

Learning Tree Management Insights

Expert Advice from Today's Top Professionals

Adapt and Survive: An Eight-Step Process for Successful Strategic Planning

We're all familiar with the adage, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." However, when advising management professionals, I like to say, "When the going gets tough, strategic people start planning." Why? Because during periods of instability and uncertainty, a dynamic strategic planning process provides both individuals and the organization with the clarity, focus and alignment needed to remain both productive and competitive. Best of all, there are very clear, concise steps that can be followed to ensure these desired outcomes are achieved.

To illustrate my point, let's consider this example: over a year ago, your organization merged with another. In this new environment, employees were confused and frustrated as constant change was the order of the day. Managers were challenged to keep their people focused and motivated even though they, themselves, couldn't keep up with shifting goals and objectives. Predictably, people longed for the "good old days" when they knew exactly what was expected of them.

To make matters worse, the economy suddenly soured creating a tough economic climate. Senior management, committed to making the merger work, decided to address the issue head-on by introducing a strategic planning process. The expected outcomes from this initiative were to be the tools that would help rebuild a spirited and collaborative team focused on delivering customer value.

Now here's the twist: several individuals, including yourself, were tasked by management to develop and implement this strategic planning process. Although you were pleased to be given the assignment, both you and your colleagues felt overwhelmed—especially when it came to researching the best way to approach your new responsibilities. It became abundantly clear that because no two businesses are alike, there was no real standard for creating a strategic plan. Fortunately, that's when you discovered an eight-step methodology that would help the team develop—and implement—both a process and a plan that could address the organization's unique needs.

Anita Caputo

This installment of *Management Insights* addresses the critical elements that contribute to successful strategic planning. Anita Caputo, author of *Promote Yourself* and an expert on work change resiliency, outlines a systematic process that is simple and effective.

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Upon reflection, the team is pleased with what they accomplished. Along with developing a strategic plan to guide the organization, their systematic approach helped management consider all their options thoroughly and knowledgeably. More importantly, strategic planning is now firmly established within the enterprise as a dynamic process that enables it to quickly and effectively adapt to whatever challenges the future may bring.

Here's how you can do the same:

1. **Assign resources—people and time.**
 - a) **Establish the key players.** The more people are included in the process, the greater the buy-in you will get in the final result, which increases the probability of success. Determine the players you need to get buy-in from to achieve success.
 - b) **Appoint a facilitator.** Choose someone who understands and has experience with the strategic planning process. An outside facilitator is most objective, but an internal facilitator adds value with their knowledge and experience of the business.
 - c) **Schedule a time and reserve a location off site.** Moving off site supports the perspective required. Create the agenda for the planning session.
2. **Conduct an environmental scan.** Begin the planning session by addressing the question, "Where are we now?" Conduct a SWOT analysis (**S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities and **T**hreats) to identify business opportunities that fit your mission and vision while avoiding those that don't let you leverage your strengths. Consider changing your vision and mission if you identify opportunities with potential too great to ignore. At the same time, don't let these opportunities displace your focus on defending against immediate threats to the enterprise.
3. **Focus on core competencies.** Your organization's core competencies are those strengths that give you advantages over your competition. To help you distinguish core competencies, determine which of your strengths provide access to different markets, whether that strength is a significant contributor to the perceived customer benefit of your end products/services, and if the strength is both unique to your organization and difficult for your competitor to emulate.
4. **Identify the future state.** State broad objectives of where you want to be. Where you are going should fit with your current vision and mission. If it does not, then you should revise your current vision and mission to point your organization toward its desired future state.
5. **Complete a gap analysis.** Understand the difference between your organization's current and future state.
6. **Formulate strategies.** Brainstorm strategy options that close the gap. The key question to answer is "How do we get to where we want to be?" Any answer can be the desired answer, so you shouldn't be afraid to generate multiple ways of getting to your desired future.
7. **Implement strategies. Execution matters.** Some of the best defined plans fail in the execution stage. It is critical to translate the broad strategies into SMART (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ligned, **R**ealistic/Relevant and **T**imebound) goals and plans that are understood and actionable at the functional level of your organization. This stage includes identifying the necessary resources required during implementation—including money. A budget identifies the financial resources required to implement the plan.
8. **Measure the results.** The plan sets the standard for the performance that you want your organization to achieve. The actual performance results need to be measured and evaluated. Based on those evaluations, actions need to be taken to align performance with the plan; similarly, the strategy may need to be adapted because of changes in the environment.

Your persistence and hard work will pay off as you begin to see the results of effectively communicating and executing your strategic plan. At its most effective, your plan will provide a coordinated and systematic way to move forward—documenting where the organization is going and how it's going to get there. It will also drive clarity into the organization's day-to-day activities, facilitate the communication of common goals, provide a foundation for decision making and help align management actions. Furthermore, a carefully constructed strategic plan will become the map used by employees to navigate their way and stay on course.

Once established, strategic planning will be recognized within the organization as a dynamic process that enables it to continuously adapt and flourish.

About the Author

Anita Caputo is the author of *Promote Yourself* and coauthor of *Learn to Bounce: From a High-Tech Layoff to Your Ideal Work*. As a Learning Tree instructor, she teaches Course 252, "Strategic Planning," Course 222, "Leadership Skills: Success Through Teamwork," and Course 290, "Management Skills."

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