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Thinking about Strategic Planning
Remarks

Robert Wedgeworth
President
ProLiteracy Worldwide
Syracuse, NY, USA
http://www.proliteracy.org

Abstract

Strategic planning as a disciplined way of thinking is defined and modeled for workshop participants in order to understand the principles and the key steps involved in developing and analyzing strategic alternatives. The model may be used or modified as may be appropriate for specific library situations. As the model demonstrates, strategic planning can be used in large or small libraries, or in rich or poor libraries.

Introduction

Strategic planning is a disciplined way of thinking about an organization as a whole in order to determine how decisions made today may affect the organization over a given period of time. It is a process that links short term, medium term and long term plans. It allows management to assess the relative value of alternative courses of action.

Why is strategic planning necessary? Even organizations with ample resources cannot do everything. Therefore, the question becomes how to maximize the use of the

resources that are available. Strategic planning does not forecast or predict the future. Fundamentally, it asks, "What is the most appropriate course of action, given the capabilities of our organization and the circumstances in which we operate?"

Five stages will be described: plan to plan; framing the decisions; strategic alternatives; analysis of alternatives; and creating the plan. There are many different approaches to strategic planning. In one-way or another these five stages are usually present. The process modeled here is a simplified version of several processes I have used in NGO's that I think are applicable to libraries.

Plan to Plan

Preparing to plan requires some thought because it establishes the credibility of the process and facilitates its progress. The key questions that must be addressed here are:

- Who will be the participants in the planning process?
- How often will they meet?
- Where and how will they meet?
- Who will receive reports of their progress?
- What resources will the planners have?

Leaders and key individuals on the staff should be members of what we shall call the strategic planning group (SPG). Establishing the terms under which the SPG will meet conveys a commitment to support the group with whatever they will need to carry out their responsibilities. The SPG will need to keep records from which to prepare periodic reports. Also, provision may need to be made for participants who have to travel to get to the meetings. In a small organization planning to plan is a simpler process.

Framing

The strategic planning process begins by setting the boundaries of the planning process. We call this framing the decisions. The first order of business is to determine what aspects of the organization will not be considered? Another might be that SPG will not reconsider the name of the library. Also, the SPG will not spend time assessing matters that are prohibited by current policy. The mission, purpose and values of the organization are integral to setting the boundaries of the strategic planning process. All of the decisions considered are intended to advance the mission and purpose of the organization consistent with its values. In framing the strategic planning process, a library with a tradition and commitment to serving children would not consider decisions that would curtail or eliminate service to children. A strategic plan must have a time frame for the decisions it will consider. Usually a 3-5 year time frame is acceptable.

Consistent with its mission, purpose and values, the leaders of any library must have the perspective that at any given point there are alternative decisions that can lead to different outcomes. It is the responsibility of the leadership to evaluate the alternatives

and make the decisions that seem best for the library. In reality, many of these decisions are made because, "that's the way it has always been done." Other decisions are made because they represent less uncertainty or risk. Still other decisions are made because they will not require too much change. All of these are valid considerations. A strategic planning process provides the basis for weighing alternate courses of action against each other to decide what seems to be the most appropriate decision for that period of time.

Themes

As you can see in the table below, I have selected several alternative strategic themes that SPG might consider reasonable to pursue. Themes can originate from "brainstorming" sessions. The definition of each of the themes follows.

Status quo refers to the library as it currently operates. All strategic alternatives need to be assessed in comparison to the current situation. In other strategic planning processes a situation audit defines the status quo at the beginning of the process. Note that In this model, the status quo gets analyzed along with the other strategic alternatives.

Children and young adults is a theme that focuses efforts on serving a clientele from age 5 to age 16 while de-emphasizing or holding constant services to other users. The age limits may be defined to fit the situation. Other services may be held constant or cut back until this theme has reached satisfactory levels. Resources may be re-allocated from other services to concentrate on the theme.

Adult education is a theme that focuses on adults as parents, as workers, and as individuals with special needs and interests. It could include an emphasis on literacy training. Resources would be concentrated in this area while holding constant or de-emphasizing investments in other services.

Rural library service is a theme that focuses on the needs of users who generally live where there is little infrastructure. Such users often find libraries inaccessible. This theme develops alternative ways to reach this population. Resources would be concentrated on this service while holding constant or de-emphasizing services to other users.

Metropolitan information service is a theme that focuses on services to professionals (attorneys, physicians, engineers) and government officials. The purpose would be to make available information services that meet their specialized needs at times and places that are conveniently accessible to them. Resources would be concentrated in this area until a desired level of service has been attained. Investments in other services would be held constant or de-emphasized as required.

ALTERNATIVE THEMES

THEME				
STATUS QUO				
CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS				
ADULT EDUCATION				
RURAL LIBRARY SERVICE				
METRO INFORMATION CENTER				

Table 1

These strategic themes have been selected to illustrate choices that may be appropriate for a given library to make. Emphasizing these services does not mean giving up all other services. However, it does raise the difficult question of how to reallocate resources in order to concentrate in those areas that are of strategic importance to the library. This is a critical concept for until resources have been allocated to support decisions, it is only talk. Strategic planning is about making decisions and committing resources, not just discussing them. Ultimately, the top leadership of the library must make the final decisions on strategic direction. This will often mean persuading a board and/or key government officials that the benefits of the strategic choices outweigh any costs or other disadvantages. Users whose interests may be curtailed or eliminated can often create difficult political situations. That is one reason why strategic choices must be weighed carefully.

Analysis

For purposes of this workshop I have employed a practice model of a strategic planning process that emphasizes test comparisons of alternative strategic themes. These themes will be analyzed for their strengths and weaknesses. The results of the analysis will allow us to display each alternative strategy along with the values assigned to each component of the strategy. Further, in comparing the alternatives we can determine which components add value and which do not.

For purposes of comparison, the model utilizes four common areas of library decision-making.

- ❏ What user population will be served?
- ❏ What will be the structure of the library?
- ❏ What services will the library offer?
- ❏ What resources will be necessary?

User population alternatives

Over the past century libraries have devoted much time and attention to developing collections, creating systems for accessing these collections and building specialized facilities to house the collections and users. Comparatively speaking, little time and attention has been given to the study of the characteristics of different types users. Many libraries do not have a precise answer to the question of what users they serve. More importantly, they do not have a precise answer to the question of what users they do **not** serve. Yet we know that the collections, services, staffing and resource levels vary significantly with the user population being served.

USER POPULATION ALTERNATIVES

THEME	USER POPULATION			
STATUS QUO	CHILDREN			
CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS	CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS			
ADULT EDUCATION	YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULT LEARNERS			
RURAL LIBRARY SERVICE	CHILDREN, YOUNG ADULTS ADULT LEARNERS AND ADULT READERS			
METRO INFORMATION CENTER	YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULT READERS			
	PROFESSIONALS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS			

Table 2

Structural alternatives

How well a library relates to its user population will be enhanced or inhibited by its organizational structure. By this we mean its physical structure, including technologies. Some years ago a major American city hired a public library consultant who advised it to reconsider building a new central public library. Instead, the consultant recommended

that the city build five to seven regional libraries that would support and coordinate the branch libraries in each region.

The city rejected this recommendation because it would mean giving up the opportunity to build a monumental library comparable to those in New York or Boston. It was hard for many observers to believe that the value of this cultural symbol was more important than the benefits that would have gone to each region of the city had they followed the consultant's advice. Libraries in cities and towns, colleges and universities, as well as more specialized institutions, have to face similar questions at various points in time. How they answer these questions is less important than the process by which they reach their decision.

STRUCTURAL ALTERNATIVE

THEME	USER POPULATION	SYSTEM STRUCTURE		
STATUS QUO	CHILDREN	READING ROOM		
CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS	CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS	LIBRARY BUILDING		
ADULT EDUCATION	YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULT LEARNERS	LIBRARY BUILDING W/ INTERNET ACCESS		
RURAL LIBRARY SERVICE	CHILDREN, YOUNG ADULTS ADULT LEARNERS AND ADULT READERS	ADMINISTRATION BUILDING W/ BOOKMOBILE SERVICE		
METRO INFORMATION CENTER	YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULT READERS	LIBRARY BUILDING W/ SEVERAL BRANCH LIBRARIES W/ INTERNET ACCESS		

Table 3

Services alternatives

Typically, libraries offer collections that may be consulted by users, and, in many instances taken outside the library for further consultation. They also offer reference assistance, and increasingly, access to resources beyond the library via online catalogs and Internet connections. Within these basic services are many variations that are determined primarily by the choice of clientele to be served. Each of the choices outlined above has political, economic, social and cultural implications. This adds to the complexity of assessing alternatives, but also represents why it is essential to do so.

Collections can be defined to be as comprehensive or general in scope. Collections can include or exclude formats other than the printed book. Services may include or exclude staff assistance. These differences have mostly qualitative and economic implications. It is more expensive to build a comprehensive collection than a general one. At a university the quality of work produced by students and faculty may justify the additional expense. However, even the best universities do not emphasize all subjects. Therefore, the expense of some subject collections may be restricted in order to concentrate resources on collections in subjects for which the university is noted. In a public library reasons for building stronger collections in some subjects may depend on what industries are located in the area, what is of historical significance in the area, or what special funds are available to subsidize collections in specialized subjects. Sometimes it is necessary to narrow the range of quality for certain services in order to achieve the economic impact desired. The level of staffing is another means of improving the quality of services to specific user populations. Determining the range of services appropriate for a given library is a provocative topic for the staff as well as interested users and supervising officials.

SERVICES ALTERNATIVES

THEME	USER POPULATION	SYSTEM STRUCTURE	SERVICES	
STATUS QUO	CHILDREN	READING ROOM	MAGAZINES AND NEWSPAPERS W/ NO STAFF	
CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS	CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS	LIBRARY BUILDING	CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULT COLLECTION W/ NO STAFF	
ADULT EDUCATION	YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULT LEARNERS	LIBRARY BUILDING W/ INTERNET ACCESS	CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULT COLLECTION W/ STAFF	
RURAL LIBRARY SERVICE	CHILDREN, YOUNG ADULTS ADULT LEARNERS AND ADULT READERS	ADMINISTRATION BUILDING W/ BOOKMOBILE SERVICE	ADULT READER AND ADULT LEARNER COLLECTION W/ STAFF	
METRO INFORMATION CENTER	YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULT READERS	LIBRARY BUILDING W/SEVERAL BRANCH LIBRARIES W/ INTERNET ACCESS	CHILDREN, YOUNG ADULT, ADULT LEARNER AND ADULT READER COLLECTION W/ STAFF	
	PROFESSIONALS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS	MULTIPLE RENTED SPACES FOR INTERNET CENTERS AND REFERENCE SERVICE	INTERNET REFERENCE COLLECTION W/ STAFF	

Table 4

Resources alternatives

Traditionally, libraries have been supported by public funds granted by government agencies at the local, state or provincial, or national level. In many countries libraries are also supported in part or totally by private funds. Other resources are contributed to libraries in the form of cash donations, equipment and/or library materials. Many libraries also charge fees for various services for which library funds are not used. Taken together, these funding alternatives represent the major ways libraries obtain the resources they need. They are also alternatives that may be pursued aggressively in order to increase resources where the opportunity presents itself. Whether it is a special grant to establish a new service or an increased appropriation to improve existing services, strategic planning helps the library's leadership focus its efforts to achieve resources commensurate with its objectives. Now let's look at the practice model.

Estimating resources available in the future can be a challenging assignment. Yet, it can be done. The starting point is the past history of how the library has been financed and what may be foreseen as affecting those sources of funds in the future. The next step is to assess the prospects of receiving funds from new sources and what will be required to accomplish that. These are tasks we will discuss in the next phase.

RESOURCES ALTERNATIVES

THEME	USER POPULATION	SYSTEM STRUCTURE	SERVICES	RESOURCES
STATUS QUO	CHILDREN	READING ROOM	MAGAZINES AND NEWSPAPERS W/ NO STAFF	PRIVATE FUNDS AND FEES
CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS	CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS	LIBRARY BUILDING	CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULT COLLECTION W/ NO STAFF	LOCAL GOVT. FUNDS AND FEES
ADULT EDUCATION	YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULT LEARNERS	LIBRARY BUILDING W/ INTERNET ACCESS	CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULT COLLECTION W/ STAFF	LOCAL AND PRIVATE FUNDS W/ FEES
RURAL LIBRARY SERVICE	CHILDREN, YOUNG ADULTS ADULT LEARNERS AND ADULT READERS	ADMINISTRATION BUILDING W/ BOOKMOBILE SERVICE	ADULT READER AND ADULT LEARNER COLLECTION W/ STAFF	LOCAL, PRIVATE, NATIONAL FUNDS W/ NO FEES
METRO INFORMATION CENTER	YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULT READERS	LIBRARY BUILDING W/SEVERAL BRANCH LIBRARIES W/ INTERNET ACCESS	CHILDREN, YOUNG ADULT, ADULT LEARNER AND ADULT READER COLLECTION W/ STAFF	LOCAL, PRIVATE, NATIONAL, INTERNATIONAL FUNDS W/ NO FES
	PROFESSIONALS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS	MULTIPLE RENTED SPACES FOR INTERNET CENTERS AND REFERENCE SERVICE	INTERNET REFERENCE COLLECTION W/ STAFF	

Table 5

DEVELOPING AND TESTING ALTERNATIVE THEMES

Developing and testing alternative themes across the areas of common decision-making is at the heart of this model. The choices in each column are listed in order of increasing complexity or cost. These are illustrative choices that may be modified to fit many different combinations as may be appropriate for a specific library. As you can see, the choices within each column may be quite different for each of the themes, although they may be the same for certain themes.

Each of the choices in each of the columns has to be defined and analyzed in terms of costs and benefits. Only after these choices have been analyzed can the themes be compared. Some of the analysis and assessment questions might include the following.

- In our community what are the benefits from a focus on children and young adults?
- In our community who benefits from a focus on adult learners?
- What are the relative costs of serving different user populations?
- What are the relative costs and benefits of the organizational structure?
- What are the relative costs and benefits of different programs of service?
- What are the relative prospects for developing resources from the sources identified?

Evaluating the strategic alternatives

The purpose of the analyses is not to arrive at precise answers to the questions. Answers represent reasonable estimates of value that can be agreed upon by the SPG. The purpose of these analyses is to be able to compare the strategic themes with each other. Once the strategic choices in each column have been analyzed, the choices that are appropriate for each theme form separate strategy alternatives. A practice exercise might be to select or modify and select choices in each column for each of the themes.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of strategic planning is establishing the value of alternatives by analyzing the costs and benefits associated with each of the components of the strategy. Once again, the purpose of the analysis is not to arrive at a precise value, but to agree upon reasonable estimates that can be used for comparisons.

One method of establishing a value for choices is to use a scale of 10. For example, the value of library service to one child could be assigned a value of 1. The value of service to a young adult might be 3 because they are nearer to being able to contribute to the community. The value of an adult may be 5 because they will improve in their capabilities as parents, workers, and participants in the community. Estimate the number of individuals that can potentially be served in each category. Library statistics are a good resource for estimates. Multiply the estimate for each category of user by

the value assigned to that category. The result is a comparative value for each category. Here again, the values do not have to be based on precisely accurate estimates. They only need to be reasonable estimates for purposes of comparing the strategic alternatives. For establishing other values, general experience, library budgets, and other records may be used. Where the records do not exist, planners have to rely on their own experience to make reasonable estimates. Once you have the value of the costs and benefits for each of the strategic alternatives, they can be compared to each other.

Analyzing the choices in the resources column establishes estimates of what funds can be acquired or raised to support the strategic choices. If a strategy requires increasing the budget by 20%, but the analysis shows that the budget can only be raised by 15% the strategy is at risk. Either further analysis must show evidence of prospects for more resources, or the strategy must be modified to be less costly. This is the process of selecting the combination of choices from the alternatives that returns the greatest value.

Once a strategic plan has been developed the next step is to translate it into an implementation plan. An implementation plan proposes action steps to achieve each strategic objective within a stated period of time and within the limitations of the resources projected for the period. For this workshop, focusing on the elements of the strategic planning will suffice.

Conclusion

Strategic planning is a disciplined way of thinking. It develops alternative courses of action that may be considered, analyzes them and compares them to determine where the most value lies. From this analysis may emerge a composite alternative strategy that when implemented, allows planners to identify those strategic directions that may represent a greater value than any of the alternatives or the current course of action. The keys to successful strategic planning are the amount of effort devoted to the selection of the themes, and the amount of time and effort devoted to the comparative analysis of the strategic alternatives.

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