

Working Backwards From Perfect: How Hoshin Planning Can Help You Achieve an Ideal Future

On July 20, 1969, astronaut Neil Armstrong landed on the Moon, signaling the attainment of President John F. Kennedy's vision to put a man on the Moon and return him safely to earth. The accomplishment required nearly a decade of research and experimentation by NASA as it worked to overcome one technical challenge after another: the ability to dock two ships together in space, the design of the Lunar Excursion Module, and the inherent difficulties of manned space travel. Each of these breakthroughs not only made the Apollo moon missions possible, but also enabled many other excursions to outer space.

But what if President Kennedy had been less ambitious? What if his vision had been to send an unmanned rover to the Moon, or what if he hadn't even thought it possible to reach the moon? How many of these breakthroughs would exist today? Of course, it's difficult to say with certainty, but one thing is for sure-if mankind had never set a goal to land on the moon, we never would have gotten there.

Wherever You Go, There You Are

In order to send a person to the moon, the scientists at NASA had to deconstruct the President's lofty vision into smaller, attainable objectives. In other words, they figured out what would need to be in place to make Kennedy's vision a reality, and worked backwards from perfect to get there.

The concept of working backwards from perfect isn't new. You may be familiar with the TRIZ notion of the Ideal Final Result, or Stephen Covey's edict to begin with the end in mind. In fact, around this time of year, many of us make New Year's resolutions to be thinner, or more productive, or spend more time with family and friends. You can bet that the ones who actually keep their resolutions are those who envision the ideal end state, and break their resolutions down into bite-sized goals that they work to achieve in a realistic timeframe.

The same concept applies to organizations and their strategic goals. When you have a vision?-an idealized concept of your company's mission-you can break that vision down into specific strategies that will help you get from where you are today to where you want to be in two, five, even ten years. And there's one approach that can help you do this better than any other: Hoshin Planning.

What is Hoshin Planning?

Simply put, Hoshin Planning is a strategic planning approach that uses Hoshin Kanri methods. Translated from Japanese, Ho Shin Kan Ri means shining metal pointing direction-which lends itself to an image of a compass, the perfect tool to help you get where you're going!

In essence, Hoshin Planning provides a proactive vision of the organization's future, and encourages movement toward that goal. Many successful businesses including Toyota, Procter & Gamble and Intel have used Hoshin Planning to design a perfect state for their organizations. By focusing on creating what they want (the vision), they de-emphasize building on what they have and, in some cases, what they don't want.

At the root of Hoshin Planning is the notion that if we only concentrate on improving the present, then all we'll ever attain is a slightly better state of what we currently have. Think of it like this: when you're in the market to buy a new house, do you focus on all the things you don't like about your current residence? Or do you list the qualities you want in your dream house? If you do the latter, you're much more likely to end up with a house you love!

In an organizational sense, focusing on creating the ideal future means going beyond incremental improvements to existing processes and systems, some of which may not even help you attain your strategic objectives. Hoshin Planning helps you dedicate resources to those processes and systems that will make it possible for you to achieve your vision.

The Hoshin Difference

In addition to working backwards from perfect, Hoshin Planning offers many other advantages over traditional Management by Objectives (MBO) planning methods. MBO plans are typically driven from the top-down without much input from the rest of the organization. Consequently, the ?plan? may be unrealistic, too broad, or not actionable for the average employee. Usually department heads are held responsible for meeting yearly objectives tied to their specific areas. The result is a disjointed set of goals that may move the needle for a few metrics, but likely will not move the organization very far toward its vision (assuming it even has one).

On the contrary, Hoshin Planning focuses on systems and methods, with cross-functional accountability that depends on the success of the process, not a specific person. Objectives are shared with employees from all levels of the organization using catchball, a participative approach that enhances the workability of the plan and increases participation and buy-in. Most importantly, the plan is designed around a unified vision, which means that every strategic objective moves the organization closer to achieving its vision. As a result, everyone focuses their efforts on the vital few goals instead of the trivial many.

The best part is that Hoshin Planning provides a strategic planning methodology that works for any organization from any industry. The Hoshin approach is systematic, yet encourages creativity; it's scalable, yet holds everyone accountable for the planning process and the results. In the end, Hoshin Planning won't help you predict the future. But it will help you create the future you envision for your organization.