Reserve time for wide-angle planning. As the research studies in Chapter Two suggested, planning is often and easily squeezed out from an ineffective manager’s day. It doesn’t demand your attention. But don’t neglect it. Invest time in thinking and planning ahead and it will pay you handsome dividends. Put some dates and times for it down in your diary now.

It is often useful to go away for a day or two with your associates or team for this exercise. Being in different physical surroundings can have the psychological effect of distancing you from your everyday life, giving you a new perspective.

WHAT AN OPERATIONAL PLAN SHOULD DO FOR YOU

Essentially an operational plan should show you and others a limited but feasible number of goals and objectives, together with plans for achieving them.

In a given calendar period, assuming you are not starting from scratch, a group of objectives/plans will be in various stages of completion. It is like managing a portfolio of shares, each with its particular contribution and level of performance.

The plan proper should detail exactly what steps have to be taken to complete the task. When you have thought forwards try thinking back from the end as well. This will help you to avoid leaving out essential steps.

A good plan will always answer the questions: Who? When? Where? How? What? and Why? If you are in doubt — or even if you are not in doubt — it is wise to check plans with someone else. You may be making some unconscious assumptions which another person will swiftly spot. Two heads are better than one.

What an operational plan will not do for you is make anything happen. It is no more than an architect’s blueprint. If you are only an architect and not a builder, nothing will happen.

On the other hand, a good operational plan will save you time — lots of it. Remember, research studies confirm what common sense tells you: the more time spent planning a project, the less total time is required for it. Imagine two groups tackling the same common task. Group A skims on planning: the leader is action-centred in the wrong sense of that phrase — he regards thinking as a waste of time. As a consequence Group A takes a long time to complete the task. For example, nobody is clear on the objective; alternative courses of action have not been explored.

By contrast, Group B takes adequate time to plan. The objective is made clear and definite; time limits and other boundaries are clarified. The optimum course of action or solution is chosen from a list of feasible options. There may even have been a brain-storming session to generate creative ideas. Everyone feels committed. The job gets done faster.

Fig. 5.2 Planning/Implementation Ratio

A casual observer in the planning phase may have given marks to the leader of Group A for decisiveness. But looking at the exercise overall it is clear who made the better decisions.

The principle that planning saves time applies at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Always work on this key principle that “Every moment spent planning saves three or four in execution.”