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MAKING YOUR WAVE

Strategic planning isn't enough to ride out a storm

By Irwin Rubin

At the peak of his career as chief executive officer of **General Electric**, Jack Welch was asked what it was about GE's strategic planning process that allowed the company to be so successful. The essence of his response was that in these times of rapid change and uncertainty, "predicting was less important than reacting." Let's explore this apparently simple notion.

All strategic planning models are based on the same fundamental premise: Setting a plan for the future is the best way to manage uncertainty. The two key questions being addressed by strategic planning, therefore, are: "What will the future bring?" and "How can we best position ourselves to make the most of the opportunities it presents?" These questions are not unlike the ones accomplished surfers ask themselves as they sit on their boards looking out at the ocean, getting ready for the next set of waves building on the horizon.

But suppose these two questions were re-framed to read: "What do we want the future to bring us?" and "How can we be proactive in creating our own future?" Or, in the surfing analogy, "What can we do to make our own waves?"

Although a typical strategic plan is subject to periodic revisions, once set, it becomes the script an organization strives to follow strictly. People are measured by their ability to act out their parts, the closer to the letter the better.

So new, truly innovative ideas, which are central to continuously proactive strategic thinking, are often viewed as problems in a traditionally reactive strategic planning processes. In proactive plans, "making waves" is the key to success; while in reactive plans, "waves" are seen as diversions.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter made a similar point in the Winter 2002 MIT Sloan Management Review. The key to staying ahead of your competition, she argues, is to adopt improvisational theater as a metaphor for organizational planning. "Improvisational" does not mean random. It does mean having a clear, agreed-upon theme -- or, in the case of an organization, a simple value-driven mission -- and a set of attitudes and skills antithetical to those in fully scripted situations.

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Take one critical example. Rather than relying solely on clearly written job descriptions, senior executives engaged in improvisational planning must be willing to walk together into unfamiliar territory [referred to in an earlier article in this series, "Leadership in Times of Uncertainty," as "map-making."]

This requires essential skills of improvisational, proactive planning leaders such as higher levels of trust, open communication, mutual confidence, and an ability to read and react quickly to subtle cues. Like a championship basketball team, to know, through extensive practice, where each person is likely to be "coming from."

This latter point about "extensive practice" is particularly vital. To an audience -- an organizations' customers and clients -- a well-delivered improvisational performance is indistinguishable from a well-delivered, highly scripted one. In both cases, the audience presumes extensive rehearsals. In the case of implementing a well-formulated strategic plan, team development -- if it occurs at all -- will look more like football teams' practice sessions, which are focused on pre-determined content: the strategic plan.

In implementing an improvisational plan, players act more like a basketball team, which spends considerably more time working together on the process of how they handle emerging and evolving situations.

If your organization has to succeed on a highly unpredictable stage, developing these improvisational interpersonal and thinking skills are more than a luxury. They will determine whether you will successfully ride the next big wave or be swamped by it.

Irwin Rubin is a Honolulu-based author and president of Temenos Inc., which specializes in executive leadership development and behavioral coaching, communication skill building training, and large system culture change. His column appears twice a month in the Honolulu Star Bulletin. Send questions and column suggestions to temenos@lava.net or visit temenosinc.com.

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[ON TECHNOLOGY]

**Do your homework
before choosing**

cable or DSL

SECOND OF TWO PARTS

By John Agsalud

One of the biggest issues concerning broadband technologies is its ability to sustain consistent, stable data rates. The truth is, bandwidth for both DSL and cable can vary according to local traffic and time of day.

As a metaphor, think about the urban legend where everyone flushes their toilet simultaneously during a Super Bowl commercial, causing the sewer system to back up. In short, speed varies according to the demands put on the system. If your neighbors are hogging the system by sending huge files, it may slow your service to a crawl.

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DSL is generally more consistent but can also be affected by traffic inside the ISP's network.

That said, you can often get terrific bang for the buck with cable. I've found for example that, at times, ordinary residential cable modem service (priced at \$45 a month) can achieve upwards of 3 megabit speeds downstream, which blows away all but the highest priced DSL services.

Then there's the issue of security. The nature of "always-on" cable and DSL connections means that protecting yourself against potential hackers is a must.

This can be most easily addressed by purchasing a firewall/router that can be obtained for around \$100 at just about any computer store in town.

If you only have a single PC connected, then you might not need such a device, but you will need to employ some basic safeguards, such as making sure your hard drive is not shared, and that you have some type of anti-virus software loaded.

Essentially both cable modem and DSL providers offer similar infrastructure. However, there are some differences when it comes to services offered by various local ISPs. If you travel to the mainland or overseas on a regular basis, you're going to want dial-up connections to check your mail. Some local ISPs (such as LavaNet) don't offer mainland dial-up where others, such as Oceanic Time Warner (RoadRunner), Hawaii Online and Verizon do offer this type of access. Pixi.com has the advantage of offering both mainland and international dial-up, which is very handy for those

traveling to Asia or Europe.

All ISPs, of course, tout their high quality of service, particularly when comparing themselves to the phone company.

Service can't be underestimated. When your system is down and you need help, it's vital to know that your ISP will be there.

How do you choose the provider best for you? Support can essentially be divided into two categories -- "local" and "mainland." If you call Verizon's help desk you're always going to end up on the mainland. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but for obvious reasons I believe most Hawaii companies prefer local tech support people.

Local ISPs offer local tech support during Hawaii business hours and Oceanic Time Warner offers 24/7 support that is split between the mainland and Hawaii.

In doing research for this story, I've found local tech support, particularly with LavaNet and Oceanic Time Warner to be excellent. The quality of Oceanic Time Warner's mainland tech support could be improved. On a recent trip to San Francisco we needed help with a simple question about dial-up services and we sought assistance from Roadrunner's "Business Class" tech support desk.

Three calls were made after hours and were routed to a help desk in Toronto. No one there was capable of solving the problem nor could they offer a phone number for someone who might be able to help. It was only the next day, when the Hawaii crew was working, were we able to get the issue resolved in a matter of minutes.

If you work out of your home and already have a cable TV connection that you're happy with, the next logical step is to go the Oceanic Time Warner route. If you're at an office, you will have to make a determination as to whether either cable or DSL is available. If you're in an area where both DSL and cable are available, carefully weigh your needs.

Are you going to want a lot of handholding from tech support? Are you going to set up a LAN or a server? Are you going to need dial-up service on a regular basis from the mainland or overseas? Are you super price conscious?

Sometimes it's better to pay a bit more for a company that has excellent service. If you're interested in DSL it's always good to question friends or associates and see who they work with. If you're a small to medium-sized business and are not able to set up a high-speed connection by yourself, find yourself an IT guru. It will cost a few bucks but is well worth it.

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integration, and consulting firm. He can be reached at jagsalud@isdi-hi.com or by calling 944 8742.

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