

# Communications Issues

Issue 03



*A Community Service of Harley House Consultants Inc.*

## The Rise and Fall of Strategic Communications Planning

### Introduction

A few years ago it was brought to my attention that a couple of articles were circulating throughout a federal government communications shop which dealt with “The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning” by Henry Mintzberg. One of my former consulting colleagues summarized it by stating that “Mintzberg is saying that everything we had been doing in our consulting practice all those years was a waste of time.” Not wanting to believe this, I set out to defend my profession and do a little investigation.

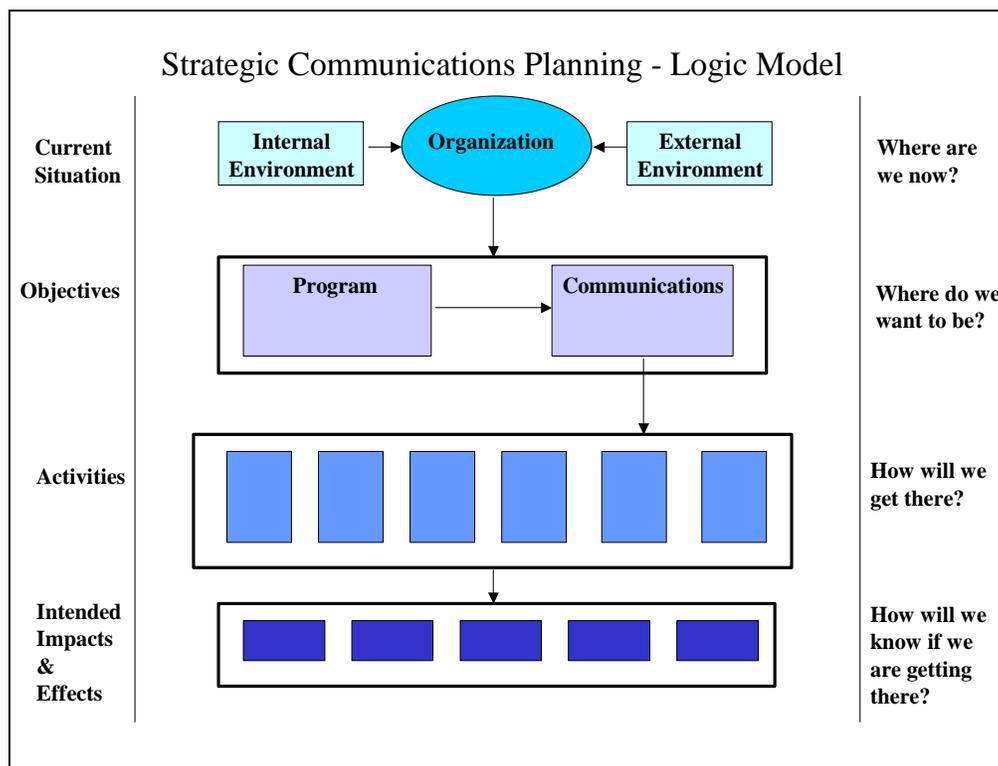
### Very Strong Views

What I discovered was that Professor Mintzberg has some very strong views on a number of subjects that are near and dear to me.

**On strategic planning:** “Strategy can not be planned because planning is about analysis and strategy is about synthesis. Coming up with a strategy is not a random event. It’s an experimental learning process. It’s an attempt to grope, probe, test, experiment and learn as you go along. Strategies grow initially like weeds. They are not cultivated like tomatoes.”

**On strategic planners:** “The role of planners within an organization is not to create strategies, but to support the process of strategy making. To make those analytical inputs that are relevant and to serve as catalysts to encourage, not strategic planning, but strategic thinking.”

**On consultants:** “The worst situation is where you get a manager who doesn’t know what to do inviting in a consultant who doesn’t understand. The ignorant leading the ignorant.”



*Making Communicators Better Managers—Making Managers Better Communicators*

# Communications Issues



## 2. The Rise and Fall of Strategic Communications Planning

### Upon Reflection

Upon further investigation and reflection, I came to recognize that while Mintzberg's views were quite strong, they were not all that far off the mark either. Let me deal with each of these in order.

**Strategic Planning:** At Harley House Consultants Inc. we have had a long history of involvement in strategic communications planning. As outlined in the Volume 06, Issue 1 edition of *Communications Issues*, there are a number of the strategic planning tools we use to assist our clients with the strategic planning process. In particular, we frequently use "Logic Models" (See page 1) to help evaluate and validate the process. In other words, a tool to be used to "grope, probe, test, experiment and learn as you go along."

These models are very valuable at ensuring senior management participation and buy-in.

**Strategic Planners:** I agree with Mintzberg that the role of strategic planners is not to create, but to support the process of strategy making. In fact, in the above-mentioned *Communications Issues* article we outlined the importance of creative thinking and management action plans to help support the strategic planning process.

**Communications Consultants:** As a Certified Management Consultant (CMC) I am honor-bound to defend my profession. There certainly is a role for consultants in strategic communications planning in terms of bringing objectivity and expertise to the process. However, it is important that the consultant you hire has the requisite experience and a solid understanding of the communications management process within the federal government.

### The Need

The *Government Communications Policy* recognizes the importance of strategic communications planning. According to the Policy, the communications function of departments and agencies is responsible for communications planning, which involves the development of corporate and program communications plans responding to public concerns and integrating major objectives of the government, the minister and the institution.

### The Challenge

The challenge for federal government communicators is to achieve the recognition and respect of their fellow government managers that they can make a meaningful and effective contribution to the strategic planning process. Strategic planning may be down, but it is certainly not out.

### In Conclusion:

- There is a stated and recognized need for strategic communications planning within the federal government.
- Strategic planning is as much an art as it is a science. To be effective, a strategic plan must be based on both analytical and creative thinking.
- The role of planners is to facilitate and encourage the strategic planning process - not create it.
- Don't hire an outside consultant to assist in strategic planning unless that individual has a good grasp of the federal government communications environment.

For more information on how Harley House Consultants Inc. can assist you in:

- Managing internal and external relationships with key stakeholder groups; and
- Improving the effectiveness of your organization's communications and consultation programs,

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