

In a 1957 speech, President Dwight D. Eisenhower quoted a statement he had heard in the Army, "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything"¹. Eisenhower understood that the thought processes and collaboration involved in planning are more valuable than the document.

Some organizations are good at creating and executing strategic plans. Others don't see the value in planning, or at least not enough to give it the time it takes. In between you have those who faithfully create their plans and set them on a shelf to collect dust until next year's planning cycle.



The "dust collectors" may appear to have a handle on Eisenhower's philosophy. Perhaps, but probably not. If they did, the planning process wouldn't be relegated to an annual retreat or a short cycle each year where plans get thought about. A focused time for planning is useful, but if the process is truly valued why doesn't it hold a place at the table throughout the year?

Here are a few suggestions for meaningful planning:

- *Have the right players at the table.* Those responsible for executing the plan must *own it*, not just approve it. Ownership comes through the messy work of collaboratively hashing it out, defending it, adapting it, getting the pieces to work together, and ultimately believing in it. The process, done right, creates the champions who will enlist commitment from the rest of the organization.
- *Get buy-in.* Forcing a plan on key players who don't believe in it is a plan for failure. Even if you brute-force your way to achieving the stated goals, the damage you will have done to the culture and sustainability of the organization will be substantial. Sure, it takes more persuasion to get some people on board than others, but this is where *leadership influence* outperforms *management pressure*.
- *Allow time for dialog, collaboration, and rumination.* No one can afford to spend unlimited time on planning, but it's not successful when treated like a one-and-done, check-it-off-the-list-and-move-on activity. Gaining commitment takes time, but commitment generates energy, mere compliance drains it.
- *Plan to refine the plan.* Being too quick to change an adopted plan is dangerous. So is being too slow to change it. Knowing when to pivot and when to persevere isn't easy. The foundation for these decisions is laid by getting shared clarity up front on *why* the plan says what it says and the impact of not hitting the marks. Just because you want to grow 30% isn't a good reason. You should be ready to explore the impact of only growing 20% or stretching to 40%. Monitor – don't ignore – changing conditions, then collaborate to adjust the plan to hit the reasons *why* even if the *how* has to change.

¹ From a speech to the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference in Washington, D.C. (November 14, 1957) ; in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1957*, National Archives and Records Service, Government Printing Office, p. 818 : ISBN 0160588510, 9780160588518