112 Hope Aint A Plan

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Most operators can tell you what they're serving tonight. Far fewer can tell you where their business is going in the next twelve months — and almost none can tell you how they're going to get there. That's not a marketing problem. That's a planning problem. And until you solve the planning problem, nothing else in this book works the way it's supposed to.

I can tell within twenty minutes of walking into an operation whether the person running it has a plan. It's not the food. It's not the décor. It's whether the operator is leading or reacting. The ones who are leading have a plan. The ones who are reacting are hoping that staying busy is the same as moving forward.

It isn't.

The Pre-Mortem Discipline

Before a major decision — new concept, significant capital investment, new market — write it down. The thesis: why this, why now, why us. The valuation: what does this have to produce to justify the capital. The risks: what has to be true for this to work, and what would have to be false. The kill criteria: what would make you walk away, named in advance before you are emotionally committed to the outcome. Then set a calendar date to review those notes. This is not bureaucracy. It is the difference between a decision and a bet. A bet hopes the future cooperates. A decision names the conditions under which it wins and the conditions under which it stops. Most operators make bets. The pre-mortem converts a bet into a decision.

There are two kinds of planning. The first kind happens when something breaks — the P&L crossed red, a key person left, a competitor opened across the street. The operator calls it planning. It is crisis management with a whiteboard. The second kind happens before the crisis, on a cadence, while the business is stable enough to look up. The first kind produces a list of fires to put out. The second kind produces a year worth building toward. Most operators only ever know the first kind — not because they lack discipline, but because they never got far enough ahead of the crisis to discover there was another way to do it.

The cadence is what makes the difference. Annual into quarterly into monthly into weekly. Each layer narrows the focus and closes the distance between the plan and the execution. Without the cadence, the plan is a document. With it, the plan is a discipline.

A plan has to answer four questions — for every area of the business, honestly, on a recurring basis.

How are you going to succeed in this area — specifically? "We're going to give great service" is not a plan. It is a wish. The plan names exactly how you will define, develop, reinforce, and measure what great service looks like inside your four walls. Specificity is the difference between an intention and a strategy.

What are you doing in the short term to keep growth on track? Strategy without execution is a document nobody reads. If you cannot name what is happening this week and this month that moves the needle, it will not happen. Businesses do not drift forward. They drift backward.

Are you prepared for the highs and lows of your market — and do you have a strategy for both? Every market has a rhythm. Busy seasons, slow seasons, competitive pressures, local events that drive traffic and others that kill it. Operators who get caught off guard by things that were entirely predictable do not have a strategy problem. They have a discipline problem.

Are you making honest progress — and how do you know? This is the hardest question because answering it requires holding up the mirror and looking at what is actually there, not what you hoped was there. Progress is not a feeling. It is a measurement. If you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it.

Most operators aren't stuck on a decision. They're stuck in fog. The decision itself, stated clearly in one sentence, is often half the answer. Before you evaluate options, write down exactly what you are deciding. Not the situation. Not the background. The decision. One sentence. When you can name it precisely, you'll often find the options sort themselves — or that you were deciding the wrong thing entirely.

These are not questions you answer once. They are questions you return to constantly — for every fundamental, every quarter, every time something changes in your business or your market.

Without a plan, you are not building a business. You are hoping one shows up.

What Changes Tomorrow

Write down the one decision sitting in front of you right now that you have been calling a situation. One sentence. What are you actually deciding — not the background, not the context, the decision. Then answer the four questions for it: how will you succeed, what happens this week to move it forward, what are the conditions that make it work or don't, and how will you know you're making honest progress. That is not a planning session. That is the first rep of a planning discipline. The operator who does it once discovers it works. The operator who does it on cadence builds a business worth running.