



# Winning Ways

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## Winning Ways

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### Winning Ways NewsBits

Winning at Sales class offered in Tysons starting February 1<sup>st</sup>. Don't miss this opportunity to become a certified professional sales person. Sign up today by calling Joan Fletcher at 703-273-9299.

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## Flexibility and Accountability: Strategic Planning and the Unexpected

It's an old saying that the best-laid plans often go awry. Anyone who has taken family vacations knows that things don't usually go quite the way they had anticipated. "Expect the unexpected" is a wise motto. Knowing all this, crafting a strategic plan for your business might seem like a waste of time. Why go to all the trouble of planning your development when you know it's a safe bet that something will happen that's outside of your plan?

It's a reasonable question to ask. However, there's a big difference between keeping your plan flexible and not having a plan at all. If you have a rigid, inflexible plan, you will be thrown off-course when the unexpected happens, and you will be stuck staring at a plan that no longer fits your circumstances. If you have no plan at all, you will have trouble identifying the steps that are essential to getting you where you want to be. A good strategic plan, however, avoids both these pitfalls by allowing for changes and unforeseen circumstances, while giving you a stable framework for making decisions.

A good strategic plan is flexible because it deals with every level of development, from your overall vision to your weekly or monthly goals. It pinpoints the essential goals and action steps at each level; that way, when something unexpected occurs that interferes with your immediate plan, you can go straight to the larger, framing goal, and see which actions make sense in light of the new circumstances.

Having the right kind of plan, in fact, is essential to dealing with the unexpected. Without a plan, you are likely to keep on doing the same things you've always done, even if circumstances have changed and made your old routines ineffective. Without a plan, we tend to revert to "default." We try to stick to the methods and processes that have worked in the past, because we're comfortable with them. Unless we can clearly see *why* we need to change, and how the new processes will move us more effectively toward our goals, it's hard to motivate a change.

Surprises don't always come from the outside. Any time we move into a new career area, we tend to discover new things about ourselves: skills and weaknesses we didn't know we had, assumptions about the way we operate that turn out to be wrong. For example, a new business owner may have assumed that people skills were a strength of hers, and accounting was a weakness. As the months go by, though, it may turn out that her accounts are always on track because she is so careful with them, but she has a hard time motivating her team. Because she has been in the habit of thinking of herself as "good with people" and "bad with accounts," it may take her a long time to notice the areas where improvement is really needed.

It's important to hold yourself accountable, especially if you are running your own business. For an employee, performance reviews and feedback from the managers are a regular part of life. As the head of a business, there is no one to review your performance but yourself, and the feedback comes from the real-life circumstances around you: how are your finances? Are you gaining or losing customers? How satisfied and motivated are your team members?

Self-accountability is usually the hardest kind. It's tough to make an honest evaluation when you have so much invested in your own success. It's very easy to try to fudge facts, make excuses for yourself, and work on the basis of old assumptions about what you're good at and what you're not. If you really want to excel, though, it's essential to be honest with yourself about what's going well and what's not. The facts will be there, whether you acknowledge them or not. Acknowledging them gives you the opportunity to take control, change what needs to be changed and make new plans to deal with difficulties you hadn't anticipated.

A good strategic plan can give you the confidence you need to hold yourself accountable. It provides continuous benchmarks for your success (am I "on goal" for the week? The month? The year?) and it can guide you to the areas where you need to improve in order to meet your goals. Instead of trying to guess or estimate how well you're doing, you have clear markers to track your progress.

The new year is a great time to take a look at how the realities of your business are lining up with your plans and expectations. What surprises have there been? What adjustments need to be made? Most importantly, how can you take hold of unexpected circumstances that have arisen and turn them into opportunities for growth?