

After the Storm: Planning for a Better Future

MY PERSPECTIVE SERIES:
REPRESENTING THE AUTHOR'S
PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Choose as your planning colleagues those who see themselves as creators, not victims; as initiators, not reactors.

by Louis L. Marines

This time it is different — the economic storm our industry has weathered for too long seems slow to abate. This was a bad one — it extracted a toll on the lives of firms and in the professional lives of too many people. For them, not all turned out for the best; they are not better off for the trauma they faced. We are all sad to have witnessed their demise and, with some guilt, relieved that we survived.

For most of us, there is no going back to whatever we thought normal was; now we know the world has changed inalterably, and in surviving, we have also been changed. We can begin to breathe again and think about desired changes that are beyond survival: What will our professional and organizational lives be in the future? What do we want them to be? How do we improve our chances of living well — whatever that means for each of us — in the organizational time that remains for us?

Most of us will answer that question by some kind of planning, often using the process we call strategic planning, and many of us will use scenario planning in that inquiry. Creating and testing scenarios is a good thing, given the uncertain state of the world. However, before we proceed to plan anew, some cautions, caveats and concerns may make that planning process a better investment for you.



TWO PROBLEMS WITH DISSATISFACTION

Planning can often be a way of expressing your dissatisfaction with the present, and many pundits believe dissatisfaction is a great petri dish for creativity. That's good. Yet there are two problems in dissatisfaction.

First, you may lose sight of, and appreciation and gratitude for, all that is good in your firm now (the Strengths part of the SWOT analysis). I think here not only of your core business attributes, but also of the trust, goodwill, camaraderie, interdependence, creativity, ethics, morality, community history and endearing stories that exist among your partners, clients, staff, consultants, industry friends and other stakeholders. These are attributes that helped you survive. You need to preserve them no matter what alternative future strategies you embrace. This exploration and affirmation should also be challenged in every instance — of those things you catalog as good, do all the leaders in your firm view these strengths

as assets and see their benefits as universally good?

Second, being dissatisfied with the present, and thus focused on the future, you may lose your visceral and complete connection to the current moment in your firm, in the lives of your staff, clients and friends. Life can only be experienced in the moment — that is where real impact and meaning reside. If you are too focused on the future, you may lose your connection to the challenges, joys and opportunities life offers you every day. The future is an abstract concept about which we can only intellectualize; creativity, innovation, compassion, happiness, grace and friendship can be experienced fully only in the current moment.

Many of you are moving so fast in search of the future's promise that you

do not see people who are not moving as quickly as you are. You are acutely aware that uncertainty breeds fear (perhaps because we do not have the courage to trust ourselves), and your response may be a kind of random, Brownian movement:¹ Any action must be better than no action, so you jump on your horse and ride off in all directions.

Future planning must not deny us recognition and appreciation for everything we are today that is good and should not wrench us into living in the future as if the present is already history, forcing us to miss the joy of living in this present moment.

CAN BLINDNESS BE CURED?

Many of you may once again place the planning responsibility in the hands of the very leaders who did not anticipate the last recession or its impact on the firm. As author and businessperson Margaret Heffernan observes, those leaders

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experienced “willful blindness.” Perhaps blinded by familiarity, they denied the early warning signs that problems existed in the markets and clients you served, and you saw your firm survive only by the grace of Lady Luck or some other cosmic force. Can their “blindness” be cured? They may be so exhausted after the battles of the last several years that they can only give lip service to the energy, passion, insight and stamina needed to craft and execute plans for the firm's preferred future. We accept and appreciate their loyalty and commitment. Maybe our best appreciation can be to allow them to take a reduced planning role or to observe, or even to sit out, this planning cycle.

Even if those leaders are energized, how well-equipped are they for assessing a new world rife with environmental, geopolitical and economic uncertainty? At a certain maturity, your mental models — the frames through which you view the world, the patterns and trends you think you see — are immutably set. Some seniors may be hard-wired in their views about the way the world was, not how it is or is becoming. They are sure of things whose proof they have long forgotten and are burdened with axioms and clichés about growth, business and organizational models, metrics, project delivery alternatives, pricing, marketing, human resources and the like, which may no longer be true, if they ever were fully true.

I'm not telling you to turn your firm's future planning over to your Millennials, nor to outsiders. However, getting new minds and hearts involved is a good idea. Choose as your planning colleagues those who see themselves as

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If you decide to access and blend in the wisdom of those born in the Reagan years and since, let them also have a say in what the planning process looks like and how it works. Do not put them in closed rooms, no matter how plush or Spartan, surrounded by flip charts, markers and tape and expect them to flourish using your old familiar process. Tell them what you are out to do and let them help you design a



better process using the entire information gathering and assessing capacity that characterizes the only world they have ever known — where information gathering, analysis, collaboration and decision making are technology-mediated.

WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY?

Don't forget about you. Many of you get lost in the future planning process, subordinating your own interests (even when you can remember what they really are), to consensus, collaboration and the “needs of the firm.” David Whyte, poet and Fortune 500 consultant, says that the bedrock question at work is, “Am I happy?” So what makes you happy? At work and in life, what really matters to you? What and who must be part of your life before you die? What do you really appreciate in your life that must continue? Do not sacrifice these needs, hopes and aspirations on the altar of the firm. Only you can know what makes you happy, and only you can be the spokesperson and claimant for your life. In the words of poet Mary Oliver, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” In the galaxy of strategic plans, this is the star that most matters. Make sure you find your answer facilitated in the firm’s plans; if not, consider whether your star may burn brighter and truer in other deep space.

The last few years have been difficult; the next several years may not be easy, until we find and capture the opportunities this great economic, environmental and geopolitical turbulence is unleashing. Recognizing and appreciating our assets, staying creatively present, making sure planning is in the hands of your “A” team, and taking care of yourself are great building blocks to stand on, in order to see and to seize your and your firm’s rightful futures. ■

Suggested Reading:

Heffernan, M. (2011.) *Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril*. New York: Walker & Co.

Whyte, D. (2001). *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a pilgrimage of identity*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Oliver, M. (2008.) “The Summer Day.” *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures: Poems and Essays*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.

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¹ Brownian movement: — The irregular motion of small particles suspended in a liquid or a gas, caused by the bombardment of the particles by molecules of the medium: first observed by Robert Brown in 1827.