

Between Planning and Crisis Management: The Case for Strategic Agility

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Most regulatory organizations have a Strategic Plan. Considerable effort goes into developing it—aligning with mandate, consulting stakeholders, and setting clear priorities. These plans provide direction, structure, and accountability.

But they are not designed for what happens next.

Once approved, Strategic Plans tend to become reference documents and reporting frameworks. Progress is tracked, updates are provided, and activities continue. What is much less clear is how those plans adapt once conditions begin to change.

The issue is not the quality of planning. It is the limited capacity to adjust strategy while it is still in motion.

This reflects a broader tension most organizations face: the balance between planning and improvisation. At one extreme is rigidity—multi-year plans that are difficult to change mid-cycle. At the other is reactivity—where decisions are made without direction or only in response to crisis.

The challenge is not choosing between these extremes. It is building the capacity to operate on both poles at the same time.

That challenge is becoming more pronounced. Regulators are operating in an environment shaped by accelerating change: technological shifts such as AI, rising expectations around transparency and accountability, and increasing government oversight.

In Ontario, changes to registration practices and timelines have required significant operational adjustments within compressed timeframes. The environment in which regulators fulfill their mandate is evolving more quickly—and less predictably—than the strategic planning models many organizations still rely on.

In this context, a consistent pattern is emerging. Many regulators are getting stronger at reporting on strategy—through dashboards, metrics, and structured updates.

Far fewer have clear mechanisms for how strategy itself is adjusted as conditions evolve. Reporting is improving. Adaptation is not keeping pace.

Where Strategic Plans Break Down in Practice

Across regulators, three constraints appear repeatedly:

- strategy cannot easily be changed once approved;
- decision-making processes are too slow; and even when decisions are made,
- the ability to shift work operationally remains limited.

These are not planning issues. They are system-level constraints.

The result is a subtle but important dynamic. Organizations appear stable and aligned—plans remain in place, reporting continues, and progress is demonstrated. Beneath that surface, priorities begin to shift informally, new issues are absorbed without explicit strategic adjustment, and resources are reallocated incrementally.

Over time, a gap emerges between stated strategy and actual activity. This gap is rarely visible in formal reporting—but it shapes decision-making and effectiveness.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a useful contrast. During the crisis, regulators demonstrated a high degree of agility. Requirements were adjusted, temporary measures were introduced, and time-sensitive decisions were made—often outside formal strategic plans and governance rhythms.

Organizations responded because they had to. If regulators can operate with this level of responsiveness in a crisis, why is it so difficult to sustain in normal conditions?

The answer lies in how agility is understood. Strategic agility is not simply flexibility within a plan. It is an organizational capability—the ability to detect change, interpret its significance, make decisions, and adjust work in a timely and coherent way.

Stronger regulators tend to perform consistently across these areas. They invest in environmental intelligence to detect emerging risks, create governance structures that allow for timely decisions, and maintain operational flexibility so priorities can shift without a full reset. They also use data not just to report on performance, but to adjust direction.

Most organizations, however, are still operating in the middle of this spectrum. Strategic planning is well established. Reporting practices are maturing. But the integration between sensing, decision-making, and execution—what ultimately enables adaptation—remains less developed.

Between Planning and Crisis Management

This is where the real challenge sits—not in planning, and not in crisis response, but in the space between them.

It is the moment when assumptions begin to shift, when new risks emerge, and when priorities start to compete. At that point, the question changes—from “What is our strategy?” to “How well can it evolve?”

What This Requires in Practice

Addressing this does not require more frequent planning cycles. It requires strengthening the systems that support adaptation:

- Clearer triggers for reassessment
- Governance practices that enable timely decisions
- Stronger links between performance information and strategic direction
- Operational structures that allow work to change when needed

Strategic planning remains essential. But in a dynamic environment, it is no longer sufficient on its own. **The more fundamental question is not whether an organization has a clear strategy. It is whether it has the capacity to adapt it in real time.**

Strategic agility is not about constant change. It is about anticipating change, responding with clarity when needed, and learning from that response over time. It is a capability—and a mindset—that must be deliberately built.

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