

Insight into Strategic Foresight – A Biblical Perspective

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by Daniel Michel

What is strategic foresight? And how does it work for the Christian leader? Didn't Jesus say, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself? Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt. 6:34). Are we to plan for the future? Is it like fortune telling or palm reading? Or do we just ask God to bless our prognostications?

According to Richard Slaughter, "Strategic foresight is the ability to create and maintain a high-quality, coherent and functional forward view and to use the insights arising in organizationally useful ways; ... It represents a fusion of futures methods with those of strategic management."¹ Strategic planning is one of the fundamental skills that a leader possesses. The need for organizations to plan for the future is as old as business itself, and organizations that fail to adapt to environmental changes cease to exist. Over a half century ago, Peter Drucker noted, in his book *The Practice of Management*, that managers not only have to determine "what is" the business of the organization, but "what will be" the business in the future.

Strategic Foresight and Who God Is

God is omniscient, omnipresent and eternal; therefore, He knows everything about everybody in the past, present and future. Wow, how do we package that in our space-time continuum? God has perfect strategic foresight. God's character is revealed to us as being Creator of all that is, powerful, majestic, sovereign over all creation, loving, compassionate, patient, perfectly righteous, just and holy. Combined, these characteristics are the building blocks to perfect strategic foresight. God's purposes encompass the whole range from eternity past to eternity future and extend to every part of His dominion. He knows the future. Jeremiah 29:10 says, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Strategic Foresight and Who I Am

God has perfect strategic foresight. We can, at best, achieve imperfect strategic foresight or, at worst, thoughtless hindsight. In Proverbs, Solomon, the wisest man, said "To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue. All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the Lord" (Proverbs 16:1-2).

Strategic Foresight and How It Works

According to a famous quote from Peter Drucker, "The best way to predict the future is to create it." Drucker also states that "Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work;" "The only thing we know about the future is that it will be different;" "Trying to predict the future is like trying to drive

¹ "Developing and Applying Strategic Foresight," Foresight International web site, http://www.foresightinternational.com.au/07resources/Dev&Apply_Strategic_Foresight.pdf.

down a country road at night with no lights while looking out the back window.” As one of the top strategic thinkers in the 21st century, Drucker devised an assessment tool that presents the five most important questions for any organization to ask:

1. What is our mission?
2. Who is our customer?
3. What does the customer value?
4. What are our results?
5. What is our plan?

Throughout the assessment process, one examines the fundamental question of the mission: what the mission is and what it should be. One determines the primary customer: the person whose life is changed through the work. One also determines the supporting customers: volunteers, partners, donors and others who must be satisfied. One engages in research to learn directly from customers what they value, decide what the results should be and develop a plan with long-range goals and measurable objectives.

Strategic Foresight and What I Do

Strategic thinkers have a significant part to play. The men of Issachar in 1 Chronicles had a place in David's army on account of being men "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chronicles 12:32). Issachar contributes just 200 men out of a total force of 336,000, yet those men made a unique contribution. All of the others are described as brave warriors, armed for battle, experienced soldiers or "armed with every type of weapon," yet it is clear that the men of Issachar bring knowledge and insight that more than makes up for their lack of fighting force.

Biblical leaders who were in tune with God were given clear strategies as to how they could achieve the goal that was set before them. Many of these required unconventional choices. Gideon was instructed by God to restrict his numerical forces severely and cause the enemy to panic and flee, undoubtedly reducing the death toll amongst his troops. Joshua was given precise instructions as to how he should take the city of Jericho. Paul chose to follow God in appealing to stand trial in Rome before Caesar when he could have been set free.

For the Christian leader, prayer not only gives us God's perspective on what our vision should be, but it also gives us God's perspective on how we should reach that vision. Luke records Jesus giving the Great Commission to the apostles in Acts 1:8 as He tells them that they will be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. In this case, there is no clearly articulated strategy. The disciples are scattered from Jerusalem as a result of persecution and are then guided by God stage by stage (e.g. Acts 8:26; 13:4). For Jonah, the strategy is clearly outlined, and Jonah is so uncomfortable at the prospect of being used by God in this way that he heads in the opposite direction with well known consequences.

Yet this does not mean that Christian leaders should not carry out a strategic analysis of a situation. Luke records Jesus teaching, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it" (Luke 14:28).

The Bible gives us the principles to determine the strategy. We may or may not be given specific guidance as to how we should approach the vision; we may or may not receive this guidance at the strategic or at the tactical level. However, just as Jesus taught the disciples to think and act according to the principles of the kingdom, so we too, can develop our understanding of the principles of the kingdom and their application to the mission and ministry of our organizations. Daniel was elevated to a high position in the court of Nebuchadnezzar because of his knowledge of God, and served Darius as one of three administrators.

Strategy should be a team effort; it is not to be done alone. We should join with others who have diverse views and experiences. In Proverbs 15:22, Solomon says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." Proverbs 20:18 says "Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance."

I had the privilege to participate in the 2004 conference of the Institute for the Future. The topic was technology horizons for the future. But as much as they talked about technology being the answer to the

future, I realized all the more that God is in control of the future. We can plan for the future, but we must commit our plans to God. “To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue. All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the Lord. Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed” (Proverbs 16:1-3). We, as Christian leaders, should use strategic foresight to plan for the future, but then commit the plans to the Lord that He would carry them out according to His will.

About the Author



Daniel has just "retired" after 30 years with IBM Leadership Development. He is now the Director of the Center for Leadership Excellence (www.cfle.org) where he consults with Christian leaders to develop their God-given leadership gifts. Daniel has a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Regent University.