Developing a Strategic Plan - Revisited

Thinking through and creating a strategic plan for your church can be one of the single most beneficial tasks any church leadership team can undertake. But it is also one of the most difficult and energy-consuming. In this volume of Defining Moments, Bill Hybels and Willow Creek Executive Pastor Greg Hawkins discuss the learnings and victories Willow achieved through the implementation of a strategic plan.

Outline

I. What are the benefits of having a strategic plan?
   a. God has blessed Willow through its strategic planning
   b. The church has grown and overcome challenges that it hadn’t before

II. The motivation to begin the process of strategic planning
   a. It began in 1992 when there were many things going on at the church and the WCA was starting out
   b. Other churches were looking to Willow for strategy and Willow was unsure about what direction to take next

III. The first 20 years at Willow Creek
   a. There was no formal strategic plan in place
   b. When the church first began, the whole plan was to lead people to Christ and grow them up
   c. As the years went by, the church grew and more sub-ministries came into play and the focus got unbalanced
   d. At the 20th anniversary, Bill realized that he didn’t have a plan for the future that was clear
   e. Consultants would come in and ask senior management to imagine 10 years ahead, and there was no energy in the room because they were so focused on what to do in the short term

IV. What to say to pastors who don’t have a multi-year plan for their church
   a. Call a time out now to get time to plan 2 – 5 years out
   b. Because you are inventing God’s money, hundreds of hours of staff and volunteer time, you must decide what God wants from the next 5 years
   c. Make sure the past is resolved – it is hard to think about the future when the past has not been processed

V. Developing a strategic plan
   a. Ask questions in a different way to get people to think beyond their present situations
   b. Ask people to make a declarative statement about where they can draw a line in the ground about what the future should look like
   c. Write out scenarios that are very different from each other to spark thinking and connect to people’s souls so they can discern what God might be saying
   d. It is vital to have energy in the room so people are passionate and creative in their thinking

VI. Establishing ownership of the strategic plan
   a. Everyone was a part of the process – not a top-down situation
   b. High input means high ownership
   c. The plan was built into staff job descriptions so they had to own it
   d. Board meetings changed, elder meetings changed

VII. Learnings along the way
   a. After the first year, Willow realized they needed to break down their goals into one-year increments so they could celebrate along the way
   b. They also required every ministry to create ministry plans based off of the goals for each year
   c. This kept all of the ministries on board with the same goals and heading in the same direction
   d. It gave staff a way to measure if they were succeeding or not in ministry
Before the plan, there was a federation of ministries doing their own thing, which ultimately would hinder the growth and development of the church.

VIII. Persevering through the difficulty of a strategic plan
   a. There isn’t an alternative – it’s unhealthy to have ministries who do not want input or leadership
   b. The ministries must work in unity – all parts working together like an orchestrated dance
   c. There are no Lone Rangers in church work

IX. Does a strategic plan stifle a visionary leader?
   a. Because the goals called for such a stretch, they did not stifle Bill at all
   b. There was so much to be done that he never felt boxed in to a narrow plan

X. Process vs. Plan
   a. When they went into it in 1996, there was one piece of paper with six goals
   b. They would change almost monthly in terms of activities to support those objectives
   c. There was constant learning and changing

XI. The difficult parts of Willow’s strategic plan
   a. Difficult conversations with long-term staff who didn’t buy in
   b. Having to let some staff go who didn’t work towards their goals
   c. The results on the other side are by far worth the pain of difficult decisions and conversations during the process

XII. Some experiments that didn’t work out
   a. Some goals were too big – there was too much pressure at times
   b. There were mixed messages to the staff
   c. Should not have pushed all six goals at once – there are seasons for certain goals

XIII. What Willow did well
   a. When some goals were not being met, people started rethinking things the way they had when the church first began
   b. Through the changes and difficulties, it inspired better thinking and creativity
   c. Ministries began to learn from each other and use those learnings to get better results

XIV. Goal champions
   a. For each of the six goals, Willow made a person the voice to senior leadership and ministry leadership to give direction to it
   b. The six champions would attend monthly management team meetings and would report on their particular goal

XV. The plan is a tool
   a. Some of the things Willow ended up engaged in were not originally part of the plan
   b. The plan is not God – the plan is a tool to be used, but there must be openness to the Spirit moving and prompting a change of direction or focus
   c. Chapter Two, Willow’s capital campaign, worked well because everyone was already used to working together effectively and efficiently

XVI. Willow’s new strategic plan
   a. Willow has been thinking about it for some time
   b. It takes discipline to do the work to create a new plan when the old one is almost finished
   c. It is a very very hard process

XVII. Leadership lessons
   a. The future of the church rests primarily in the hands of its leaders
   b. There are no shortcuts
   c. Lead at a higher level
Process Questions

1. Of all the ideas you heard, which one stuck out to you the most as you think about your church’s strategic plan (or lack thereof)? Write it below and share it with your group or team.

2. What is your church’s strategic plan right now? Below, write down the main points of your plan (if you have one). If you do not have a plan or do not know the points of the plan, write down the names of the people who should be a part of the discussion to create one.
3. For five minutes, in the space below, write out what you want your church to look like in five, ten and twenty years. What does the church look like? Who is coming? What is the impact of your church? Brainstorm ideas and then share them with others in your group or on your team.

My church in five years will...

My church in ten years will...

My church in twenty years will...
4. Creating a strategic plan is not easy work, but according to Bill and his team, it is absolutely worth the time and pain. What is one action step you will take to either begin to create a strategic plan, or to refine the one you have? Write it below and share it with someone else who will hold you accountable to this goal.