

Two Critical Strategic Mistakes Most Churches Make

One of the most important responsibilities of leadership is navigating the dynamics between strategy and tactics.

Strategy, if illustrated militarily, is the science of directing large scale military operations, such as maneuvering forces into the most advantageous position prior to actual engagement with the enemy. It's a skill rooted in planning and managing.

Tactics are literally “matters of arrangement.” Again, in a military context, it is the science of arranging and maneuvering forces in view of short-range objectives. Tactics are methods used to achieve a predetermined end.

So strategy lies behind when and where (and even if) to use armed conflict in view of a wider objective; tactics dictate the battlefield maneuvers.

Obviously, both are important and inextricably intertwined. But that is where countless mistakes have been made—their intertwining. Here are two critical mistakes that many organizations, and most of all churches, often make:

1. Confusing tactics with strategy.

There are many things that are mere tactics that are distinct from strategy but are often treated as if they *are* strategy. For example, take small groups. It should not be any church's strategy to have small groups. That is a tactic. The strategy is to be a biblically functioning community where the practice of the “one-anothers” is manifest. Small groups are simply a means to that end, and perhaps not even the best.

Or consider a multi-site approach to church growth. Though it's often called a strategy, it's not. It's a tactic. A strategy is to grow your church through the unchurched in your community. Having additional campuses is simply one way of pursuing that strategy. But the goal is not to be a multi-site church, as that is a tactic that should be embraced or released as deemed important to the strategy.

When you confuse a tactic with strategy, the tactic becomes enshrined as if it is sacrosanct. Soon, the goal is to preserve the tactic, rather than pursue the strategy. Yet tactics, by their very definition, only exist to serve the strategy. They should be ruthlessly evaluated in light of whether they continue to serve the strategy as well as other options, or if they even continue to serve the strategy at all.

2. Pursing tactics without a strategy.

A second mistake that is all too common is to pursue a collection of tactics without an overarching strategy. This is when you have a number of activities, but no coherent plan as to what they are all trying to collectively achieve, much less how they work together synergistically

to achieve it. A great amount of energy is being spent and activity abounds, but that is all it is—a collection of energized activities.

There are many dire consequences that flow from this mistake, but two stand out. First, nothing is aligned in a way for impact. Think of how light works—light that is diffused doesn't make much of a difference, but take that light and focus it through a magnifying glass and you can set something on fire. Focus it even more, and it can become a laser that cuts through sheet metal. Tactics without a strategy is like light that is diffused; tactics with a strategy become a laser beam.

A second consequence is that without an overarching strategy, you have no way of evaluating what you should be doing and, sometimes more importantly, what you should *not* be doing.

Here are two examples of strategy providing telling insight into tactics. For years, Meck offered a Fall Festival for the community on our 80-acre North Charlotte Campus. It grew in size until it became one of the largest-attended Fall Festivals in Charlotte and, I might add, took enormous resources for us to offer. I remember gathering a team of leaders and asking, "Can any of you name a single unchurched family that has come to Meck through our Fall Festival?" Silence. I then tasked them to dig deeper into whether this event was strategic for us. We were not, after all, in the Fall Festival business. It was a tactic. We were in the unchurched business. As it turned out, there was very little fruit despite very large crowds.

That was the last year we had a Fall Festival.

Another example took place during a construction phase when we had limited use of our auditorium at our largest-attended campus. We rented the Verizon Wireless Amphitheater (now the PNC Music Pavilion), which has a capacity of more than 18,000 people for our Easter service. Thousands came. We did it again the next year. Even more attended. We added egg rolls, bounce houses; we even had bands such as NEEDTOBREATHE perform mini-sets. By the fourth consecutive year, it was easily the largest attended single Easter service in Charlotte, perhaps the largest in the entire southeast United States. Again, a huge event, at the expense of vast resources.

But was it translating into growth from the unchurched?

No. It had simply become the go-to event for Christians who wanted an Easter mega-event. But we were not in the "Easter for happily churched Christians" business, much less in the "let's grow from other churches" business.

That was the last year we hosted "Easter at Verizon."

One of my mantras is that the mission, vision, values and message of the church are timeless and unchanging; the methods, however, must be continuously evaluated in light of their ongoing effectiveness.

So whether it's confusing tactics with strategy, or employing tactics independent of a strategy,

the lesson is the same:

Get strategic.

> [Read more from James Emery White.](#)