

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Means vs. Ends

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"If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail."—Ben Franklin

"The best laid plans o' mice an' men gang aft agley."—Robert Burns

"In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are worthless, but planning is indispensable"—Dwight D. Eisenhower

Unlike Ben, I'm not much for planning. Just ask my wife. She spends two weeks packing for a trip. I spend two minutes. Like the Poet Burns, I'm sure that no matter how carefully you plan, some outside factor will come along and render it null and void. I'm not saying I don't plan; Ball

Publishing does annual planning for our media kit, which helps our advertisers know what's coming in each issue. But some of the biggest, most cover-worthy stories happen last-minute. We can't plan breaking news and suddenly-hot topics.

That's why I follow Ike's philosophy: Be prepared to deal with whatever might come your way, which leads to the topic of this month's column: means vs. ends.

The "end" is the goal, the destination. It's the answer to the question, "Where is our business headed in the next three years?" The "means" are the resources and preparation you use to get there. To me, the means are much more important than the end. Why? Because with the right means on hand, you can achieve any end you desire. Without the right means, all your planning is worthless.

I can't take credit for this means vs. ends of thinking. I'm borrowing it from Anna Ball. What with the constant and fast-paced upheaval within and outside our industry, Anna has been preaching "means," and to me, a reluctant planner, it makes rugged good sense. So I asked her to define "means" as they apply to greenhouse operations. She gave me this list:

Low debt. The most important hallmark of any successful business. Low debt gives you the ability to say yes

or no as required, to take advantage of opportunities and avoid unsavory avenues. Suppose a customer pushes you further than you want to go—do you have the financial stability to say no?

Multipurpose greenhouses and infrastructure. For a while, this meant building a Rolls Royce, \$30 per sq. ft. open roof glass palace ... which wouldn't be paid off in your kid's lifetime. Now it means efficient facilities that are adaptable, but also affordable, so if you have to replace them with something more suited to your needs, you can. For some, it's hoop houses or high tunnels, or open-roof houses with double poly instead of glass. The keys are flexibility and efficiency.

The best IT systems you can afford. Information is power and if you're still using computers just for spreadsheets and order entry, you're falling behind. CIO magazine recommends that companies invest an average of 4% to 6% of revenues on IT annually. For a million-dollar company, that's \$40,000 to \$60,000. Skip a year and you've fallen behind.

Have as much year-round business as feasible. Every grower strives for this. Think shoulder seasons, prefinished, getting into the plug and liner business. It's not easy, but it helps pay your overhead, while easing your dependence on the 100 days of hell that is spring.

Staff that is flexible and open to change. The most important means of all, because without smart, adaptable employees, nothing else matters. It costs no more to hire a flexible person than a rigid one and the long-term investment will pay off a hundred-fold. Key questions you should ask job candidates should revolve around how they deal with change. Do they embrace it and run with it? Or does it make them uncomfortable?

A culture of continual learning and training. This goes with the previous entry. You can hire great people, but they won't stay if they aren't given the opportunity to grow. Anna says that her grandfather, George J. Ball, was constantly learning through reading and travel. He started GrowerTalks magazine to share what he was learning. And the more he learned, the more he knew there was to learn.

Don't get me wrong: Every business needs goals and a strategy to achieve those goals. And you need to be able to adjust those goals and strategy to keep up with the ever-changing market. Having the right means in place will make your job that much easier. **GT**