

The power of planning

Remember where you wanted to be by now? Are you there yet, or are you too busy putting out fires to think about plans for July, or 2001 or even 2010?

Harvard Business School once did a study of a graduating class and their progress 20 years later. While most students had goals at graduation, not all achieved them. It helped a lot if they had clear and specific goals at graduation, for there was a dramatically higher chance of achieving them. But what was even more remarkable was that 80% of those who actually wrote down their goals achieved them.

That's probably not so much a testament to being a purposeful, organized person (although that doesn't hurt) as it is an insight into the power of planning, for the act of writing a goal is very complex. It involves thinking it through and defining exactly what you hope to achieve, how you'll measure success and how you plan to get there. Writing formalizes it and makes it more of a commitment.

I was fortunate to sit with several landscape contractors at ALCA's Executive Forum as they discussed their problems dealing with growth, or in some cases, "hypergrowth." As they shared their concerns, some common threads emerged:

- ▶ Growth, like a virulent infection, can take over before you're aware you're in trouble.
- ▶ When you grow too fast, it can throw your whole operation into chaos.
- ▶ You might see hypergrowth on the horizon, but unless you have a solid plan to deal with it, you're going to have problems.
- ▶ If you can plan for growth, you can handle growth.

This group was smart, experienced and savvy (some even had five-year plans). Yet, growth ambushed them.

Planning for change

So what can you do? Don't plan all the time, but it does pay to plan regularly, and to be specific, foresighted and imaginative. A relative told me that the best mothers were those who were the most imaginative, because they imagined the potential problems and dangers that could happen to their children and tried to take steps ahead of time to avoid them. They aren't being overprotective, just anticipatory.

It's the same thing with your operation. You have to anticipate your competitor's tactics, hiring shortages, cash flow problems, good or bad weather, economic downturns and too much growth, too fast. You need a solid, specific plan that will get you from Point A to Point B. And you must take time to revise that plan, develop an emergency Plan B for those unexpected new fires to put out.

Those plans will make you ready to invest in a new service, tackle a long-term problem or move your quality up to a higher level. Those plans will give you the power to change.

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