

Planning Is an Ineffective Way to Bring About Change

BY AND LARGE, organizations are simply not good at changing themselves. They change more often as a result of invasion from the outside or rebellion from the inside, less so as a result of planning. One could argue that it is plans, not planning, that is ineffective. Certainly, the planning process itself can be valuable. But the distinction has to do with *making change happen*. Neither plans nor planning is especially effective in that regard.

Planning is built upon the flawed idea that it is possible to predict the future. Yet the future almost always takes us by surprise. Since there is simply no good way to predict future events, there is no sure way to plan for them.

Here are some other reasons why plans and planning are of so little use in bringing about change.

The members of an organization tend to be blind to those aspects of the organization crying out for change. They often do not see what may be obvious to others. That's why it's so easy to be an expert in someone else's organization. Additionally, the organization generally has an interest in maintaining the status quo, including commitments to people and programs that may no longer be aiding the organiza-

tion. Anyone charged with planning cannot help but be influenced by this reluctance to change.

The planning process tends to be located in a relatively low-status department so that the planners are not knowledgeable about the organization's top-level concerns. Thus their plans cannot be truly strategic. Too often, planning is an empty ritual designed to make management feel there is something going on in that area. Plans are made but they are seldom put into use, checked and rechecked against the actual experiences of the organization. Little wonder that planners constantly feel frustrated.

The fact that planning is usually confined to one department is in itself limiting. When planning is not a function of management in all departments, there is no broad organizational "buy-in." The plans remain sterile because they have not been sold to, or had the participation of, the larger organization.

The planning process usually cannot effectively accommodate in its plans the many political pressures that are brought upon the managers charged with implementing the plans. In city planning, for example, large real-estate developers and other special-interest groups that make financial contributions to politicians are able to obtain legislation that works against the best intentions of the planners. Individual citizens who try dealing with city planning departments to get their own plans accepted may see the planners as being very powerful. But those within the department feel relatively powerless against the influence of special interests. Corporate planners can be similarly circumvented by directors who have sweetheart relationships with other corporations, by executives with pet projects that don't fit the plan, by the company's informal or even secret relationships with suppliers or competitors, and so on.

Carrying out plans to the letter ordinarily requires such authoritative control that the human spirit is stifled. Planned communities are an example of this. They are beautiful, clean, and orderly, but their inhabitants pay a price. The price when order takes precedence over vitality is the loss of individual liberty. Communities and organizations of all kinds need order. But they also need its opposite: spontaneity, a certain degree of chaos, even messiness. Just as our great cities have bohemian neighborhoods where spontaneity and creativity can thrive, organizations should make room for those aspects of human behavior that authoritarian plans would discourage.

Planning is as vulnerable to fashion as any other managerial activity. As it happens, planning is itself a fad that was much more popular a decade or so ago, when "strategic planning" was the byword of management. It is no longer the case.

Self-interest can be a barrier to effective planning. In particular, the professions stubbornly resist planned change and seem interested only in protecting themselves. If the professions actually did plan with the public interest in mind, they would probably have to merge with each other or go out of business. At the least, they would have to diversify, retrain their members, and engage in all sorts of activities that would threaten the status quo. That is why their plans are seldom ambitious or radical.

Rebellion and Invasion

Earlier, I observed that rebellion or invasion from the outside will change an organization more often than planning. The labor movement is an example of a rebellion with lasting effects. It has wrought far more fundamental change in the ways in which organizations function than has, say, the introduction of any management technique.

Similarly, the invasion of the computer is certainly changing organizations. We are now observing huge shifts in the way organizations think of themselves as a result of computerization.

Corporate takeovers, whether hostile or friendly, are another example of organizations changed dramatically by invasion—especially when new owners make major changes even before they really are a part of the reorganized company.

Given just these three developments, one would not today design an organization of the future in the same way that organizations have been designed in the past.

A Way to Make Ready

If planning is so ineffective, why do we do it? And why is it so important that we continue to do it?

Planning may not be effective at assessing the future, but it can be a good way to assess the present. It also indicates trade-offs that may be necessary, sets boundaries so that possibilities can be carefully assessed, simulates plausible scenarios, integrates ideas, and forces people to think about consequences. Additionally, it can put management on what planner Jivan Tabibian calls an “anticipatory alert,” so that it is better prepared for the unexpected.

The process, not the product, is what is important. At its best, planning becomes a form of anticipatory, strategic thinking—the basis for organizational flexibility and readiness. That may be the most it can offer, but that’s a lot.