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“Pardon me

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**just one more
question”**

Big picture thinking: easier said than done

By Stephanie Barganz, CFFA, CPA, CVA, SPHR

Today, the reality of business is stranger than fiction and this new reality is causing many managers and business owners to question traditional planning techniques. The norm has been for companies to develop very detailed plans dictated by the accounting calendar. Markets move so fast that an infrequent and static view of the future is not only useless but dangerous.

ask yourself:

How good was your business planning for 2008 compared to the results? Effective planning can be one of the many positive results of “big picture thinking.”

Visualize big picture thinking (planning) as the business equivalent of the GPS system in your car. It provides you with immediate feedback when you vary from a route. It also provides you with alternative routes and how to correct yourself when you're lost. It even tells you when you'll arrive. More sophisticated systems will provide you with advance warnings of hazards ahead. Effective and timely strategies are the GPS of your business. What does your GPS say?

The question I have been asked most often over the last nine months is: how are your clients/businesses doing in this economy? I've spent a significant amount of time thinking about what's separated the successful survivors from the casualties. A key element to the business owners is that they are big picture (strategic) thinkers. They are leaders who could step back from the day-to-day operations and assess what opportunities still exist and what proactive measures and actions can be taken. By looking objectively at their business models and asking the tough questions, many businesses were able to make changes that responded to the economy. They were able to:

- Focus on value and service over price.
- Be willing to edit existing models.
- Listen to what the customer is asking for today versus yesterday.
- Conserve cash.
- Utilize current data to facilitate effective decision making.

The element of using current data to make effective decisions for today is critical. The old rule that the past is the best indicator of future performance was thrown out the door in 2008 and 2009. Our current business environment has provided large amounts of information that people are estimating. Accountants can play a critical role in grounding assumptions in reality by providing real time data and trend analysis to businesses. When I have done this for clients, several of their assumptions were simply perceptions and rarely the root cause of poor or unexpected results. It is often easier during this time to blame a poor economy than it is to find out why negative results are occurring at your business. Seeing patterns and trends based on today and not the past can help you generate creative and real-time solutions.

Most CPA firms' service models are established to generate data in the most efficient means available (tactical versus strategic). This can often result in our passing on the data but not taking the additional time to figure out what it means. In Bodilly CPAs & Consultants' recent annual customer service survey, we asked our clients if they understood the financial statements that we provide to them. An overwhelming 92 percent said they did.

While I believe our firm works hard to have the numbers make sense to them, I still wonder if I asked the right questions. Maybe the questions needed to be: Do you use the financial statements to make timely decisions for your business? Or, have we provided you with a meaningful analysis of your data? The difference may seem small but it is clearly the difference between providing data or providing meaningful information that drives decisions. I think it is important to view whatever you do through the customers' eyes.

After supervising and training staff for more than 20 years, I have witnessed the difference between the people who can view the big

picture and those who want to process information. Both options are important. Some are willing to learn both while others are not. It's a learning process. I'm often fascinated by how accountants are taught their skill set. A significant amount of their training is focused on critical thinking e.g., what's wrong? Why doesn't it balance or reconcile? Who did what wrong? I believe we are predisposed to find reasons why something can't be done or shouldn't be done in a certain way. We're certainly predisposed to find errors and mistakes. We also need to allow ourselves to use the other part of our brains that elicit creativity and are allowed to ask questions about how the result occurred or how we can accomplish it.

What can you do to become a big picture thinker?

- Allow yourself some down time (think time).
- Get outside your comfort zone.
- Be a continuous lifelong student.
- Ask the hard questions (even more important when you do not want to hear the answers).
- Imagine yourself as Lt. Columbo (listen and ask more questions even when you think you know the answers).
- Trust your silly ideas.
- Challenge your assumptions.
- Strengthen your ability to identify relationships, patterns and trends.
- Play chess.

Big picture thinking is easier said than done. It requires continual discipline and effort and a little bit of a rebel nature. Challenge yourself to practice big picture thinking while looking for ways to execute this with your clients. It can be one of the most rewarding services you can provide.



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