Toss conventional wisdom for fresh thinking to make strategy work

By Laura Stone and Elizabeth A. LaPierre / Meetings | Friday, May 1, 2009 | **http://www.bostonherald.com** | **Women's Business News**

It happens all the time. Plans are rolled out for a strategy for the coming year, or a new project, or a new division, and "conventional wisdom" wins the day. No new ideas, no fresh thinking.

Times have changed such that conventional "wisdom" usually doesn't cut it anymore. Instead, fresh thinking is the new strategic king, outscoring conventional wisdom every time. Behold 12 potent examples.

1. Conventional wisdom: Try to save money by short-cutting your planning process, budget and time investment.

Fresh thinking: Strategic thinking and planning are more important now than ever. A carefully thought-out, collaborative plan saves thousands if not millions of dollars in wasted efforts, confusion and diluted focus. Consider this an investment that will pay big dividends throughout the coming months.

2. Conventional wisdom: Plan critical meetings by yourself in about 30 minutes.

Fresh thinking: Effective meeting planning can take about as long as the meeting itself, meaning a two-day meeting can take at least two days to plan depending on the complexity of the issues. Solicit from attendees both input on their needs and buy-in to design a valuable meeting.

3. Conventional wisdom: Plan a one-day meeting for three days of work.

Fresh thinking: Complex strategies take time to develop. There is no easy way or shortcut around this, and it always takes longer than you think it will. A great read is David Strauss's book, "How to Make Meetings Work."

4. Conventional wisdom: Don't make the time together interactive. Instead, use this meeting for report-outs (also called "death by meeting").

Fresh thinking: Ensure that sharing information happens in advance to level-set everyone's understanding by designing the meeting so the group is working on only the work they can do together.

5. Conventional wisdom: Send the agenda the morning of the meeting.

Fresh thinking: Strategic thinking begins well before the meeting itself. Send the agenda at least a few days (even better, a week or two) in advance and be sure to assign pre-work to jump-start strategic thinking and really maximize your valuable time together.

6. Conventional wisdom: Have everyone take their own notes and set action items themselves.

Fresh thinking: Use flip charts to capture brainstormed ideas, agreements, action items and "parking lot" items as a simple and very effective tool. This focuses the group's attention, ensures alignment and minimizes misinterpretations of the core work. Be sure your action plan flip chart includes the columns of what, who and by when.

7. Conventional wisdom: During the meeting, ensure all BlackBerries are on so that everyone can focus on their own e-mails while pretending to listen.

Fresh thinking: Spend five minutes to create meeting ground rules together at the beginning of the meeting and add a "no cell phones" rule if no one else offers this suggestion.

8. Conventional wisdom: Focus on data analysis only. Feelings? What feelings?

Fresh thinking: Acknowledge and explore individual feelings in order to surface critical priorities and get to the most important work. Feelings and instincts are integral components toward developing superior game plans. Pride, in particular, is a powerful emotional driver.

9. Conventional wisdom: Stay rigidly married to your agenda and ignore all signs that you need more time and/or different agenda items.

Fresh thinking: Even the best planned meetings can require flexibility in the face of new data. Keep an ear out for these "strategic moments" and decide together as a team if the agenda should detour.

10. Conventional wisdom: Assume everyone was quite pleased with the meeting content, process and relationships. Adjourn the meeting when time is up and move on.

Fresh thinking: Be open to how to do things better and take five minutes at the end of each meeting to understand what worked and to identify upgrades for the next meeting – then be sure to review the upgrades when planning and/or starting your next team meeting.

11. Conventional wisdom: Believe that change will "just happen" after this meeting.

Fresh thinking: Even with the best of intentions, change is hard. Be sure to collectively agree on how best to follow up on your work over time, and talk about how to hold one another accountable.

12. Conventional wisdom: Keep silent on the meeting's output.

Fresh thinking: Other team members will be curious with what happened during this meeting and, in the absence of communication, people make up their own stories – usually for the worse. Add an agenda item to agree on key communication points to share with the rest of the company and to create a communication plan.

Bottom line: Bar conventional wisdom from the door – make it wait outside. Let fresh thinking in to run the show.

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