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Preparing for the Unexpected

By Jeff Davidson

It seems that Chatham County, like every other county in the nation, is bracing for a weak economy for at least a year. Of course, this mass, self-fulfilled prophecy undoubtedly will come true if everybody thinks it will and acts like it will. Even if you're an optimist, how can you flourish when everyone else is committed to acting pessimistically? More important, how can you prepare for the unexpected when the unexpected has wide potential variation?

Scenario-Thinking

An effective way to prepare for the unexpected is to engage in scenario-thinking. What is scenario-thinking? Instead of trying to accurately pinpoint the future, which is about the most futile thing I can ponder, you give yourself some slack and envision several ways how a situation might unfold:

- * A best-case scenario.
- * A mid-case scenario.
- * A worst-case scenario.

Precisely determining which scenario will come to pass isn't necessary. By creating the vision of future possibilities, you're in a better position to act, given that any one of them could come to pass.

Suppose rumors are flying about budget cuts in your organization that will impact your progress on a project. Although you were promised x amount of money for the duration of the project, that promise may be in jeopardy. How do you creatively approach the prospect of having less funds than you pre-determined, in detail, you would need for on time, successful completion?

1. In the best-case scenario, there would be no budget cuts. Thus, your project would proceed according to plan, although you would probably stay on high alert.
2. In the mid-case scenario, there might be budget cuts, but they might not be severe. As you thoroughly review your project plan, you look for places where you can save here and there, crimp on this, scrounge on that, and make your way through.
3. In the worst-case scenario, there would be severe budget cuts that would dramatically hamper your ability to proceed, let alone succeed on time. In this case, you would consider a variety of options. You would
 - * look for ways to double up and triple up on activities
 - * shift team members to this assignment and that.
 - * review all alternative resources at your disposal.
 - * drop the less important tasks so as to not dissipate any precious resources devoted to completion of the more important tasks.
 - * meet with your team, several times, to make revisions in the game plan and to ensure that everybody knows their roles.
 - * meet with the higher-ups to review how you intend to proceed given the new restraints.
 - * get leaner and meaner, likely, in all aspects of project operations.

It would be a tough several weeks, but you would slug it out. Even though you still don't have word as to whether or not the budget cut is for real, you now have, at least, a mental blueprint of what will occur given the best-case, mid-case, or worst-case scenario. From that standpoint, you're better off than if you had not considered these possible outcomes.

In his book "The Art of the Longview", author Peter Schwartz observes that devising scenarios doesn't mean you have to determine how the future will unfold; rather, you consider what key questions will arise and how you will address them. He says, "Spinning scenarios is a highly sophisticated, singularly useful, and eminently practical way to think about the future."

You're not limited to devising the three scenarios I suggest. I choose three because it's simple, it's relatively fast, and, usually, one of them doesn't require that much work, the one that's closest to having things remain as you first planned for them. Depending on your responsibilities and what kind of projects you undertake, you might have reason to devise four, five, or six scenarios.

Irrespective of the number of scenarios you devise, it is useful to approach them in a cascading manner. In other words, one scenario is rather simplistic and close to the path you are already taking, and each succeeding one becomes a bit more of a challenge until the last one, which is the scenario in which you find yourself to be in a dire state. It's not a lot of fun to contemplate that one, but invariably, that one yields the greatest number of insights and contingencies. Contemplate the worst-case scenario can help you to be better prepared in the event of any scenario.

Jeff Davidson is a work-life balance expert for our time-pressed workforce. He wrote "Breathing Space" and the "60 Second Self-Starter." Visit www.BreathingSpace.com or call 800.735.1994.