

PLANS AND SCHEMES, BEAUTIFUL DREAMS

A student asked me recently what the difference was between a visionary thinker and a strategic planner, and whether a person could be both.

A visionary thinker sees what is possible, what could be that is not yet known. A visionary thinker articulates dreams into a form that is vivid and inspiring. A visionary thinker brings the creative power of the imagination into the world.

A strategic planner, inspired by vision, sees how to bring it into reality. A strategic planner bereft of vision looks at what is and sets out to reconstruct it, redirect it, or re-engineer it. A strategic planner translates the idea at hand, whatever it is, into action.

Because there is no limit to what or how anyone can think, any person could be both a visionary thinker and a strategic planner. As things are, most often people define themselves one way or the other. Self-described visionaries say they have insufficient patience or discipline for strategic planning. Self-described strategic planners say they cannot reflect far enough beyond the known to envision the not-yet-known, although they are challenged and energized when presented with it.

What matters most to our future, though, is that vision and strategy dance together. Vision without strategy is a passing dream. Strategy without vision is a prescription for the *status quo*.

One of my first bosses was a bureau chief in a regional newspaper office who had the most remarkable imagination I had ever encountered. It seemed as though every month he became absorbed in a new interest and immersed himself in reading, talking and learning about it. And it seemed as though every new interest led him to a fresh invention that would contribute to the field. He had ideas that might revolutionize weather instruments, beach erosion plans, automobile gas conservation, symphony orchestra recordings, photographic equipment, radio reception, driveway construction, tire performance, city planning, ballet shoes, garage door openers – and on and on. We were all captivated by his logical, simple, brilliant thinking. He kept us inspired to keep learning, to look beyond the obvious, to believe that anyone could master anything, to see that everyone could continually generate new ideas.

Nothing ever came of his ideas. He was a visionary with no clue about how to make a plan, and no planner in his life. He was in love with his own creativity. He enjoyed the dreaming so much that the idea of bringing any particular dream into reality rarely crossed his mind except as occasional wishful thinking. Then he'd be right on to the next subject, the next dream.

I have often wondered how many people there must be like him, people who bring innovations to mind daily and simply let them go, undeveloped, untried, untested.

Later in life, I worked briefly for someone who was a fantastic strategic planner with no vision, and no visionary, in her life. She was absorbed in minutia. She sent out complicated memos, replacing earlier complicated memos, every week with a new set of rules and instructions to get us more efficiently and effectively where we were already going. Our direction was clearly to do more of the same, but do it in ever more skillfully planned ways. Each newcomer to the group would be dazed, early on, trying to comply with all her involved instructions. Gradually, each newcomer would settle into a routine of appearing interested in the plan of the week and simply going about business as usual. Once in a while, she would bring us all together and criticize us for failure to follow the new instructions or to respect the new strategy. But in truth neither we nor she had much energy for it. We still kept on doing the usual work with the same basic results. In other parts of the organization, we were known as “the drones.” Most people didn’t last long at that assignment.

A strategic planner with no vision endlessly recombines and rearranges things as they are, looking for a better order, a better process, a better outcome from the same ingredients. A visionary with no strategic plan endlessly drifts in the ether, dreaming beautiful dreams that take momentary form like pretty designs in a kaleidoscope, then shimmer into nothingness as new designs appear.

This might be a harmless and self-evident observation. Yet looking around at the world, it has significant implications. The following questions come to mind:

- Do strategic planners, or visionary thinkers, dominate our national leadership?
- Do strategic planners, or visionary thinkers, dominate our educational institutions?
- Our financial institutions?
- Our helping professions?
- Our airline industry?
- Our postal system?

How often are we asked to do as much or more with less, rather than to do something entirely new and reinvent our work? How often are we told we have to pay more to get the same service because it now “costs more” to deliver it the same way? How often are we asked to impart old knowledge into a new world, without questioning how we impart it or how useful it is? How often are we rocketed to excess or plunged into debt by a financial system with strategic puppetmasters and very little innovative thinking at its heart? How often do we question long-standing policies or interventions that work marginally, if at all, and look to see something entirely different?

Absent vision, strategic planning is drudgery. Absent planning, vision is whimsical. Combined, they lead to the exhilaration of the evolution of ideas, to invention, to discovery, to progress, to positive change, to the freedom of thought that is the purest expression of the human spirit.

There's an old expression often tossed out by business consultants: "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there." Vision defines the direction; planning maps out the best road to move in that direction.

Returning to the opening question: Can one person be both a visionary thinker and a strategic planner? Beyond that, another question: If more people were both, how different would our world be?

With an understanding of how our thinking works, we begin to see that visionary thinking is natural; we come into life absolutely able to make up ideas out of nothing. Strategic planning is a skill we are trained for from childhood. They are not two different minds at work; they are not two different "types" of minds. They are the same mind working the same way to manifest two different types of thoughts, two types of thoughts among an inestimable variety of possible thoughts. The process of thinking is always the same, always employing universal energy to create the myriad thoughts with which we make up our lives.

We are not limited to any types of thought; nor are we limited in any way. The power to think without constraint is infinite and boundless. It is the pure spring that feeds the river of experience. As we navigate the river, we are free to explore every tributary, ride any current, float in any pool, raft the rapids, catch the wind and sail, or power our vessel with the engines of our own creation.

When we all see the ease of tapping that energy, we can extricate ourselves from churning in the mud of uninspired strategy and appreciate the starry fields of vision that light new paths on surer, wiser ground.

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