LIBRARY STRATEGIES
Planning strategically and strategic planning

Mott Linn

Clark Univesity, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This paper argues that, while one needs to logically decide on an organization's strategy, it does not need to be a product of a lengthy strategic planning process.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper discusses and gives examples to illustrate why an institution does not need to go through an intricate strategic planning process.

Findings – A laborious process is not needed to plan a library's strategic direction.

Practical implications – A library can more efficiently use its money and time to satisfy its customers than by spending them on a drawn-out strategic planning process.

Originality/value – Hopefully, this article will motivate librarians to find the proper balance between having no strategy and wasting too much time and money on creating a lengthy strategic plan.

Keywords Strategic planning, Corporate strategy, Libraries, Librarians

Paper type General review

> If you want to win, when it comes to strategy, ponder less and do more (Welch and Welch, 2005, p. 166).

A number of years ago, the author took part in a formal strategic planning process at his library. This continued for many months until it ground to a halt before it was able to create a strategic plan. The staff just had too many higher priorities for their time than continuing this long process. It just was not worth it. This judgment might be difficult for some to understand given what was written in the previous column (Linn, 2007) about how a proper strategy is critical in "order to prevent tactical skill from dissipating into a random thrashing about" (Kissinger, 1994, p. 98). However, having a plan that is well-reasoned strategically does not require the wasting of a great deal of a library's most valuable asset – the time of its librarians.

Perfectionists often act as if the perfect strategic plan is attainable and that there are no costs involved with its creation. However, a prudent manager must keep in mind that there are opportunity costs involved in going through an elongated strategic planning process. Opportunity cost is a phrase economists use to point out the amount of other goods and services that must be sacrificed to obtain something else. For example, if a librarian spends $10,000 on purchasing books, then that money can not be used to buy journals. In this case, the more people that are involved in the creation of a strategic plan and the more time they spend on making it, the more resources are used in this endeavor rather than the library functions that they otherwise would be doing. For example, if librarians put in 1,000 hours in creating a library's strategic plan, that is 1,000 hours that they could have used for interacting with faculty and students,

processing the backlog of uncataloged materials, and making decisions about how to improve the collection. What if that library instead only used 500 hours to create that strategic plan? Would the plan be appreciably worse? One should weigh the expected difference in the plan's quality, which would probably be slight, with how many more customers could be interacted with, how many unprocessed items could get cataloged, and how many collection management decisions could be made. Would the library and its customers be better served with a good strategic plan and more of these tasks being accomplished or a slightly more detailed plan with fewer of these being completed? A wise library administrator would think about planning in this way.

When Colin Powell commanded the army, he had a rule of thumb concerning the timing of how he made his plans. He preferred to make his judgment when he had about 60% of the possible information. He thought that making up his mind much sooner would be too risky and that by waiting for much more information to be gathered his opportunity might evaporate (McNeilly, 2001, p. 112).

This highlights the fact that oftentimes most of the needed information takes relatively little time to collect, but that the last pieces often take an inordinate amount of time to find. As a result, a relatively small amount of the facts take a relatively large amount of resources to locate. Often it is prudent to save those resources by making the decision without knowing a few of the hardest to find facts or having fewer people involved with the process. Perfectionists only worry about quality and ignore the expenditure of time and money. This too often leads to missing opportunities and wasting resources trying to find the last few bits of information when the vast majority of what is needed is already known. This is just as true in the creation of strategy as in anything else.

In fact, one may not even need a detailed strategic plan even if one has the resources to put into the effort. When considered together, the classic management books *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, which are related studies, point out the need for balance between the need for having a strategy and being hamstrung by a detailed strategic plan. On the one hand, *Good to Great* champions the Flywheel Concept and warns about getting stuck in the Doom Loop. The former states that great companies stick to a strategy and slowly build momentum towards fulfilling their goals. The later occurs when one jumps around from one strategy to another in hopes that the next one will create the quick fix that will bring success to the organization. Obviously, one needs to carefully pick a strategy and give it time to build momentum so that the institution not only becomes successful, but also is likely to continue to excel. On the other hand, *Built to Last* explicitly states that it is a myth that "successful companies make their best moves by brilliant and complex strategic planning" (Collins and Porras, 1994, p. 9). Instead, they found that "[v]isionary companies make some of their best moves by experimentation, trial and error, opportunism, and – quite literally – accident. What looks in retrospect like brilliant foresight and preplanning was often the result of 'Let's just try a lot of stuff and keep what works.'…We found the concepts in Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* to be more helpful for replicating the success of certain visionary companies than any textbook on corporate strategic planning" (Collins and Porras, 1994, p. 9). One of the numerous examples they give is that at 3M a core strategy was to encourage experimentation within certain perimeters and accepting the failures that went along with the successes. They then point out that 3M quickly outgrew Norton Corporation, which decades ago was the more successful of the two,

because it was retarded by its insistence that all facets of its business be guided by its strategic plan (Collins and Porras, 1994, pp. 150-63).

Many organizations plan strategically without going through a formal strategic planning process. For example an ice hockey team starts its season with a basic strategy of how their organization will win as many games as possible and they do this without going through a formal strategic planning process. The team management considers the competitive environment and what the personnel's strengths and weaknesses are and then decide on a strategy for how they think they can maximize the team's chances for success.

Another example is one that is more germane to the library world because it concerns the budget that governed an ARL Library. The recent Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (UMass), John Lombardi, did not put the university through a formal strategic planning process, but still had a plan for strategically using the university's money. In the early 21st Century the school went through a financial crisis largely caused by the rapid reduction in the amount of funding it received from the state. As a result, the University instituted an early retirement incentive plan that reduced the number of professors dramatically, which kept many students from being able to graduate in four years. In addition, for an extended period of time UMass had been deferring needed maintenance to its physical plant. As a result, it was obvious to those who knew the institution that its two most important needs were to hire more faculty and to spend considerable amounts of money on improving their buildings and grounds. Consequently, when some funding was restored in later fiscal years Lombardi's strategy for allocating the vast majority of the additional money was to use it to meet those two needs. His plan for strategically using funds was made without having had a formal strategic planning process and thereby saved an unknown number of hundreds of hours that would have gone into creating a strategic plan. Except for a small reserve kept for other opportunities that might occur over the course of the fiscal year, he delegated to the appropriate administrators the decisions about exactly which professorships to fill and which buildings to fix. The Provost and the Vice Chancellor for Administration and Finance were given guidelines to work within and given the flexibility within those to specify how to spend those funds. Certainly, some faculty wanted a higher percentage of the additional funds to go towards hiring more faculty, while other people may have wanted a higher percentage the money to go towards improving physical plant. However, one would have been hard-pressed to find people who would not admit that the University's two most important needs were to hire more faculty and to improve the physical plant. As a result of Lombardi's decision making process, UMass did not waste precious time and resources to determine what was obvious: that the university had to increase the number of faculty and to improve its physical plant.

With all this being said, there may be times when a full-blown strategic planning process is needed. For example, if it is required by those who oversee your institution, then one should go through the process to mollify those in charge. In addition, having everybody go through the process may be what is needed to get the whole staff committed to putting their effort towards the same goal.

Certainly, some of the concepts that various formal strategic planning processes use have value. For example, SWOT Analysis has one consider the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats given the basic goals that one wants

to attain. Obviously, it would be foolish for librarians or anybody else to create a strategy for achieving a goal without taking into account their organization's strengths and weaknesses as well as the competitive environment.

However, one should be careful before committing copious amounts of resources to create a strategy that could have been developed with less time and money. Depending on how it is done, conducting strategic planning can be financially imprudent. Thus, while it is critical to plan strategically, it is not important to conduct a formal strategic planning process. The prudent manager finds the proper balance between the twin evils of having no strategy because no time was spent on creating one and wasting too many hours of too many people creating a strategic plan.

To finish the example from the beginning of this column about my library's attempt at creating a strategic plan, a few years later we needed to have one to apply for a particular grant. At that point, the University Librarian and a few of us who reported directly to her made one. We completed it in less time than the previous attempt and came away with a perfectly fine strategic plan. Consequently, although planning strategically is critical, a lengthy strategic planning process is not. As Jack Welch wrote:

> Forget the arduous, intellectualized number crunching and data grinding that gurus say you have to go through to get strategy right. Forget the scenario planning, year-long studies, and hundred-page plus reports. They're time-consuming and expensive, and you just don't need them. In real life, strategy is actually very straightforward. You pick a general direction and implement like hell (Welch and Welch, 2005, p. 165).

References

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Further reading

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Corresponding author

Mott Linn can be contacted at: mlinn@clarku.edu