

So Who Needs a Strategy?

Why is it that we (men) get such a charge out of strategizing when it comes to sports, career objectives, competition of any kind with friends—or enemies—but we don't think personal relationships call for strategy?

If we have an objective, we need a strategy. With sports, our objective is to win. In our careers, our objective is...to win. In any kind of competition, our objective is...OK, so we are nothing if not predictable...to win. How each of us defines winning might be different, but we are generally driven by a desire to come out on top in any given situation. So how does this basic logic fail us when it comes to winning in marriage?

As far as I can tell, the problem most of us have when it comes to relationships is that we equate 'winning' with 'getting the girl.' Once we marry her, the competition is over; ergo, no further need for strategy. Until, of course, we are distracted by a trimmer, sleeker, shinier new model...and we start strategizing all over again!

What if we could see that the 'ride' we have is a rare collector's edition that makes our friends green with envy? What if our marriage gave us the buzz, the excitement and the sexy distractions we crave, without the destructive backlash? Most of us want our marriages to last and stay energized. But anecdotal evidence and recent divorce statistics suggest that it's just not happening. Why? Because we're doing it wrong. It's time we took a new and different approach

to marriage. Otherwise, we are doomed to continue making the same mistakes, and living with the same unsatisfying results.

I can't say that I spent a lot of time thinking about these things as a young man, nor did I enter marriage with all of this figured out. Waking up to the reality of what it takes to sustain an exciting and physically intimate relationship with my wife, Pat, was a gradual process of trial and error (as often as not...a trial for her and error by me!). Probably the most valuable lesson I learned over the years was also one of the toughest, and it finally sank in consciously when I watched my father, in his final years, reaching out to my mother—and I watched her pull away. Let me give you the background before I describe the particular scene.

My dad turned 80 in a nursing home. At that point in his life, he required constant care and supervision as he struggled with the effects of Parkinson's disease and senile dementia. When Dad's health first began to deteriorate, Mom tried to look after him herself, but his worsening condition and her advancing age made it just too much. In the end, she accepted the inevitable and moved

Dad into a facility where the staff had the expertise to deal with the daily challenges of his care.

Dad spent most of our visit chasing Mom around the table

On this particular birthday, since Dad couldn't come to the family, we made arrangements to bring the family to Dad.

All three of us 'kids,' our spouses and, of course, the grandchildren descended on the nursing home for a good old-fashioned family birthday bash. The nursing home was wonderfully cooperative. They welcomed us and made a private room available for our party.

As conversation swelled and the gathering became more animated, I noticed the liveliest one of the bunch was Dad. Although he was not overly responsive to us or the grandchildren, he paid

close attention to Mom. In fact, he spent most of our visit chasing her around the table; his eyes glued to her face as he reached out to touch her, clearly craving contact from the one person who had been a constant presence in his life for more than 50 years.

I watched him persist, following Mom around the room as she continued to evade him. I tried to understand why she wouldn't (or couldn't) respond to his efforts to connect. Maybe she felt guilty about placing him in the home? Even though, at 78, she had little choice. Uncomfortable and puzzled, I thought back over the years, remembering their relationship and the way they interacted with each other when I was young. If my memory served me right, reaching out was not typical for my father. My father seldom touched. Pieces began to drop into place in my mind and I realized that Dad was offering too little, too late.

Throughout their life together, Mom played the traditional role of wife and mother, while Dad, a Baptist minister, was out saving the world. Because he was an introvert functioning in an extroverted role, when he came home, he withdrew into his separate space and his silence, leaving Mom with an unsatisfied need for affection and contact. I never doubted my father's love for my mother, I just rarely saw him demonstrate it. Mom, having learned to live without those visible signs of affection, and being unaccustomed to such overtures from Dad, was not prepared to accept his sudden change in behavior, whatever may have triggered it.

Near the end of his life and stripped of his defenses, Dad instinctively reached out to the woman he had always loved. At some primal level, he was aware of my mother as his source of comfort and care, in spite of the dementia. His typical restraint had dissolved and only the need for touch from the one love of his life remained. But it is not easy to redefine the relationship of a lifetime in an instant, and my mother could not reciprocate.

Early in their marriage, likely following the example set for him by his father, my dad left my mother feeling emotionally abandoned. Even so, they built a good life and a solid marriage. A marriage in which they functioned like two pillars, joined at the base, together supporting the roof that protected the family, but essentially standing apart, isolated and self-contained. Although openly vulnerable in the beginning, my mother became more distant over time. Nat-

My dad didn't really think beyond showing up for the ceremony

urally distant from the start, my father finally became vulnerable, but living with Parkinson's disease for 25 years, and the barriers of a lifetime to overcome, it was too late to close the gap.

For me, seeing my mother's inability to lower the walls she'd built to protect herself during years of silence, and watching my father's confusion as she pulled away, was one of the saddest things I have ever experienced.

Three months after we celebrated his 80th birthday, my father died. Surrounded by the family he could no longer communicate with, he went quietly. We all got up to leave, deciding to go for breakfast rather than watch them wheel Dad away to some obscure back room for preparation.

Mom stood and followed us out.

"Mom," I whispered, "this is the last time you'll ever see him. You might want to say goodbye."

She stopped, momentarily flustered, then nodded and walked back into the room. Waiting in the doorway as she bent over him, I heard her cry out, "Bob, why did you leave me?"

Three times he had left her behind; first when he withdrew emotionally in those early years, then again when the dementia dulled his sharp intellectual awareness, and now his physical presence was also gone. I suspect (if anyone took the time to ask her),

she would say that of the three, it was the first departure that had the greatest impact on their life, their love and their marriage.

Throughout his lifetime, my father approached his ministry with a definite strategy: building and developing his congregation with the fierce dedication of an entrepreneur launching a new venture. If members of his church came to him with a problem, he would sit down and help them create a plan to overcome it. Even his own spiritual development was tackled with forethought and a pursuit of perfection. He was forever reading and attending courses, striving to become a better preacher and counselor. He had a clear vision of what a minister should be, and until the Parkinson's became pervasive, worked steadily toward that goal.

Yet, like many men, when it came to his marriage, my dad didn't really think beyond showing up for the ceremony. He was fully committed to family: setting an example in the community, serving as a strong father figure, and putting food on the table. But he expected the one-on-one relationship with my mother to be self-sustaining. With no conscious nurturing (no strategy), my parents' relationship did not have the chance to become much more than a stable environment for rearing children and a life of mutual accommodation. It could have been so much more.

Fortunately, I have some of my mom in me. Especially since I started out with much the same assumptions as my father did: I got the girl, I showed up for the ceremony, my work was done. Like Dad, I had no objective beyond 'catching' Pat, and I certainly had no strategy for the relationship. As an extrovert, though, I don't withdraw into silence very often (stop laughing, Pat!)...and I like to touch. I realize now that my parents provided both an example of commitment and devotion, and an example of how futile commitment and devotion can be when they are not expressed. At the time of my wedding, however, I was more interested in launching into life than reflecting about its eventual outcome. Luckily for me,

though, even when things went sideways between Pat and me, issues were tabled and dealt with...eventually.

On occasion, I was a little slow on the uptake. One day after a few years together, I noticed that my wife seemed increasingly less affectionate. Impromptu hugs and random touches had dwindled and I suddenly wondered why. When I asked about it she looked at me for a moment and then said, "One is rebuffed only so often, Dennis, before one starts to withdraw affection."

I felt a bit like a schoolboy being reprimanded. Fortunately, our relationship was strong and I know that she doesn't say things like that lightly or without justification. Rather than becoming angry and defensive, I was able to ask for more information. It seems that my preoccupation with work was making me unresponsive. While I enjoyed her impulsive gestures of affection (which sometimes ended behind closed doors), apparently I wasn't returning them. After awhile she began to feel ignored and unappreciated, so she stopped reaching out.

I'd like to say that she was being unfair and that it was all in her head, but she was right. While my dad regularly retreated into spiritual and academic musings, I had a tendency to bury myself in work, blocking out everyone around me. From what I've seen over the years, this is such a common pattern in marriage that it often goes unnoticed. So many couples experience the gradual withdrawal of affection, until there is no more touching, no more intimacy...no more sex. Ultimately, you end up like my dad did, alone in a nursing home with a wife who makes duty visits but can't bring herself to hold your hand.

This example wasn't the first wake-up call I received during our many years of marriage. One of the biggest came with the kids. We waited five years after marrying before having children, and

This new family and business model had fantastic results

then quickly made up for lost time by having three in a row in just over three years. At the time, I was heavily involved in building my insurance practice and typically put in 12- to 14-hour days, while Pat ran the household and stayed home with the children. It wasn't long after our youngest was born that Pat decided she'd had enough. One day, she announced that dinner would be ready at 6 p.m. every night and that I was expected to be there for parenting duty after dinner for the rest of the night.

For the sake of her sanity and well-being, Pat needed some time of her own, away from the children, to relax and be with friends. She was also perceptive enough to realize that my business was consuming me and that I wouldn't change my habits unless I had to. As a result of her new policy, I was forced to rework my business model and my growth plan to accommodate a more reasonable workday.

This new family and business model had fantastic results. For the first time since the children were born, I became an integral part of the family rather than just the breadwinner like my dad. I can now look back on all those great memories with Pat and the kids and know that I didn't miss out on the best stuff because I was too busy chasing business to be there.

An unexpected bonus of doing what was right for my marriage and my family was a flourishing business. I'd always taken a strategic approach to building my practice, so after my initial frustration with the new schedule, I completely revised my strategy to work within it. I was forced to become more efficient and more focused at work. With less time available to put into the business, every decision had to be focused on earnings. I changed my job description so that I only worked on issues that generated a higher revenue and delegated everything under that number to my staff. Working much shorter yet more productive days, my income steadily increased.

Of course, it took a number of similar situations before I began to recognize a pattern in my marriage. Things would be going well; I'd get wrapped up in work and start to take Pat and our relationship for granted; the environment would deteriorate until I finally noticed something was wrong (or Pat finally reached her limit); I'd snap out of it (or get snapped out of it) and realize that my marriage required some attention; things would go back to being good. At some point along the way it dawned on me—why not develop a winning strategy for my marriage? Instead of leaving everything to chance, I could make a plan. Closeness and physical contact were too important to me, Pat was too important to me, to risk losing them through neglect.

My strategy was nothing complicated at first. It was more a question of identifying a few things that I considered to be important to me in my marriage (like physical contact) and then thinking about actions I might take to ensure that those things would happen, as often as possible.

Pretty simple really. Not necessarily easy, but simple! The biggest challenge, always, was figuring out how to get the desired reaction from Pat, and I soon learned that the first step was getting to know my wife a lot better. In my profession, listening and understanding are the key components to identifying a couple's values so that I can build the proper financial plan for them. It was then pretty simple to start listening to Pat with a different filter so that I could better understand her.

I remember getting drawn into a conversation at a meeting about what husbands do to surprise and delight their wives with varying degrees of success. One woman shared the following story. One year on her birthday, her husband surprised her by sending her on a scavenger hunt. Each clue led to another clue in a different location. After traveling around town to several different places, she ended up at an exclusive women's lingerie store with

his bank card in hand, where she was told to spend as much as she wanted.

It was interesting to watch her body language and listen to her voice as she told the story. She was thrilled that her husband had made the effort to plan something for her in such detail. She found the whole adventure of the hunt exciting and fun, and was not coy about telling us that her husband achieved his desired outcome at the end of the day...in spades! She was only sorry that she would never really know if he planned the birthday surprise for her or for him. Ultimately, while they both benefited from his plan, she wonders if his actions were more about the result he wanted and less about pleasing her. Perhaps the fact that he's never done something like it since suggests this is the case. What this husband and others like him fail to recognize is that when you focus on pleasing, loving and cherishing your wife, both of you will feel better about your marriage and more loving toward each other and that will lead to better sex!

Then there was the time I heard both perspectives about another surprise gift. A friend of mine decided to buy an electric bike for his wife. I knew my friend was passionate about cycling, but I didn't recall his wife being particularly keen on it, so I asked him why. He explained that his wife didn't like to go bike riding with him, but the electric bike would make it easy for her to join him and 'keep up'—pedaling when she wanted to, and coasting when she was tired. So I asked him what she thought about the gift, to which he replied (with a grin), "She thinks it's great!"

Later, I had the chance to ask his wife the same question. Her response was less enthusiastic and tinged with frustration. "It's OK,"

Sometimes we focus so hard on what we want that we convince ourselves it's what our wives want, too

she said, “but I know he’s just making it possible for me to do what he wants, not him doing something for me.”

Somehow, without being aware of it, my friend missed the mark with the bicycle. Yet, this same friend makes a point of having flowers delivered to his wife at work, where she loves being called to receive them in front of her co-workers. Her response to the flowers is much more wholehearted, and I hear only pleasure and warmth in her voice when she tells us about her latest bouquet.

Like my friend and the bicycle, sometimes we focus so hard on what we want that we convince ourselves it is what our wives want, too. Unfortunately, this self-centered perspective may gain the quick point, while losing the pennant. To put it bluntly, if you attain the objective of having more sex in your relationship, but when you finish making love your wife tells you that it’s time to repaint the ceiling, what have you accomplished? A purely self-serving objective seldom leads to a winning strategy.

As for me, I may not get things right the first time, but gradually the key difference between the successful strategies and the not-so-successful ones become clear. In fact, I could sum it up in one sentence: *It’s not about what you get, it’s about what you give.* With this realization, I began to understand something that would make all the difference to Pat and me. After all, how many times had I ‘won’ an argument, either heated and nasty or cold and cutting, just because Pat finally backed down? So what, exactly, did I win? I didn’t feel like a winner when that happened. In fact, I felt angry and empty: like a loser. And do you think Pat felt like a winner? It seems to me, in a marriage, when only one of us wins, we both lose. Chances are we’ve all experienced the high of cheering on our favorite sports contender, or felt proud to have contributed to a friend’s achievement. So why not try a similar approach in our marriages?

For example, when we built a new home a few years ago, I made a few design changes to the kitchen so family or dinner guests could sit around the cooking area. It serves two purposes, which serves both our purposes: Pat is not separated from the conversation, and I can clean up behind her while I make sure everyone has enough to drink. Just as importantly, I have a forum to boast about Pat's cooking. Friends who hear me comment about her great cooking tell other friends about my compliments and it bounces back to Pat.

It's not about what you get, but about what you give

While I originally decided to use a more strategic approach in my marriage to help *me* achieve objectives that were important to *me*, it soon became clear that if I defined those objectives in purely selfish terms, I could not win.

No wonder we guys tend to mess this up. We can only win by helping our wives win—this is not a natural frame of mind for us. It sounds a lot like throwing the game. But it's not. It is just really good strategy. In fact, it's time for us to completely rethink the game. Even if we believe we 'won' our wives when we said our vows, it was actually just the draft pick. From that point on, winning becomes all about teamwork! OK, so maybe this should have been obvious from the beginning, but better late than never.

Armed with this new awareness, I started to do things a little differently. Whenever Pat made a passing reference to something she would enjoy doing, or would like to have, I noted it for future reference. If one of Pat's female friends described something someone had done as being particularly romantic or thoughtful, I noted it (because Pat likes romantic and thoughtful). I wanted to have a long list of actions, items and behaviors that I could use to make Pat feel like a winner. My objective became making Pat feel loved, appreciated and valued, without having to ask for it.

I started out by experimenting with this new approach, eager to see what a little strategy might accomplish. One Christmas, I arranged with a florist to have flowers sent to Pat once a month for the next 12 months. In her Christmas card I wrote, “Something bright and heartwarming will arrive once a month for the next year.” I picked random days of the year, except for her birthday, our anniversary, February 14 and the day after New Year’s, so that she did not have long to wait for that next gift. What I found was a direct correlation between my efforts and the degree of closeness Pat and I experienced, both physically and emotionally. Husbands often say that they don’t really care about emotional intimacy, they just want their wives to want sex more often. That may be because they think emotional intimacy means “Oh no! We’re going to talk about feelings!”

The emotional intimacy I’m talking about is a kind of unspoken connection that makes us automatically take care of each other’s

Marriage without a proactive relationship strategy is hazardous to one’s mental health

needs and recognize each other’s moods.

I’m talking about the look my wife throws me from across the room that says “Hey sexy, why don’t we sneak out of this party and...you know?” This is the kind of connection and intimacy that we all crave (whether we admit it or not), and so often

lack in our relationships, and in society

at large. Many wives fill the intimacy gap in their relationships by exercising their imaginations; for example, they read. It is no accident that one of the biggest selling book categories in North America, across all socio-economic groups, is the romance novel. Husbands, on the other hand, are less likely to recognize a lack of intimacy in their marriages (or to identify it as such) until it is too late.

Luckily, I know I crave intimacy—both emotionally and physically—and the lessons I learned early in my marriage showed me

how to create it, like being more affectionate when Pat wants to be, not just when I want to be. For example, when we're golfing together and Pat makes a great shot, she doesn't want a high-five for her efforts, she wants a kiss. Over time, I learned to use planned strategy combined with a less selfish focus almost without thought. I try to think about Pat first instead of me. But in the beginning, like anything automatic, I did take intimacy for granted. Early careless habits, such as not calling home when I was going to be late, were effectively corrected with a quick call, for example—but then a few new things crept into the mix. One particularly damaging habit-forming device turned out to be my Blackberry: the greatest piece of technology ever invented!

As I mentioned earlier, being completely absorbed in business has always been a tendency of mine. I had made significant changes in my business life in order to be more supportive of Pat and the family, with excellent results all-round. Pat knew that when I was with her, she had my undivided attention. That is, she did until I got a Blackberry and it began taking a bigger and bigger slice of my mental pie. In typical fashion, I didn't see that I was losing ground at home because of this new technology until Pat accused me of being "addicted to that thing on my hip," adding, "What's so damned important that you have to take it everywhere—even into the bedroom?!"

Once again Pat demonstrated just how well she knows me. As soon as my brain made the connection between 'irritated wife' and 'bedroom,' she had my complete attention. When I argued that this was my most effective tool for shortening the communication process, she countered that I'd be shortening a lot more than that if I intended to be open for business 24 hours a day.

Over the years, I have learned to listen when Pat makes a sincere effort to bring something like this to my attention, especially when she feels the need to hit me over the head with a verbal

sledgehammer. So now the Blackberry is turned off and put aside during personal time and I am again 100 percent present.

Thinking strategically is not static. In business and in competition (friendly or otherwise) we know that adjustments must be made, that review and revision are essential. The same applies to the strategic relationship. Success does not come from resting on our laurels. For me, Pat is always my best indicator of stagnating

If you don't stand for something, you'll fall apart over anything

relationship strategy and I do my best to pay attention. Even though I still wander off the plan from time to time, I know that listening, being responsive and making that effort is all part of my marriage commitment. I am grateful that Pat understands my need to be fully focused when I am

working, either at home or in the office. In return, I know that when I am with Pat, I must be with her all the way. And when I do miss the mark, making the effort to bring things back on track lets her know how much I value her and our marriage and tells her that my heart is in the right place.

So who needs a strategy? I know I do—and I suspect most men do. The lessons I've learned from watching my parents, reacting to my wife and interacting with friends all point to the same thing—marriage *without* a proactive relationship strategy is hazardous to one's mental health, not to mention damaging to one's sex life.

We know that if we want to succeed at anything, actively pursuing a goal is critical. This is just as true for marriage as it is for business, sports and any significant achievement. No doubt you've heard the adage *If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything*. When it comes to marriage, I think of that phrase with one slight variation: *If you don't stand for something, you'll fall*

apart over anything. Since I definitely don't want my marriage to fall apart, and I want it to stay filled with a lot more intimacy and physical contact than my parents experienced, I will continue to take a stand, follow a plan and aim for the goal of a marvelous, sexier marriage.

STRATEGY #1

Have a Strategy!

Be as strategic about winning in your marriage as you were about winning your bride. Just like your business, your career or your favorite sport, you can't win without a strategy. And when it comes to marriage, the key is in the teamwork!

If you *are* interested in taking a more strategic approach to your marriage for more fun, excitement, sex, or just because you want to know that the love of your life will love you forever—begin by asking yourself the following questions:

1. What is your long-term objective for your marriage?
List three specific aspects that would be part of that ideal marriage.
2. What three things could you say to describe your wife that you believe she would agree with? (You have to test this on her to measure the reaction or verify.)
3. If you were going to create a win-win strategy for your marriage, what one behavior would you do today that would make the biggest difference?

The answers to these first three questions will give you an idea of how you define a sexier, more satisfying marriage. The rest of this book will help you create a plan to make it happen.

Intended Results

I started with two overarching objectives when I decided to be more strategic about my marriage—making it last and

making it good. I defined 'good' as having fun together, enjoying each other's company and engaging in lots of hot sex. By following the strategies outlined in this book, I have achieved all this and more.

Unexpected Results

Along the way, I discovered some surprising unexpected results as well, not the least of which was the incredible impact of 'what goes around comes around.' It seemed, as soon as I focused my energy on creating a stronger, more loving marriage, the entire world wanted to help. Obstacles disappeared and people stepped forward to help from the most unexpected corners. Pat's girlfriends helped with ideas for presents and my guy friends stopped trying to encourage me to come join them if I said I was busy with Pat. And friends started being more positive with each other, which made our times together that much more fun.