



Plan your work like you plan your vacation

Beginning with the destination in mind leads to success.

By Tim Smith

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Improving your business in 2005 is just like planning a vacation.

It's true. Think back to the last great getaway you planned.

Before you started making flight arrangements or booking hotels, you decided on a specific locale. In fact, you probably had the destination in mind long before you began coordinating details – at the least, you had a vision of what you wanted to do or see.

It's tough to plan a trip if your only definition is that it be “fun.” Or “far away.” While those are indeed interesting qualities, they are too vague to give you any direction. Without proper guidance, your travel agent may have you skiing in Switzerland when you really wanted to be sunning in San Juan.

That same approach holds true for most business efforts. As you think about improving your company's results in 2005, **begin with the end in mind.** Where do you want to go?

Get clear – gain clarity

Many times I hear from clients who are frustrated over aspects of their operations, or at the level of commitment from employees. They want customer service to “improve.” Or manufacturing to be “better.”

Sometimes, they want their company to be an “industry leader” but are disappointed that it hasn't happened yet. And sometimes, they just want “things to run more smoothly.”

Like a vacationer who wants to go somewhere far away, they aren't defining their goals with enough specificity to make them achievable. What does “better” look like? How will we know if we're an “industry leader?” What does “smoothly” really mean?

And how can employees show motivation or commitment to a goal if they don't really understand what's expected of them, or what they should be working to achieve?

Managers often don't get what they want because they haven't clearly defined what the end result looks like. Doing so makes all the difference.

It's what I call “gaining clarity.”

Think destination!

Want business success?
Begin with the end in mind and
follow these steps:



1. Visualize and describe the result you want
2. Communicate the picture of success to your team
3. Create specific targets that support your vision
4. Finally – Build in accountability. Define who will do what, and by when.

Take the next steps

In other words, it's not enough to simply have a goal, or even to communicate that goal.

You have to take the next steps – visualize the end result, and define what success looks like.

Gaining clarity means setting specific qualitative and quantitative measures to define what you want to achieve. The objective is to make certain that success is measurable.

In other words, “better” might mean reducing manufacturing defects to less than 3 percent. “Improvement in customer service” might mean obtaining greater than 95 percent satisfaction ratings on annual surveys, or perhaps retaining 100 percent of all existing accounts. And so on.

See the difference? One goal – being better or improved – is obtuse, easily dismissed or misunderstood. The other is specific and focused, and enables everyone to clearly grasp what is expected and track whether it is being achieved.

Defining that level of detail creates buy-in from management and employees, as others understand your goals more accurately. It keeps your team focused and working together. And it drives actions that lead to the desired target.

The apex of planning for success

Let’s look at an example of how the “begin with the end in mind” style of planning can lead to success.

Apex Industries has a problem with its receivables. Even the company’s best customers pay slowly, and cash flow is an issue.

Apex’s management team has talked for some time about getting “better at managing receivables,” but that’s as far as things get. Something else always takes priority, and the employees in accounting and customer service typically think that receivables are someone else’s job.

But when planning for next year, Apex’s management team “gains clarity” – with the help of The Plaid Group, of course. Together, they decide to put some specific measures in place – and accountability, too.

1. **The team first visualizes its desired end result.** The vision is simple: Apex will no longer have cash flow issues because existing customers will pay promptly. And credit worthiness of new customers will be sufficiently evaluated prior to the start of work to ensure that they are financially sound and responsible.
2. **Next, the team defines clear targets for its vision.** In year one, 80 percent of all receivables will be paid within 30 days, 95 percent will be paid within 60 days, and 99 percent within 90 days. This will be accomplished without alienating any existing customers. Finally, no work for any new clients will begin without sufficient background checks and reporting.
3. **Now, the team builds in accountability.** All the steps in the process are spelled out in detail, including:
 - ✓ Receivables clerks will be responsible for contacting customer accounts payable

departments after 31 calendar days, if payment is not received;

- ✓ Additionally, at the 32-day mark, the assigned customer service rep will contact the customer directly to arrange payment;
- ✓ All clerks and reps will undergo training prior to the start of activities to ensure that they are communicating with customers in a positive, productive manner; and
- ✓ Sales teams will be responsible for explaining the company’s credit policies and terms to new customers, and for securing all background information on new customers, with approval of credit for new clients coming from the Credit and Collections Manager.

4. **Finally, the team plans its communications process.**

It’s critical to make sure that employees understand the desired end result, the measurements used to track progress, and the business rationale behind the effort. To ensure this, the management team plans meetings with affected departments. The HR group will follow up with detailed policies as well as information about the training classes. Each month, the Accounting department will produce a report showing progress toward the goals that will be distributed via e-mail. Finally, the team agrees that a follow-up employee meeting at the 90-day mark will help strengthen the company’s commitment.

With a strong vision and measurable goals, the Apex team found that developing the tactics and efforts was simple. And now that the accounting and customer service departments understand what is expected of them, they can begin to develop and tweak the individual tasks or efforts that will help them achieve that goal. That builds acceptance and buy-in, too.

Think destination

To help your business achieve greater success in 2005, plan for success like you would for your vacation. Begin with the end in mind by visualizing the destination first, and follow up with specific measures that can be communicated and tracked.

The results will be more beautiful than a Caribbean sunset ... or fresh snow on a black diamond run. Whichever you prefer!

More Information? If you’d like to learn more about developing specific, measurable plans for enhancing success in your organization, please send an E-mail to tim@plaidgroup.com, visit our web site at www.plaidgroup.com, or call us at 713-627-3569. The Plaid Group publishes a free bimonthly e-mail newsletter filled with insights and ideas you can use to enhance your company’s operational performance, spur growth and increase bottom-line profits. To subscribe, change your e-mail address or unsubscribe, please visit www.plaidgroup.com/newsletters_subscribe.asp.

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