

A NEW TIMING FRAMEWORK FOR THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Article by:

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Introduction

The strategic planning process is often viewed as a series of steps. Based on coursework in the MBA program at George Washington University and our experience creating strategic plans for businesses, nonprofit organizations and educational institutions, we have discovered that many organizations believe the strategic planning process starts either at the time when someone begins to write the strategic plan or when the decision is made to create a strategic plan.

Both of these concepts are flawed. We believe these "misconceptions" often result in strategic plans that never get approval, plans that get approval but collect dust, or plans that fail to be implemented successfully despite significant effort on the part of the organization. One of the authors in a separate article has written about the need to include project management professionals early on in the strategic planning process to insure that the plan that is developed is actually implementable.

In this article we outline a new way of thinking about "time" in the strategic planning process. We use a standard notation of T-4 (T Minus 4) T-3...T+1, T+2... to show the reader that there are four distinct stages which must be completed before "T-0" (T Minus 0), which is the traditional kickoff meeting for the strategic planning project. These stages are crucial in building a solid foundation for the strategic planning process, well before assignments are handed out, and the process of conducting data collection and drafting the strategic plan begins. Likewise "T+1, T+2, T+3, T+4 and T+5" represent five distinct time periods after the initial kickoff meeting where the strategic plan is created, reviewed, accepted, implemented and revised. Diligently completing every step in this process before moving on to the next step is essential to the creation of a sound, realistic strategic plan which all stakeholders will support and implement.

The New Timeline for Strategic Planning Projects

T-4: Idea and Vision (T Minus 4)

Actions:

Someone in the organization sees the need for a strategic plan (This person may be called the "champion" or the "proponent")

The champion or proponent begins to discuss the need for a strategic plan with others in the organization.

Green Light (Criteria to advance to next stage):

The organization has at "T-4 a desire to formulate a vision for where it intends to go over the next 2-5 years

The organization has a belief that it can improve itself with the assistance of long term strategic planning

The organization is committed to developing a full vision of where it intends to go over the next 2-5 years as part of the upcoming strategic planning process

T-3: Buy-in (T Minus 3)

Actions:

The organization should strive to develop a consensus in answering or take votes to decide the best answers to the following questions:

Is the organization committed to developing a strategic plan?

How much time and money will the organization budget for this strategic planning process? (very preliminary estimates at this stage)

Green Light - Proceed to the next step if:

The organization has generated significant buy-in to the process, and an agreement by key stakeholders has been reached to evaluate the feasibility of conducting a strategic planning process .

A general outline of the strategic planning process has been developed for the organization.

Beginning ideas have been developed regarding the personnel who will lead and participate in this strategic planning process.

Initial objections have been given serious consideration and answered, and a file/communication system has been developed to facilitate this dialogue.

T-2: Seek "Go Decision" (T Minus 2)

Actions:

Insure organizational support is solid.

Investigate and determine what data are needed, their availability and get a solid estimate of the cost of acquiring and analyzing the data

Refine the timeline for the planning process. This step is critical in establishing expectations on all sides. The needs of the organization, the availability of human and budgetary resources, and the capability of the strategic planners must be thoroughly understood before a functional timeline for the strategic plan can be finalized

Establish a "project mentality" and make sure that all parts of the strategic planning process are identified so that nothing falls between the cracks

Develop a Business Case for the Strategic Plan where the need is clearly presented, the potential solutions from developing the plan are identified and all costs and benefits of undertaking a strategic planning process are carefully weighed)

Complete the budget and cost tracking system for the strategic plan. (You might want to have this system capture staff time devoted to the strategic planning project in addition to out-of-pocket-expenses so you can capture the full cost to the organization of this upcoming strategic planning process)

Make all determinations of personnel assignments that will be used should the strategic plan receive a "GO" decision

Determine if outside experts and resources are needed to help prepare the strategic plan

Identify all coordination points, procedures and protocols, especially in matrix organizations

Green Light - Proceed with the next step if:

The projected ROI of developing the strategic plan justifies entering into the process.

All stakeholders commit to investing and participating in the strategic planning process

T-1: Get "Go Decision" (T Minus 1)

Actions:

Line up human capital and budgetary resources

Set up structure of team, reporting systems, and software to coordinate project

Establish deliverables

Set research/data collection agenda.

Develop job descriptions for team members.

Establish employee and stakeholder enrollment system that allows for input of all interested personnel, not just those "assigned" to the strategic planning project

Establish governance system for making decisions and resolving conflicts

Establish all project rules including quality control systems, backup systems, and communication systems. (Make sure to make the best use of modern information technology to facilitate the strategic planning process)

Develop final recommendations of experts and outside resources to assist with the project

Establish progress reporting system (budgets and deadlines)

Identify what types of information people will need to access during the strategic planning process and insure access to this information

Establish procedure for handling feedback and integrating it into the strategic plan.

Set up a portal or other communication system to facilitate information transfer

Green Light -- Proceed with the Strategic Plan if:

Money and resources are allocated.

Go decision is made, communicated and the project is given high level support within the organization.

T-0: Kick-off

Actions:

Kick-off Meeting

Make initial assignments and establish corresponding deadlines

Create clear monitoring system to track that each person in the strategic planning process stays on time, budget and on course.

Early on in the process, project meetings should be scheduled often

To conclude the "T-0" phase:

Everyone knows their assignments and agrees that the budgets, time allocations and deadlines are reasonable and will be met

T+1: Team Deployment

Actions:

Rigorously monitor progress reports (budgets and deadlines).

Regularly gather information from team members.

Encourage open communication among team members in order to assess resistance and fix weak links.

Consult regularly with all stakeholders.

Add new sections to plan as they are identified as being essential

Establish measures of success to be used in the implementation phase

Corrections and reassignments to be made are identified and implemented

To conclude "T +1" Phase, insure that

Information is flowing and the strategic planning team is functioning well.

Draft reports are completed on time and circulated properly

T+2: Synthesis and Integration of Elements

Actions:

Assemble first draft documents

Gather feedback from everyone on every section

Constantly review and synthesize draft sections

Assemble subsequent drafts until consensus develops that the plan is one the key decision makers and stakeholders can support

To conclude the "T+2" stage:

All deliverables identified in T-1 stage have been completed and are now supported by a consensus within the organization

Linkages between the various reports are made and a synthesis of all information is being generated to foster the creation of a unified strategic plan

All documents organized, the executive summary is written and the entire strategic plan into one document

T+3: Adoption

Actions:

Declare drafting phase of project complete

Present the strategic plan for formal approval

Revise plan as necessary to insure that the document will be able to secure all levels of approval and endorsement necessary

To conclude the "T+3" phase:

Secure approval of the plan from each stakeholder and each level of the organization

Set the stage to implement the plan

T+4: Implementation

Actions:

Implement plan

Carefully observe what is working and not working

Gather information related to success measures established in T+1

Insure that it is safe for everyone to tell the truth about what is working and not working

To conclude the "T+4" phase:

Implementation moves forward on schedule

Implementation generates accurate data and feedback

T+5: Feedback and Revision

Actions:

Gather feedback regularly and in an organized manner

Revise plan and implementation process as needed, based on feedback

Have tracking system to number each change in the plan

Reward those who give feedback that improves the plan

To conclude the "T+5" phase:

The full implementation of the plan including all revisions is on track

Throw a great party

Conclusion

We have identified ten separate time frames in the strategic planning process. We hope that this framework is useful the next time you enter into the "T Minus 4" stage with an idea that your organization needs a strategic plan. Do not leave T-4 unless and until you secure a commitment from the leaders of the organization that they will actively participate in and

lead the effort toward creating a consensus for a long term vision for the organization. At each stage it is essential to meet the criteria for advancement, or received the "Green Light" before advancing to the next stage. This will insure the integrity of the strategic plan in the long run. Good luck.

Biographical Information

Herb Rubenstein is the CEO of the Sustainable Business Group, Inc., a business consulting firm. He is co-author of Breakthrough, Inc. - High Growth Strategies for Entrepreneurial Organizations (Prentice Hall/Financial Times, 1999) and author of Leadership for Lawyers (American Bar Association, 2008). He has also served as an Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurism at George Mason University and Colorado State University, is a founding director of the Association of Professional Futurists, and is the author of numerous articles on innovative business solutions and strategic planning. He has his law degree from Georgetown University, his Master of Public Affairs from the LBJ School of Public Affairs, a graduate degree in sociology from the University of Bristol in Bristol, England and was a Phi Beta Kappa/Omicron Delta Kappa graduate from Washington and Lee University in 1974. His email herb@sbizgroup.com and he can be reached at 303 592-4084. For more information about the Sustainable Business Group, see www.sbizgroup.com.

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