

Planning: The What and the How

Fred Nickols

Planning: The What

To plan is to form a set of intentions. It's as simple as that.

One set of intentions relates to results, to the outcomes to be obtained. Another set of intentions relates to the actions through which the intended outcomes will be achieved. A third set of intentions relates to resources, to the means available for effecting the intended actions and thereby realizing the intended results.

Outcomes, Actions and Resources (OAR) – these are the main elements of planning (see Figure 1). These three elements come into play in two basic ways: (1) desired outcomes are specified and then analyzed to determine the actions necessary to achieve them; these actions are in turn analyzed to determine the resources required to carry them out; and, (2) resources and actions are configured into an integrated course of action, replete with time lines, deliverables, controls and accountabilities; resources are obtained and allocated, along with responsibilities; and the plan is then carried out, which includes doing what has been planned, monitoring progress and adapting to circumstances actually encountered. There is, then, an initial “getting ready” phase to planning as well as an ongoing “doing” phase. A common mistake is to separate them, to divorce planning from doing. The two are inseparable.

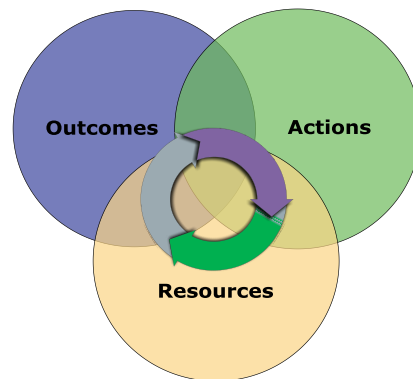


Figure 1 – The OAR Model

In terms of procedural steps or a process to be followed, consider Figure 2 below:

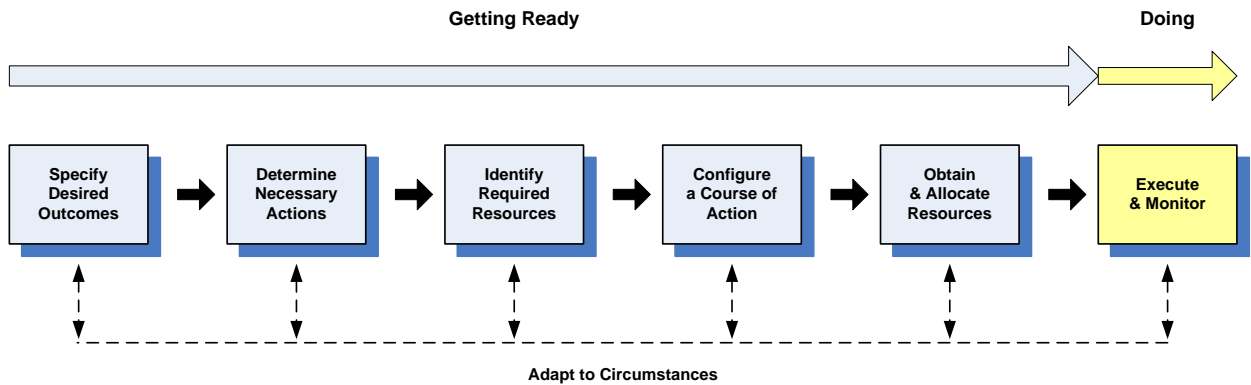


Figure 2 - The Planning & Doing Process

All but two steps in Figure 2 pertain to getting ready; the last two concern themselves with actually taking action. It would be easy to conclude from the diagram that the majority of effort in a particular planning endeavor goes into the getting ready phase. That would be a mistake. It is often the case that carrying out a plan covers weeks, months or even years and the time spent in the initial preparation phase can be far shorter. Conversely, planning a two-day event might consume weeks or months. The length of the arrows in Figure 2 does not signify time.

Conceptually, then, planning is very simple. As a practical matter, it often proves extremely difficult and taxes even the most ingenious and competent among us. Why? For several reasons, chief among them the following:

- First off, there is contention. People have different views and different values, which is to say there can be disagreement regarding the outcomes to be achieved and the actions that are deemed necessary to achieve them. Moreover, there is perhaps even more intense contention when it comes to the allocation of resources and responsibilities. In short, planning is often a hotly political process as much as it is a rational, analytical one.
- Second, there is the problem of prediction, complicated by the factor of change. A plan, as defined above, is a set of intentions. It is also a set of predictions; that is, a plan says essentially that if you do this, that will result. There are limits to our knowledge. Our best bets are often wrong. Another complicating matter is that plans rest on assumptions, stated and unstated. Even if the assumptions were correct at the outset (which isn't always the case), things change. Whatever the cause, assumptions often turn out to be wrong. And that brings us to a third issue: adaptation.
- Helmuth von Moltke's dictum that "No plan ever survives first contact with the enemy" is a pithy reminder that our actions take place in a world filled with other actors and factors, many of which are unforeseen and unanticipated. Hence, Carl von Clausewitz' statement that "The greatest enemy of a good plan is the dream of a perfect plan" should serve as cautionary guidance to all who engage in planning. Or, as Publius Syrus observed some 18 centuries earlier, "It is a bad plan that admits of no modification." Execution, then, is informed in part by intention and analysis, and in large measure by observation. The aim of monitoring is only partly to keep tabs on how things are going.

The real aim of monitoring is to identify circumstances that require adaptation and to adapt so as to maintain progress toward the objective. The tragedy of far too many plans is an almost pig-headed insistence on sticking to the plan, even when it is apparent that it is not working. Constancy of outcomes in a changed and changing world can only be achieved by varying one's actions in response to the situation at hand.

Having said what planning is we come now to the matter of how to do it.

Planning: The How

To get at how to plan is to ask and answer the following questions:

- How do you specify desired outcomes?
- How do you determine the actions necessary to achieve them?
- How do you identify the required resources?
- How do you configure a course of action?
- How do you obtain and allocate resources?
- How do you execute and monitor?
- How do you adapt to circumstances?

Some readers glancing through this list of "how to plan" items will shrug and think to themselves, "I know how to do that." Others will wonder why even ask such questions. And some will say, "Yes, I'd like to know more about that."

Spelling out detailed answers for each question above is well beyond the scope of this brief piece. Moreover, the skills involved are so fundamental to success in organizational settings that they have been known for a long time. Specifying outcomes, for example, can be a one-way, top-down declarative process or it can be an interactive process of discussion, clarification and negotiation. Determining the actions necessary to produce a particular outcome can be an intuitive, "seat of the pants" process based on an intimate grasp of the factors involved or it can be a rigorous, analytical undertaking. The same holds true for identifying the required resources. Configuring a course of action can also be largely intuitive or mainly analytical. Obtaining and allocating resources is almost sure to be hotly political and involve a great deal of persuading and negotiating. Executing and monitoring are a manager's stock in trade and adapting to the circumstances at hand is something we all do – even if we don't all do it equally well.

In the last analysis, several factors affect how you plan. One is the person leading the planning effort and that person's preferences and abilities. Pick that person carefully. Another is the client or customer for the effort. That person's demands and expectations will form restraints and constraints on the planning effort. Still another consists of the skills and abilities, including the mental models of the people who staff the effort. These, too, will shape it. Yet another is formed by the initial circumstances. Is this a crisis effort or is it one that takes a strategic, long-term view of matters? Is it a small endeavor or a massive undertaking? Does it have a short time horizon or a very long one? In other words, the only honest answer to the question of how to plan is this: "It depends." As the planning process outlined above suggests, planning is a configured activity, devised in response to the conditions at hand. It is not some prefigured routine to be carried out blindly.

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