

Have we lost art of just doing it?

Here's a question – is it better to plan or just do it?

Given constant warnings Mt Taranaki is about to blow its top, having a plan for that is sensible. But in other matters, the latter credo has a lot going for it.

Its popularity spread in the late 1980s after US sports shoe company Nike dazzled the American market by using the slogan in an ad campaign. It was later declared one of the great tags of last century and has survived into this one, partly thanks to an actor called Shia LaBeouf, whose two-minute video screaming of those compelling three words got him invited on motivational programme Ted Talks.

It continues to survive (just) as a philosophy in New Zealand, probably because we pride ourselves on being doers rather than talkers, but also because it's a reflex against that barrier to getting anything done – the strategic plan.

How can that be right you're probably asking. How can you hope to achieve anything if you don't have a strategic plan? And you'd be right... sort of. Strategy has been around for two and a half millennia and was first systematically employed by the military. No surprise there.

It was also picked up and refined by business, while governments have long had a benign version, embodied in the annual Budget, with a capital "B". But a fundamental change emerged in New Zealand in the 1980s (paradoxically, just before Nike's "just do it!" campaign). It turned strategising into something more sophisticated and, for bureaucrats, irresistible.

I first became aware of it in the early 1980s, not long after Brierley Investments took over NZ News Limited, owner of the Auckland Star. At Brierley's behest, we immersed ourselves in the modernised version of strategic planning, a process that lasted weeks, required many meetings (including one out-of-town sojourn to keep us docile), exposure to a guru - and production of a report weighing half a kilo.

Our responses varied. Some people glowed in the brilliance of it. Others fled the company. Along with some I suspect (we never discussed it), I filed the report in a bottom drawer and got on with doing the job. I did pause to reflect on what might happen if strategic planning in its new guise was ever embraced by government, central and local.

I pause now on the same reflection. It's not pretty. In my view, the strategic plan, which in theory seems like an irreproachable concept, has overwhelmed us. Government, central and local (and business) has been blinded by the process and paralysed from doing, at great cost in time, progress and money.

Add in well-meaning philosophies concerning privacy protection, risk aversion, political correctness and consultation and you have an intellectual and practical swamp that swallows much enterprise and doesn't even bother to spit it out.

Take New Plymouth's long-term planning. From the outside, it appeared shambolic, but what happened may have been the natural outcome of someone – Mayor Neil Holdom - having the stones to challenge the process. While his choice of what to "just do" was ill-conceived, I admire his chutzpah.

What may have been the final episode of New Plymouth District Council's long-term planning saga involved something epitomising all the negative things about strategic planning – the referee's report. It was feedback from the chief umpire, the office of the Auditor General, a government watchdog charged with making sure local bodies follow the rules.

The report is muddled. Sentences censuring the council for bad process are contradicted by "there, there, you're okay" reassurances. You're left with the impression the office was deeply concerned

about holes in the council's procedures, but sensitive about covering its backside should criticism rebound.

The mayor did the honourable thing and took responsibility. He had to if he is to work with his senior staff, who must accept a share of the blame. The problem for the rest of us is knowing what blame, exactly. In my view, it doesn't rest with individuals; as a process, strategic planning is now so mired up its own fundament it's a miracle we get anything done.

The first draft of the LTP was 500 pages long. It was cut to fewer than 300, then changed again. It could have been summarised in 20, with its overlapping major segments shunted into appendices. A short version presented for public reaction was open to charges of bias.

Nevertheless, don't give up on the idea of just doing it, Mr Mayor.