

SOAR don't SWOT: Asset Based Strategic Planning

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Are you feeling frustrated with conventional strategic planning processes? Do you feel like you are wasting your time and that of other board members and staff? Interested in an alternative that generates enthusiasm, creates positive momentum, and propels your organization toward a brighter future?

Research and experience show us that focusing on the strengths of individuals and organizations is much more powerful and effective than dwelling on deficiencies. An asset based approach to strategic planning is the SOAR which stands for Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results. The SOAR is based in Appreciative Inquiry – an approach which creates tremendous energy and great results through focused inquiry on strengths and successes.

The conventional wisdom about strategic planning embraces use of the SWOT analysis - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. This focus on weaknesses and threats is derived from a warfare mentality, which is based in a world view based in competition, where some win and others lose. The focus on problems (a result of talking about weaknesses and threats) is limited in effectiveness. There is a large literature on the negative consequences of focusing exclusively on problem solving as an approach which includes the following findings:

- problem-solving is driven primarily by a desire for relief, not results,
- problem-solving depresses groups and individuals,
- the cure is often worse than the disease, and
- most difficult, challenging situations are not solvable because they are in fact not problems.

In Barry Johnson's book *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*, he discusses how things that are often are viewed as problems are in fact polarities. An example of a polarity is stability and change. When viewed as a polarity, the positives and negatives of each "pole" can be identified, and strategies can be developed to "manage" them by staying in the realms of the positives while working toward an overarching state which would exist if the positives of each pole were experienced. Alternately, when viewed as a problem to be solved, one pole is viewed as bad and the other good, with a desire to stop or slow down one or the other. However, there can be no "solution" because there will always be both stability and change.

Another polarity is hierarchical and distributed leadership. There are advantages of each, and an attainable goal is to experience the best of both, rather than embracing an impossible goal to get rid of one or the other. Polarity Mapping is the process used to identify the polarities present in an organization and identify strategies to manage them. Using this process with groups produces huge Aha moments for participants, when they literally feel the relief of using a different lens or paradigm to view their current conditions and possibilities for the future.

There are often negative consequences of utilizing a SWOT analysis or deficit approach focused on problem solving during strategic planning efforts. These include:

- a lack of focus on the most important and highest impact goals,
- lack of shared vision,
- no plans to support goals, and
- no review or evaluation of the plan after it has been developed.

Another common experience is the lack of involvement in development of the plan by people who are responsible for the implementation of it, and planning is experienced as an event and not a process. Another contributor to these results, is the disconnect between the development of strategy and planning, and the focus on incremental goals which are seen as easily met given existing circumstances. Conventional planning strategies were designed for a world that was much different from today, it was much more predictable and the pace of change was much slower. Traditional planning processes lend themselves to a more static and predictable environment while strategy is more fluid, responsive to a changing environment, and is not often the result of a linear analysis.

Ever notice when discussing this topic and someone asks everyone in the room to raise their hand who has found a strategic planning process valuable -- that virtually no one raises their hand? The frustration with traditional strategic planning in the non profit sector is discussed in the Daring to Lead 2006 report. Their focus group findings include that Executive Directors are re-thinking strategic planning and want to move beyond categorical management – a fundraising plan, a strategic plan, a budget – to an integrated model for sustainability and deeper impact. A quote from a participant “I don’t want to say strategic planning because I hate what our world does around strategic planning. It’s strategic business sense. I need to be able to look farther than anybody else and lengthen my horizon.”

What is another option? The Appreciative Inquiry approach to strategic planning allows for a planning process that is dynamic, ongoing, and involves the entire system. The development of appreciative strategy using the SOAR approach, starts with a strategic inquiry phase. This includes discovery and exploration of the organizations strengths and opportunities. Then participants share and generate their aspirations and co-create a shared vision for the future. A vision which is not an incremental step up from existing conditions, but which is a bold leap that challenges people. Why is this so important and so different? Because bold visions for the future challenge, motivate, and unify people in a way that incremental improvement does not. After a vision has been developed, an organization develops recognition and reward programs that are designed to inspire employees to achieve measurable results. This keeps the process alive rather than producing a stagnant document which sits on a shelf.

The key to innovation is the continuous generation of little ideas – which when recognized and appreciated grow into major results. The SOAR approach develops a culture that supports the generation and development of these important little ideas. A New Framework for Strategic Planning by Stavros, Cooperrider, and Kelley discuss the lack of success with traditional methods and this powerful alternative. They offer several case studies of organizations with success using the SOAR approach. One example cited is the experience of the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. As a result of participating in the SOAR process, they identified their positive core as generating new and exciting ideas developed for real-world applications and adopted by employers. They developed this statement “ Bold Ideas. Lasting Impact” to guide them. It captures both what they are today and who they aspire to be. They are putting this into action with a Bold Thinkers Series and a Bold Ideas in Leadership Conference.

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