

TRANSLATING MANAGEMENT THEORY INTO ACTION: STRATEGIC PLANNING IN THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIES

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My recent experience in strategic planning formed the basis of a presentation to the NSW Chapter of ANZTLA at the meeting held on 26th May, 1995. An edited version of the workshop paper has been prepared for inclusion in this newsletter.

WHAT IS 'STRATEGIC PLANNING'?

The management literature is filled with definitions of the strategic planning process. These can be difficult to apply in any library setting, and even trickier when the special nature of the theological library is considered. The planning process is concerned with future directions for the library service. Current activities form the basis of ideas on developments, opportunities, and specific detail contained within the planning document. This plan articulates the librarian's vision for future developments in service provision and information technology; and can be seen as a blueprint for activities which are not currently undertaken by library staff.

WHY BOTHER WITH STRATEGIC PLANNING?

Many librarians report to supervisors who often have little understanding of library activities, work loads, or resource limitations. The strategic planning process can demonstrate the professional approach and competency of the Librarian as Manager.

The discipline of preparing the planning document can be a useful exercise for the librarian, in thinking about the library as it is now, and how it could be. It can be a chance to dream; to extend beyond routine activities. The plan can help to focus priorities, and to determine those tasks which are urgent, and those which are important: and the difference between them.

OTHER MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

It can be useful to focus initially on Aims, Goals, and Objectives as part of the planning process. If a Mission Statement has never been prepared for the Library previously, then it can be timely to develop a short statement which encapsulates the "mission" of the library, within the organization. Another useful exercise which could be undertaken as part of the planning process is SWOT analysis - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. These are standard management techniques which can be utilized in the library setting. There are a number of useful books and articles which will provide information on these issues. The Bibliography lists some suggested reading for further information.

HOW IS A STRATEGIC PLAN DRAFTED?

One suggested method is described in the following paragraphs - this is simply an attempt to translate the management theory into practical application in a theological library setting. The method used is less important than the intellectual processes involved in the preparation of the planning document.

Some tips on ensuring time is used efficiently and productively:

- a. a block of several hours time should be allocated for working on the planning document.
- b. the writer should arrange to work undisturbed. Sit away from the usual workplace, and take the phone off the hook!
- c. use of blank continuous feed computer paper can help the ideas to flow.
- d. use different coloured pens or highlighters to make connections between different points within the document.

PREPARATORY ACTIVITY

Draw up columns headed "COLLECTION SERVICES", "MANAGEMENT SERVICES" AND "INFORMATION

SERVICES".

List the major activities undertaken under one of these headings. Of course many library activities relate to more than one, however at this point it is helpful to focus on one specific aspect, and place the activity in that category as appropriate. These library activities may encompass serials management, collection development, personnel management, budgeting and financial management and many other matters.

How can the specific aspect be applied? Take the example of Acquisitions, which falls into the category of Collection Services. Then list one acquisitions activity which needs to be investigated. It may be evaluating different library suppliers. This may be done by comparing speed, reliability and cost. List the steps involved in the activity.

It is then possible to transfer these ideas onto a document which will become the strategic plan, using the format described below.

WRITING THE PLAN

Across the page, make headings for STRATEGY, ACTIONS, RESPONSIBILITY, TARGET DATE, AND OUTCOMES OR PERFORMANCE MEASURES.

It is then a matter of working through the ideas for each category.

Strategy Column:

In one brief statement provide an overview of the task. Keywords such as 'review', 'implement', 'conduct' are useful to convey the "big-picture".

Action Column:

Leave the most room for this column, and mark each point with some device such as a dash or number. This is the essence of the plan, as the Actions describe in more detail how the strategy is to be implemented. If it is unclear how a task will be handled, then the Actions column may read "Prepare Action Plan".

Responsibility Column:

In this column appears the name of the position responsible for carrying out the actions.

It is preferable to use position, rather than named persons, because even if the people move on, the task should remain on the agenda to be undertaken.

Some activities will involve positions outside the library staff, within the organization. These should also be included eg. Accounts Department, Systems Manager.

Target Date:

It is not always necessary to use the target date for the date of completion - it could also mean that it will be 6 months before the commencement of the task. Target dates need to be realistic, or they are meaningless. The Strategic Plan should encompass a time-frame of 12 months as minimum; most of the literature seems to work on time-frames of up to 3 years. As many activities are dependant on financial resources, the timing of budget estimates and the end of the Financial Year used within the organization may also need to be factored in to the drafting of the Strategic Plan.

Outcomes or Performance Measures:

It can be useful to list quantitative measures, however it is not always possible or appropriate to use statistical measures. In such cases, specific outcomes can be listed in the column. It may be the publication of a new brochure, or the visit to another site using the same computer system. There may be several outcomes with a statistical measure included.

Other columns can be added if desired; for example resource implications where appropriate.

BEYOND THE FIRST DRAFT

Once the creative ideas have been set on paper, it can be useful to return to the draft. It may then be helpful to group ideas together under subdivisions such as Policy, Practice and Administration, or other headings as appropriate. The various strategies can then be listed together in a block, at the editing/rewriting stage. It is useful to then transfer the plan onto a computer-based file using a word-processing or database package, so that future updates and changes can be accommodated without rewriting the whole text.

STAGE TWO : SELLING THE PLAN

a. Within the Library

Although it is important for the Strategic Plan to be prepared by Senior Library staff, the next

stage is to work through the Plan, page by page, with all staff of the library. Copies of the document should be accessible for all staff to see. Comments and suggestions from them can be incorporated into the plan, particularly if the plan includes items which will directly affect the duties they perform, or the physical location of their work-space. The Strategic Planning document will not be translated into ACTION unless the staff co-operate, and are prepared to carry out the activities which are listed, within the time-frame. Strategies imposed from above, without discussion by staff involved are doomed to failure.

b. With Library Supervisor

Preparation of a Strategic Plan indicates a professional commitment by the Librarian, in attempting to set goals and strategies for future information service provision. It is recommended that the person to whom the librarian reports is given a copy of the plan. Time for reflection, discussion, and clarification of aspects which are not understood will assist in gaining the support of the supervisor. Comments made by the supervisor need to be incorporated, and the document adjusted to reflect the input made by them.

c. With Library "Stake-holders"

Key elements of the Strategic Plan should be conveyed to specific library user groups within appropriate timing. The Librarian must be seen to be responsive to user needs, and these people also may have suggestions which can improve the library service. Groups such as the Library Committee can provide valuable authority in terms of implementing strategies which may require special funding or resource implications.

REVIEW OF THE PLAN OVER TIME

The preparation of a strategic planning document incorporates Action plans for various activities to be undertaken. Over time, these actions are completed; or they are then carried forward to the planning document for the following cycle. It is important to reach a sense of achievement when the plan is reviewed after a period of time, and staff can be encouraged by the progress on activities itemized within the planning document.

CONCLUSION

It is no easy task to prepare a strategic plan, however there are benefits in spending focused time to think beyond daily activities and routines. There is great value for the staff of the small, special or one-person library in undertaking strategic planning processes.

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