

Principles for Planning Holistically

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What is planning?

I describe planning, or designing a program, simply as deciding carefully what I am going to do before I do it. It involves thinking in advance about what I want to do, why I want to do it, and how I will do it with the resources available to me.

Sometimes we plan, or design a program, to respond to some felt need. In this case, it helps to define the need clearly from different perspectives, identifying the features that will satisfy that need. Then we examine the extent to which the need is satisfied, and what changes can increase satisfaction. Other times we plan, or design a program, to move toward a vision or a better future. The purpose is not to satisfy a specific felt need but to develop unrealized potential.

You will not find My Peace by engaging in excessive planning: attempting to control what will happen to you in the future. That is a commonly practiced form of unbelief. When your mind spins with multiple plans, Peace may sometimes seem to be within your grasp; yet it always eludes you. Just when you think you have prepared for all possibilities, something unexpected pops up and throws things into confusion.

I did not design the human mind to figure out the future. That is beyond your capability. I crafted your mind for continual communication with Me. Bring Me all your needs, your hopes and fears. Commit everything into My care. Turn from the path of planning to the path of Peace.

Sarah Young, Jesus Calling, September 17

In either case, we should identify obstacles on the journey toward that desired situation, and then steps for avoiding or overcoming them. Generally, we plan so that we can use available resources wisely in getting to a better situation within a specific period.

The nature of both a holistic plan (holistic program design) and the process of planning (designing a program) in a holistic way are difficult to describe. Here are some initial thoughts about the content of a holistic plan, and the holistic process of developing a plan.

The proposition is that planning or designing holistically is as important as producing a holistic plan or design. The process of planning needs to be holistic, *holy*, more than it needs to produce a plan that includes every activity that is related to achieving the ultimate goal.

What makes planning holistic?

I define planning holistically as figuring out what God intends for me to do that enters into the work that

God is doing around me. If I am planning an evaluation, what is it that will bring glory to God through the evaluation work? What is God already doing in what I will evaluate, and how will doing the evaluation enter into that? That usually leads me to consider the

spiritual aspects of relating to those involved in the evaluation. In addition, how will collecting and analyzing information affect worldviews? When I sense that I have that figured out, then I look at methodology.

Psalm 37:5 says “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.”

Do not plan without consulting God. God often upsets the plans we make without Him. However, if we plan with God, then we have no need to worry about what happens. Put God first in all our practical issues. Oswald Chambers (*My Utmost for His Highest*, 1935, p.187) offers two guidelines in planning with God.

- Avoid “worst-case scenarios.” Do not plan with evil in mind; trust in the Lord to keep the Evil One from interfering with your Godly planning. Keep divine love and righteous paths in view.
- Do not hold anything back for “a rainy day.” Trust God to provide whatever you need for implementing Godly plans.

I use four principles to organize my thinking about planning holistically. Each principle has an application for the content of a plan and the process that produces that content.

First principle: Base your plans on Scripture

Holistic planning products and processes are consistent with Scripture. In other words, both the document that I call a plan, and the procedures that I followed to create that document, are consistent with Scripture.

In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul gives praise to God for blessing us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Our planning should include praise to God for every blessing that we have experienced, and every blessing that we missed because we were too busy planning to see

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

Ephesians 1:9-10

the blessing. The final product of a holistic planning process inspires hope. When I read the design document for a community development program, I pray that it will inspire me to praise God for the current situation in which the people are living, and to praise God for the vision of what God wants the program staff and the community members to do in the coming years.

In a holistic planning process the participants meditate on appropriate Scripture passages throughout the planning exercise. Weave this meditation throughout the day and week as a constant reminder that consistency with God’s

word is essential for any plan called holistic.

All planners that intend to be holistic must root their thinking in the following verse (Psalm 33:10-11, NIV).

The Lord foils the plans of the nations;
he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.
But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever,
the purposes of his heart through all generations.

The authors of *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Henry and Richard Blackaby and Claude King, Nashville TN: LifeWay Press, 2007 revision pp. 98-102) describe implications of this verse for planning. God delights in his creatures as they join in his work. God reveals his purposes to them so that they can see what he is doing. When they see what God is doing, and they love God, they will join in his work. Continually relating with God, nurturing your relationship with him, is the most important element of holistic planning. Your relationship with God is more important to him than any planning activity you do or any outcome of your planning activity.

Second principle: Focus on relationships

Focus holistic planning products and processes on the quality of relationships, with special concern for holiness in those relationships. In other words, center both the document that I call a plan, and the procedures that I follow to create the document, on relationships like those demonstrated in the life of Christ.

Often the focus of a plan is on activities that will cause desired results to occur. Focus the content of a holistic plan on the quality of relationships. How will activities, products and events in the plan affect relationships among people, relationships between people and their environment, and the relationship between individuals and God?

In the Ephesians passage, Paul talks about God's plan for all of life, even more than that, all of time before "the creation of the world" (Eph 1:4) on into the future until there is no more. God's plan is relationship centered, promising that God will bring His people into harmonious relationship with God, no matter how estranged they have become by following their own plans.

In most cases, the process of planning holistically involves the key persons in creating the plan that will be affected by implementing the plan. Each person's perspective is valued and respected as consensus emerges on the plan. A holistic plan identifies both benefits and harm that may result from implementing the plan. Plans make provision to do no harm in the process of producing benefits.

Third principle: Keep the bigger picture in mind

Holistic planning products and planning processes reflect the bigger picture. A holistic plan describes the *context*, or the bigger picture of reality, for implementing a particular project. Base the plan on different types of information that reflect different aspects of the whole picture.

Logical framework planning, as well as other results-oriented approaches to project planning, is focused on activities that will lead to certain outcomes. In other words, the plan is focused on deeds. In addition to defining what deeds will be effective, a holistic plan describes how implementation of deeds will take into account:

- What program participants and beneficiaries will experience through the way people are living as they perform deeds.
- What messages are heard (not necessarily what was said) as people interact with each other in various activities.
- What people regard as pointers, and how they decide what the pointers mean.

A holistic plan is *strategic* in the sense that every element contributes to the ultimate goal, to moving toward the vision for the future. The pieces of a holistic plan are in harmony with all the other pieces.

Holistic planning is an exercise in *stewardship*. Planners make decisions about allocating resources and scheduling activities not just to be effective and efficient, but also to be good stewards of resources entrusted to us by God. This means that we have to know God's intentions for those resources. It also means that we will abide by those intentions with humility.

Fourth principle: Invite the Holy Spirit to lead

Holistic planning products emerge as the Holy Spirit guides the planning process.

Both the planner's view of eternity, and how the sojourn on earth is related to eternity, informs planning holistically. Throughout the planning exercise holistic planners reflect on what matters at the time of final judgment. How will this plan help people decide what they want to do in their lives in relation to the time of final judgment?

In a holistic planning exercise immerse in prayer the preparation of a logframe. The planners seek the leading of the Holy Spirit in making decisions about goals, purposes, outputs and activities. They share their thinking with Jesus, and listen carefully for Jesus' response. Keep in mind that the records we have of Jesus' conversations with disciples show that Jesus responded by addressing themes at a deeper level and in a manner that provoked reflection on ultimate meaning. Planning holistically is much more than filling in the boxes in a chart. It is learning about what God intends for you, and for those around you.

Summary

Ephesians 1:3-14 has several important messages to planners.

- Praise God for the blessings God has bestowed upon us. Everything we experience on earth is a blessing from God's point of view. v.3
- God in love chose us to be holy and blameless in God's sight. v.4-8
- God has made known to us God's will to bring all things in heaven and earth together under Christ. v.9-10
- God has provided the Holy Spirit to keep our planning consistent with divine plan for redemption. v.11-14

Topic of Principle	Content of a Plan	Planning Process
First Based in Scripture	Will implementation of this plan demonstrate God's love of all of creation?	Has there been frequent mediation on relevant Scripture, along with study and research on Scriptural principles throughout the planning process?
Second Focuses on the quality of relationships	Does the plan anticipate how implementation can lead to beneficial and harmful consequences to a broad variety of people?	Implementing a plan affects people. Has the process consulted them, and has it respected their views?
Third Considers the big picture from an eternity perspective	Is the content of this plan consistent with our understanding of sin and grace?	Did the planners decide on allocation of resources from the perspective of stewarding resources provided by God (time, talent, treasure)?
Fourth Guided by the Holy Spirit	Will implementation of this plan be redemptive?	Did the planners pray through each decision?

Frank Cookingham, Bamako, Mali; February 8, 2006

For additional insight, examine the focus of a plan against the scriptures in the World Vision Bible Study, "Following Jesus: God Invites Us to Transforming Discipleship."