

Hunger for Hope

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“I sought to hold vision open in the dark of people’s lives and society’s pain.”

Robert Raines
Time to Live

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Planning season is officially open. For too many organizations planning is actually optional, but budgets are required. Too often there is really little envisioned for next year that is materially different from last year. The process is really about accounting for business as usual. Cut a little cost here, add a little revenue there, but really very little changes. It assumes that the most important resources to be managed and controlled are the money resources. So if you don’t add to staff-related resources, in most functions you are pretty much there. You’re in control of your costs.

Yet a budget-driven planning process misses perhaps one of the most important issues facing business: Where does opportunity and hope for next year reside? I find over and over again that for many, there has been a loss of hope. Particularly for mature organizations who have been at it for a while, it seems that the controls of the budget process – tracking, reporting, explaining deviations to plan all year long – have caused the circles to get smaller and smaller. As the focus has moved increasingly away from planning toward controlling, the organizational processes have, quietly but unintentionally, starved out those new ideas and possibilities that are the seed for opportunity and hope.

Planning should combine two very disparate realms. The first is the realm of dreams, visions, and possibilities – things that excite and energize customers, employees, management, and ultimately shareholders. They represent opportunities for breakthrough.

The second is the realm of organizing, accounting and control. A part of organizational maturity is bringing greater discipline and control to the naiveté and chaos of earlier stages.

The problem is that some organizations have accidentally stifled the vision and possibility inherent in the business. As the budget process has grown in scope and rigor, hope and vision are starving to death. In an environment where each quarter-end represents life and death, it is easy to see how control of quarterly financial performance dominates.

What does a process for resurrecting vision in an organization look like? Well, like effective budgeting and everything else, it should be a year round process. It starts with allocating time in discussions with customers, employees, and the other stakeholders about possibilities that excite. Seldom in these discussions will you hear a coherent vision of breakthrough. But if you listen with your ears and your eyes through the prism of possibilities, you will probably discover in any discussion one or two ideas that can be part of the tapestry of new opportunity, excitement, and maybe even hope for those involved in the discussion.

Once these types of insights are collected, they should help focus and inform planning and budgeting efforts. Many organizations conduct an annual strategy session in the first part of the year to enable the budget process in the latter part. This approach provides an excellent way to focus on the strategic process as a prerequisite to the more tactical budget process. All too often, however, participants arrive at these sessions without having solicited the kind of input that leads to breakthrough possibilities.

If budget season is already upon you, let me suggest three key steps that you can take immediately to help open up the process of discovery.

1. First, set aside at least eight hours to meet with your customers (external or internal) to ask them about their hopes and dreams. If you already have a series of meetings planned with them, devote a portion of those discussions to possibilities that would be exciting to them.
2. Second, do the same thing with employees in your organization. Focus on their hopes and dreams for the business.
3. Third, pull your managers together for a meeting with only one topic – hopes, dreams and possibilities. There will be plenty of time to get into the mechanics of execution and even how to budget and plan for it, but spend at least two hours on future possibilities.

Each of us carries a responsibility to ‘hold open’ the vision in our part of the business – where loss of hope and possibilities represents the ‘dark’ of the work world in which we spend the majority of our waking hours. The ability to increase revenue, to be a part of a growing vibrant business, and to make a difference – financially, socially, personally – these are tied to a hoped-for, imagined future state – a vision.

Stephen Covey has said that achievement is created twice – first in the mind and then in reality. There is a compelling need to lead and manage the business so that this creation happens unintentionally, because if this vision does not get created in the mind, then it is not going to get created in reality.