

Project Evergreen's Long-Range Strategic Planning

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Our lives are measured in discrete increments of time: a work day, a work week, a fiscal year. The boundary conditions for our thinking are often defined by those increments. Like the proverbial boiling

frog, however, planning and thinking in this way limits our ability to recognize that the heat is on-or that maybe someone changed the pot.

We all operate in a highly complex world of interdependent variables. Any organization that casts its net into an ambiguous future to glean a strategic vision needs a way to avoid incremental thinking. More importantly, we need a way to rigorously bridge creative analysis of the future environment to practical planning and budgeting actions.

The following is an example of how the Coast Guard is attempting to deal with this challenge. These methodologies and lessons learned can apply to any organization desiring to analyze an uncertain future and develop strategic vision. Despite the fact that scenario-based planning is highly participatory, we found that feeding highly polished strategy statements into the organization failed more often than succeeded. We also learned that acting with strategic intent is at least as important as insightful strategic plans, but that takes time and a willingness to fight the tyranny of the present.

Background

In 1998 the Coast Guard initiated an alternative futures, scenario-based strategy development effort aimed at making greater progress in linking Coast Guard strategy development to decision-making processes. The initiative eventually became what we now call Project Evergreen. Evergreen has been a strategic success on many levels, and the Coast Guard continues to invest in the growth and development of the process.

From its early days, when Evergreen codified maritime domain awareness as a key concept for strategy development, to the more recent manifestations of emerging polar and underwater mission requirements, we have used its insights for guidance in decisions that have strategic impact, whether they be long-term, medium-term, or short-term. Sometimes we need the perspective from 25 years in the future to truly understand today's issues and how solutions will play out over time. We gained significant advantages by innovating the Evergreen process to shift away from discrete time frames, and shift toward understanding the strategic impacts of macro-level trends to all parts of the Coast Guard's mission.

As a result, the scenarios that Evergreen develops are not geared to answering one "critical question." The Coast Guard has always been keenly aware that not only does it not know all the answers about the future, it also does not know all the questions to ask. Therefore, the scenarios are broadly cast to ensure the Coast Guard thinks critically and creatively about the future needs for current missions, new missions that might be required, and how they might be accomplished. The strategies and needs that emerge from the scenario planning are, therefore, at the same macro level of analysis. Evergreen cannot say very much about what the next cutter must look like, but it will have a lot to say about the future mission demands that might (or might not) require on-scene surface assets.

It was never intended that Evergreen would be the strategic planning process of the Coast Guard, which should be influenced by a host of inputs. Thus, Evergreen is only one of many components in the Coast Guard's larger plan, and was designed from the beginning to be the strategy source least influenced by daily activities.

Why Abandon Strategies?

Project Evergreen has always embraced innovation and experimentation. Over the years, we have added and subtracted elements from each four-year cycle in a regular attempt to do our job better, to involve more people, and to make our "products" more useful. At the time, the decision to abandon strategy development within the Evergreen process was just one more experiment. The project always had two main goals: to produce innovative strategies that would help guide the Coast Guard as it dealt with increasing levels of uncertainty in its operating environment, and to

create an organization that thinks, as well as acts, with strategic intent.

Many senior Coast Guard leaders will tell you that the second goal has become the first priority. Hundreds of officers, enlisted and civilian personnel have taken part in Evergreen core teams, workshops, and conferences. They looked into the future of the service through the lens of alternative scenarios and imagined new versions of the Coast Guard to fit new operating conditions. They learned to think strategically, and the service has benefited.

Evergreen also produced "strategies" that influenced the course of the Coast Guard: maritime domain awareness; the merger of marine safety and operations into sectors; guidance for the Strategy for Maritime Safety, Security and Stewardship; Arctic mission activities; and underwater mission activities are some examples. That history of success gave us a foundation for further exploring the process.

We set out to experiment with the strategy part of the process for several reasons. First, no matter how brilliant or prescient the strategies from Evergreen may have been, every time we attempted to build an implementation team, or required resource proposals to be measured against them, or sought an executive champion to carry them through, the effort often landed like most additional work on an office with an already full plate: dead on arrival. Rather than giving people new work to do, we needed to inform the work they were already doing.

Second, when previous workshops began to develop strategies to address their identified needs, we often found that the ideal people to do the job might not be in the room. That is not to say that the strategies were not well thought-out or valuable, but when they got distilled and synthesized what emerged was not easily actionable. We were asking Evergreen to do too much.

The fact was, there were good things being done all over the Coast Guard to address acknowledged strategic gaps. Introducing these strategies would influence those things in different ways. We learned that the solution space had to be left to the people who were actually going to implement the solution.

Finally, we struggled to find just the right place to insert Evergreen strategic insight in every cycle. The "program" level did not work well because strategies usually involved multiple programs and implied staggered implementation. The "budget build" level did not work well, due to the macro-level nature of the strategies and the very narrow and technical nature of the issues often evaluated in the budget process.

We have encouraged and supported "strategy development" in more appropriate places in the organization. We were determined that we would find a way to offer strategic guidance to both kinds of strategic decisions: those made in the course of formalized strategic planning, and those made in the course of daily tactical circumstances (but having strategic implications all the same). Of course, we never found one single replacement deliverable for strategies. Instead what has emerged is an interlocking set of products and processes that offer tailored strategic guidance to a wider range of users. Evergreen, therefore, becomes a support structure for strategy development and critical decision-making.

Strategic Needs

The collective strategies crafted in previous cycles were in many ways an isolated, independent cog, a rigid gear that we devoted considerable effort to forcefully engage into the many turning mechanisms of Coast Guard planning. We needed instead to find a way to make the gear flexible and have the ability to customize it so that it could synchronize smoothly where it needed to go in the various points of the gear train.

In the new version we spend much more time evaluating and understanding the requirements that would be placed on the Coast Guard in each scenario. The end product of the strategy workshops is not strategies, but robust strategic needs. Instead of a list of things the Coast Guard should do, we develop a comprehensive look at the future needs and requirements that the Coast Guard must meet. The difference is subtle but significant. The strategic needs do not provide solutions but rather "demand-side" strategic context, which is intended to be deconstructed and then reconstructed to more specifically inform the end user's subject or issue.

Tailored Workshops

Evergreen has evolved from a singular tool into a toolbox of options that can be combined and customized. It offers tailored products to support service-wide, program-level, or topic-area strategic thinking and planning:

- * Five Evergreen scenarios about the future global maritime operating environment;
- * List of Coast Guard Strategic Needs;

* Engaging high-level briefing that offers a stimulating macro-level look at future conditions impacting the U.S. government, Department of Homeland Security, maritime actors, and the U.S. Coast Guard; and

* Five operating models of the Coast Guard that match the demands of the five scenarios.

We used various combinations of these tools several times to further advance Evergreen insights into the service. Sometimes the scenarios and operating models were used as a backdrop to study specific issues against alternative futures such as Coast Guard operations in the Caribbean and the Coast Guard Reserve. In most other instances, we provided customized content from the Evergreen strategic needs as a focal point for further discussion within a particular topic area. In several cases, the results from the Evergreen workshops were deconstructed and rebuilt to guide strategic forums for executive leadership, to inform out-year budgetary guidance, support and shape long-range strategic planning initiatives, and offer strategic context to decisions with strategic impact.

The point is for Evergreen to provide strategic insight and a method of strategic thinking to those who are the most appropriate makers of particular strategic decisions. In many cases, that means Evergreen is a backdoor strategic contributor. It offers guidance and insight, but doesn't take center stage.

Every agency with a scope of responsibility beyond the near term needs to be in this business of thinking about the future. Project Evergreen has been used to mentor other organizations such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Border Patrol, Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, among others. Initiatives such as this one rarely manifest their value through one brilliant report or defining moment. Because senior leadership and vested participants have continuously supported it over the years, Evergreen reached a tipping point and became a regular organizational exercise. Through 15 years of rigorous strategic thought, the Coast Guard has pre-invested the type of analysis that is needed for the inevitable emergencies that arise during times of fiscal constraints. Rather than having to create this analysis from scratch, we can capitalize on the gains from many years of enormous intellectual capital.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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