

Focusing On Weak Points Builds Good Strategic Plans

Feature article about John Myrna and Myrna Associates

Strategic planners tend to weigh strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. But John Myrna likes to tweak this so-called SWOT analysis. "It's best to start with the organization's most important weaknesses," said Myrna, president of Myrna Associates in Silver Spring, Md. "You stimulate a richer dialogue by addressing the weaknesses first." He suggests following a discussion of weaknesses with a look at opportunities, threats and strengths—what Myrna calls a "WOTS up" analysis.

When you gather your management team to engage in strategic planning, welcome negativity. People often prefer to point out problems than highlight successes, Myrna says. He finds that a negative event has a substantially greater impact on someone than a positive one. By starting the session with a stress on what's wrong, you can spark a lively give-and-take and increase everyone's participation.

As a facilitator, Myrna likes to inject negativity into the first hour of a strategic planning session by asking the 10 to 12 participants, "How could this meeting fail?" "Almost everyone has been through a failed strategic planning process," he said. "They

may also bring personal agendas into it. By having them identify how things can fail, it brings potential roadblocks out into the open so that



John Myrna, *co-founder and president of Myrna Associates Inc.*

we can deal with them."

For example, managers often gripe about lack of accountability during the follow-through phase. To address that complaint, Myrna works with the group to assign specific action items to individuals in the room. Each person agrees to complete a designated task within a set timetable.

Another issue that participants raise is finding time to implement action steps. Myrna says that many managers will claim they're too busy to

take on new initiatives. "I tell them to divide their week into 85% usual work and 15% development time," he said. Most people don't stick to that 85-15 ratio, he adds. They squander the 15% allocated for working on strategic initiatives by making excuses and indulging in time-wasting activities. A better approach is to delegate nonessential work and reserve 15% of the work-week for bigger-picture priorities.

After the group shares concerns about how the meeting can fail, they can proceed with a fresh commitment to succeed. They work together to devise ways to overcome obstacles and define their roles in spearheading effective implementation.

While an organization's chief executive typically attends strategic planning meetings, it's important for the head honcho to keep quiet. When Myrna facilitates these sessions, he establishes a ground rule that the CEO always speaks last in any discussion. "Sometimes, this rule is frustrating to CEOs who are used to speaking up whenever they want," Myrna said. "But everyone else in the room loves it."



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