

Elements of a Successful Strategic Planning Process

Five ingredients are essential for an effective strategic planning process--the right people, good data, preparation, a structured process, and adequate resources of time and dollars.

People Having the right people means that all the key stakeholders are represented in some way. Usually this is done through a representation system where each participant in the planning event is there representing a particular stakeholder group--students, business, faculty, classified staff, academic staff, affiliated agencies and the like. The responsibility of all participants is to take the preliminary planning results back to the group they represent to receive feedback. This feedback, both positive and negative, is then brought back to the group and used for revising the draft plans.

Data One of the connections between strategic planning and continuous quality improvement is the reliance on data as the basis for decision-making. Data on stakeholder/customer needs and their evaluation of existing services are required for the planning process. The more hard data that are available to describe the current situation, the better the chances of a good plan. Strategic planning in the absence of reliable data can be dangerous. Yet, it is not unusual to find organizations planning for the future with little or no reliable information about the true state of affairs. Some organizations find, upon beginning a strategic planning process, that they must create a temporary plan while collecting crucial data on which to base subsequent strategic planning.

Preparation Those who are planning the future of their department, school, college or university should be adequately prepared for the task. It is unwise to plan without some notion of the many alternative directions and what others have found to be successful. Review mission, vision and plans of other similar institutions. Seeing and discussing these examples helps individuals to prepare to make the small and large changes that are inevitable with or without a strategic plan. Some groups visit other institutions to get ideas on what is working successfully elsewhere. Preparation that expands the group's perception of what is possible and desirable creates the most innovative and bold plans.

A Structured Planning Process Most of us have attended at least one meeting where everyone talked but when it was all over, nothing had been accomplished. This common experience points out the need for a structured planning process. Structured means designated and sequenced activities such as brainstorming, small group work, listing, summarizing, prioritizing and the like. Structure requires a facilitator who is responsible for maintaining the process without having input into the content. A structured planning process makes it possible for everyone in attendance to participate fully, while discouraging domination by high-verbal, high-status group members.

The approach to strategic planning used by various departments and offices and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison represents a combination of the eight step strategic planning model for public and non-profit organizations created by Bryson (1988) and the Technology of Participation (ToP) approach developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs, Chicago (Spencer, 1989).

Resources of Time and Dollars The costs of a sound planning process and the time required for optimal planning are worth the effort. Both inadequate time and too much time are detrimental to the process. And the cost of synthesis and collection of data, facilitation, outreach etc. is necessary for buy-in from the broader university community.

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