



The Future Ain't What It Used to Be

BY RICHARD MARTIN

My financial advisor and I were discussing how our respective clients tend to ignore their future financial and business well being and focus almost exclusively on the present. David Maister, an expert in professional services, calls this the “fat smoker” syndrome. Some people continue to smoke, overeat, or laze about, instead of adopting healthy habits and lifestyle. Psychologists haven’t fully elaborated the reasons for this, but they have made headway in naming it. It’s called “future discounting.”

In most cases, people—that means you and me—view the future as a realm of wishes, possibilities, and potentialities, some of them hopeful and some of them threatening. The far future is abstract and nebulous. The present and near future are concrete. We can see menaces and opportunities starting us in the face, so we act with less hesitation.

This problem also exists in military strategy and tactics, but military planners have developed ways to overcome future discounting and paralysis in the face of uncertainty. There are three key concepts that are particularly relevant for business strategy and tactics.

OVERCOMING FUTURE PARALYSIS

The first and most powerful of these concepts is to plan and operate over three temporal horizons: current operations, future operations, and future plans. Current operations are about executing the commander’s existing plan. Future operations are about developing the next steps after the immediate objectives are attained. Future plans are devoted to the development of contingency and follow on

plans after the current operation and its immediate successor is complete.

But it’s not enough to have three time horizons. You also have to put “troops to task” to ensure you have people focused on the present, others focused almost entirely on the immediate future, while still others explore the more distant future.

While the chain of command works on executing plans in the present, there are staff officers preparing the next phase of the operation. They are busy analyzing the current situation and adapting plans for follow on actions (and reactions). Their time focus ranges from the next few hours (for a battalion) to the next few months (for, say, an expeditionary force).

There is a smaller group of analysts and planners developing enemy and friendly scenarios over a more extended time scale. They are also looking at ways to “shape” the future battlespace, so that friendly forces are in the best position to impose their will on the enemy (or stakeholders and belligerents, if you’re talking about peace-support or low-intensity operations). Leadership is critical for the three time horizons. The commander exercises his will in the present, while considering advice from, and providing guidance and direction to, his future operations staff and future planners.

GENERATING A RANGE OF OPTIONS

The second key concept comes from the fact that there are always multiple ways of achieving the aim. Too often military planners, as well as business executives, get in a rut. They continue doing things in the same old way because that’s how they learned them. But, as

Marshall Goldsmith says, “What got you here won’t get you there.” The strategies, methods, and tactics that generated your current successes (or failures) won’t necessarily work (or fail) in the future.

Leaders and their staffs must analyze conditions and the factors that impinge on them so they can generate a range of options. Each of these options must then be weighed against the enemy’s (or competitors’ and buyers’) potential actions and reactions. The optimal course of action becomes the basis for the main plan, while lesser options provide the basis for contingency and follow on plans.

The final concept that military planners have developed is scenario-based planning. This is a whole field unto itself, but in essence the idea is to look at the strategic, operational, or tactical environment as a spectrum of alternate realities. Each scenario paints a picture of a more or less altered world, which can then be explored to identify and qualify their implications from a variety of perspectives and in a number of dimensions.

Scenario-based planning is particularly relevant the further out in time you look, where the intricacies of cause and effect and cascading developments can be assessed and evaluated. The findings provide input for shaping the future of the organization and its impact on competitors, markets, and other stakeholders.

There is no silver bullet solution for future discounting and hesitation in the face of uncertainty and risk. Unfortunately, trying to convince people to be virtuous is a bit of a lost cause. The military approach to this problem provides a range of methods and ideas for dealing with the “fat smoker” syndrome.

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