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HOW TO FACILITATE THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

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Strategic planning is one of the most common organizational practices in existence today. Almost all organizations facilitate some type of goal setting and planning activities at one point or another. Strategic planning can be defined as a systematic decision-making process to identify an organization's mission, primary goals, action plans, and operational roles. It allows you to more clearly define the purpose of the organization; to clarify goals and objectives for organizational members; to ensure more effective use of institutional resources; to provide a framework for organizational evaluation; and, when done effectively, to improve organizational performance. Much has been written on strategic planning, and, while there are a variety of ways to facilitate the process, this guide outlines the simplest, most straightforward approach and incorporates the following steps:

1. *Develop a mission statement.*
2. *Identify SMART goals.*
3. *Facilitate the force field analysis process.*
4. *Facilitate the action-planning process.*
5. *Evaluate progress.*

Develop a Mission Statement

A *mission statement* is a brief, formal declaration that describes the specific purpose of an organization. It specifies, in general terms, what the organization is trying to accomplish. It is used by the organization to create a vision in the minds of stakeholders such as employees and customers. Almost every organization has a mission statement; however, many are poorly developed or have never been used properly. An effective mission statement contains three elements:

1. It defines why the organization exists.
2. It describes what the organization should be doing.
3. It identifies who will receive the benefits of the organization's output.

A mission statement can be very helpful in communicating an organization's values and purpose. It tells customers, clients, employees, and other stakeholders what the organization is all about and what it values most. Unfortunately, many organizations make the mistake of allowing their mission statement to become dormant. You can avoid this by developing specific goals based on your mission statement, and by using it in your communication and marketing activities.

An effective mission statement articulates the organization's purpose in a clear and concise fashion. (See Figure 1 for an example of a brief, yet functional mission statement.) To develop an effective statement, key organizational stakeholders (e.g., top management) should work together to answer the following questions:

1. What does your organization do? (What is the nature of the organization's business? Why does the organization exist? What purpose does it serve?)
2. What are the desired results of this activity (the primary goals)?
3. For whom does your organization perform its functions? (Who is the primary client/beneficiary of the organization's output?)

Figure 1: Sample Mission Statement.

The mission of the ABC organization is to collect and compile data, make strategic decisions regarding that data, develop training programs, and provide staff assistance in state-of-the-art computer technologies for our internal clients, including the accounting, finance, and marketing departments. Our aim is to help our clients improve individual and departmental performance while reducing overall costs.

Identify SMART Goals

A goal is a declaration of a desired end state. It specifies where you want to be at a specific point in the future. Effective goals should be written using the SMART goal method. *SMART* is an acronym that describes the five characteristics of a well-written goal: *specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound*. Figure 2 provides a brief description of each of these characteristics.

Figure 2: SMART Goal Characteristics.

Specific: The goal is concise and stated in performance terms.
Measurable: It is easy to determine if the goal has been met.
Achievable: The goal is set high, but is also attainable.
Relevant: The goal is tied to organizational performance needs.
Time-Bound: The goal has a specific timeframe for completion.

Using the SMART goal method provides two benefits. First, it helps ensure that all employees concur when it comes to the direction of the organization. Because SMART goals are so clear-cut, it reduces the chance of confusion about goals and objectives on the part of the organization's stakeholders. Second, because SMART goals are clear and concise, determining whether they have been accomplished is easy, making it easier to assess progress toward goal achievement on an ongoing basis.

You can use the following model to write a SMART goal: "By the end of _____, we will _____, as demonstrated by _____." The first blank is used to specify the goal completion date. The second blank is used to describe the goal itself, while the final blank is used to identify how goal achievement will be measured. Applying this model ensures that the goal is time-bound, measurable, concise, and stated in performance terms. Figure 3 offers several examples of well-written SMART goals.

Figure 3: Sample SMART Goals.

- By the end of the second quarter of 2005, we will increase the quality of our six online training courses, as demonstrated by a 10 percent increase in utilization and by receiving at least 80 percent responses in the Very Good or Excellent categories from participant evaluations.
- By September 30, 2005, we will increase sales of our accounting computer training software, as demonstrated by a 15 percent increase in sales revenue.
- By the end of fiscal year 2005, we will significantly improve the accuracy of the budget process, as demonstrated by 90 percent of our functional areas being at or under budget.

Facilitate the Force Field Analysis Process

Once you have identified your SMART goals, your next step is to create plans that describe how these goals will be accomplished. However, before you develop action plans, it is helpful to analyze your goals to identify any potential barriers you may encounter. *Force field analysis* (FFA) is a relatively simple, highly effective way to do this. FFA was developed by the renowned social psychologist Kurt Lewin. Dr. Lewin offered a very basic idea. He suggested that any problem situation could be seen as a “sea of forces in motion.” Some of these forces are favorable to goal achievement, while some are unfavorable. Force field analysis is a process that involves identifying a current problem or goal (such as your SMART goals), identifying the *restraining* forces that can prevent the goal from being achieved, identifying the *driving* forces that are pushing for goal accomplishment, and developing a change strategy. Your change strategy can include:

1. Increasing the driving forces.
2. Decreasing the restraining forces.
3. A combination of both.

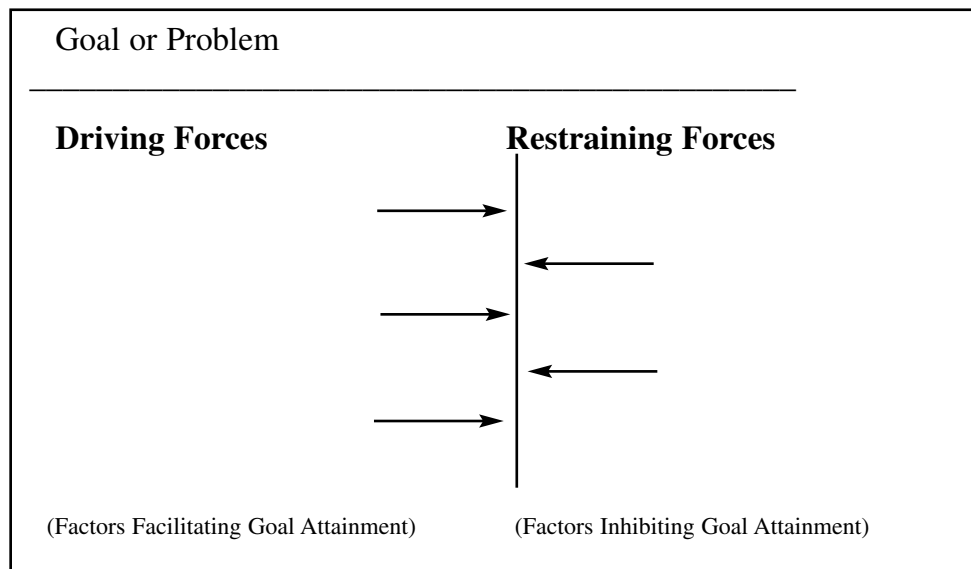
Figure 4 outlines the force field analysis worksheet. It allows you to look at any goal and better understand it by identifying the forces at work and their relative influence on goal attainment.

To implement the force field analysis process, you must first select the participants. The people most responsible for the achievement of the goals under consideration should take part in the process. Once you have the participants assembled, start by brainstorming the driving forces. You can do this by asking, “What are the factors that will help us achieve this goal?” List those factors on the left side of the worksheet.

Then brainstorm the restraining forces by asking, “What are the factors that can prevent us from achieving this goal?” List those factors on the right side of the worksheet. Once you have identified the driving forces and the restraining forces, the next step is to determine what can be done to strengthen the driving forces and minimize the restraining forces. You can do this in a variety of ways, but the easiest is to review each restraining force, one by one, by asking the participants, “What can we do to reduce the impact of this restraining force?” List the responses and identify the top two or three actions the group can take to minimize the effect of the restraining forces.

Repeat this process with the driving forces by asking, “What can we do to strengthen the impact of this driving force?” Once again, identify two or three actions the group will take. By using force field analysis, you can identify potential roadblocks well in advance and increase the likelihood of successfully achieving the SMART goals identified in your strategic plan.

Figure 4: Force Field Analysis.



Facilitate the Action-Planning Process

Once you have created your mission statement, identified the SMART goals, and analyzed the feasibility of each goal, your next step is to create action plans that outline how each of the SMART goals will be accomplished. An *action plan* is a list of specific steps that need to be accomplished to achieve a goal. Each step should identify the person responsible, the action to be taken, and a completion date. The resources required can also be included.

Table 1 illustrates a sample action plan based on one of the hypothetical SMART goals listed in Figure 3. As you can see, the action plan lists five distinct steps that will be taken to improve sales revenue. Key participants are identified for each step, and everyone involved knows exactly when each step is to be completed. Keep in mind that, when you create an action plan, the key persons should be listed by name and position.

Table 1: Sample Action Plan.

SMART goal: By September 30, 2005, we will increase sales of our accounting computer training software, as demonstrated by a 15 percent increase in sales revenue.

Action	Key Person(s)	Complete By
Determine exact sales figure for each product line over the past year.	Senior Sales Manager	January 30, 2005
Facilitate the new <i>Power Selling</i> training series for all sales representatives.	Sales Reps	March 1, 2005
Develop a sales strategy that will increase individual sales rep revenue. Each strategy will incorporate at least two of the <i>Power Selling</i> techniques introduced during the sales training series.	Sales Reps	March 15, 2005
Obtain approval for all individual sales strategies and launch.	Sales Reps and Managers	March 30, 2005
Evaluate individual sales strategies 90 days after launch by reviewing revenue streams for each sales rep.	Sales Reps and Senior Sales Manager	June 30, 2005

Evaluate Progress

Generally speaking, there are two types of evaluation for your strategic plan: formative and summative.

- *Formative* evaluation attempts to answer the question, “Are we on target to meet our goals?” It takes place at the midpoint of the planning period. Your aim is to determine if you are on track to accomplish the goals you have set and, if not, to make adjustments to the plan.
- *Summative* evaluation answers the question, “Did we achieve our objectives?” It takes place at the end of the planning period. Your aim is to determine if the goals set at the beginning have been accomplished and, if not, why.

The SMART criteria make the evaluation process easy to facilitate. You simply examine whether the SMART goals have been met. Since effective goals are specific and easily measured, you can always tell at a glance how you are doing.

Conclusion

Strategic planning can be an effective way to enhance both individual and organizational performance. It clarifies organizational goals and values for key stakeholders, and helps employees better understand their role in the organization. By using the process outlined in this article, you will be able to create a strategic plan in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

