

Exploring the Three Questions of Strategy

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This week, about a dozen professional coaches and I spoke with Dr. Laurence Lyons, the most highly regarded executive coach in Great Britain (www.lslyons.com). To prepare for the conversation, I read his contributions to *Coaching for Leadership*, a collection of essays by respected executive coaches from around the world.

Among his comments, Dr. Lyons' spent a few moments addressing the three questions of strategy:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be at some specific future time?
- How do we get there?

Consultants and coaches keep these three questions in mind as they serve their clients. If you've not given thought to these questions recently in your organization, I invite you to do so.

My appreciation for these three aspects of organizational planning were enhanced a few days later as I spoke with a colleague named James "Rip" Rainey. Rip is a pilot, and he related the questions to filing a flight plan with the air traffic controllers.

Where are we now? A pilot starts the flight plan by identifying the airport where the takeoff will occur.

Identifying where your organization is at any point in time is likely not as easy. Most of us believe we can describe "current state" easily, but accuracy is often quite difficult to achieve.

A skilled individual can conduct an organizational assessment by interviewing a cross-section of the employees. I prefer to utilize questions drawn from the criteria for the National Quality Award (www.quality.nist.gov). This allows the leaders to compare their organization against a legitimate definition of excellence. Typically, the results of an assessment include some significant surprises.

Where do we want the organization to be at some specified time in the future? The pilot includes in the flight plan a destination airport and an estimated time of arrival.

An amazing number of leaders have a difficult time expressing their desired organizational future state. One of your primary jobs as a leader is to set your organization's direction and articulate a vision of "what could be."

Your colleagues will engage their creativity and power to move forward into the future only to the extent they can imagine the improved state that will exist when they arrive there! Your job as leader is to inspire their imaginations.

How do we move our organization toward that future state? The pilot's flight plan includes the anticipated altitude, speed, and direction. (Not every flight is a straight line—weather and restricted air space may require the trip to be composed of two or more segments).

Organizationally, the strategic planning process identifies behavioral initiatives that will move the organization toward its vision of "what could be." Deploying and gaining alignment to these initiatives is another of the leader's responsibilities.

Have you recently considered these three questions for your organization? Maybe this article will stimulate you to evaluate your organization's current health and the clarity of its future direction.

Rarely does a pilot's flight plan last longer than a few hours. Your organizational plan will hopefully last much longer! The realities of leading an organization in today's world require that you continuously reevaluate where you are, where you are headed, and how your organization will move in that direction.

Dr. Laurence Lyons suggested that one of the functions of a good coach is to help leaders evaluate these three questions for their organizations.

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