

Reading the Tea Leaves---Becoming a Strategic Directioneer While Digging Trenches

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Show Me the Future:

Every board and every general manager wants to see the future. They'd like to know what the members will want five, ten, even fifteen years down the road. They'd like to "read the tea leaves" so that dollars go into the right projects, the right staff, the right goods and services. They'd like to have a strategic plan.

Although there's little "real" strategic planning being done on a daily basis, there are lots of tactical decisions being made every day that have strategic implications. Maybe boards, managers and line employees who are in the trenches would be well served by investigating how their day to day tactical decisions are or are not aligned with strategic directions.

Trench diggers make day-to-day decisions. Each decision is a tea leaf telling you something about the future. Lots of tea leaves give you a direction. Strategic directioneers are no more than trench diggers who see the future impact of current decisions. Great clubs have lots of strategic directioneers who don't even know that's who they are---busboys, maitre d's, managers, committee members, board members. Each can and should be thought of as a directioneer. Everyone in the trenches can be taught by the right person---presumably, the general manager or the president---to see the future in their handiwork. It's exciting for trench diggers to know that great futures are being built with their help, one decision at a time.

This whole strategic directioneering process requires people who understand the beauty and the simplicity of reading tea leaves. These people---who, ideally, are at every level of the operation---ask themselves and others a series of simple questions before a decision is made, while the decision is being executed and after the results of the decision are in. What forces are at work in "the outer world" that are impacting the club community? What direction is the club going and is it in alignment with "the outer world?" What strategy should be adopted to pursue that direction? What tactics would be consistent with that strategy?

These aren't complicated or abstract notions. No consultant required.

Let me give you an example from my own club. My Assistant Manager is also my Youth Director. She understands "synergies" and wants to build participation in the youth program, the dining room and the bar at one and the same moment. She is proposing that we convert an under-utilized outdoor area, The Pit, into a dining room for families enrolled in the camp program. We need \$10,000 to create a prototype that will prove or disprove the concept. Not a big deal, really, but a key opportunity if you're in the habit of reading tea leaves and thinking like a directioneer.

She and I talk about strategic directioneering as we contemplate the possibilities. We clarify our thinking with questions. Forces at work in "the outer world"--- Society is becoming more family oriented and the demand for "family locations" is on the rise. Current and Anticipated Club Direction: we are already a family friendly club but want to become even more so in the years ahead. Family Friendly Strategy: we want to expand family opportunities within the Club while maintaining friendly relations with other "tribes" within the member community. Investment Strategy: Invest in needs and not wants. Do it cheaply at first with a prototype "proof of concept" design. Tactics / Action: Create a dining space that provides a "family ambiance" while allowing other "tribes" their own space and ambiance. Do it in an existing space using in-house staff with slush fund monies. And make sure that there's a six month return on investment! Is this project decision consistent with our strategic direction? Decision: build, promote, hope.

Strategic directions are far more important than strategic plans. Plans suggest you have an outcome in mind. Plans create the illusion that all is known and can be trusted. Plans tend to discount the unexpected, the upside surprise, the unintended consequence. Plans change. Strategic directions rarely do. That you'll become a more family friendly club is for sure, but how you will do so over the next twenty years isn't.

Strategic directioning is a messy business. The whole thing is an organic process with fits and starts, moans and groans. It's about trying one thing, discovering upside surprises and unintended consequences, listening to the feedback, switching gears, modifying what is, trying again. The stock market may crash, Iraq might get invaded and the birthrate might rise. Details change but strategic directions remain. Growth is organic and not linear. There are no straight lines to the future.

More often than not, strategic directions arise spontaneously over time as decisions are made, modified, thrown out and reconfigured with nothing more in

mind than what was right when the decision was made by a trench digger. Adam Smith would say that an “invisible hand” has been at work during the years and decades of your club’s existence. You are, at any given time, the sum total of every decision ever made by your trench diggers.

Actions speak louder than words. Philosophy is hidden in the details. You can write all you want about “vision” and “mission” but people discover your club’s strategic direction whenever they connect with the club in the flesh, in the here and the now---the greeting they receive from your front desk personality, the visibility of the General Manager, the size of the drinks you pour in the bar, the type of chairs they sit on in the dining room and the hand written card they receive each year on their birthday. Strategic directioneers know this to be true. They not only make decisions with the direction in mind, they listen to the feedback. Good strategic directions are pursued one step at a time and continuity in membership, management and staff will, over the decades, create both a culture and a direction for your club. Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” is alive and well.

You’ve Already Started:

You’ve already begun the strategic journey whether you know it or not. Your trench diggers---committees, boards and staff--- have been making decisions for years. The future is alive in each of those decisions. You have a strategic direction. Whether it’s the right one or not can be seen in the number of members who walk through the front door.

Learn to read the tea leaves. The process of thinking, acting, reflecting, talking and adjusting will make you a strategic directioneer. The General Manager, the staff, the Board and the entire membership will thank you---a trench digger---for becoming one!

Remember that the future is being built in the trenches one decision at a time. Enjoy the journey!