



TRENTON HIGHTOWER

Curriculum vitae

As Frederick Community College's associate vice president for customized training, Trenton Hightower oversees the training needs of more than 5,000 employees at 75 area companies. Mr. Hightower is a board member for the National Council for Continuing Education and Training. With a bachelor's in communications and public relations, and a master's in administration of higher education, Mr. Hightower still maintains his best education was basic training at Fort Benning, Ga., home of the Army's Infantry Branch.

Commando strategic planning

By TRENTON HIGHTOWER

In case you were distracted during the 1990s and missed their debut, three words were introduced into the business vernacular: Vision. Mission. Values.

Vision, we were told, means what you aspire to be, while your mission is comprised of the steps you'll take to get there. Your goals, we learned, advance your mission.

Identifying our company's vision, mission and values became a hot topic.

Businesses invested in retreats that lasted as many as five days. Each day was filled with hours of discussion and exercises aimed at identifying the big three: Vision. Mission. Values. It was a procedure that ultimately yielded results — but at what cost in time, money and energy?

Don't get me wrong. These three things — vision, mission and values — are the bedrock of every business, every company, every organization. Building a vision and mission statement as a team is important. Setting goals is crucial. Taking the time to define these as a team makes all the sense in the world.

My suggestion, however, is that you tackle strategic planning in a way that can abbreviate the process considerably without sacrificing the outcome. When you can keep the group focused and provide appropriate direction, you can

arrive at consensus in hours rather than days.

Start the process by doing your own analysis. After all, as the leader of the group, you are the one who will ultimately be accountable for its success or failure. Therefore, it behooves you to give the matter some thought before you take it to the group.

Where to begin? Consider your own mini-SWOT analysis; SWOT being strength, weaknesses, opportunities, threats.

What are your strengths and weaknesses as a group, team or organization? What opportunities exist for you in the marketplace to leverage the best you have to offer? And, finally, what are the threats you must get around to achieve your full potential?

Spend some time reflecting on those four areas, and you will be better prepared to facilitate a group strategic planning session.

To further guide you in the strategic planning process, try listing all the functions of your organization: sales, marketing, service, production, staff development, quality assurance, and the like.

Using a scale of 1-5, rate each of the areas. Your goal is to see balance across the board. For example, excelling in sales when the quality assurance rating

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is low is going to result in dissatisfied customers. Use this mini-exercise to hone in on areas that need to be addressed.

While you don't want to do your strategic planning in a vacuum, taking the time to formulate some

thoughts and ideas in advance of the group session makes sense.

Arrive at some conclusions about where you'd like your team to go, and use them as a place to start.

Be flexible. Get team buy-in. Strive for consensus, but don't be afraid to guide your team in a winning direction.