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Strategic Planning for Heaven and Earth

R.J. PLANISEK with S.L. PLANISEK

Goal setting or strategic planning has been a major business priority during the past decade. Large U.S. corporations have been trying to find socially acceptable yet financially viable positions in the new global marketplace. Nearly all business courses, including the management information courses I teach, now contain a section on strategic planning. This semester, in an attempt to dramatize the importance of setting goals, I asked my students to respond to the following two statements.

1. Consider the concept "heaven" and what the concept means to you. Describe three characteristics of heaven as you see it.

2. Think about your epitaph. Describe three epitaph characteristics for which you wish to be remembered.

One purpose of the assignment was to get students to realize how difficult, yet important it is to set goals, especially the really significant goals in life, the "end" goals, which are difficult to articulate. An unexpected but valuable side benefit of this assignment was the discovery that a disparity exists between my goals as teacher and their goals as students. Since inter-personal conflicts most often arise between people with disparate goals, I realized that my teaching goals must be aligned with student goals for my teaching to become their learning.

I am sharing the results of the student responses so that other faculty might consider them and evaluate their interactions with their students. Perhaps my colleagues in other disciplines will ask the same questions of their students for a comparison. My results are tabulated and summarized into categories which are more convenient than scientific.

Heaven

Twenty percent of the students described heaven with physical characteristics describing a warm and bright place. It was white and dazzling bright but also "Dutch" clean and pleasant. A few students envisioned angels, but no one mentioned wanting to hear harps, as Mark

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Twain did in his *Letters From Earth*. While these descriptions might be useful in deciding what an ideal campus setting might be like, they more significantly suggest that students have given minimal thought to their personal idea of heaven.

Eighty percent of students described heaven as a place of social interactions. These students may have given more serious consideration to their destiny. The responses, however, fell into some very predictable patterns mirroring popular media topics. Heaven has:

- No psychological problems, no stress, no anxiety, is a happy place. 57%
- No social problems, a place of peace, no inhumanity. 25%
- No body problems, no disease, no discomfort. 18%
- Stimulation and challenge 1%

Escaping the psychological problems of stress and anxiety seemed to be the modal description of heaven. Heaven is a place where one has sufficient time to spend with loving family and friends. Heaven is also a very personal place, a place for “me,” since 74% of the people expect to find either psychological or physical bliss. The other 26% are more socially conscious and worry about broader conditions, particularly world peace and world hunger. Only one percent indicate that they want a challenging or stimulating environment, an exciting, adventurous place with lots of change.

From these results I have concluded that teachers are facing a formidable challenge. To the extent that we try to challenge and stimulate our students, we are driving them from their ideal of tranquillity. By creating a stimulating intellectual educational environment, we are in direct conflict with student goals of minimizing stress. Have we created a learning experience that has hurled so much so fast at students that they feel as though they are standing in a driving hail storm? Have we developed a student attitude that will cause them never to want to face the challenge of learning again? How can we nurture students to seek knowledge rather than avoid the anxiety it may produce?

**Epitaph**

I divided the responses to the epitaph descriptions into the four fields of study suggested by the Greek philosophers: the pursuit of truth and wisdom, the pursuit of power, the pursuit of goodness, and the pursuit of aesthetics.
The largest number of students wanted to be remembered as loving, caring, friendly, honest and considerate. Perhaps their death wish is that St. Peter will see them as angelic and deserving of the shiny bright heaven they seek.

Although power (and wealth) would seem to be predictable for business students only about a third chose it. Some students were blatantly specific:

"Owner of a Porsche 11 -twin turbo convertible--red with black interior"
"The only U.S. President that also was the heavy weight champion of the world"

But most expressed desire for power in their careers, with goals that would make the GVSU Board of Control proud:

"World-renowned lecturer on organization behavior"

"Politically correct" statements, seeking power cloaked in goodness, were also fashionable:

"Created something of value to leave behind to be remembered by"
"Was very wealthy and gave to others"
"Philanthropist"
"Worked hard to achieve goals (non-materialistically)"
"I want people to remember me as being an asset to them in some way"

Wisdom was the goal sought by very few students. Mastery of the arts was sought by even fewer. But then neither of these goals is usually associated with business persons, and these students validate the view that wisdom and art are not important to most business students. Moreover, the only interest in aesthetics was environmentally oriented:

"Loved nature, was very appreciative of the earth's gifts"

These business students want primarily to be remembered as good and secondarily as successful and powerful. Can the students' goal of being "good people" be utilized in the classroom? Can this student goal be
creatively combined with the new million dollar GVSU philanthropy grant? Challenging possibilities in this direction augur well. The liberal education goals of knowing truth and art are definitely not high priorities for these business students. After two years of general education, the business students are not internalizing the liberal arts goals. Perhaps we will have to re-think all of those general education requirements.

Gender Differences
The students fell into the male-dominated ratio of 2:1. Heaven looks fairly similar to both sexes, but their epitaphs differ. Twice as many male students as female students were interested in power. Females are pursuing goodness; they perceive themselves as angelic business persons by choosing goodness 24% more often than males. The old sexual stereotypes live on. But the undergrad sex differences were not quite as distinct as those of the older graduate students of whom the male MBAs were six times more likely to value power than the females! Maybe times are changing.

Thoughts
Articulating goals is difficult, but a focus on goals can be the precursor to sorting tasks into those worth addressing and those worth postponing. Since stress results from undertaking too many simultaneous responsibilities, explicit goal consideration may have therapeutic value by helping both students and faculty handle stress. It is unfortunate that we seldom discuss our goals in public and that there seems to be no time in the business curriculum to discuss goals as we rush to "cover" the course content.

As a result of this exercise I have several questions: How well do we, as individuals, understand our own motivations, beliefs and values? What role do these values play in influencing our lives? Do we use our values to influence our choice of career? Is there a need for personal and employer goals to match? What happens if the employer's goals change?

Some people are in charge of their lives: they know what their personal and professional goals are, and they are working toward achieving them. If personal and professional goals are congruent, people should feel good about themselves and about life.