely to arise in the near future.

An evaluation of what's happening externally -- the weather check -- also is crucial for strategy development. Such an external assessment permits a critical view of one's environment as it currently stands and where it is likely to move over time. With such information in hand, planning can take place to determine realistically where the person or the organization should be going and how to get there. This type of information gathering provides the basis for realistic planning.

**Reason #7: Unrealistic planning**

Effective goal-setting strikes a careful balance between what is achievable and what encourages continued development. Accordingly, goals are likely to be ineffective when they are set so low that they neither grab the interest of the implementer(s) nor offer a healthy challenge. Similarly, though, goals that are set so unreasonably high that they couldn't be reached...ever...are just as likely to find themselves on the "Incomplete" list at the end of the year. So, successful planners seek to stretch and to grow but do so at a realistic pace.

**Reason #6: No specifics**

Loosey-goosey planning is another reason why organizations and individuals don't achieve the desired results. To be achievable, a plan must contain goals that are specific. In other words, the plan should be crafted in a way that allows anyone examining it to understand what success looks like with respect to each goal. Assigning responsibility for each goal and, ultimately, for every action item under each goal, further increases the likelihood of goal completion.

Also related to specificity is setting timeframes around each goal and action step. People generally have the best of intentions when involved in planning. And then, life happens! With the busyness of daily responsibilities, goals that lack exact due dates (and that have not been transferred to the person's calendaring system) just get lost in the shuffle.

Those are Reasons 10 – 6 for why strategic plans fail. Next month we'll review the remaining reasons.

In the meantime, how are you approaching planning? If you could use some help, reach out to us at [Executive Advantage](#). We are ready to walk along side as you prepare for your annual planning, during your strategy session(s), and as you move into implementation. [Contact Executive Advantage today](#).

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*"The purpose of the mission must be thoroughly understood beforehand, and the men must be inspired with a sense of personal dedication that knows no limitations[.]"*  
~William H. McRaven

*"No problem can be solved until it is reduced to some simple form. The changing of a vague difficulty into a specific, concrete form is a very essential element in thinking."*  
~J. P. Morgan

*"Perception is strong and sight weak. In strategy it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distanced view of close things."*  
~Miyamoto Musashi

*"I give myself homework.... I give myself goals, and that's how I check how I'm doing.\*\*\*And then afterward, it's an assessment[.]"*  
~Lupita Nyong'o

*"Doubt is important because it suggests progress. Total certainty can mean there's no assessment of things. Doubt, if you don't panic, can allow newness to come in and challenge something that's an established mode."*  
~Chris Ofili

*"Determination without discipline is dreaming."*  
~Paul E. Sheppard

*"Outstanding people have one thing in common: An absolute sense of mission."*  
~Zig Ziglar

## About Executive Advantage

At [Executive Advantage](#), we are committed to providing results-based business and management consulting, leadership development, and coaching support. We partner with business leaders to build healthy, well-functioning organizations, where goals are met and people thrive. We also partner with individuals to create professional (and personal) lives with clearer direction, improved results, and greater balance.

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