STRATEGIC ACTION PLANNING NOW!

A Guide for Setting and Meeting Your Goals

CATE GABLE

CRC Press
Taylor & Francis Group

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Axioun Communications International
Berkeley, California

CRC Press
Taylor & Francis Group
Boca Raton London New York

CRC Press is an imprint of the
Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Reprinted 2010 by CRC Press
CRC Press
6000 Broken Sound Parkway, NW
Suite 300, Boca Raton, FL 33487
270 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016
2 Park Square, Milton Park
Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN, UK

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Catalog record is available from the Library of Congress CIP

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International Standard Book Number 1-57444-233-3

DEDICATION

For John Hoover, for giving me a chance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have been as efficiently written without the emotional support and editorial help of Linda Aldridge and Nancy Jessup.

I would also like to thank my editor, Drew Gierman, at St. Lucie Press, a Division of CRC Press LLC, for his personal interest in the ideas of this book; Barbara Ley Toffler for her insight and conversations about ethics; Stanley Mason for his puckish creativity; and Mark Wilson for his straightforward assistance.

Additionally, I want to mention a few special people who have helped me at critical points in my career: Edson Sheppard; Rondi Gilbert; Mark Tanaka; Mary Ellen; Susan Harris; Mary Alice Stadum; Ann Golseth; Peter Blomerley; Janathin Miller; Kris Schaeffer; Joe Parker, Joe Profetta, and Mike Ripple; Ninamary Langsdale; and Adele Horowitz.

And, last, there are three people without whom this book could never have been written—William Franklin, Virginia Catherine, and Starla Rae.

THE AUTHOR

Cate Gable is a writer, poet, and business consultant. Founder and President of Axioun Communications International, Gable specializes in strategic marketing and planning for clients both in the U.S. and Europe. Axioun's clientele includes high-tech start-ups, Fortune 500 companies, nonprofits, and small businesses.

Prior to founding Axioun, Gable was Marketing Director for the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco and Marketing Manager at CitiBank, Citicorp Western Division. Additionally, she has served as Director of Public Information both for Ohlone College, an institution of 10,000 students in the Silicon Valley, Fremont, California, and for the Federal Reserve Bank of Los Angeles.

Gable has published widely in a variety of fields.

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INTRODUCTION

Ends and beginnings—there are no such things.
There are only middles.

Robert Frost[1]

BEGINNINGS

As a young English teacher on the island of Hawaii, I often gave in-class writing assignments to my students, many of whom were native Japanese studying in Hawaii as a transition to college on the U.S. mainland. One of my favorite students was a shy girl of twelve who talked eagerly outside of class but, when it came to writing, suddenly became terrified. She would sit and look at the blank piece of paper on her desk as if it contained an invisible death sentence. There was something about that blank page and the idea of beginning anything that felt so permanent and precious to her that she could not bring herself to add a mark for fear that she would ruin something. No amount of coaxing could convince her that she knew anything worth putting on that paper.

One day I said to her, "Take out a second piece of paper and put —2— on the top. Now start here, start right in the middle."

Somehow this broke the spell for her and she was able, little by little, to improve both her writing skills and her confidence in English. The idea that she could start in the middle, that she was only adding to something already in progress, freed her to begin.

I tell this story to offer an analogy. Your planning process *is* starting on "page two," whether your organization is a start-up heading toward an IPO or a Fortune 500 company with a 50-year history. There is no such thing as a blank slate. There are traditions and constraints that you will need to consider, attitudes about your product and industry that you

will need to take into account, and team members you will be working with who already have a history with one another.

And, further, your planning process is beginning in the middle, literally, in that it is surrounded and influenced by other factors. Your responsibility and your authority are probably limited; but whether or not you can make sweeping strategic decisions about the long-term direction of your organization, you can make a difference—here and now.

In the words of Aaron Wildavsky, "Planning may be seen as the ability to control the future consequences of present actions...Its purpose is to make the future different from what it would have been without this intervention...To change the future, one must be able to get people to act differently than they otherwise would."[2] And that will be your challenge as manager of the planning intervention you have been assigned.

So, in this respect, there really is no beginning; every part of your process is connected to aspects of the past as surely as to the future. However, on the other hand, the important thing *is* to begin: to put that first mark on the paper, to write that first planning idea on the whiteboard.

Both of these ideas—the importance of *action* and the *connectedness* and flow of the planning process to everything that has come before and to everything that will come after—are central themes in the planning approach outlined here in *Strategic Action Planning NOW!*

IS THIS BOOK FOR YOU?

No matter where one begins, beginnings offer opportunity—a chance to get it right this time. It is important to devote some attention at the beginning in order to ensure smooth going later on. Every minute spent at the beginning of a project making sure your fundamental thinking is accurate will save you untold hours later.

Strategic planning is a complex process and, as a discipline, has a huge body of literature explaining, supporting, defining, and analyzing it. You will not find everything in this book, although you will find pointers to many other aspects of planning not covered here in detail.

Before going too much further, make sure that *Strategic Action Planning NOW!* is the right book for you.

If you want a text that leads you point by point through the complex and magical process of creating a mission statement; or you want exhaustive case studies of other businesses and their planning processes; or you need guidance for undertaking a complete financial, competitive, or situational analysis—put this book back on the shelf. Well, you may not want to put it back on the shelf immediately—you might want to take a look at the "Selected Readings" in the back to get some good suggestions for other texts that might satisfy those needs.

What you will find here is a book that, in plain English, outlines an intuitive, team-based, tactical planning process that will allow you to work quickly and efficiently. So, if you need a set of clearly sequenced and explained planning steps; if you want tips and pointers to help ensure that your strategic thinking is insightful and your results are on target; if you have never done strategic planning before but you have said to yourself, "Hey, I'm pretty competent. I've gotten this far, it can't be that hard," then, without a doubt, this book is for you. Read on.

Inherent in the idea of strategic action, as I conceive it, is a commitment to understanding—yourself, others, and the situation in which you are operating. Later chapters will provide further discussion on this; for now, a few words about your work style.

If you are one of those people who never reads the instructions when you assemble furniture, even if it means that the headboard might go on backward and have to be unscrewed and reattached (in fact, you have probably skipped the introduction), you will want to go directly to Chapter 4: Strategic Action Planning: Four Steps. This chapter will give an overview of the four steps of Cate Gable's Strategic Method CGSM© in a quick synopsis fashion. Then, each of the four steps is discussed in more detail in the following chapters (Chapters 5 through 9).

If you are in the "read the directions" category of learner and doer, you would probably rather sneak up on your task, take a few notes, and do a bit of mental warm-up before you begin. In that case, continue from here for an outline of what to expect in each of the chapters of this book.

REVIEW OF BOOK CONTENTS

Chapter 1: My Team, My Self

Strategic planning is a complex process of gathering information and making decisions, and when undertaking a planning project with a team, the process itself becomes even more critical. Chapter 1 offers a discussion about the process-orientation of our planning approach.

The chapter discusses aspects of the team environment: how to balance your role as both the team leader and a planning participant; what aspects of a team-based planning process you can influence and how; tips on choosing team members; a discussion of different models for working in a group; and what to do if interpersonal communications problems arise.

Chapter 2: Beginning Concepts

Chapter 2 proposes some definitions for *strategy* and *action* as single-word ideas and discusses their conceptual power when they are brought together as *strategic action*.

Along the way, the chapter reviews the basic concepts that provide the foundation for the planning process outlined by this book. This chapter might also be of some interest to those who wonder why the Greeks won the Trojan War; that narrative is critiqued as a representative planning process in miniature.

The chapter concludes with a brief interpretation of time, a discussion of the "NOW" in the book title.

Chapter 3: Becoming a Strategist

This chapter explores in more detail the skill of insight, one of the main attributes of a strategic thinker. It discusses how you might actually practice this quality—in the same way you might think of working out in a gym—and enhance your environment to nurture your intuitive strategic skill.

Another important aspect of insight is the ability to be honest with yourself and others. The chapter discusses these ideas using the Asian concept of CHI, meaning energy or spirit, in a metaphoric way applied to the world of business as an acronym for Clarity, Honesty, and Integrity.

Creativity—a key element in any planning process—is also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4: Strategic Action Planning: Four Steps

This chapter provides an overview of the entire four-step planning sequence outlined in the book:

- Challenge
- Goal
- Strategic action
- Monitoring and measurement

The following chapters discuss each of these steps individually.

Chapter 5: Seeing the Challenges

It is sometimes difficult to see the things that are right in front of your eyes. This chapter begins the planning process by outlining how to identify or see the challenges in your organization.

Some techniques will be introduced for generating ideas in a formalized exercise called "What Needs Fixing?"

The chapter's second exercise involves a check on alignment between the challenges facing your team and those of your executive leadership group.

In this chapter, hypothetical challenges are created; and subsequent chapters follow them through the remaining steps of the planning process in order to illustrate how each exercise works.

Chapter 6: Sorting the Challenges

In the second phase of the challenge step, you and your team will go through a series of exercises designed to help you analyze and group your challenges into clusters in order to address them more easily.

Chapter 6 also introduces some practical analysis techniques to help in the sorting and prioritizing of your team challenge list.

The sample challenges that started in Chapter 5 will be carried forward, creating a hypothetical discussion to illustrate several of the techniques proposed.

Chapter 7: Setting the Goals

This chapter proposes nine attributes of an effective goal and discusses how to apply them to transform your challenges into a set of preliminary goals.

These goals are evaluated based on some proposed criteria: What is the right amount of stretch? Is the goal reachable and realistic? Is this goal appropriate for your department? Are these goals critical to the success of your overall mission?

An exercise is included to help you and your team with this planning step; included is a hypothetical discussion illustrating how this step might work with the sample list of challenges.

Chapter 8: Devising Strategic Action

Chapter 8 dissects the process of transforming insight and energy into strategic action. Included are discussions about intentional insight and synergy and proposals for some brainstorming techniques to assist your team in formulating innovative action plans.

Additionally, the chapter considers what establishes an environment conducive to creative thinking, and then outlines an exercise that will assist in directing your team's formulation of strategic actions.

Returning to the sample challenges/goals, this chapter reveals their evolution into strategic actions.

Chapter 9: Monitoring and Measurements

This chapter is brought to you by the letter "M," as in monitoring and measurement—the fourth and final step in the planning process. Monitoring is a key factor for success in planning projects, yet it is often overlooked.

Some aspects of effective measurements and a method for adding accountability to your planning process are detailed. There is a discussion about the many ways that monitoring becomes its own tool for planning, management, and even communications effectiveness.

In addition, the monitoring component is added to the sample list of evolving challenges, goals, and strategic actions.

Chapter 10: Implementation Tips

Chapter 10, the post-planning section, provides you with some pointers on how to carry through effectively from the planning stage into the implementation stage of your project.

Various aspects discussed include the planning document, the creation of a communications plan, the formulation of a project implementation team, and an idea for continuous feedback (called the Information and Communications Möbius).

Chapter 11: Future Perfect

As a wrap-up, Chapter 11 suggests a process for self-evaluation of your team's planning process and provides some sample evaluation questions to assist you in improving your planning process the next time around.

Postscript

The Postscript provides some ways to contact the author to let her know if this book has been helpful: what you might suggest changing about it or adding to it; or how you used the book's planning approach with your team.

Chapter Notes

Any footnote in the text indicates further comments on the subject, the quotation citation, or a listing of other resource materials that relate to this topic; these notes appear at the end of each chapter.

Appendices

Appendix A: List of Exercises—including the names of all exercises, what chapters they appear in, and who they are meant for.
Appendix B: Sequential Overview of the CGSM© Planning Process—a visual, chronological representation of the four planning steps and which exercises and tasks relate to those steps.
Appendix C: Sample Planning Items—a sequence of planning items placed together in their natural progression (as discussed in each of the relevant chapters) as challenges, goals, and strategic actions with monitoring devices.

Glossary

Terms used in a particular way in the text are defined in a quick-reference glossary at the back of the book.

Selected Readings

A collection of recommendations for other planning texts you might refer to for further reading or more specific help in areas not covered in this book.

Bibliography

A complete listing of all resources used in writing this book.

Index

An index for topics, businesses, or people referred to or quoted in the text.

So, that is what is assembled for you in this text. The hope is that you will find the book clear and easy to use, full of just the right amount of helpful information, and presented in a way that gives you quick access to what you need.

By the way, studies have shown that whether you read the furniture assembly instructions carefully, sorting, identifying, and counting all the hardware pieces, or whether you begin by immediately attaching part A to part D, the end result is more or less of the same quality and takes more or less the same amount of time. This proves one of the concepts this book's planning process is built on—there is not a right answer, but there probably is a good solution.

Good luck with *your* version of our planning process!

NOTES

1. Lathem, Edward Conney, In the Home Stretch, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1969.
2. Wildavsky, Aaron, Does Planning Work, *Public Interest*, Summer 1971, 101.

I

PRE-PLANNING PREPARATION

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