



The “Best Laid” Plans...

When I saw that the editorial theme for this month's *Alert!* was “Planning,” I chuckled. Planning has always been an instinctual part of my make-up. As a college undergraduate, I began the practice of using a “Week-at-a-Glance” planning calendar, scheduling every nuance from class schedules, to extra-curricular activities to social obligations...I even got down to scheduling time to call home or listen to music, when things got really hectic. In graduate school, I learned about PERT-CPM charts, Michael Porter and all of the formalized tools that went into “Strategic Planning” at some of the world's largest corporations. To this day, I still use the latest electronic AND hard copy versions of the old “Week-at-a-Glance.”


Those who've seen the Time Management and Stress Reduction seminar that Ed Sugar and I have presented to numerous MRA chapters, may remember the slide that shows my handwritten, but highly effective “priority list,” built off a variation of the old “Franklin Planner” system (“A,” “B” and “C” graded priorities) that I still use, to this day.

I'm not embarrassed to admit that in the fourth of my non-workplace jobs (the others being MRA President, father and husband) as a little league baseball manager, I chart out my fielding rotations for every inning, before the start of the game, including multiple scenarios based on various situations like pitch counts. I admit that I'm a planning geek, and I'm proud of it. Every December, I take a personal inventory of my own life and career plan, formally summarizing the past year's accomplishments and shortcomings; looking back at the previous year's plan and my goals for the coming year. Those who know me well, understand 2008 was a challenging, yet rewarding, year for me both professionally and personally. But I move into 2009 with the comfort that my incessant planning has yielded a direction that is consistent with the plans that came before it, and one that I feel quite comfortable with.

Of course, the tumultuous economic events of the past several months have certainly reminded all of us that even the most well considered plans need to be dynamic and flexible. Much of what we witnessed in the financial markets is actually the result of a lack of planning. In other words, blind optimism, careless ignorance of the surrounding environment and pre-occupation with self-preservation lack a look at the big picture often render plans built around an often flawed constantly upward and linear growth curve. To be truly effective, a good strategic plan needs to allow for

careful situational monitoring coupled with the inclusion of various scenarios and resulting courses of action. When one of my starting pitchers hit two of the first three batters that he faced in a fall baseball game this past September (requiring his immediate removal from the game), I needed a back-up plan. Fortunately, I had one...in a young lefty pitcher named Eric Last.

The paradox of all of this, is that while I am a huge advocate of strategic planning and the development of scenario analysis, I also realize that one can “plan oneself into inertia.” It's an adjunct of the old “paralysis by analysis” adage. In our lives and business careers we need to find a balance between the critical need to plan and be prepared for anything, and the necessity in a dynamic and competitive business environment to take action.

So, in response to this “double edged” sword, I'm advocating that any good plan include elements of both rigorous preparation and willingness to take reasonable risks. Early next year, MRA President-Elect Kim Larson, myself and a select group of association leaders will embark upon the development of MRA's next strategic plan. This is a bold, complex and crucial initiative for the association and for each of you. To be successful, the plan will need to apply and factor macro and micro-economic conditions in our profession and the industries that we serve (virtually ALL of them!), the mission and goals of a diverse membership and a fiercely competitive business environment that could yield multiple scenarios. We'll need to be fiscally prudent, but also bold enough to assert ourselves and take action to continue MRA along the aggressive path to pre-eminence in the profession that we embarked upon several years ago. I encourage each of you to apply that same discipline to your own lives and careers, and of course, welcome your thinking along the same lines about the future direction of MRA. 

Jon Last is the Vice President, Corporate Marketing & Research at the Golf Digest Publications. He can be reached at jon.last@golfdigest.com.