



March 30, 2011
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(GSN) Unity Requires Fidelity to the
Apostles' Teaching, Fellowship,
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Strategic Planning – Nurturing
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Strategic Planning – Nurturing Successful Teamwork

By Howard Craig

"It's said that every community. . . needs two essentials to keep it vibrant: memories and dreams. If all we have are memories, we become a museum. If all we have are dreams, we turn into rootless drifters."

(Archbishop Timothy Dolan, *Doers of the Word*, pp 123-124)

Honoring the Past, Building a Future.

As Archbishop Dolan notes, a healthy parish has both a past and a future. It is absolutely critical that any plan find a balance between the identity of the parish informed from past history, and the vision of the parish influenced by the dreams and opportunities of the future. The past will anchor the dreams; the future will enliven the past.

An analysis of many strategic plans indicates that far too many planners fail to find a balance between the future and the past. Some plans regurgitate past solutions, perhaps due to the thinking, "If it worked before, it should work again." But to continue to pursue the same path as before is to continue to experience the same results as before. Indeed, one of the fastest ways to derail planning is to sacrifice innovative thinking and creative solutions by not looking critically and honestly at both the successes and failures of the past. Put more succinctly, "The Seven Last Words of the Church are, 'We've never done it that way before.'"

Discounting the past to focus solely on the future is no healthier. The thinking that says, "Well, that may be the way we did it before, but this is a new day" is faulty as well. Too many plans formed from this school of thought ignore the lessons of the past to elevate a rosy future. Such plans are often untenable, with unrealistic goals and simplistic solutions. Lofty "pie in the sky" plans separate the parish from its roots, threaten to divide the congregation, maroon the older generations, and discount the rich history and traditions that made the parish what it is today.

Certainly these observations are obvious. No parish leader or pastor would consciously

ignore either the past or the future. But this is often the situation a pastor finds himself in by the end of the planning process. The initial expectations and focus of the planning team have been deflected or never fully realized, resulting in a plan that is stilted to one view or the other, limited in its appraisal of the past or restrictive in its solutions for the future. How can one avoid a plan that is slave to the past? Or a plan that is too much pie in the sky? The solution is to build and nurture a team in such a way that the process will honor both the past and the future. This article will focus on key first steps of team building and team convening that will provide a safe venue to explore the past and a healthy environment to nurture the dreams of the future.

Successful Team Building.

Saint Paul encouraged the church at Ephesus to grow into a balanced, properly functioning "body."

" . . . living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love."

The term "body" may no longer be in vogue when describing an organization, but the importance of building a healthy, balanced "team" cannot be understated. In her article titled "Twelve Tips for Team Building," Susan M. Heathfield notes twelve areas that must be addressed in order to create effective, balanced teams. Borrowing from her terminology, several clear principles for effective team building in a parish setting emerge:

1. **Clear Expectations:** The pastor and parish leadership must communicate clearly the expectations they have for the team. Members must understand why the team was created and leaders must provide sufficient direction and support.



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2. *Context:* Team members must understand where their work fits into the total context of the mission and purpose of the parish.
3. *Commitment:* Team members must want to participate on the team. They must feel that their task is important. They must be excited about the opportunity and challenges that the process provides.
4. *Competence:* Team members must feel competent in the task. They must recognize that they have the knowledge, capability and skill to address the issues that the parish faces.
5. *Charter:* The team must be able to define and communicate its goals, delineate a timeline for action, and measure the outcomes of its work.
6. *Control:* The team must have enough freedom and empowerment to feel ownership and understand the boundaries of authority.
7. *Collaboration:* Are team members working together effectively? Team members must cooperate to accomplish the task of planning.
8. *Communication:* Are team members receiving the best information and feedback from their work? Team members must communicate outwardly to report progress to the congregation. Team members must also communicate inwardly as they receive feedback and evaluate their work.
9. *Creative Innovation:* The team must value creative thinking, unique solutions and new ideas. The pastor and team members should generate opportunities to stimulate new thinking and fresh perspectives.
10. *Consequences:* Team members must feel responsible and accountable for the achievements and set-backs of the team. Fear of reprisal and finger-pointing must be minimized, and team members must see the impact of their work.
11. *Coordination:* Is the work of the team coordinated within the larger framework of the parish mission and purpose? Team members must feel that their efforts are inclusive, not exclusive. All aspects of parish life must be addressed in the planning process.
12. *Cultural Change:* The team and the parish must be willing to accept the outcome of the process. Even before the process begins, the parish and the team must be willing to make significant, cultural changes if the plan warrants such changes.

These twelve tips can assist pastors and parish leaders as they seek to create an environment that will enable healthy strategic planning. Other suggestions for effective team building and mentoring might include:

- Pastors should set expectations from the very first, starting from the enlistment of the team.
- Parishioners need to see a commitment of time and effort from the pastor first. Remember, you cannot expect a commitment of time and effort unless you are willing to give yourself first.
- Pastors must be bold in their leadership into a new future, and absolutely candid in their review of the past. It is too easy to be timid about the future or critical of the past. Strategic planning requires that the pastor foster and model a balanced view of both the past and the future of the parish.
- Group dynamics should foster mutual respect in the midst of diverse opinions. Members of the team must be constructively critical throughout the process, examining and questioning even the most time-honored assumptions of the parish. But such criticism must be tempered, never harsh or demeaning.
- There can be no fear of reprisal or ridicule for differing views. The choice of words is important, especially in early brainstorming sessions. The pastor should foster language that does not elicit moral judgments, but



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fosters mutual respect. For example, one should avoid labeling a viewpoint as a “wrong” or “bad” idea. Rather, the pastor can gently point out that an idea may be inappropriate or not fitting for the parish plan at this time.

- The pastor should take the lead in the visioning process: he must start with his own vision for the future.

Unceasing In Prayer.

Successful strategic planning is a difficult task. And the task sometimes seems almost impossible within the Church. In a recent planning session, a Catholic businessman observed:

This is really hard. If an old franchise in my business suddenly found itself in a failing community, we would close the franchise down and move it. But we can't just close down a church because the community this parish finds itself in has changed. God demands that we be present for that community as well. We can't leave just because it is now difficult or expensive to fulfill the mission of Christ.

So planning for the church is often tough. Decisions are not always made according to strict “business principles.” Our God demands that the spiritual dimension of life, the needs of the poor and marginalized, and the betterment of society be considered in our planning. And sometimes finding a solution seems almost impossible. But it is not impossible. The Catechism reminds us that “we live as we pray:”

Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort. The great figures of prayer of the Old Covenant before Christ, as well as the Mother of God, the saints, and he himself, all teach us this: prayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God. We pray as we live, because we live as we pray. If we do not want to

act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name. The “spiritual battle” of the Christian's new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer. (CCC, 2725).

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of nurturing and building a team is this: pastors must establish an atmosphere of prayer, servanthood, and humility from the beginning of the planning process. In his final words, Moses reminds the children of God, “. . . you shall seek the Lord, your God; and you shall indeed find him when you search after him with your whole heart and your whole soul” (Deuteronomy 4:29). It would be unwise to begin such a worthy, Christian endeavor without an overt acknowledgement that God is in control, and that we must seek His guidance in all we do. And since human beings are prone to forget the goodness of God, every step of the way must reinforce the spiritual life by constantly challenging the team in the practice of these spiritual disciplines.

Many pastors will seek professional counsel from a firm that offers strategic planning. When seeking outside counsel, the pastor should look first for a consulting firm that can provide spiritual resources as well as sound, practical counsel. Even though a planner may be successful in the “real world,” the lack of a spiritual focus may result in a technically correct but spiritually dry and dead strategic plan.

But even without professional counsel, there are many ways in which a pastor can shepherd the spiritual life while building up the team. A retreat for leadership may be a wise investment of time at the beginning or mid-point of the process. Encouraging a team of parishioners to pray for the planning team is another practice that honors God and builds spiritual unity in the parish. The pastor may choose to celebrate Mass with intentions for the team or the process. The pastor may also encourage team members to grow in their own spiritual lives by providing helpful devotionals or prayer books for the team. Some pastors may choose to



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purchase an annual subscription to *Magnificat* for each team member, encouraging them to join him in the daily devotions that are provided each month. A pastor might seek other suggestions on nurturing the spiritual life of the team from his spiritual director or another pastor who has been in the process. But by all means, the pastor must never cease nurturing the spiritual aspect of team building.

In conclusion, a successful strategic plan starts with a healthy, well-informed, balanced planning team. Enlist the best

team members you can find, nurture and build them up in an atmosphere that will encourage success, and earnestly seek God throughout the planning process, trusting Him to guide and lead:

“Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him.” (Matthew 7: 9-11).