

MAR  
APR

15

V 19 | N 02

# information outlook

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SPECIAL LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION

A photograph of three people in a meeting. On the left, a man with glasses and a beard is looking towards the center. In the middle, another man is looking towards the right. On the right, a woman is looking towards the center. They are sitting around a table with a laptop and some papers. The background is a blurred office space with sticky notes on a wall.

INFORMATION TEAMS  
AND STRATEGIC  
PLANNING

# Information Teams and Strategic Planning

EACH TEAM MEMBER BRINGS DIFFERENT KNOWLEDGE AND PERSPECTIVES TO THE PLANNING PROCESS. SUCCESS DEPENDS ON CREATING A COLLABORATIVE TEAM ENVIRONMENT TO ENCOURAGE SHARING.

BY BILL SEDGWICK AND ESTHER EWING

**A**ny team in any organization can benefit from strategic planning; by the same token, teams are also crucial to the successful implementation of strategic plans. It's very much a two-way street.

At Big Tree Strategies, we have conducted a lot of research on what makes great teams, and we have found that truly outstanding teams need four key elements to work together:

1. A clear sense of direction, and the knowledge that what they do is important to the organization and to all of them as individuals.
2. The involvement and commitment of everyone in a leadership position to tell the story of the team and build a motivating narrative. This narrative should engage the team, rein-

force the fact that what they do is important, and explain how they will accomplish their goals.

3. A commitment by all members to improve how they operate as a team and continuously learn how to be a better team.
4. A team culture in which respect and trust are the foundation of a team-wide commitment to performance and accomplishment.

## The Intent of a Strategic Plan

A well-crafted strategic plan weaves through all four of these elements. A plan developed by a team in an open, involved manner can become the fuel for commitment and accomplishment. But what is the intent of a strategic plan? Again, there are four considerations at play.

**Purpose and direction.** A strategic plan is all about focusing and clarifying the roadmap for the organization to follow. We tend to think in two buckets: the first one is “business as usual” and involves those activities that keep everyday work flowing, and the second refers to “change items” that will keep the organization relevant in the future.

Strategic planning is mostly about the second bucket—knowing what we need to do in order to change. The challenge for most teams is that they are already overloaded with business-as-usual items. This means that finding the time and energy to commit to, and deliver on, the change items is a crucial aspect of the planning process.

**A forum for dialogue, learning and agreement.** Top-down planning may be appropriate in highly regulated, command-and-control structures, but it is



**BILL SEDGWICK** and **ESTHER EWING** are co-founders and partners of Big Tree Strategies Inc. (BigTreeStrategies.com). Big Tree Strategies works with teams that are doing critical work and helps them become more effective, engaged and productive. They can be reached at Bill@BigTreeStrategies.com and Esther@BigTreeStrategies.com, respectively.



seldom the right approach for professionals from diverse backgrounds who have fluid business challenges to conquer. Dialogue leads to learning, and learning allows for shifts in perspective.

**The voice of reality.** Strategic planning is not a free-form exercise. All plans are created within a context that may involve market needs, competitive moves, or changes in the environment. What's more, they are subject to similar rules (budgets, schedules and legislation come to mind). It's not unusual for many team members to spend time focused on their own work and role, but being reminded of the larger context is always valuable.

**A launch pad for action.** A strategic plan is a call to action. For a team, it should provide a playbook on what needs to happen over a defined period of time. It should bind people together and clarify who will do what and when.

We think of a strategic plan as a collection of project plans. The structure looks like this:

1. A statement of intent with metrics of success.
2. An outline of the phases of the work.
3. A "drill down" into the actual activities required for the first couple of phases. This should include details of the activities, duty assignments (who will lead and who will contribute), timelines showing when activities will begin and end, and lists of resources that will be required for the effort.

## Producing a Strategic Plan

What does it take to produce a good strategic plan? For starters, consider these important factors:

**A collection of valid intelligence.** We are often told that knowledge is power, and this is very true in strategic planning. In fact, collecting pertinent information from a variety of sources is crucial for a robust plan. But this is where knowledge intersects with power—teams are composed of people with different viewpoints and experiences who bring their insights to the table,

but only if *invited* to do so. Collaborative planning in a team environment brings these two elements—knowledge and power—together.

**Engaged leadership.** Establishing conditions for successful planning is the responsibility of the team leader. Being intentional about the type of engagement and involvement of team members will result in getting the right type of plan.

Sometimes the full engagement of everyone is not necessary. For example, if a crisis has occurred and immediate reworking of the plan is required, gathering many perspectives may be too time consuming. However, there could be times when involving a number of team members makes complete sense—for example, when thinking through the impact of a societal trend, such as how using electronic readers affects reading habits. Getting a handle on a subject like this may very well require many perspectives and responses.

We once worked with the internal audit team of a bank that was going to perform some planning. The team leader arrived with a binder under his arm. When asked what it contained, he replied, "The plan. I worked all weekend on it." As things turned out, his team was disengaged throughout the entire exercise. Their (correct) impression was that he had already made up his mind about the "right answer" and expected them to fall in line and implement the plan he had come up with. This wasn't planning at all—it was command and control.

The promise of collaborative planning is engagement and inclusiveness. The leader must set the conditions for this, and how the leader prepares for the process and the manner in which the team is engaged are crucial. Hiring a facilitator who helps construct the process and then leads the group through it allows both the leader and team to participate fully. They know someone else is thinking about the best way to get the job done.

**Truth and honesty.** Strategic planning, poorly conducted, is a waste of time and effort. Worse than that, it

turns people off the process and makes them cynical about planning. Planning processes provide a valuable time for leaders and team members to be truthful about the topics they are covering. If resources are slim, this is when to mention it; if time is tight, the team can be challenged to find creative solutions; if the challenges are large, people can rise to the occasion. But all of this takes a commitment to telling the truth.

**Few areas of focus.** Nothing kills the successful implementation of a plan like having to focus on too many areas. As the plan is implemented, the energy generated by coming up with great ideas can result in too many candidates for action items. Trimming down the list of potential focus areas is critical so the team won't be overwhelmed by the sheer number of action items. We advise teams to identify a handful of focus areas, with three the magic number (this is a noble aspiration, but seldom accomplished). The more common number seems to be about five.

The importance of limiting the number of focus areas becomes obvious when the team starts thinking about detailed actions that must be undertaken to accomplish a particular focus area. Consider this scenario: let's say you have five focus areas with four phases apiece, and there are five actions per phase. That gives us  $5 \times 4 \times 5$ , which equals 100 discrete actions to perform. Each of these actions needs to have an owner, people to work on it, a budget, and time to complete it. Of course, not all actions are equal, but it is clear that the more focus areas your plan has, the more activity you will initiate.

**Tight/loose process.** Planning is all about opening, narrowing, and closing. *Opening* is the free-form consideration of possibilities and ideas. *Narrowing* is about applying criteria and finding a short list of pertinent ideas for fuller consideration. *Closing* is about finalizing and making decisions. A team that works through these stages in a disciplined manner will do a thorough job and bring the best information to the table. The team will then be able to consider this information and make

decisions that will have the greatest positive impact.

The most effective planning process for a team is both tight (disciplined and structured) and loose (with flexibility built into it), so the team can pause and explore areas that need more thought. Without this combination, even the most carefully planned strategic planning process can be thrown off the rails by the introduction of new information or by a topic that initially appeared simple but then became complex and required more thought.

**Clear documentation.** Without a clear record of the process you have followed and the conclusions you arrived at, all you end up with is strenuous conversation. A strategic plan is the story you tell yourself about your business or organization. It should be able to show your assumptions, the logic of your argument, your hypothesis, and your conclusions. It should also act as a catalyst to action, communicating clearly what success will look like and how the team will reach the goal. Ultimately, a plan is a communication tool, and must be clearly written as such.

### Implementing a Strategic Plan

All plans need to be implemented. Planning without implementation is like a mirage—you think you have something material, but it only turns out to be a dream of success. So, what does it take to implement a strategic plan? Two approaches we encourage teams to adopt are (1) creating projects and (2) 90-day milestone meetings.

**Creating projects.** Focus areas and action plans within a strategic plan are, in effect, project plans. Their implementation moves across time—as one action is completed, another one starts, until the goal is accomplished. Project management discipline is essential to ensure success. The planning activity, done right, not only gives the plan form, but defines the phases that the work will follow. By being clear about resource requirements and the duration of activities, the leader and the team should have a reasonable level of confidence about their ability to deliver on their

commitments.

**90-day milestone meetings.** Quarterly team meetings are a fundamental tool in keeping close to the strategic plan. By scheduling these ahead of time, for a year, the team commits itself to staying in touch with the plan and its execution. The pull of day-to-day work is so strong that it's always easy for a team to revert to doing the familiar, business-as-usual work rather than the change work contained in the strategic plan. We encourage teams to structure their 90-day milestone meetings with the same level of care as used in the original strategic planning. That means having a clear agenda, a facilitator, and documented outcomes.

Any exercise in strategic planning should involve the whole team; a team without a plan lacks direction. Having a facilitator can be a good idea, but make sure that person isn't the team leader. The leader is a member of the team and cannot effectively contribute as a member if he or she is also the facilitator.

So, what should you do? Bring in an outside person who is part of the larger organization to be the facilitator, reach out to your professional association and ask for advice, or hire an outside facilitator to assist. If you are a solo library or information center manager, don't forget about the internal clients you serve. If you can involve a few of them in your planning exercise, they will give you valuable advice and buy in more warmly to a plan they helped develop.

Finally, it's evident that a great team draws synergy from the collective effort of a group of individuals. This is just as true in carrying out a strategic plan as it is in creating the plan. And the same forces are at work in a team during the execution as in the planning—individuals are accountable for their own piece of the work, and mechanisms need to be in place to encourage team functioning.

The plan is what provides a strong motivation for collective action. So make a good plan, ground it in reality and honesty, execute well as a team, track your progress, and celebrate your success. **SLA**