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Title: "SWOT" Tactics: Basics for Strategic Planning

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Summary:

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Focus on Strategic Planning

"SWOT" Tactics: Basics for Strategic Planning

By Randy Garner, Ph.D.

Often considered a daunting task filled with such complicated procedures and terms that it makes some want to ignore the activity altogether, strategic planning need not be an overly complicated process. Instead, managers can view it as simply considering where their organizations are -- or should be -- going over the next year or more and how they will get there. As it relates to law enforcement agencies, a strategic plan is the product of a leadership process that helps departments better focus their energies and resources to ensure that all members work toward the same goal.

The entire strategic planning process may take many forms and follow a variety of paths. At some point in the process, however, planners will identify or update the strategic philosophy. This may include a mission, vision, or value statement-or some combination. While each has similarities, some general distinctions exist. Typically, a mission statement is a brief description of the intent of the organization, an expression of the agency's unique reason for existence usually contained in a formal statement of purpose. A vision statement, which many agencies increasingly use, offers a vivid image of the desired future. It compellingly describes how the department will or should operate at some point in the future and how customers benefit from its services. A value statement often lists the overall priorities of how the organization will operate. It may focus on moral values, such as integrity, honesty, and respect, or operational values, such as efficiency or effectiveness. This also may include an agency's core values or principles that describe how it should conduct itself in carrying out its mission.

The Process

Four basic questions comprise the essence of the strategic planning process: 1) Where is the organization now? 2) Where does it want to be? 3) How will it get there? and 4) How does it measure its progress? While a number of terms are associated with this process, departments should focus only on what works for them. Some agencies have separate mission, vision, and value statements; others combine them. Some organizations create strategic goals, strategies, objectives, and tactics; others merely offer an identified goal and the objectives to reach it. Some review and update their current mission or vision statements before doing an analysis of their environments; others examine their mission statements after completing an assessment. More important than any particular order is examining all aspects of the agency and the environment it operates in while remaining flexible enough to make adjustments as needed.

Regardless of the terms or order used, getting started remains one of the most important parts of the strategic planning process. It is akin to pushing a car: the greatest difficulty lies in getting it rolling; after that, the task becomes easier. Departments should not get lost in the search for the perfect method or approach; it does not exist. Rather, they should start with the basic questions and move forward, not getting sidetracked by "analysis paralysis" wherein they overly obsess about getting everything just right or worrying about "neatness" in the beginning. They should concentrate on just getting the process started.

Generally, agencies should consider three main tasks when working on a strategic plan. The first, strategic analysis, is a review of the organization's environment, both internal and external. The next, strategic direction, involves what the department must do as a result of the major issues and opportunities that it may face. Finally, action planning deals with explaining how the agency will accomplish its strategic goals. Each component is important in creating the overall plan.

Strategic Analysis: "SWOT" Tactics

Not surprisingly, for an organization to determine where it wants to go in the future, it must assess where it is now. In this part of the strategic planning process, law enforcement administrators can call on the "SWOT" team for help. Simply put, this acronym stands for assessing an agency's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, a critical phase in the general planning process as it helps determine exactly where the agency is and what resources it may or may not have. Strength assessment identifies what the department tends to do well and can include a skilled, professional staff and a modern, well-equipped facility. Weaknesses denote what the agency may not do so well or what diminishes its effectiveness. Inadequate financial resources may fit into this category. Opportunities reflect what the organization might seize upon to do better. This area could include increasing community interactions and taking advantage of particular grants. Finally, threats are environmental factors that may hinder performance. Examples could include a rising demand for service or increased legislative mandates that can impact resources. Managers should consider "SWOT" analysis for issues both external to the agency, such as population growth and increased industrialization, and internal to it, such as an aging workforce that might result in excessive turnover or competing priorities for resources. "SWOT" analysis

constitutes one of the most important aspects in the overall strategic planning process.

Strategic Direction: SMARTER Goals

To move from an assessment of where it is to a plan for where it wants to be, a law enforcement agency must articulate particular strategies and identify strategic goals. When considering goals, a department can use the acronym SMARTER to create specific, measurable, acceptable, realistic, and timely goals that extend the capabilities of those working to achieve them while being rewarding for the organization and its members. An organization should make its goals as specific as possible so as not to cover too broad an area or to require completing a large number of steps or satisfying a vast array of objectives. Usually easier to assess for success, specific goals lend themselves to helping an agency determine if it has accomplished them. Those charged with carrying out the goals must find them acceptable and realistic in scope. "Pie in the sky" ideas or goals that have no reasonable chance of success do not help the organization or the individuals who must work toward a goal's completion. Some, believing that they are providing challenging direction to an agency, may set such lofty or demanding goals that no one possibly can satisfy them and, thus, predestine the organization to fail -- exactly the opposite of the intended effect.

Timely goals identify a specific issue that a department can accomplish in a reasonably appropriate time frame. Additionally, an agency should avoid overly simplistic, easy, or obvious goals. Instead, goals should challenge the organization within its limits and extend the capabilities of those working to achieve them. Careful consideration in goal creation can lead to renewed enthusiasm for the agency and its mission.

Strategic Success: Action Planning

Once a department has assessed the environment ("SWOT" tactics) and arrived at a set of (SMARTER) goals, it must place the strategic plan into action. One of the biggest problems in strategic planning (after giving up on trying to find the "perfect way") is not following the steps to implement the plan. It does little good to spend the time and energy identifying where the organization is and determining where it wants to be to then let the whole thing stagnate for a lack of action. In fact, strong leadership at this critical stage often proves key to successfully implementing a strategic plan. An action plan simply sets forth the goals, specifies the set of objectives needed to reach them, and identifies the responsible entity for accomplishing each one and in what time frame. This process ensures that the hard work of developing the strategic plan will become more than an exercise of enumerating "dreams." The difference between a wish and a goal is the initiation of an action plan that specifically outlines the responsibilities for success.

Conclusion

The purpose of strategic planning is to help a law enforcement agency better recognize where it is, where it wants to go, and how it can best get there. Although different departments use varying terms, they should focus on the creation of a thoughtful plan to achieve growth and success. This need not be an overly difficult task. As the saying goes, "if

you fail to plan, you plan to fail." This proves particularly true in organizations that may face numerous challenges and competing priorities. The law enforcement profession cannot afford to practice "pinball leadership," getting bounced around by every unexpected event. Instead, leaders must plan proactively to create a future that encompasses the vision they desire and the plan required to achieve its success.

The Essence of the Strategic Planning Process

- * Where is the organization now?
- * Where does it want to be?
- * How will it get there?
- * How does it measure its progress?

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