

▶ MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK



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Years ago, a concept embedded itself into my thinking. It has been a constant reference point for me ever since. This concept has helped me to understand how life itself works.

The central idea within this concept is that life is ever changing. This is so because the environment within which life exists is constantly changing. Life must adapt as it seeks to constantly maintain a healthful balance with its environment in order to survive. If life doesn't adapt, it goes into stress (or "disease" as one of my favorite philosophers, Rene DuBois, liked to say). Life perishes if it can't come into balance or homeostasis within its environment.

These ideas apply with the same certainty to our institutions since they are devised and operated by us—living beings. Institutions must also continually adjust to their environment in order to survive. Anyone who thinks their business can operate apart from its environment flirts with danger. You can think of the demise of as many companies as I can whose leaders didn't make the necessary adjustments when their environments changed.

I'm from the Detroit area. I was recently there for a visit. Michigan, as most people know, is in many respects Ground Zero for the Great Recession. The impact of the automobile industry's cataclysmic collapse is visible everywhere. It just didn't have to be. When the world was changing, the city and the industry fiddled while white flight imploded Detroit and Japanese automakers took over the California market for automobiles. The failure to respond properly

The Quest to Be Relevant and the Results of Our Efforts

Part 1 — The Background to Why Relevance is the Central Driver to the NEHA Story

*...life doesn't
get planned;
it emerges.*

(or respond at all) to these trends sowed the seeds for the sad story playing out today in my home area.

No one and no institution escapes the gravitational field of this little concept. It is absolute.

And so, I accept this concept and use it daily in both my personal and work life. For example, this concept fuels my deeply held belief that change, adjustment, adaptation, flexibility, and innovation will increasingly come to define the healthiest among our institutions in this increasingly fast-paced world. Those institutions built to have the agility to turn on a dime will succeed. Those institutions, however, bogged down by lumbering decision-making bureaucracies and slow to change court ruin.

In the business world, this idea of adapting to trends and developments can also be stated in another way. I think that successful adaptation is simply the means by which an organization retains its relevance. In a free market economy such as ours, relevance is the Holy Grail for success. The day an organization loses its relevance is the day that that organization becomes obsolete. If you are not adapting to changing consumer (or citizen) needs, you are becoming irrelevant and ... unnecessary.

I hope that these observations are fairly self-evident. Yet it amazes me to see so many organizations continue to practice the classical and mechanistic version of strategic planning that strait jackets them into rigid marches into the future with minds hypnotized by a handful of fuzzy goals. This way of thinking and acting presumes that the future can be predicted and that trends and serendipity are immaterial distractions. The feel-good sensations that abound when the organization's top minds plot out goals and lock in resources to achieve them accentuates the "high" that makes this approach feel like a fulfilling religious experience.

I like to ask my friends who buy into the religion of strategic planning, "How many of you are doing today what you thought you would be doing even a year ago?" Funny thing. After years of asking, I have yet to hear one person say "Me!"

Henry Mintzberg, in his seminal book *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*, eloquently and forcefully argued that life doesn't get planned; it emerges. I would add that it emerges in (or, in evolutionary terms, "selects for") patterns and schemes that reflect successful adaptations to its environment.

In organizations like ours, I dare say that success and even survival hinge on our ability to be adaptive and remain relevant. The commitment to relevance is honored when an organization looks daily at its environment to see where new trends or circumstances are emerging that hold meaning for the organization. A growing thread within the strategic planning literature talks about the importance

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of the “strategic conversation,” which is a new term being used for the idea of constantly being engaged with one’s environment. (Interestingly enough, the term strategic plan is increasingly being abandoned.)

As I have previously explained, in determining how best to steer the good ship NEHA into the future, the leadership of our association traded in long ago classical strategic planning for the much more flexible approach of setting strategic directions. This means that we lift the messages that we most need to heed from the trends and circumstances impacting environmental health. We then adjust our sails and try to create the kinds of products and services that correspond to the needs of our members, stakeholders, and communities.

Following general directions is a lot less binding than locking in on some goal. Thus as the winds that buffet our profession change, so too do we. The point on our compass that we continually steer towards is the direction where relevance is found.

I must acknowledge that some people mistake this commitment to relevance as a subversion of our identity to wanton opportunism. This misguided conclusion conveys a gross misunderstanding of what identity is. Identity is a matter of values, not goals or destinies. For example, years ago, the American people agreed to support a mission to the moon (a goal or destiny). But the values that defined the American public at that time involved an embrace of future possibilities and a confidence that America was capable of leading the world into those new possibilities and frontiers. Going to the moon was an expression of these values, distinct from the actual values themselves.

NEHA, too, has values and hence an identity. One of our values involves a fiery determination to retain our relevance—both to the cause of environmental health as well as to the people who practice it. In a very real sense, our commitment to relevance is a strong statement that we are willing to zigzag in funny ways, because underneath it all, our commitment to be there for you is absolute.

In my next column, PART II, I will provide details about some of the trends and circumstances that have caught our attention. I will also document specific actions that we are taking to keep our product line—and the way we do business—relevant. 🐛

Jefferson E. Fatsian

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