

Ready, Aim, Fire

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By Peter McGinn

Health care leaders who want results must assess the situation, figure out a target, and then implement a plan.



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When I was a consultant, one of my clients, a fashion retailer, sneered at his competitors, saying: “They are so stodgy. They believe in ‘ready, aim, fire.’ But in our industry, it is actually: ‘fire, ready, aim,’ or maybe: ‘fire, fire, aim.’”

For his business, which was trendy and fast moving, I think he was correct. In health care, however, “ready, aim, fire” is not stodgy. It is both efficient and sensible. Health care is a high-stakes business without excess resources. We need to make sure our initiatives are well-conceived and executed.

Focus on the Goal

Steven Covey of 7 Habits fame said one of the key practices of success is to “begin with the end in mind.” That is, know where you intend to go when you first embark on your journey. Do not take action merely for the sake of movement. As Covey teaches, if you get someplace very efficiently, but it is the wrong place, your efficiency is an illusion.

This sounds so simple, but health care management teams and boards mistake action for progress much too often. Here is how it happens: Someone identifies a problem, and that person or a colleague proposes a solution. The team or board debates the solution and decides whether to implement. That sounds reasonable, right? No!

They forgot “ready, aim.”

“Ready” is ensuring that you know what the problem actually is, that you know the facts of your current situation. These include the strengths and weaknesses of a typical SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis. They also include the data that substantiate the existence of a problem. “Ready” means being able to formulate a brief problem statement on which everyone can agree.

“Aim” means that you also agree on a target--not how you intend to get there, but where you intend to go. Listen to a typical board or management discussion and you will often hear lots of discussion on the means to an end. Frequently, the ends themselves are left undefined because of assumptions of agreement--or because of reluctance to surface disagreement.

The Horse Before the Cart

Years ago, a consulting colleague, Dr. Joe McGill, taught me a technique he called S-T-P (situation-target-proposal) that I apply in situations like these. Joe contended that one of the most common causes of dysfunctional planning was putting the cart before the horse, or in this case, the proposal before the target. After Joe pointed this out, I saw it repeated in industry after industry, and just as often in health care as anywhere else.

Here is a typical example. I serve on a state board of health care executives. One long afternoon, we debated approaches to community health planning. We got stuck on issues about the role that health insurers were seeking to play given the demise of regional governmental planning agencies. As health care providers, we were suspicious of the motives and expertise of health care insurers regarding health treatment. Therefore, we bandied about half a dozen proposals to ensure that the payers would not be able to hurt providers by taking advantage of the planning and regulatory vacuum.

We went round and round in circles. Finally, one of the senior and well-respected members of the group suggested that we stop arguing about different approaches and first clarify the criteria of a good outcome. He said we could then evaluate our various proposals in light of the criteria we agreed upon. In other words, since we had achieved agreement on the situation (S), we could make more progress by also agreeing on the target (T) before engaging in discussions on our proposals (P). This got us back on track and we made much more progress as a result.

The foregoing illustrates why mission and vision statements are such powerful tools for managers and board members. Managers frequently get caught up in day-to-day operations. Financial pressures often narrow their field of vision. One action leads to another. One step follows the other. They are in a cycle of “Ready, fire. Ready, fire. Ready, fire...” If it seems like they have lost an overall sense of direction, they have. It is like the old saying: When you are up to your neck in alligators, it is hard to remember that your original intention was to drain the swamp.

Those who have fiduciary responsibility for an organization need to maintain focus on working toward its mission. A year ago, the chairperson of a nonprofit board on which I serve did just that. In alliance with the CEO, he structured a couple of board retreats so that the board members and top managers could re-ground themselves and re-establish their target, or mission. The result was a modification, clarification and recommitment to the fundamental aims of the organization. The CEO communicated this throughout the organization.

More recently, this organization ran into some operational and financial challenges. They responded and dug in deeply, but they did not flail as an organization because the recently restated mission operated as a gyroscope to keep them in balance and on target.

Pulling the Trigger

There is one more lesson of “ready, aim, fire” that is worth considering. Although some boards and management teams have the tendency to act without thinking or without establishing an overall sense of direction, others have a tendency to think and plan without moving to action. My fashion retailing client described these people as practicing: “Ready, ready, ready, aim, ready, aim, ready, ready...”

Action without a target leads to ineffectiveness because there is movement without direction. Planning without implementation is “ready, aim” without “fire.”

Only when you know where you are starting from and where you want to go can you decide how best to get there. So whether you use S-T-P, “ready, aim, fire” or some other tool as your reminder, responsible boards and senior management teams will help further the organization’s mission by the right combination of thinking, talking and action.

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