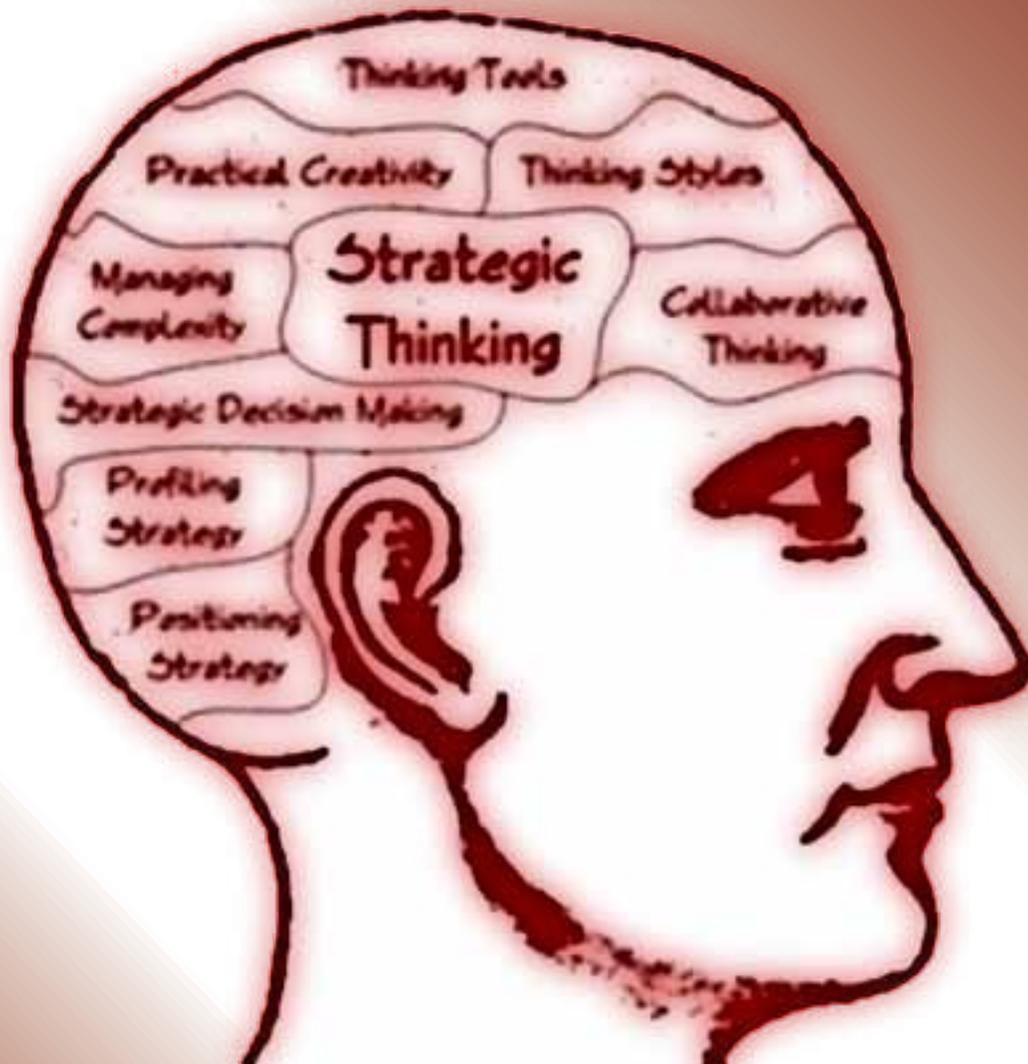


Strategic Thinking – Seeing the Unexpected Coming



Looking forward into the unknown

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The need for strategic thinking became obvious from a tragic story told by a local pastor. “The county condemned our church property to build a wider road! Now we have to move. We have so much of our lives invested here within these church walls. It’s like losing an old friend; it hurts. Why didn’t we see it coming? Why didn’t we foresee what is obvious now? What was wrong with our thinking?”

“Our semi-rural area with scattered homes transformed seemingly overnight to a ballooning population of tract developments. With growth in mind, we stepped up the pace to reach the rapidly increasing number of people. We created an ambitious plan with a purpose statement, a mission statement, and a vision statement. We produced a profile of the people in our neighborhoods. We fashioned an evangelism strategy, a training program, and an expansion plan.

“According to church growth theories, we did everything right – except foresee the impact of the growing population on our roads. If we had been paying attention to what we already knew, perhaps thinking more creatively, more comprehensively, more strategically, we could have predicted what would happen. We would not have been able to stop it, but we would have saved the money we spent on a building intended for destruction. If we had understood our circumstances more accurately, we could have spent our energy toward a more farsighted plan.”

The Shock of the Unexpected

These are the anguished cries of a pastor who, with his board and congregation, sacrificially built what the county would soon destroy. Three years of demanding hours, sacrificially giving, and dreaming about the future – they focused entirely on what they were building. Why didn’t they make a simple call to ask about the county’s plans to handle the growth?

Leadership’s failure to do so resulted in shock when the county sent them the letter announcing an expansion of the road from two-lanes to six-lanes. The road and right-of-way would pass through a portion of their building, so the county condemned the church property for public use. The church leaders had planned well but failed to think “strategically”.

Seeing and Planning for the Unexpected

Without realizing it, when the pastor referred to “thinking more creatively, more comprehensively,

more strategically," he was referring to "strategic thinking." Strategic thinking breaks out of tunnel vision and considers the present creatively through a wide-angle analytical lens. Strategic thinking looks forward comprehensively, for the seeds of potential problems and opportunities. Strategic thinking looks deeply, complexly, and comprehensively at the unpredictable which may surface to surprise an organization.

In the book *Strategic Thinking and the New Science*, Irene Sanders explains, "[Strategic thinking] begins by stepping back and observing the environment as it really is, a complex system of interactive variables." Applying this to the church in question, had leadership been thinking strategically they would have examined the impact of the increasing population on the roads. They would have projected the impact of the roads on their church property. As a result the church leadership would have had a clearer picture for their present planning.

The clarity from strategic thinking creates a superior environment for planning. With this greater clarity and insight, they would have made a noticeably different strategic plan. They could have invested their funds to explore alternatives, such as planting other churches or selling their real estate asset and buying a larger parcel.

Strategic planning considers where a church is today and from that frames steps to move the congregation into an improved future. Planning is a procedure of programming action steps to reach a predetermined goal. When the leaders of this church decided to step up the pace of evangelism, they introduced an excellent "strategic plan."

Strategic planning and strategic thinking differ yet joined together they maximize the opportunity for success. Insight limited to only the present fails to capture necessary information and ideas to guide organizational leaders' thinking. Comprehensive and continuous strategic thinking and strategic planning provide an ideal foundation for organizational success. This raises the questions: who should think strategically?

Who Should Think Strategically?

Everyone in a leadership role needs to think strategically. Regardless of leadership position, every leader deals with the same core problems – a changing today and an uncertain tomorrow. The world in and around the church is changing so rapidly, all church leadership must not only meet present challenges but begin preparing now for tomorrow's potential problems or opportunities. With the rapidly changing world of technology, media, communication, and temptations, the ones with the greatest influence on the future of the church, parents, also need to think strategically. Once leadership recognizes the comprehensive need for strategic thinking permeating the entire church, the next question is, "How do we make it happen?"

How to Make it Happen

Once leaders begin doing strategic thinking, realize a change in thinking takes time to allow

people to adjust to the change. During a time of change, fear raises its ugly head and developing strategic thinking within a congregation is no exception. Sharing creative – and potentially dumb – ideas carries extreme risk for most people. It is safer to discuss predictable ideas. As a result, the biggest step in developing strategic thinking begins with creating a safe environment for people to talk.

Jeanne Liedtka, in the journal *Strategy & Leadership* suggests a step toward increased strategic thinking begins with conversation. The simple act of talking can be a powerful tool in developing strategic thinking. Talk must be two-way, in an environment of safety where people are free to speak and question both theirs and others' assumptions. The need for respect, recognition, approval, and safety drives people in powerful ways. Most people withdraw from risk and play it safe to avoid others' negative opinions.

Joel Mehlhorn, writing for *Scientific American Mind*, supports safe, free-to-speak talk as a tool to open the minds and mouths of team members. To encourage participation in strategic thinking, Mehlhorn writes, "Banning criticism will encourage even the most reticent group members to suggest half-baked ramblings." From "half-baked ramblings" come many creative ideas.

An atmosphere of true Christian love and concern helps people relax, think creatively, and be open to new ideas. As more "what if..." suggestions flow, strategic thinking will become natural leadership thinking. Then the leadership of your church will "see it coming" and respond positively to a continuously changing field of ministry.

With the sense of safety, a variety of organized brainstorming sessions provides a platform for open expression. You may restrict early sessions to brainstorming the categories for future sessions; categories such as technology, communication, and traffic. The format can vary from a storyboard approach with post-it notes, to a cognitive map with its two-dimensional chart or butcher paper on a wall format. The key is to raise questions and provide free expression with some arrangement for recording of those ideas.

Encourage everyone in the church to see the world around them from a new perspective; a world of unpredictable problems, yet a world of ministry opportunity. From seeing a rise in the number of ipods, came the idea for pod-cast downloadable sermons. From the popularity of "Pirates of the Caribbean" came a pirate theme for the children's program. From the popularity of the blog have come new and popular discussion groups on-line beyond the boundaries of the local community. What developing trends is your church seeing in the world around you? That is strategic thinking. How can you harness the trends into future programs? This is strategic planning.

Think Strategically or Be Surprised

Today, you are no longer living in the luxury of "doing ministry like we always have." While the Gospel message has not and will not change, the variety of ways to deliver the message is

changing. The culture is changing so the ways we approach the lost must change. Methods of communication are changing so how we get and keep in contact must change. These are all potential changes which are understandably reasonable to expect.

However, it is not what you know but what you do not know about trends and change that is your greatest threat. One real issue before many churches is the economic value of their location. Many churches are in prime locations, locations so prime that developers may decide they can use the property in another way for a greater economic use for the community. Now that government can condemn private property to sell for economic development, many churches are facing the potential loss of their property and do not even know it. Do not look for threats only in the areas you know; look for threats in areas of the unknown.

What about your church? How are you going to discover and understand the unknown? Your church must begin thinking strategically now. Now is the time to organize a strategic thinking team to protect your church from surprise events. Now is time to integrate strategic thinking into the personality of your church. Now is the time to lay the foundation for the future.