

Assess the State of Your Strategic Plan

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In the fall of 2000 the director of the University Libraries of Notre Dame learned that the university would begin a campuswide strategic planning effort the next academic year. I had recently joined the library from a management consulting firm specializing in strategic planning and had already expressed my interest. The director and I agreed that we should assess the state of the library's planning in order to prepare for the university-wide effort. She asked me to form a task force to investigate library documents that might be relevant, to assess whether or not there was a discernible strategic plan, and to present the findings. In its two and a half months of existence, the Task Force on Communicating the Goals and Directions of the University Libraries did not engage in strategic planning, but it did thoroughly assess the state of the library's planning. The strength of the assessment was that it was done outside of a planning process. Because of our success, I am convinced that your organization should take a moment to assess the documents you have written in order to determine where you already are. This should be done before you begin a strategic planning process.

The task force was formed in early January and submitted its final report on March 30. The group consisted of the business reference librarian (who was also pursuing his MBA), the library's budget officer, the director's executive assistant (who had more than fifteen years of experience), and myself (a former corporate librarian with five years of experience). One of the strengths of the group was its diversity of membership: library faculty, managers, and staff, as well as varying years of experience. We avoided some of the mistakes of the past by having a staff member with solid experience during the various eras of the organization.

Having only two and a half months to do the work assigned, in addition to regular duties, forced us to focus on the essential. It was to our benefit not to get bogged down in the details. The task was to assess the state of the library's planning, not to research and analyze it. There were four phases of our work:

- define planning in general and also specific types of planning;
- determine which type of planning framework was best suited to organize the library's official planning documents and put them into that framework;

- evaluate the documents in the light of the framework (including conflicts between or among them) and assess how well they formed a coherent whole and communicated the plan; and
- recommend a future planning process.

Planning versus Strategic Planning

The first task was to understand clearly what planning is and is not. It was also important to communicate this understanding to library administrators and managers. We were not looking for the world's best definition of planning, but we were looking for a good one. We settled on the following: an "analytical process which involves an assessment of the future, the determination of desired objectives in the context of that future, the development of alternative courses of action to achieve such objectives, and the selection of a course, or courses, of action from among those alternatives."¹ This gave us a general definition of planning.

Next, we wanted to understand what types of planning occur in an organization. Some examples are organization-wide, corporate, financial, departmental, and committee. From that discussion, we decided that the type of planning to be assessed was the library's corporate planning—perhaps down one layer in the organizational chart, since the library is organized into three broad divisions. Then, we reviewed the different types of corporate planning. One of the best documents regarding this is the ARL SPEC Kit 210.² This survey reminded us that strategic planning is not the only organizational planning method. Also, a review of the library's history showed that the library had tried various corporate planning schemes in the past, for example, zero-based budgeting and total quality management (TQM). From our cursory overview, we confirmed that strategic planning did seem the most comprehensive and that it had the most opportunity for success in our organization.

A Strategic Planning Process

The next phase involved reviewing the various strategic planning processes available and assigning a place in the framework for the existing documents. Since there seems to be a new process every couple of years, we surveyed the landscape and settled on a few that were good enough. We found about five strategic planning processes, wrote the steps for

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each on a blackboard, compared them point by point, and chose the best. We were tempted to create our own by combining the best ideas from several plans, but determined that it was all or nothing. The one chosen was Bryson's *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*—its advantage is a focus on nonprofit organizations. Bryson's process consists of the following ten steps:

- Initiate and agree on a strategic planning process.
- Clarify organizational mandates.
- Identify and understand stakeholders; define and refine mission and values.
- Assess the environment to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats [SWOT].
- Identify and frame strategic issues.
- Formulate strategies to manage the issues.
- Review and adopt the strategic plan.
- Establish an effective organizational vision of the future.
- Develop an effective implementation process.
- Reassess strategies and the strategic planning process.³

The unique step in Bryson's process is the review of mandates imposed by governing bodies. In our case, this body would be the university; for a public library, it might be the city government. The only thing unusual about Bryson's process is that the formulation of a vision statement is postponed until step 8. His view is that a vision cannot be formed until other information—the mission, external threats, and so on—is determined.

We then gathered all of the library's documents that looked like they might be part of a strategic plan: a mission statement, vision statements, and statements of directions and challenges. We were creative and looked for things in unusual places (for example, presentations given by the library director to the advisory council). Since one of the task force's charges was to round up these documents and make them available in a central location, this was also a benefit of our preplanning process assessment. In our case we found documents for each step as follows:

- *Strategic planning process identification.* We found no statement on the process itself or on previous processes used.
- *Organizational mandates identification.* We used the university's mission and values statements.
- *Mission and values statements.* We found three documents that could serve as a mission statement and one that could serve as a values statement.
- *SWOT analysis.* We found no documents presenting the results of any previous SWOT analysis.
- *Strategic issues analysis.* We found no documents presenting the results of any previous analysis.
- *Strategy formulation.* We found several documents labeled "directions" and "challenges."

- *Strategic plan.* We found no plan pulling various other documents together into one coherent whole.
- *Vision statement.* We found two documents that could serve as a vision statement.
- *Implementation plan.* We found no documents that would serve as an implementation plan.
- *Reassessment.* We found no documents presenting the results of any previous analysis.

Assessment of the Library's Plan

Having chosen a framework, gathered the available documents, and assigned them a place in the framework, we began the assessment phase. First, we made sure to understand how to define the various types of documents and how to characterize the best examples. *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations* was helpful, but we also looked for definitions and characteristics from other sources. However, the assessment was not supposed to be a research project. The focus was on "better" definitions (one or two) and characteristics (two or three) rather than trying to find the "best." Next we began to assess the documents. When the process said "develop and refine mission and values," we assessed the documents that might serve as mission statements to see if they met the criteria for a good one.

An example of this process is our assessment of the library's mission statement. We assessed it in several ways: on its own, in relation to other competing statements, in relation to other documents that would govern it or be directed by it (for example, organizational mandates govern the mission statement; the mission statement governs strategic issues), and in relation to our sense of the library's current strategic thinking (in the absence of a formal plan). We asked ourselves, Was this mission statement good? If not, briefly why not? What needed to be done to improve it? How did it compare to another statement that looked like a mission? Was it better or worse? Which was more recent? Did it relate to any governing documents or documents governed by it in the ways it was supposed to? If not, why not? What needed to be done to make it relate properly? Did it correspond to our sense of the library's current thinking?

As we began to work, it became clear that some of the library's planning documents were fine on their own; however, since they had not been written in conjunction with one another, none related very well to others. At this point, we decided to limit the work to a more thorough assessment of the mission statement and the strategic issues (or goals, directions, or challenges) statements. We felt that by presenting findings on these two steps, we could effectively characterize the state of the library's planning.

We evaluated the mission statement using a definition by Jack Deal. According to him, a mission statement should say who you are, what you do, what you stand for, and why

you do it.⁴ The task force concluded that our mission statement should be shorter, more powerful, unique to Notre Dame, and reviewed more regularly.

When evaluating the directions statements, we recognized immediately that since they were not written as strategy statements, they could not be expected to meet the evaluation criteria articulated by Bryson. According to Bryson, an effective strategy statement fits with the organization's philosophy and core values, works technically, addresses concerns of key stakeholders, and furthers the organization's pursuit of the common good.⁵

When evaluating whether the mission statement governed the best directions statement available (see the library's *Access* newsletter, May 1998), the task force determined that since they were not written together as part of a strategic plan, they did not support each other. For example, "Collecting library materials in all formats necessary to support course work, research and service" from the mission statement was compared to "Focus greater attention on developing library collections and information resources" in the directions statement. Both are written at the same general level, though they say something slightly different.

What Next?

The final phase was to make a recommendation. This is where we began to run into difficulties. Clearly, if strategic planning was good for the library, and if Bryson's strategic planning process was good enough for an assessment of the state of our planning, then the libraries' documents did not form a coherent strategic plan. The obvious questions were whether they could be modified to make a coherent plan, and, if not, what should be recommended to the library's management group? Unlike the other phases, there was nothing available in the literature to help. We concluded that, on the one hand, the documents could be modified to look like a strategic plan, but that those changes would be so radical that the task force would be setting the direction for the library. On the other hand, we hesitated to recommend starting from scratch because the literature is very clear about the success rate of such an endeavor—it is a process fraught with difficulties, and a solid strategic plan is uncommon.⁶ After much debate, we settled on four mutually exclusive options, each with an increasing commitment of resources, but with options that would be available to every organization:

- heighten awareness and manage expectations about strategic planning,
- reconcile the formal statements with the framework of a strategic plan by using a small committee with limited input, primarily from senior management,
- rework the mission statement, strategic issues, and strategies with broad input, and pilot the strategic planning process with just one department, or

- create a complete strategic plan with broad library-wide input.

Based on our assessment, we cautiously recommended the last option: the creation of a complete strategic plan with broad input. Others organizations might choose a different option. For example, a library might find that its planning process is sound with only the need for some fine-tuning. It would choose the first option. Another library might find that there is little time for the complete strategic planning process, and thus need to choose a process where there is only limited input from outside the management group—the second option. However, a short assessment is extraordinarily helpful in determining the best course of action before beginning any planning process.

Presentation of the Findings and Recommendations

The last task was to present the findings and recommendations to the library's administrators and managers. In a one-hour session, we walked them through the four phases of work. We did well explaining planning versus strategic planning and outlining a strategic planning process. We should have taken more time to explain the definitions and characteristics of the various types of documents—as you can imagine, this is a perpetual source of difficulty. Who, for example, can clearly explain the difference between a mission statement and vision statement, or between a mission statement and a goals statement? Nevertheless, we did well presenting our conclusions and making our recommendations, and some in our audience were even enthusiastic about starting a thorough strategic planning process. The process began in the fall of 2001; the library director presented a strategic plan to the university administration in fall 2002 and an implementation plan in fall 2003.

After two and a half months, the task force's work had been accomplished. All the relevant planning documents had been gathered in one place, and our findings were posted on www.nd.edu/~adminoff/taskforce/directionstf.htm. Like the other administrators and managers involved in the process, I now knew that although we had some very good planning documents, they had not been written as a comprehensive plan, and therefore, planning for the library would continue to be ad hoc until the process was completed. More importantly, I discovered that doing an assessment before beginning a planning process was well worth the time and effort. If your library is between planning cycles, now is a good time for a checkup. If your library has not gone through a formal planning effort in several years, now is the time to determine whether the planning documents are in good shape or not. Remember, this assessment does not commit the library to an intensive planning effort. It measures the state of the library's planning and gives the administrators and managers options for the future.

References and Notes

1. Robert D. Stueart and Barbara B. Moran, *Library and Information Center Management*, 4th ed. (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1993): 29.
2. Richard W. Clement, *SPEC Kit 210, Strategic Planning in ARL Libraries* (Washington, D.C.: ARL, Aug. 1995).
3. John M. Bryson, *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995): 21-44.
4. Jack D. Deal, "How to Create and Use a Mission Statement," *The Small Business Journal* 3, no. 4 (2001). See also www.dealconsulting.com/strategy/mission.html.
5. Bryson, *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*, 32-34.
6. For example, Bryson writes "Although strategic planning can provide [many] benefits, there is no guarantee it will. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that any organization will experience all or even most of the benefits of strategic planning the first time through—or even after many cycles of strategic planning," *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*: 7.

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