

## *Strategic Planning for Real World Child Care*

# How Can I Have Clear Vision When My Glasses Are So Cloudy?

by Pauline Davey Zeece

### Things to Do

*Plan A: Survive the day.*

*Plan B: Rework the budget figures for Friday board meeting (present overage costs for plumbing repairs as an opportunity for creative, collaborative problem solving).*

*Plan C: Conduct extensive search for remaining wooden eggs — one more in the toilet and the resulting clog will certainly break the entire system. Search Marissa upon arrival — last child known to hoard wooden eggs in her cubby!*

*Plan D: . . . Marissa is here. Put on hip waders. Call plumber immediately. Cancel Plans B and C. Go directly to Plan A.*

rial functions are built. In a pragmatic sense, it is important because it paves the way or impedes the progress of later programming functions. In a philosophical sense, it is crucial because it anchors programming decisions to something more substantive and future-driven than solution of an immediate crisis.

What, then, is *strategic planning*? Digman (1990) suggests that it is the periodic activities undertaken by an organization to cope with changes in its internal environment. It involves formulating and evaluating alternative strategies, selecting a strategy, and developing detailed plans for putting the strategy into practice. In plain words, it is the plan a child care program makes which contains the details about how it will get from Point A to Point B.

Kaufman and Herman (1991) have proposed a four-stage strategic planning model which includes directions to view comprehensive program outcomes in practical ways. Utilizing this system, functional objectives are identified and then linked with strategies to meet them through scoping, data collection, planning, and implementation/evaluation phases.

And so the world turns in child care programs. The best laid plans of competent, hopeful administrators are regularly thwarted by the day-to-day crises embedded in program management. In fact, one of the most needed but least often available resource in child care is time — time to reflect, time to regroup, and time to plan. Administrators find them-

selves idea rich and time poor, so that planning is often limited either to superficially developed on Thursday/shelved on Friday long-term planning documents or short-term objectives derived and driven by the disaster of the moment.

Yet effective strategic planning is the hinge on which all other manage-

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## Scoping

In the scoping phase, planners discuss at great length the effects of program outcomes on children and families, the program itself, and the larger society. Implicit in this action is the notion that program outcomes impact much more than the bottom line of a spreadsheet (which, by the way, is still very important).

Thus it becomes important for planners to decide who the primary client of their program will be (i.e., children, families, society). Who will be impacted most by successes or failures? All of this is considered as planners move to the second phase of data collection.

## Data Collection

### Seeing the Vision . . .

At the core of the data collection phase is the identification of a program's ideal vision. Digman suggests that such vision is the glue that holds things together during turbulent times and guides competitive strategy. Similarly, Kaufman and Herman contend that strategic planners must have the courage to imagine the world they want children to live in now and in the future, then find practical ways to achieve such a vision. This becomes a pretty tall order in the real world of child care work where the resources are too few, the crises are too plentiful, and the time for a director to balance too precious to be wasted on tasks with only a paper payoff.

But the creation of a program's ideal vision can be a viable management tool critical to the long-term success and well-being of every aspect of child care programming. As such, the ideal vision is conceptualized first in the planning process to allow planners to be unencumbered by

unexamined values and beliefs, as well as the *status quo*. Thus, pragmatism is best left at the door of discussions during this phase, so as not to limit outcomes only to what a program is currently achieving (or not achieving).

As the vision evolves, beliefs, values, and even the greatest dreams and hopes for a program are identified and shared within an open and non-judgmental arena. From the richness of such activity, commonly held ideas are identified and basic beliefs about critical issues surface. Gradually and carefully, the vision takes shape. Previously unchallenged ideas can now be safely unearthed and critically examined. This moves the planning process forward in a healthy manner.

### Mapping the Mission . . .

Following the conceptualization of the ideal vision, planners identify current program missions and write these in terms of results. This activity includes the development of *measurable* indicators of "where a program is going" and "how people (including the director) will know when it has arrived!"

The difference between the ideal vision and the current mission is discussed not as a dialogue about existing program deficit, but as a directive and challenge for future program need and growth. Such need is conceptualized as a gap in perceived results between current and ideal status. Identification of future tasks and opportunities strengthens the process and helps to ensure its positive, forward motion.

### Identifying Needs . . .

At this point, the planning group identifies needs using both performance and perceptual information.

An internal scan of the program and an external scan of the community is conducted. This allows for a realistic view of the gaps between the current and ideal status of the program as it is perceived currently and for the future.

## Planning

### Anybody Got a Match? . . .

The first step in the planning phase involves the identification of matches and mismatches among program vision, beliefs, needs, and missions. Differences are reconciled through honest dialogue and discussion. Conclusions at this point represent the common ground held by all those in the planning process (and hopefully all those within a program).

### Setting the Goals . . .

Delineation of the program mission's short- and long-term goals comes next. It is not unusual even for those who are intimately involved with a program to be unaware of program missions or to be unable to articulate these clearly. When missions are not clearly written or understood, common meaning and consensus is rare and missions may, in fact, be no more than loosely defined floating goals (or targets). But when program missions are clearly delineated in several forms and easily understood, mission objectives make sense.

Short-term missions are more likely to be limited in scope and to involve children or groups of children and their families currently being served. Long-term missions are usually more complex and focus on the organization or on the program impact on the community and the larger society.

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## Outlining the Mission Objectives and Measurable Performance Indicators . . .

With the mission well conceptualized, the structuring of mission objectives for specified results at appropriate levels follows easily. At this point, it is clear to everyone in the process *where* the program is headed in the immediate and distant future. The rationale for selecting a specified mission becomes apparent; there are now common referents about *why* decisions for directions have been made. But knowing where a program is headed and why that course has been chosen is not enough. It is equally important to consider and understand what performance within a program will look like.

## SWOT You Looking at . . .

To differentiate between road blocks and building blocks, strategic planners next engage in internal self-reflection and external inquiry to objectively determine program strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOTs). This process affords everyone a deeper understanding of the breadth, depth, and complexity of program issues in the context of the larger community.

- **Strengths** define where a program is the strongest, the most unique, and/or the most efficient and effective.
- **Weaknesses** consist of growth points in any aspect of programming. These should be considered neither failures nor fears, but rather well understood facts about a program. They help set realistic limits and delineate challenges for the present and the future.
- **Opportunities** also present challenges and chances for a program.

They represent the resources yet untapped and directions yet untaken and the mechanism by which a program can grow successfully into the future.

- **Threats** are all the barriers which potentially keep a program from thriving and moving ahead. They are those circumstances, people, situations, and things which have potential to impede program progress or stunt program growth. Like all of the other SWOTs, these can be both internal and/or external by nature.

## Developing the Decision Rules . . .

Development of a comprehensive SWOT inventory of program resources and deficits provides the basis for the next step in the planning process — construction of decision rules. In other words, SWOT data help strategic planners to determine how they will decide on the actions and activities entered into by a program.

the plan is identified and a system for monitoring is put in place.

## Implementation and Evaluation

During the final phase of implementation and evaluation, the newly developed (or revised) strategic plan is launched. Ultimately, the director is held accountable for managing this phase of the process. Both formative and summative evaluation is used to help planners and administrators monitor the effectiveness of the strategic action plan.

Formative evaluation includes the systematic collection of information to monitor ongoing program activities as these relate directly to program objectives. Summative evaluation comes after the plan has had time to stabilize and includes measures to determine if short- and long-term program outcomes or results have achieved the strategic action plan objectives. As such, program evaluation becomes one of

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Kaufman and Herman suggest that such decision rules provide strategic objectives that can then be carefully and effectively linked to measurable criteria.

## Developing the Strategic Action Plan . . .

In the last step of the planning phase, a strategic action plan is formulated. It is during this time that planners strive to finalize answers to key questions posed throughout the process: What? Where? When? Who? How? Why? The method and the final format of

an administrator's most significant responsibilities. Based on the results of all evaluation information, the strategic plan is reaffirmed, revised, or discarded.

It is important not to overlook or eliminate the evaluation phase of strategic action planning. Evaluation generates program changes mandated by external commands and stimulated by internal needs or problems. It feeds the lifeline of a program by keeping program decision makers and advocates in touch with the needs of clients and the larger community.

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A well-conceptualized strategic action plan, like the system it engages, is a dynamic entity. Left alone, even a carefully, creatively developed plan will eventually fall on fallow field, resulting in a program plan stuck in the past. A well-constructed, well-monitored, well-nurtured plan can, however, carry a program into the future. Strategic planning can make a difference in program quality. Used well, it can create a catalyst for constructive, introspective actions and powerful, visionary programming.

## **References**

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