

Strategic Planning for Library Managers

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by Donald E. Riggs



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The rare Arabian Oryx is believed to have inspired the myth of the unicorn. This desert antelope became virtually extinct in the early 1960s. At that time several groups of international conservationists arranged to have 9 animals sent to the Phoenix Zoo to be the nucleus of a captive breeding herd. Today the Oryx population is over 400 and herds have been returned to reserves in Israel, Jordan, and Oman.

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PREFACE

The business world has learned that the traditional method of planning is insufficient in our ever-changing and turbulent society. To ensure growth and viability while coping with increasing risk and uncertainty, companies and organizations have been steadily adopting the management techniques of strategic planning. There is nothing new about having to cope with changing circumstances; in fact, this has always been one of the primary responsibilities of library managers. What is different today is the pace at which this change is taking place, the number of directions in which it is occurring, and the increase in its magnitude. An environment is being created which is beset by instability and great uncertainty, one in which libraries need to adopt more flexible strategies in order to survive and thrive.

The theme of strategic thinking and planning has never been more topical than in today's uncertain environment. When recent issues of *Business Week* and the *New York Times* suggest that strategic planners are in great demand, it is certain evidence that strategic thinking is becoming a necessary management function.

Yet the deliberate practice of strategic planning in libraries is regrettably slow in being adopted and rudimentary, despite its wide recognition in the corporate world. Until now, there have been no books devoted exclusively to strategic planning in libraries and fewer than five journal articles written on strategic planning as it pertains to library management. As a result of this void in the library literature, I found myself turning to business and management sources for theoretical and practical applications of strategic planning.

There is hardly a library administrator who would deny the virtues of planning. However, if administrators are to become more than crisis-oriented, they will need to engage in more strategic thinking and planning. The strategic plan itself is not a panacea or a guarantee for success. Some library managers do not want to be committed to a plan because, if there are

no written objectives for the library, one can never fail and, if there is no direction, one can never be lost.

Before devising and implementing a strategic plan, library managers must understand the nature of strategic planning and its implications. One of the purposes of this book is to provide general and procedural information on how to go about adopting strategic planning into the library management construct. The book is designed to be used by library directors, associate and assistant directors, department heads, students, and others interested in library management. It should raise the awareness level of librarians to “think and plan strategically.”

This book offers a helping hand to managers, so they may better understand and assess where their libraries currently are, where they are going, and what the best ways are to get them to where they want to go. It is a succinct state-of-the-art document on strategic planning, including a descriptive narration of the interrelationships of the various components of a strategic plan and a “how to do it” prescriptive approach for effective implementation. The book provides an introduction to strategic planning; discusses organizing for planning; differentiates among mission, goals, and objectives; underlines the importance of strategy formulation; describes alternatives and contingencies; denotes the roles of policy and resource allocation; rationalizes the involvement of management information systems, the Planning Programming Budgeting System, and the general systems approach; stresses the significance of implementation of the planning process; focuses on planning evaluation and control; and provides concluding observations. In addition to the references given at the end of each chapter, a bibliography of selected resources is provided for the library manager seeking further information on strategic planning.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface ix

Chapter 1: Setting the Stage	1
What Is Strategic Planning?	1
Why Strategic Planning?	3
Library Management-Related Issues and Trends	6
What Good Is Strategic Planning to Libraries?	8
Fear of Planning	9
Transformational Leadership	9
References	10
Chapter 2: Organizing for Strategic Planning	12
Participants in the Process	14
Developing a Planning Environment	17
Library Self-Analysis	20
Identifying Policies	22
Information for Planning	23
The Planning Manual	23
Organizational Change	24
Pitfalls to Avoid	25
References	28
Chapter 3: Mission, Goals, and Objectives	29
Mission	30
Goals	32
Objectives	35
References	37
Chapter 4: Strategy Formulation	38
Mistakes to Avoid	40
Integrating Strategy with Organizational Design	40

Goals for Change	42
Assumptions	43
Group Sessions	43
Characteristics of Effective Strategy	45
Levels of Strategy	47
Types of Strategies	48
Specific Library Areas for Strategic Development	50
Interrelationship of Strategies	51
Synergy	51
Economies of Scale	52
Tradeoffs	52
Strategic Gap	52
Linking Strategy with Operations	54
Evaluation	54
References	56
Chapter 5: Alternatives and Contingencies	57
Alternatives	58
Contingencies	62
References	64
Chapter 6: Policies	65
Stating Policies	66
Policy Formulation	68
Types of Policies	69
References	70
Chapter 7: Resource Allocation	71
Time and Risk Dimensions	72
Critical Resources	72
Achieving the Right Balance	74
References	75
Chapter 8: An MIS for Strategic Planning	76
Practical Aspects of Library Information	77
Objectives of an MIS	78
MIS Planning Steps	79
The Computer and the MIS	81
Why an MIS Fails	82
Implementation	83
References	84

Chapter 9: Strategic Planning and PPBS	85
What Is PPBS?	86
Objectives of PPBS	88
Interrelated Dimensions of PPBS	89
Major Components of PPBS	90
Advantages of PPBS	90
What PPBS Is Not	91
Strategies and PPBS	91
Similarities Between PPBS and Strategic Planning	92
References	92
Chapter 10: The Systems Approach	93
Systems Analysis	94
Systems Models	95
A System of Plans	97
Decision Making	99
References	100
Chapter 11: Implementation of Strategic Planning	101
Organizational Complexities	102
A Plan for Implementing Planning	104
The Ongoing Planning Team	108
References	109
Chapter 12: Planning Evaluation and Control	110
Ways to Evaluate	111
Planning Control	116
References	118
Chapter 13: Conclusion	119
Selected Bibliography	123
Index	135

1

SETTING THE STAGE

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”
—*Proverbs, 29:18*

WHAT IS STRATEGIC PLANNING?

Writers have offered the following definitions of strategic planning:

Strategic planning is the process of deciding on objectives of the organization, on changes in these objectives, on the resources used to attain these objectives, and on the policies that are to govern the acquisition, use, and disposition of these resources.¹

A continuous process of making present entrepreneurial (risk-taking) decisions systematically and with the greatest knowledge of their futurity; organizing systematically the efforts needed to carry out these decisions; and measuring the results of these decisions against the expectations through organized feedback.²

Strategic planning deals primarily with the contrivance of organizational effort directed to the development of organizational purpose, direction, and future generations of products and services, and the design of implementation policies by which the goals and objectives of the organization can be accomplished.³

For the purpose of this book, a library's strategic planning process encompasses its mission statement, goals, objectives, strategies, alternatives and contingencies, policies, and resource allocations, and their implementation and evaluation. Particular emphasis is placed on the interrelationship of these components and on the formulation and implementation of strategies. Special attention is also given to the control and evaluation mechanisms necessary to ensure effectiveness in the strategic planning process. One purpose of strategic planning is to determine future areas of activity and decide future courses of action that will result in a high degree of achievement of the library's goals and objectives. In addition, this process provides a set of strategies and policies that contribute a framework for planning and decision making throughout the library. Simply put, the strategic plan gives the goals and objectives of the library and the means by which the library intends to reach them.

While defining strategic planning, it is appropriate to define "strategy." It is derived from "strategos"—meaning a general.⁴ In military usage, "strategy" has been long associated with generalship (i.e., determining basic plans of action regarding matters considered to be of critical, even decisive, importance). Regardless of the military overtones, the word "strategic" conveys the kind of planning most needed by today's libraries.

Planning is one of the most important and difficult tasks of modern management. In the early part of this century, organizations were able to enjoy a certain degree of control over their environment. Conditions today, however, are dynamic rather than static. Moreover, Emery notes, they are changing at an even faster rate due to the influence of such factors as economic depression and modern technology. And these changes often occur in a sudden and unpredictable manner similar to turbulence in the atmosphere.⁵ Thus, what has emerged to deal with these changes is a "strategic" approach to thinking and planning for the future of rapidly changing organizations.

Strategic planning is not happenstance. It is a complex process requiring much preparation and organization. Strategic planning does not establish a procedure for libraries to eliminate risk; rather, it is a means of recognizing risk and a method for taking advantage of the rewards it might offer. It is more of an art than a science; it is concerned with power and politics. Therefore, it would be folly to expect that a single strategic plan could be developed and implemented for all types of libraries. A small special library will not have a strategic plan identical to the one for a large public library. The organization for strategic planning has to be compatible with and support the goals and objectives of the library. Flexibility has to be

built into the strategic planning process in order to accommodate the rapidly changing library environment. The time frame for an effective strategic planning system will normally run from three to five years.

Strategic planning is not a “bottom-up” planning process that the library director can delegate to a committee. Since the director is responsible for providing leadership and creating the grand design (including the formulation and execution of strategies) for the library, strategic planning is essentially a “top-down” process. It is a people-interactive process; thus, it is important to keep the entire library staff apprised of the strategic planning activities.

One should not perceive strategic planning as an effort to create a “set in concrete” plan for the library. Rather, it is a process which is continuously being updated and, in any case, it is not a means for replacing managerial intuition and judgment.

Strategic planning does not focus primarily on daily operational and budgetary issues. It does deal with broad intentions of the library, it serves as a planning process which analyzes future threats and opportunities, and it offers alternative courses of action for the library’s consideration.⁶ Strategic planning differs from traditional approaches to planning in that, for example, the choice of alternative courses of action for an organization is made only after consideration of strategic decision situations.

WHY STRATEGIC PLANNING?

One of the attributes of the strategic planning process is that it is future-oriented. It encourages simulation of the future; one can project the future on paper and redo it if the results are not desirable. It is important for library managers to determine what they want their libraries to be, say, in five years, then work back in time to determine the strategies they need to reach that goal.

Although modern organizations operate in a dynamic environment, many are dominated by an inherent conservatism. John D. Rockefeller, III, describes the conservatism of organizations in this way:

An organization is a system, with a logic of its own, and all the weight of tradition and inertia. The deck is stacked in favor of the tried and proven way of doing things and against the taking of risks and striking out in new directions.⁷

Because it looks at organizations in such a systematic manner, strategic planning is most appropriate for use by these conservative organiza-

tions. Decisions are made only after thoughtful analysis with all parts of an organization viewed individually and collectively as they interrelate. The process minimizes emotion, guesswork, and intuition and provides a workable solution somewhere between compromise and creativity.

In for-profit organizations, paramount attention must be paid to the "seeds of success and failure." Strategic change must be controlled and directional; bottom lines receive special emphasis. While some tactical mistakes will be tolerated, the master strategy must always be on target. Some years ago, General Robert E. Wood of Sears, Roebuck and Co. observed that "business is like war in one respect, if its grand strategy is correct, any number of tactical errors can be made and yet the enterprise proves successful."⁸ Both for-profit and non-profit organizations must have their strategies conceptually well-written and understood, and they must relate directly to overall organizational goals.

The importance of strategic planning in the business world is illustrated by a 1977 survey conducted with chief executive officers of the 500 largest for-profit firms in the United States. One question asked the respondents what their most important responsibility as a chief executive officer was. Planning/strategy ranked first in all companies above management selection/development, capital allocation/profits, policy decisions, and maintaining morale, in that order.⁹

Before getting involved in the strategic planning process, top managers must know what they want from the planning system. Steiner has listed some possible objectives of formal strategic planning. They are not mutually exclusive; some are subsets of others or interrelated. They are not arranged in any order of importance. His 20 suggested objectives are to:

1. Change direction of the company.
2. Accelerate growth and improve profitability.
3. Weed out poor performers among divisions.
4. Flush up strategic issues for top management consideration.
5. Concentrate resources on important things. Guide divisions and research personnel in developing new products. Allocate assets to areas of best potential.
6. Develop better information for top managers to make better decisions.
7. Develop a frame of reference for budgets and short-range operating plans.
8. Develop situation analyses of opportunities and threats to provide better awareness of company's potential in light of its strengths and weaknesses.

9. Develop better internal coordination of activities.
10. Develop better communications.
11. Gain control of operations.
12. Develop a sense of security among managers coming from a better understanding of changing environment and company's ability to adapt to it.
13. Stretch the mind.
14. Train managers.
15. Provide a road map to show where the company is going and how to get there.
16. Set more realistic, demanding yet attainable objectives.
17. Review and audit present activities so as to make proper adjustments and modifications in light of changing environment and company's aims.
18. Provide awareness of changing environment in order to better adapt to it.
19. Pick up the pace of a "tired" company.
20. Because others are doing it.¹⁰

Based on Carlson's excellent description and justification of strategic planning,¹¹ the following continuum reveals the benefits realized by moving from traditional planning to strategic planning.

FROM	TO
Random planning	Systematic planning
Reactive decision making	Proactive decision making
Incremental evaluation	Synoptic evaluation
Goal-setting based on operational needs	Goal-setting based on the organization's mission
Isolated decision making	Team decision making
Decision making based on subjective evaluations	Decision making based on objective evaluations as a result of gathering data
Guessing results	Evaluating all possible outcomes

LIBRARY MANAGEMENT-RELATED ISSUES AND TRENDS

The current period in the history of library management is a complicated one. More than ever before, major external forces are compounding management practices. Shifting of priorities and restructuring of internal programs have brought forth a new era in library planning.

As a consequence of improved services, users have yet greater expectations of their local libraries. They are demanding expansion of existing services, creation of new services, extension of library hours, and enlargement of collections. Better bibliographic access to collections has enabled users to know which libraries hold particular books and journals, and consequently, the users place heavy pressure on local library staff to get materials from other libraries in a shorter turnaround time.

Adequate space to house new services and growing collections is an ongoing challenge for library planners. Unlike the 1960s, there are limited funds to construct new facilities; alternatives and strategies for accommodating space needs have to be developed and assessed. Remote storage and compact shelving are popular alternatives for easing cramped quarters. Reconfigurations of existing space may save funds and provide a "band-aid" solution to the heavy demand in some libraries for more user stations. The growing population has depleted the availability of study carrels and tables in libraries. Frequent complaints are even heard about the lack of parking space adjacent to the local public library.

Technological adaptation could best be described as having a positive impact on library procedures and processes. However, the state of the art of some library technology has evolved at a snail's pace. This exceedingly slow development of particular technological applications (e.g., a workable acquisitions subsystem) has played havoc with planning for a totally automated, integrated library system. Moreover, library managers must try to reconcile all the glittering technology available with the economic realities of library budgets. The following questions deserve answers from library managers who strategically plan on incorporating the role of technology into their library's future:

- When should a library use a home-grown computing system in lieu of purchasing a turnkey system?
- How important is it to have all catalog records in machine-readable format?
- What role will computer reference service play in the technology program?

- Who will train the library staff to use the new technology?
- Will advanced technologies eventually drive the traditional library out of existence?

Austerity and retrenchment are common watchwords throughout the library world. High inflation rates occurring concurrently with reduced annual library budgets have created a double-whammy effect. Competition for funds has intensified within the past few years as city managers, college presidents, corporation leaders, and other budget decision makers take a closer look at library expenditures. Many of them perceive the library as a “bottomless pit” agency/department because, each year, the amount of funds requested by the library grows larger and larger. Planning which library programs to deemphasize and on which existing strengths to build on are key points to consider prior to the redeployment of already scarce resources.

Preventative maintenance of library materials and full-scale conservation measures are being factored into today’s library goals and objectives. New funds for conservation of materials will not be easy to justify. Attempts to explain to city officials and state legislators why funds are needed to deacidify materials may fall on deaf ears. It is difficult for budgeteers to comprehend why new funds are needed to preserve materials; they understand requests for new books, but preservation is a phenomenon not yet fully understood.

Changes in staffing patterns and reductions in the work force have created perplexing challenges for library managers. Reductions in precious human resources have left some libraries debilitated. Counteracting a large-scale staff reduction calls for the wisdom of a Solomon and the cunning of a Machiavelli. Effective use of staff during difficult financial times sets forth a rethinking process in personnel planning. A renewed emphasis should be placed on productivity and the quality of the work environment, with the inclusion of strategies for coping with areas often overlooked (e. g., stress and burnout).

Retraining of staff members should be a high priority in any library environment. Continuing education opportunities have to be provided to keep staff members apprised of new developments in their respective specialties. If a new, qualified staff member cannot be employed to oversee implementation of a novel service, then some provision has to be made to train existing staff. Well-designed and well-funded continuing education and staff development programs must be an integral part of a library’s planning endeavor.

WHAT GOOD IS STRATEGIC PLANNING TO LIBRARIES?

Libraries are highly complex organizations which are being pressured by societal demands to do progressively more with progressively less. The time has gone when library managers could meet each new day by "planning" on the spur of the moment; today, this "Mickey Finn" approach to management of libraries would be devastating to their well-being, growth, and vitality. An uncertain and muddled environment has intensified the need to plan for the future. Although some library managers may prefer to take an ostrichlike approach to coming change and do what has always been done, it is no longer possible to count on our tradition to maintain momentum in the growth and development of libraries.

In his 1981-82 library annual report, De Gennaro states:

We have come to an end of an era. Change has overtaken and replaced growth as the dominant driving force in . . . libraries. Librarians, as well as those who use and fund libraries, must come to terms with this new reality. It should be clear to all by now that libraries can no longer afford to do what they tried to do in the past. . . . The forces that have been transforming the library during the last decade are intensifying and accelerating. We will have to move quickly and decisively to take advantage of the opportunities such a climate of change offers. The library can either ride this wave of change or be overwhelmed by it. I believe we can and should ride it.¹²

There is no better time than now for a change in the library manager's mentality. It is an ideal time to begin developing a strategic philosophy to facilitate the library's relationship with its current environment and to provide a better sense of direction and commitment to the library's future.

Davis describes the importance of strategic thinking this way:

In the placid world of traditional librarianship, strategic thinking was an unnecessary and indeed alien idea connoting conniving in its worst extreme. The library was meant to be carried wherever the satisfaction of the user needs took it. In the turbulent, resource scarce environment of contemporary librarianship, strategic planning becomes indispensable. However, most librarians are simply not practiced in strategic thinking, which requires a shift in mind set. A mind which is used to thinking forward from action to consequences, must begin to focus on "backward analysis" from desirable future outcomes to immediate requirements. Capability to think strategically needs to be developed in most managers; unfortunately, it seldom is.¹³

FEAR OF PLANNING

Since planning involves change, it is sometimes feared because it may mean a disturbance in the status quo, a threat to job security, or a modification in the established way of doing things. Strategic planning is not a panacea for a library's problems, and "bullet biting" and "hard choices" may accompany the process. Administrators who propose change may face resentment—may even run the risk of losing prestige. Perhaps the lack of a plan may satisfy some library managers who do not want to risk taking action and possibly making a mistake.

Reinharth et al. believe that the following are typical planning-related fears:

- It is hard to plan (and I might not do a good job).
- It puts constraints on my actions (if it's not in the plan, I can't do it).
- It forces me to make decisions (and that makes me vulnerable).
- Making a plan provides a yardstick for critique and evaluation (and I might not measure up).
- Planning brings direction and organization out of chaos (and removes a very good excuse).
- Planning brings its own chaos and disruption (when managers resist or choose not to follow the plan).¹⁴

It is the library director's responsibility to set the stage for the strategic planning process. A positive approach cannot be overemphasized; the immediate benefits and long-range value of planning need to be advocated. For example, the library will gain much knowledge about its strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities during the analysis phase. To ensure that the final planning document is accepted by the staff, it is judicious to keep them informed throughout the different stages of the planning process.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Due to today's internal and external environmental factors, the top-level administrators of libraries are required to be change agents. Even though this book frequently uses the terms "managers" and "management" while discussing strategic planning, it should be understood that the book is geared toward library leaders. As a matter of fact, strategic planning cannot effectively exist in any library setting without strong, creative