

**USING A COMBINED TEAM BUILDING/  
ALTERNATIVE FUTURES PLANNING PROCESS  
TO DEVELOP SHARED VISION**

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Corps of Engineers' Commanders face a unique management challenge. They know, and their staff know, that they will occupy their management role for only three years -- one tour of duty. They also have no role in selecting their key staff, unless they have the opportunity to fill a position which opens up during their tour of duty.

While it's not unknown for CEO's of corporations or heads of governmental agencies to hold their position for only three years, this is rarely known when the individual takes office. Most also select their key staff.

It's not unheard of, in the Corps, for civilian employees who report to Corps commanders to simply "outlast" a Commander whose approach and vision is different than his/her own. As a result, effective Commanders must be able to create a management approach or vision which unites the staff, without using many of the management rewards/punishments possessed by many executives. Loyalty must be won, and emotional commitment granted freely.

While these problems exist for all Corps Commanders, they are magnified for the Commander of the Corps' Pacific Ocean Division (POD) and Missouri River Division (MRD). In the case of POD, the problem is geography. The commanding officer in POD, a brigadier general, supervises a far-flung enterprise that delivers engineering throughout the entire Pacific Rim area. From his office in Honolulu he supervises three district commanders in Japan, Korea, and Hawaii. Except for the work performed in the Hawaiian Islands themselves, every project is at least 2500 miles -- and usually more -- away. Communication amongst the executive team in Hawaii can be personal and informal, but communication to Japan and Korea is usually electronic or telephonic. Unlike most Corps' divisions, there are also numerous foreign governments to be dealt with, in addition to the challenges of different cultures and time zones. The Missouri River Division (MRD) is unique in that, in addition to normal responsibilities, the Commander of MRD has national management responsibility for construction on a number of major missile programs.

As an overlay on all of this, the Corps of Engineers is undergoing considerable change in its mission. The civilian "civil works" mission has been declining in many regions. The military program grew during the Reagan Administration, but was already showing signs of slackening during the period in which the programs described in this article took place. Finally, the Corps is being offered opportunities to perform new missions, many in the environmental cleanup arena. As a result of all these changes, there was no straight-line version of the future on which to rely. There were enough variables that there were many alternative futures.

General Robert Ryan, who commanded first the POD and subsequently the MRD, recognized the need to create a sense of "team" and shared vision within his management groups. For assistance in this enterprise he turned to Dr. Jerome Deli Priscoli, a senior analyst at the Corps' Institute for Water Resources in Fort Belvoir, VA., who has advised Corps management on many "process" issues. He in turn included Dr. James L. Creighton, who has experience involving groups in alternative futures planning processes.

The challenge was to design a process that built a sense of team, and a shared vision, but also took into account the range of possible futures. There are many instances in the management literature of companies with strong corporate cultures and well-defined visions for the future -- but the culture and the vision were flat-out wrong for the circumstances they faced. If shared visions aren't going to be just a communal crap shot, they must be sufficiently flexible and probabilistic that they can ensure accommodation to very different events than were originally expected.

In this case, the authors integrated traditional team-building activities with an alternative futures planning process originally developed by one of the authors<sup>1</sup> to develop alternative forecasts of water needs, land use demands, etc. Figure 1 provides an overview of the process which resulted from this hybrid. The process described below was completed over a two-day schedule.

## **THE PROCESS**

The specific steps in the process were as follows:

### **Identify the factors which could affect the organization over the next five years**

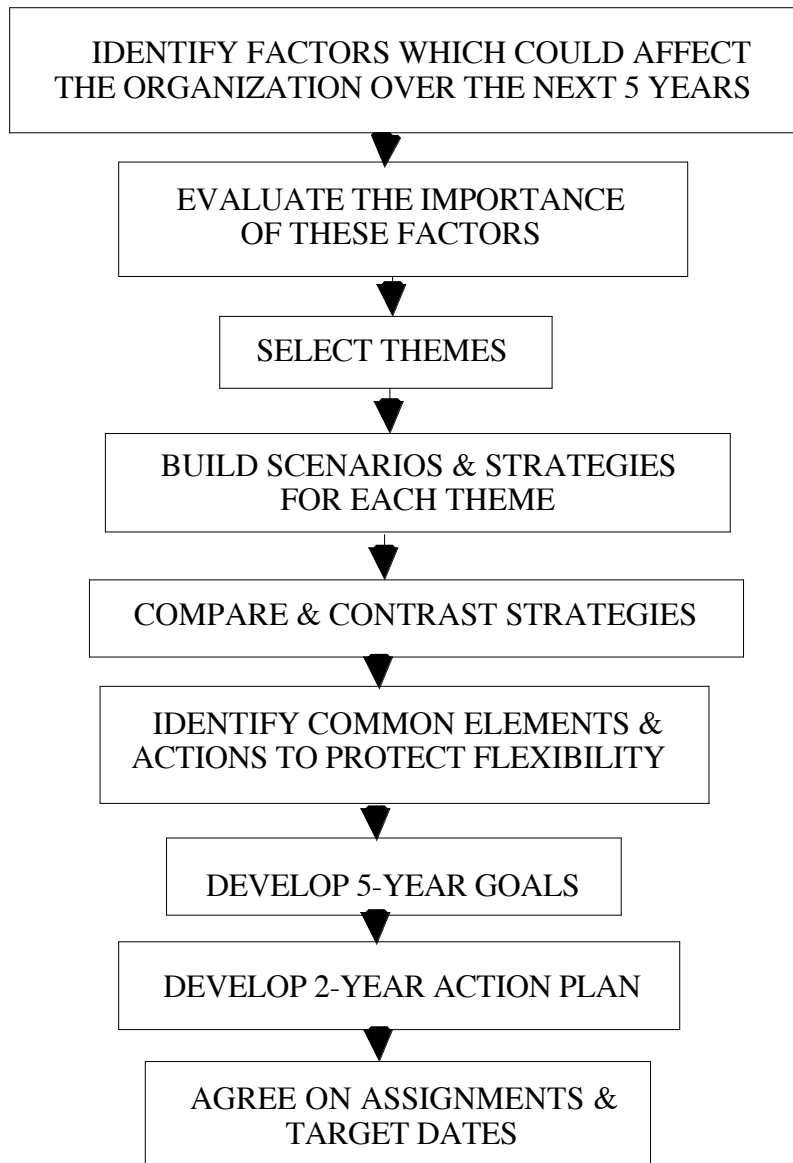
The first step in the process is to use the rules of brainstorming -- that there be no evaluation while people are generating ideas, and that way-out ideas are encouraged -- to develop a list of factors, both internal and external, that could affect the future of the organization. The purpose of this step is: a) to get team members to share information about the factors that impact on their part of the organization, and b) to encourage recognition of the many variables that influence the future of the organization. The value of brainstorming is to help the group break out of group-think about what factors matter to the organization, and also encourage everyone to participate.

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<sup>1</sup> Creighton, James L., "New Processes for Alternative Futures Planning," World Future Society Bulletin, Vol. XI, No. 1, January-February 1977, pp. 3-11.

Also see: Creighton, James L., Alternative Futures Planning, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Denver, Colorado. 200 pages., 1976. (Available National Technical Information Service).

**Figure 1**  
**Executive Planning Session**  
**Process Steps**



## **Evaluate the importance of the factors**

Evaluating every factor on a brainstorming list is a time-consuming and cumbersome process. So the next step is to use a simple ranking process to identify those factors that were most important. This begins by reviewing the list to be sure that all the items on the list are understood. There may also be some discussion of the significance of items that are known to some members of the group but not to others, but this discussion should not be permitted to slip into full-fledged evaluation of the items. The group should also discuss whether there are items that needed to be consolidated. Then participants are given five colored dots, and told to come up to the flip chart sheets on which the brainstorming ideas were recorded, and vote with their dots. Participants are permitted to distribute the dots any way they wished, e.g. one each on five different items, all five on one item, etc.

The colored dot ranking technique is used because of its simplicity, and because participants enjoy the process. On other occasions, one of the authors has asked participants to rank ideas on two scales, one evaluating the significance of the factor if it did occur, and the other evaluating the likelihood that it will occur. This approach leads to important discussions about how much impact some factors would have, even though they may not seem likely. Mechanically, however, the tallying of the scores is cumbersome unless the exercise occurs before a lunch or overnight, allowing enough time to tally the scores.

## **Select themes**

Typically a limited number of factors emerge as clearly most significant. Often the scores show 4-7 factors as most important, with a clear drop-off in scores after that.

The first step of the process simply leads to lists of factors, such as "legislative support for Corps' environmental cleanup mission." This phrasing doesn't say whether legislative support is increased, decreased, whatever. Obviously to develop an image of the future, some sense of direction must be projected for each of these factors.

So, following the scoring, the group uses the major factors as the basis for selecting unifying themes around which scenarios of the future can be built. If a key factor is "legislative support for Corps' environmental cleanup mission," one theme might stress greatly increased legislative support, the other might assume that Congress curtails any further Corps activities in the environmental cleanup arena.

Even with only 4-5 major factors, by the time you visualize each of the factors going in two or three direction, the number of potential scenarios becomes unmanageable. Our experience to date suggests that the most efficient process is for the facilitators to present a proposal of themes to the group, based on the factors which the group ranked high, inviting the group to modify and accept the proposal. One important consideration in proposing themes to the group is to include themes which "bracket" the most important possibilities. It's not possible to consider every possible future, but it's important to include themes which lead to scenarios that are sufficiently different that the group will recognize that the future is not a straight-line projection from the present.

To illustrate, here are the lists of themes selected by the MRD work team:

### MRD THEMES

Theme A: CIVIL WORKS - CURRENT TRENDS:

This theme assumed continuation of current trends, which means that the civil works program has already declined, and the size and character of the projects has already changed.

Theme B: CIVIL WORKS - EXPANDED MISSION:

This theme assumed MRD would be able to expand the mission of the civil works program in such a way that the program would be maintained, even expanded.

Theme C: HAZARDOUS/TOXIC WASTE PROGRAM INCREASE:

This theme assumed that MRD would play an expanding role in delivery of services in the hazardous and toxic waste field.

Theme D: INCREASE IN MILITARY PROGRAM:

This theme assumed that MRD's military program would expand as a result of serving customers outside of MRD's area, added programs with old customers, or additional responsibilities gained through Corps reorganization.

Theme E: DECLINING MILCON (MILITARY CONSTRUCTION) PROGRAM:

This theme assumed that the military construction program had reached its peak and would decline, either because the major needs have been met over the past eight years, due to a change in administration, or because MRD's customers turn to alternative providers of services.

Theme F: NEW MISSIONS OUTSIDE CIVIL WORKS PR MILCON:

This theme assumed that MRD would provide its services to other federal, state or local governmental agencies in support of programs such as highway construction, building of the super collider, or performing other services for clients such as the Veterans Administration, State Department, or Department of Justice.

### **Build scenarios and strategies for each theme**

Participants are then divided into working groups, with each working group assigned the task of developing a scenario based on that theme, and a the strategy they would recommend for the organization if they anticipated that scenario would, in fact, occur. Scenarios are short word descriptions of what the future would be like, given the occurrence of the theme.

Then the sub-groups develop a proposed strategy for how the organization could cope effectively if the scenario they identified would occur.

### **Compare and contrast strategies**

The participants then reconvene and present their scenarios and strategies, inviting feedback from the other groups. The key questions which need to be addressed are: Are the assumptions in our scenario reasonable? Are there other critical assumptions that should be substituted or added? Does our strategy appear effective? Are there other possible strategies?

Once there is agreement on the scenarios and strategies, the next step is to compare and contrast the strategies. The intent of this step is to analyze the degree to which commitment to one strategy forecloses the ability of the organization to implement the strategy in one of the other scenarios. Examples of actions which might foreclose other strategies include: commitment of capital resources, reducing the organization's expertise in particular areas, abandoning a specific class of customer, etc.

The key concept during this step is to get participants to think about which actions foreclose options, and which maintain them. Another important consideration is which actions must be taken now to protect future options, i.e. you may foreclose options by taking an action, but you may also foreclose options by failing to take action. For example, if the Corps fails to develop its expertise in the environmental cleanup area now, it will likely foreclose that as a future mission.

### **Identify common elements & actions to protect flexibility**

Having analyzed which actions create/foreclose options, the next level of analysis is to look at those actions that are common throughout most or all of the scenarios. These actions, and the actions to protect flexibility identified in the previous step, are all potential candidates for inclusion in a final organizational strategy.

### **Develop five-year goals**

At this point the process becomes more like the traditional Goals -> Objectives -> Plans planning process. The difference is that the context in which the goals are set is much broader, and the group has a much expanded image of what the future could be like and which steps play a role in shaping how the organization is positioned to meet those futures.

The five-year time frame was selected because, in our experience, it represents the outer limits beyond which managers become so overawed with the uncertainties that they have difficulty planning effectively. On the other hand, it is a long enough period of time that managers can imagine significant change taking place.

### **Develop two-year action plan**

In our experience, two year actions plan provide not only a guide for action, but some sense of direction and change. Much beyond this, and managers begin to waffle, wanting more feedback from the external environment before proceeding.

### **Agree on assignments and targets**

Not infrequently, executive retreats end with many virtuous words but result in little action. This often leaves people convinced that these sessions are pleasant but unproductive. To ameliorate this problem, it's important to agree on assignments and targets before leaving the retreat. This provides a practical transition back to the real world.

### **ADVANTAGES OF THIS PROCESS**

The process described in this article blends team-building with futures planning, and based on our experience, has the advantages of both. The payoffs frequently mentioned for team building are: increased trust, improved communication, development of stronger interpersonal relationships, and emotional "ownership" for group agreements. We believe the addition of the futures planning process provide the following additional benefits:

- Consideration of a range of possible futures, not just a version of the future based on tradition or groupthink.
- Opportunities for different parts of the organizations to describe external trends -- and the significance of those trends to the organization -- of which others within the organization may not be aware.
- Strategic planning is based on an appreciation on the potential consequences of action or inaction on future flexibility and responsiveness of the organization.
- Group commitment is created to both a vision of the future, and a shared program to achieve that future.