

Using Systems Thinking for More Effective Strategic Planning

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The best blueprint for truly understanding systems thinking is by reviewing the organization's strategic plan. If a systems thinking perspective is used in the strategic planning process, there is integration of key stakeholders into the blueprint of the design and delivery of the plan. Beyond my consulting experiences, the research also validates this by demonstrating that the engagement of key stakeholders in systems thinking has two primary outcomes for an organization—

- Higher quality decisions that create more successfully executed actions;
- High commitment to these decisions (Nevis, Lancourt, & Vassallo, 1996).

The significance of systems involvement is no more pronounced than in the field of strategic planning. As noted in my recently published article on strategic planning, *Real-time Strategic Planning: Moving Beyond Never-Neverland*:

“Strategic planning is no longer limited to executive suites. In fact, it is not sustained here.” (Kusy & McBain, 2000, p. 18).

For a successful transformation process, systems thinking and inclusion is a significant variable to be addressed

A Blueprint for Strategic Planning

As an organization development consultant, I propose initiating the concept of systems thinking by using a diverse range of representative stakeholders to “plan the plan.” John Kotter refers to this as the “guiding team” in *The Heart of Change*, (2002). This “guiding team” is actually the second phase of an 8-phased systems thinking model I propose using. The first phase is “increasing a sense of urgency” based on an understanding of the system and how to make align it best with the strategy of the organization. Thus, Kotter’s 8-phased systems thinking model would incorporate the following process:

1. Identify a sense of urgency;
2. Establish a guiding team;
3. Produce a clear vision for direction and action;
4. Communicate for buy-in;
5. Remove barriers for true empowered accountabilities;
6. Create short-term wins;
7. Keep the urgency up and eliminating unnecessary and competing work;
8. Make the plan stick.

I perceive helping learners in this session understand that this guiding team is made up of 6-10 diverse stakeholders who would guide the planning process. Then, by applying Kotter’s systems approach in the guiding team with Jacobs’ (1994) inclusion of as many stakeholders as feasible in the actual strategic planning “event”, the systems approach comes full circle—the guiding team uses the systems approach

with a small group of members; the entire organization uses the systems approach through efforts of large-scale change (Jacobs, 1994). In this large session, all stakeholders would have opportunities to discuss, brainstorm, and create action strategies in interdisciplinary small groups—created from a maximum-mixture of stakeholders at the session, commonly referred to as “max-mix” groups. I would teach learners how to facilitate the large-scale sessions by a combination of max-mix group activities, followed by sharing with the large group, and culminating in defined actions.

The concern of some leaders/board members regarding this participative approach is, “What if we receive suggestions that we really can’t do?” The answer is a simple one. First, the planning-to-plan team would determine which decisions are to be made by the board or executives and those the participants will make. Second, there will also be decisions that are made in a collaborative fashion—through consensus. These various approaches to shared decision-making have been heavily researched and are described in my book *Fast Forward Leadership* (Essex & Kusy, 1999). The bottom line in both perspectives is that, depending upon the situation, the large group will become involved in decisions where input or consensus is needed.

The Training Session

The training program will be focused on integration of systems thinking, based upon the stages of successful strategic planning (Kusy & McBain, 2000):

1. Planning-to-plan process, with inclusion of:
 - Goals, including expected outcomes;
 - Logistics for smooth facilitation and maximum participation;
 - An agenda design;
 - The kinds of data to be used in the process;
 - The amount of time to be spent in various facets of the process;
 - Any additional data/information that may be needed;
 - Which stakeholders to involve in the large-scale process;
 - How decisions are to be made during the process;
 - The coaching strategy for facilitators of each max-mix group;
 - How community-involvement processes will be used to assess needs between what “is” and “should be”;
 - How to intervene with core actions.
2. Mission generation to identify the organization’s enduring purpose;
3. Vision identification to generate the 3-5 year direction of the organization;
4. SWOT analysis of the organization’s:
 - Strengths;
 - Weaknesses;
 - Opportunities;
 - Threats.
5. Key drivers that will achieve the vision;
6. Strategies to fine-tune the key drivers to practical action;
7. Evaluation throughout the process;
8. Follow-up, once the consultant leaves.

References Cited

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