

“Measure Twice, Cut Once”

By Randall Rollinson

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Growing up in Southern Illinois in the 1950's and 1960's was the formative period in my life. I can't tell you how many times my brother and I were cautioned about doing things the right way the first time. I can still hear my father and grandfather saying "Measure twice, cut once! You've only got one shot at cutting a piece of wood, so be positive you are using the correct measurement." This important life lesson has stuck with me ever since.

In the field of strategic management this axiom also holds true. While there is no "standard approach" to launching a strategic management program, the assessment work done up front should yield sufficient information to design and organize an effective program configured to meet the needs of a given leadership team and its organization.

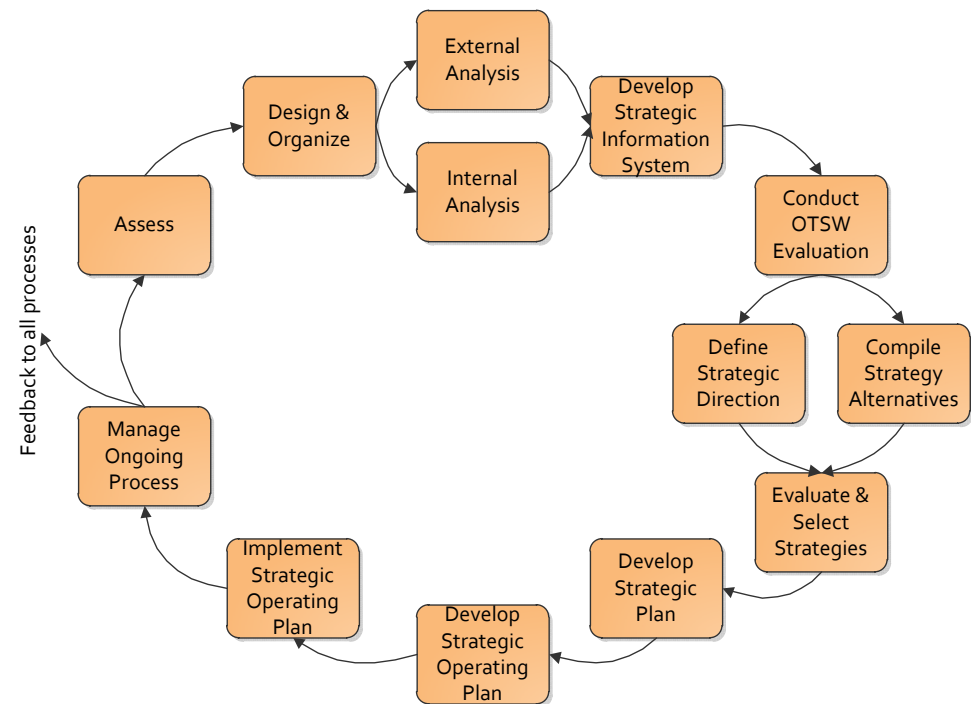
Each organization needs a process that meets the unique and distinctive features of that particular organization. While each strategy practitioner has a preferred approach, any practitioner worth his salt should first determine the level and scope of the program, a preferred conceptual model and then modify each to meet the needs of the leadership team and the organization.

The level and scope of any strategic planning process should reflect the best use of management capabilities, and equally important, leadership preferences on how to initiate strategic management activities—regardless of the ultimate

level and scope of the strategic management process aspired to and eventually realized.

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FLOW DIAGRAM OF A THOROUGH AND PRACTICAL STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PROCESS



Irrespective of the conceptual model chosen to guide the process, the model selected will likely require further adjustment to the contextual, situational, and unique factors that modify the direction and types of strategies that the organization is able to pursue effectively. In all cases, the key task is to reconcile between what the leadership team wants, what it's capable of doing and what needs to be done in order to launch a strategic management program.

We argue that before effective strategic management can take place organizational leaders (including the board of directors) must embrace the need for a disciplined approach, both strategically and operationally. By accepting this fundamental premise, coupled with the willingness to allocate the resources (time, skills, and money) necessary to clarify the direction of the organization and its implementation, a successful effort can be launched. Commitment to the effort must come from all levels of leadership and management, since strategic management is an organization-wide responsibility. Before this or any major change program, for that matter, is undertaken this commitment must be communicated to all levels of the organization. It is top management who must take the lead, not only in making this commitment, but also in assuring the commitment is understood and prioritized throughout the organization.

Organizations, even those of the same size performing the same functions, vary greatly with respect to organization structures, management authority and responsibilities, degree of specialization and style of managing. Therefore, it is only feasible to offer some general guidelines and suggestions to organize and manage in a manner that fits the organization while providing a comfort level and familiar

patterns to those involved in the program. It is difficult enough to deal with new tools and concepts without also having to adopt new management styles and systems. Based on this organization and management approach, it is important to assign responsibility for various aspects of the strategic management program. Obviously, many members of the leadership team will be involved in all parts of the program; however, as it progresses, new roles and responsibilities will be identified and need to be assigned at that time.

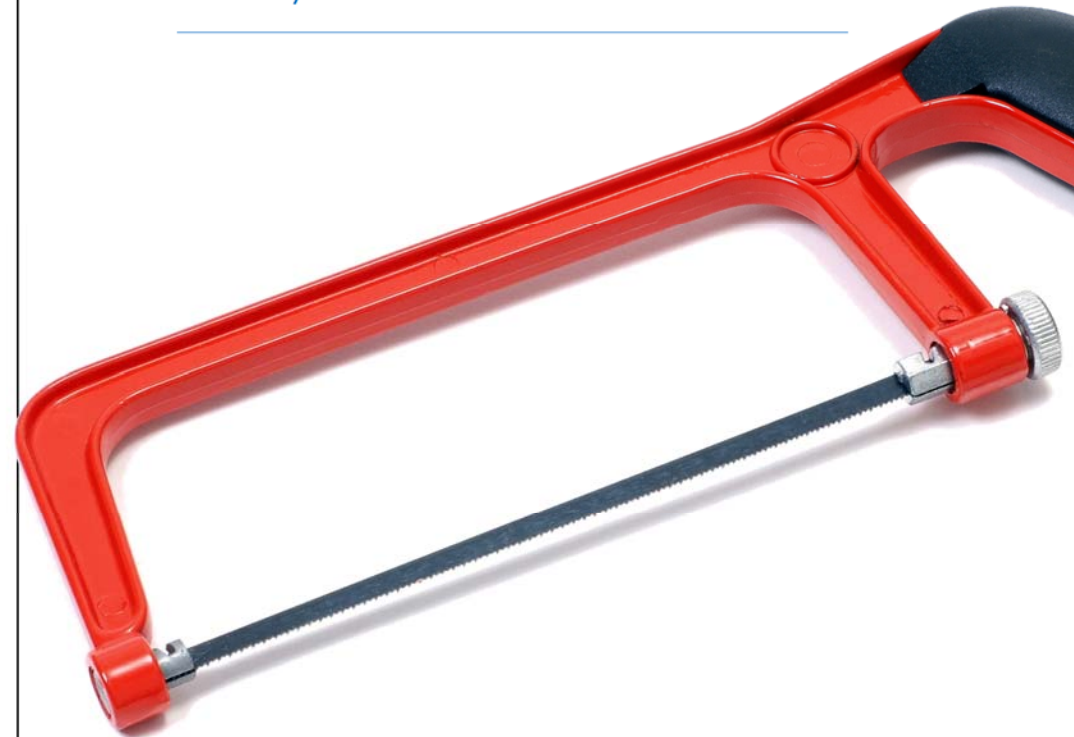


In all cases make sure to compile a comprehensive set of benefits expected from the process, and a list of anticipated concerns to be addressed before the process begins. The team must agree upon and communicate a reasonable work plan and timeline. Throughout the development of the strategic management program it is vital to maintain top leadership involvement and participation in all phases of the program. This cannot be emphasized too strongly. Determining strategic direction, planning and implementing strategy requires deployment throughout all functions and at all levels of the organization remains the primary responsibility of top management.

Depending on the size of the organization, internal management and staff experience / expertise in strategic management, it may be necessary / advisable to seek outside assistance. In most cases, this assistance comes from a seasoned senior facilitator that has had broad experience in strategic management programs in several organizations. This is the only type of assistance that should be sought at this time. Later, as the project evolves, the need for various types of specialists may be identified for all types of functional expertise, and for highly specific expertise, such as gathering competitive intelligence in rapidly changing industries, process improvement or privately held businesses.

Careful attention to selecting a team manager / facilitator and the formation of the project's oversight team is extremely important, since the composition of its membership will determine the project's scope as well as managing expectations to keep them realistic and achievable. If key members of the leadership team or the professional staff are omitted, the success of the project may fall short of its deliverables. It is far too easy to make assumptions about a particular function, process, or strategic business unit when its key manager(s) is not on the team.

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Exercise: Get Organized

Instructions:

Work as a team to answer the following items. Doing so allows your team to discuss, understand, define the scope of planning and better manage expectations at the beginning of the process.

1. List the benefits you expect from strategic planning.
2. List any concerns you expect from strategic planning.
3. Note possible ways to overcome each of your concerns. Circle the best idea(s).
4. Decide how you will proceed.
 - Full steam ahead
 - Proceed with caution, addressing the concerns above
 - Wait until a better time to begin
 - Stop - Don't proceed
5. You are developing a strategic plan for:
 - Total organization
 - One Strategic Business Unit (SBU) or Program Unit of the organization
 - Functional area
 - Core process
 - Other (Explain)
6. For what period of time are you planning?
 - Next 12 months
 - Next 18 months
 - Next 2 years
 - Next 3 years
 - Other (Explain)
7. What critical issues do you hope planning will address?
8. Who will be on your planning team?
9. Are there other stakeholders you want to involve? (e.g. customers, suppliers, vendors?)

In the development of the plan? In the review of the plan?
10. Who within your organization will manage the overall planning effort? Who will be the team manager?
11. By what date do you want to have the plan approved?