



205 Powell Place  
Chesapeake Business Centre  
Brentwood, TN 37027  
(615) 369-0828  
info@BillLindsley.com

## Six Keys to a Successful Strategic Planning Process

By Bill Lindsley, Ph.D. © 2005

Setting up a strategic planning process is similar in many ways to setting up any business process. It should be done in a methodical way. It should have a clear goal, with measurable outcomes. And it needs to be regularly recalibrated to ensure its internal validity. As your company is considering initiating, updating, or continuing its strategic planning, there are seven basic questions you need to answer in doing this.

### 1. Who should participate?

As you consider the planning process, the first issue is who participates. The critical principle here is that participation builds ownership – and without ownership of the plan by key individuals, failure is almost assured. Involvement will also ensure that the plan is a good one – that all the most critical input has been secured. How far down in the organization? At some point, the further the better. I typically recommend a cascading effect, starting with senior management, and moving down in the organization to secure further input. This is also an opportunity to build “bench strength” and to develop managers being groomed for new positions. Some clients have chosen to use the existing team of senior managers; others have taken this opportunity to bring in new blood into the discussions, especially picking managers who bring a fresh perspective or who are truly strategic thinkers or have experience and/or insights into possible new growth areas.

However you start, it is also extremely effective to take initial drafts of planning output and secure input from the next level of managers. I also will facilitate the building of task forces to address identified strategic issues – and these teams can bring in other individuals throughout the organization.

Eventually, all managers in the organization will need to build their parts of the plan (goals, strategies, action plans) based on previous planning efforts. In this way, the entire organization is aligned toward achieving strategic objectives.

### 2. What design will work best for US?

Like any process, the strategic planning process needs an intelligent design. The goal is that the planning process will become part of the culture of the organization. It should be conducted annually, and it should precede the budgeting process. Care should be taken in deciding on timing and design to

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ensure that this goal occurs. Management must also consider how much time is available to managers in doing the planning; should we stretch it out or concentrate efforts in a short period of time? Should we conduct part of the process off-site? Should ongoing meetings be scheduled separately or conducted as part of regular management meetings? It is my experience and belief that no cookie-cutter process should be imposed on the organization, but that the process should be customized to fit the unique needs and situation of the company. I personally have facilitated almost every imaginable combination of situations. Having said that, I do believe that off-site meetings for at least some of the sessions makes sense; it helps to get managers in a new setting, and away from their offices and their immediate concerns to focus on longer term issues.

### **3. What format should we use?**

There is no magic format for plans. However, whichever one you use, it should be the same throughout the corporation. Remember, you are building a common language and culture around planning – and you want to be able to compare different departments and/or divisions. The key components of any strategic plan must be set – vision, goals/objectives, strategies, action plans – and formats can be designed to reflect these. One word of caution: Keep It Simple. The deadliest enemy of strategic plans is lengthy verbiage. On some of my assignments I take the large planning notebooks from previous efforts and take it down to a few pages. Remember: the point of the plan is to have a management tool – one that you use every day in your business. Too many planning efforts end up on the bookshelf – and are never seen until the following year when it's time to plan again.

### **4. Who has overall responsibility?**

Every major process and/or initiative needs an internal champion. Of course, the president/CEO needs to be very supportive of the planning process or it will generate into nothingness. Practically, this means that he or she needs to make sure there is no undermining of the process. I have certainly seen this happen – this process can be seen as threatening to the status quo, especially if a manager feels he/she is losing control of his own “turf.” There must also be an understanding, voiced from “on high,” that time spent on planning is of the utmost importance.

At the same time, there needs to be someone else internally who will help guide, shepherd, and nurture the process through its hills and valleys. The champion is invested in the success of the venture and making sure that it has internal validity and consistency. He/she makes sure deadlines are met, that the plan is completed – and afterward – monitored for success.

## **5. Do we need outside help?**

In spite of the presence of an internal champion, you may need to consider bringing in some outside help. This may be a trainer to help participants to understand the ins and outs of planning, explaining terminology, answering questions, etc. Most often, this is an outside facilitator who has experience in designing processes, ensuring maximum participation, and keeping the process on track. Some management teams feel it is important that this person is an expert in their industry, while others prefer someone who can bring in a broader range of experience for perhaps some innovative ideas.

It is my experience that is nearly impossible for a manager to be the facilitator as well as a participant. It is very demanding to facilitate an activity like a retreat, for example. This person will not be able to participate him/herself. And it is impossible for anyone inside the company to rid themselves of their "corporate hat," either because they themselves are unable to do it, and/or others are unable to see them in a different role.

## **6. How do we monitor results?**

Once the plan is assembled and approved, it is now time for implementing the plan. This is the most crucial period. Will it be used on a daily basis? Only if it is regularly reviewed: how are we doing with respect to our plan? And if we are not meeting expectations, why not? Or more importantly, what should we do about it. This needs to be done on a regular, consistent basis, no less frequently than once a quarter, possibly every month.

I can't emphasize enough that the strategic plan is really a strategic planning response system: it provides key guidance instruments to measure how we're doing so that we can make appropriate strategic adjustments to get us back on track. And because you've done the research and analysis in your planning process, you will have a much better clue as to what things to look for in making those real-time adjustments.

## **Summary**

As I have suggested, you must design a planning process that fits YOUR organization. Otherwise, it will be just like a human body rejecting a foreign organ. But if you address each of the questions above to your team for rigorous discussion ahead of time, you will give the planning process a much greater probability of success.