

Analysis

Strategic Planning

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Libraries

Miami University (Miami)

Montana State University (MSU)

University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT, Knoxville)

Wesleyan University (Wesleyan)

Introduction

Each institution's entry point into the strategic planning process is a key component of this analysis. MSU and UT, Knoxville, had guiding documents to work with from the beginning of their change stories. These consisted of expired or already existing strategic plans or data from nationally normed surveys. Miami's story began with a library-wide strategic planning process while the second half focused on middle management's role in implementation after the consultants left. These three institutions, the largest in this category, reported positive relationships with and support from upper university administration on their respective campuses.

The entry point into strategic planning at Wesleyan, a small private institution, was very different from that of the other institutions. It entered into the library strategic planning process having to establish credibility with its campus administration, a step that was not necessary for the other institutions. Consequently, its strategic planning process took much longer, with many stops, starts, and stalls due to its relationship with university administration in addition to extraordinary circumstances.

The scope of strategic planning at each institution varied in this category of change stories. MSU zeroed in on work to develop its strategic plan, while UT, Knoxville, primarily focused on the Strategic Achievement Review (StAR) team's efforts to implement the strategic plan at the institution. The StAR team was responsible for monitoring and reporting progress toward achieving the strategic plan. The change stories at Miami and at Wesleyan spanned the entire process of strategic planning from development to implementation of the strategic plan.

I. Warm-up Phase

STAGE 1: ESTABLISHING A SENSE OF URGENCY

The level of urgency among these strategic planning stories ranged dramatically, from mildly urgent to extremely urgent in the face of crisis. In all of these instances, evidence suggests that strategic planning efforts were moving forward and taking root. Complacency was not a systemic problem in these change stories.

At Miami, campus-wide facilities upgrades sparked change. The dean wanted to create an architectural master plan so that the library could be part of the momentum on campus. The dean also wanted to create a more unified, cohesive library organization. After years of patching holes in its organizational structure, the library needed to redefine reporting lines, remove barriers between departments, and improve collaboration and communication. MSU's reason for change was a strategic plan that had run its course and needed to be updated in addition to the library wanting to participate in change at the university level. MSU chose the Balanced Scorecard Framework to guide its process.

At UT, Knoxville, urgency was self-imposed—it added a specific goal into the strategic plan to create a group to monitor and communicate the progress toward achieving the strategic plan. The library leadership subsequently sent a clear message to the staff by allocating resources, forming the StAR team, and presenting the team with a specific charge.

The urgency for the work at Wesleyan was the most pressing among all of the change stories in this category because the library underwent a comprehensive strategic planning process in response to its leader being dismissed and its college administration questioning the library's credibility. Its administration gave the library a mandate to conduct a self-study and start a strategic planning process. It launched both mandates under extremely tenuous circumstances and with the staff reeling from losing their leader. The sense of urgency was, in fact, unrelenting and continued when the staff at Wesleyan faced another crisis after the unexpected death of their newly hired permanent library director.

STAGE 2: CREATING THE GUIDING COALITION

The guiding coalitions at MSU and Miami included external consultants, with the latter employing consultants from two different firms. Miami's strategic planning steering committee comprised the dean, the associate dean, and two assistant deans of the library but lacked middle management involvement until later on in the implementation process when the task forces were developed. In fact, the initial steering committee had more members external to the library than internal, an unusual approach when compared to the other change stories in this category. Each task force was subsequently provided with a charge shaped by the strategic plan. The guiding coalition at MSU also included a consultant, but the coalition was mindful at the outset of making certain that constituent groups had broad representation. The overall committee was not given a charge, but the consultant was. In a unique approach when compared to the other stories, the guiding coalition worked together to create its own charge.

The guiding coalitions at UT, Knoxville, and Wesleyan were small when compared to the other two institutions. The coalition at UT, Knoxville, consisted of three members who accepted this responsibility in addition to their regular jobs. Unlike any other guiding coalition in this category, they were given a detailed charge by the dean with specific guiding action steps. The guiding coalition at Wesleyan was small but consisted of the interim university librarian and three senior managers who were trusted colleagues of the interim university librarian. This team of four had a history of working together, understood the depths of the crisis at hand, and had a shared interest in moving the organization forward. Instead of a committee charge, this group had the daunting task of conducting a self-study given to them by their provost.

MSU recommended the need for release time for committee members to serve on such committees because of how time-consuming the change process can be. Another constructive piece of advice several of the authors provided was the need to consider who is at the table when it comes to strategic planning committees. The guiding coalition must include people who have the appropriate level of authority, knowledge, and influence.

STAGE 3: DEVELOPING A VISION AND STRATEGY

The visioning process was led by the guiding coalition of consultants and strategic planning committees at Miami and MSU but with a great deal of input from the staff. Through the work of three task forces, Miami was able to develop its service philosophy, guiding principles and new service categories, which ended up serving as its new departmental structure. Its vision and strategy were formed in six months and synthesized into a 260-page master plan to guide the organization through implementation after the consultants left. The consultant experience at MSU differed from Miami's in a few distinct ways. Staff discussed selected readings, filled out surveys, and unexpectedly revised their existing set of value statements, which heavily influenced the outcome of the strategic plan. What started out as a simple refresh of existing vision and mission statements ended in a much more involved exploration as staff examined their values, a step that Kotter warns can be time-consuming and iterative.¹ Another unique aspect of the change story is that MSU completed a Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results (SOAR) analysis instead of the more common Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) analysis. The visioning process at Wesleyan unfolded very differently from that of Miami and MSU primarily because its situation was so different. After it completed a self-study, its provost mandated that it do an external review. Both processes pointed to the need for a strategic plan, which the interim university librarian developed in seven months. Approximately 90 percent of the staff responded to three specific questions she asked them about their work. From these results, she wrote the strategic plan while the management group crafted the mission statement.

The UT, Knoxville, StAR team had a slightly different challenge from the other institutions because they started with a finished strategic plan and a specific charge. As a consequence, they spent their time strategizing about how to tackle their role of monitoring staff progress toward accomplishing the goals listed in the strategic plan. They approached this monumental task by establishing a timeline spread out over the first two years.

STAGE 4: COMMUNICATING THE CHANGE VISION

Communication typically happens throughout a change story. Therefore, the authors mention communication not only in the Stage 4 section of their chapters, but also refer to communication practices elsewhere in the change stories. The strategic planning change teams frequently sought direct feedback from staff in the form of surveys and during face-to-face meetings with staff.

Miami stressed its commitment to transparency by sharing all documentation related to the change effort with staff. Its dean also sent monthly communications via email. MSU took similar measures by creating an intranet to host all pertinent change documents. It went one step further and branded the emails used for its communications, and it also involved everyone from the library in an iterative process to create many drafts of strategy maps and value statements for a truly participatory experience. Both MSU and UT, Knoxville, had team member representatives who regularly reported their progress to the library administration. In addition to regularly communicating to staff through email and staff meetings, the StAR team at UT, Knoxville, built an interactive, dynamic website for the staff to use. This was the primary way of documenting progress toward achieving the goals of the library's strategic plan. As a result, the team spent a great deal of effort to build in incentives for staff at the library, from the possibility of earning medals to staff being able to extract information from this system to use for other required reporting such as annual reports. Wesleyan took a completely different approach to communicating strategic planning change efforts to its staff. The guiding coalition under the interim university librarian's direction developed project-based goals and worked with the library staff at their annual retreat to develop concrete action steps needed to complete specific projects. This approach was intentionally designed to build teamwork and buy-in among the staff and to begin moving the library forward in visible ways. After they worked together to create their strategic plan, their new university librarian was hired and the work among the leadership team to reorganize the library began.

Readers will find a few words of caution about communicating the vision in these strategic planning stories. The chapter on Miami points out that lag time between staff involvement and the production of a written strategic plan may cause angst among staff. Another issue is that long stretches of time without communication with staff could disrupt buy-in. Actively engaging staff in person via workshops and other face-to-face interactions, such as annual retreats, may foster buy-in more quickly than counting on staff to check in on a website for updates. The latter approach may be easy for staff to ignore if they are busy or if widespread buy-in does not exist. Momentum appears to be compromised when a guiding coalition that involves library administration hands off the implementation of a strategic plan to a team that does not include library administration.

II. Introducing New Practices Phase

STAGE 5: EMPOWERING BROAD-BASED ACTION

Miami's story of strategic planning involved a complete reorganization of its entire structure. After the consultants left, the library faced the daunting task of making this new structure work. The leadership team wrote position descriptions for the heads of the six new departments, some of whom they needed to hire. Each department was asked

to create a mission statement to align with the overall vision and to help guide their work. The department chairs started meeting together as a group to avoid recreating silos in their newly formed structure. Middle management at MSU also led the change process at their institution, with more than half of the library staff holding some type of coordinator title. While MSU did not have to contend with a reorganization to the degree that Miami did, MSU still expressed angst at this stage because staff turnover was a barrier to success. Wesleyan recognized that the logical next step in its strategic planning was to reorganize, but it needed to wait until library leadership stabilized and the new leader got his bearings. While the interim university librarian created and hired one new position and filled several others temporarily, it was not feasible for her, as an interim, to address all of the barriers the organization faced.

The change story at UT, Knoxville, provides a stark contrast at this stage when compared to the other institutions. It was up to the small team of three to keep the strategic plan alive among the staff. It is no surprise that employee buy-in was among the primary barriers in this change story, especially since it did not seem as if the middle managers were involved to the degree as were middle managers at Miami or MSU.

The importance of continuous and effective communication at this stage cannot be overstated. In most of these stories, the authors describe how important the role of middle managers was to the change efforts. This usually came in the form of having a seat at the table from time to time with the library management group for regular check-ins about progress toward achieving change efforts. It is also important to note that not all libraries are in the position to hire needed staff, to pay for a consultant, or to purchase new systems. Cash-strapped organizations may not be able to fix some of the barriers but instead must be creative in how they address them.

STAGE 6: GENERATING SHORT-TERM WINS

The teams responsible for strategic plan implementation at Miami had three primary short-term wins. They worked with staff to address burdensome reporting structures in one of their departments by creating a substructure with a new middle management position. They also merged two service points and adjusted the collection development budget and the way staff were organized to approach collection development. These immediate changes demonstrated their desire to adapt to the new structure, to address long-standing problems, to firmly root these changes in the new structure, and to resist the urge to fall into old habits. Library administration support of these changes also signaled commitment to the staff.

MSU experienced six short-term wins that directly aligned with steps taken to achieve its strategic plan. These short-term wins include creating committee structures and finding financial resources to help achieve its building master plan goal. They helped set the stage for anchoring changes in the organization. Wesleyan's use of its annual retreat to focus on projects and action steps toward completing projects helped to unite the staff the most and made them feel a part of moving the organization forward. This was much needed as its momentum as a library was once again disrupted by another tragic event that left it without a leader. While it continued to move forward in the wake of this trauma, short-term wins were episodic and in select areas of the library.

Because staff interest in submitting their short-term wins at UT, Knoxville, had waned, the StAR team devised a strategy to mine the annual departmental reports. This innovative work-around addressed staff complacency but was not sustainable in the long term.

STAGE 7: CONSOLIDATING GAINS AND PRODUCING MORE CHANGE

To strengthen its momentum, MSU created a new user experience and assessment group, the UX&A Team, to ensure that accountability measures for achieving goals in the strategic plan were integrated across all levels of the library. It did not have the opportunity to hire any additional staff for this new work. However, this offered stability and continuity as it implemented its plan. In fact, of the institutions in this category, MSU had the most direct and streamlined timeline for its process. Miami had the opportunity to hire seventeen new staff as a result of staff turnover and unfilled librarian positions. However, hiring, onboarding, and familiarizing new staff with the institution are labor- and time-intensive, and these tasks slow momentum for an organization already in flux. In spite of the significant turnover at Wesleyan at the top ranks, it accumulated large-scale wins, from the completion of a self-study to the creation of a strategic plan. As at Miami, hiring and onboarding caused the change process to be episodic and slower than desired. Spreading these short- and long-term wins out over longer periods of time may also impact staff morale, in both positive and negative ways. The length of time it took to address the organizational structure at Miami frustrated people. However, the length of time that the change process took at Wesleyan worked in its favor. Some staff who had been initially resistant to change began to understand why changes needed to occur, especially once they experienced more support from the university administration and others on campus.

With the strategic planning process complete, the UT, Knoxville, team focused on influencing staff behavior. They encouraged staff to report progress in a couple of strategic ways. First, they intentionally celebrated accomplishments that staff submitted to the StAR team by throwing a party and publicly recognizing accomplishments. Some leadership experts refer to this as “encouraging the heart,” a strategy that leaders frequently overlook when immersed in such focused change.² Rather than punitive measures, the UT, Knoxville, team used rewards and public appreciation for those who contributed to the system of self-reporting. They also shared an executive summary of the strategic plan in the form of a small booklet and a dashboard that contained five overarching strategic areas distilled from an overwhelming list of 154 action steps. Their strategy to make an administrative document more accessible to everyone was commendable.

III. Grounding Phase

STAGE 8: ANCHORING NEW APPROACHES IN THE CULTURE

With the help of consultants, Miami and MSU moved through the strategic planning process within months. Because Miami also reorganized its entire library and hired so many new people, its next steps to anchor change in its organization were to explore leadership training and to discuss if anything else needed attention in its structure. MSU

realized that it needed to agree upon a systematic project management approach in order to make change, so it built its accountability infrastructure through the creation of its User Experience and Assessment (UX&A) team. The chapters on both MSU and UT, Knoxville, mention the importance of building in linkages between the ways staff contribute to strategic plans and to their annual reports. The UT, Knoxville, team even developed an annual report template that mirrored the strategic plan framework to facilitate this process and took the important step of enlisting the library administration's support and willingness to communicate this message. UT, Knoxville, acknowledged a growing need for professional development related to creating measurable goals. Unlike the other institutions in this section, Wesleyan experienced strategic planning born out of reaction to one crisis followed by another. In spite of these circumstances, library leadership worked together to create a secure foundation to position the next leader for success. Wesleyan's story demonstrates that in spite of the unexpected, an organization can be resilient and move along a change process that is just as remarkable as an institution that takes a less pressure-packed approach.

Analysis and Conclusions

The strategic planning process at each of these institutions was holistic and involved the entire organization. However, none of these change stories is complete. Therefore, it is not possible to comment on the final outcome from the strategic planning process at any of these institutions, nor was that the goal. More than one institution reported at the outset failed attempts at strategic planning in the past. These strategic planning efforts are strong and well anchored in their organizations. In order for these efforts to stay strong, it is imperative that the staff understand how library administration will use the results of these efforts in order to continue to buy in to future strategic planning cycles.

TIPS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

- Continuous communication with staff throughout the strategic planning process is important for maintaining the momentum and understanding the reasons for change.
- While the change momentum is swift when consultants are brought in to help with this process, the staff may feel disoriented and uncertain as to how to proceed when consultants leave. A transition plan should be provided by the consultant or crafted by leadership to help with this potential problem.
- Written strategic plans are important and serve a purpose in the strategic planning process. However, it may help library staff to buy in more quickly if large strategic planning documents are distilled to a more digestible format. Large plans in excess of 100 pages or plans that contain more than 100 action steps can overwhelm readers and diminish buy-in.
- Strategic planning often involves multiple committees. It is important to have some overlap of membership from one committee to the next for communication purposes and to make sure that there is adherence to the overall vision.

- It is important to build into the strategic planning process metrics and assessment measures by which everyone will know if the planning process was effective. One way to do this is to use a ready-made framework such as the Balanced Scorecard.

Notes

1. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 1996), 81.
2. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 6th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017), 245.

Bibliography

Kotter, John P. *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 1996.

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