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Lessons from MSH

**Strategic Planning:
Reflections on Process
and Practice**

**Management Sciences for Health
Family Planning Management Development**

LESSONS FROM MSH

**STRATEGIC PLANNING:
REFLECTIONS ON PROCESS AND PRACTICE**

Sylvia Vriesendorp

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Dedication

This monograph is dedicated in memory of
Michael Merrill and *Ralph Stone*
two masters in the art of facilitation
who continue to be a source of
wisdom and inspiration.

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Acknowledgments

The process of strategic planning takes many forms and shapes. There is no such thing as a simple formula, or one recipe for success. This monograph reflects the experiences of many people who are either seasoned facilitators of strategic planning exercises or who helped the author tease out and articulate the lessons that we have learned at Management Sciences for Health (MSH). Our experiences as facilitators of strategic planning exercises span many years and many continents. They signified for us, as individuals, moments of great joy and great despair, a tremendous amount of learning about people, about planning, and about the dynamic process of people planning together. I am particularly grateful to those of my colleagues who shared their experiences with me in lengthy interviews: Catherine Crone Coburn, Sallie Craig Huber, Saul Helfenbein, Barry Smith, Michael Hall, and Judith Seltzer. Our collective experience provided the six key lessons which form the basis of this monograph.

Our experiences were made possible because a number of leaders of organizations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and here in the United States invited us in and entrusted us with the delicate task of guiding their organizations through a strategic planning process. We acknowledge that this kind of trust can never be taken for granted and we are deeply grateful for it.

Any facilitator uses a number of tools and techniques that have been developed by others. Although we don't always know who the actual authors of those techniques are, let me thank at least those who are known. I am particularly indebted to Eunice and Sherwood Shankland from the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) who got me started on the strategic planning trail. The methods with which they equipped me were developed over many decades by countless people who are part of the ICA network. I learned

much from this network and cannot imagine facilitating any planning process without using their wisdom. Other facilitation tools are available through MSH's Health Manager's Toolkit, a collection of tools and techniques put together by my colleagues Sarah Johnson, Shirley Ko, and Erin Mone. The Health Manager's Toolkit contains the wisdom of many of our colleagues in other agencies and is available in the Electronic Resource Center (ERC) on MSH's website. This is an ever-expanding treasure chest for those of us working in international health programs. It was conceived of and is kept up to date by Jim Wolff, Bea Bezmalinovic, and their team. And then there are the many MSH print publications that are the products of years of experience of too many people to list here.

This monograph has been long in the making, and, as any other publication, has gone through many drafts and revisions. Several people from within and outside MSH have responded to my requests for review and given me helpful feedback. They are Abu Sayeed, Ann Buxbaum, Alison Ellis, Michael Hall, Ken Heise, Saul Helfenbein, Peg Hume, Terry Jezowski (AVSC), Sarah Johnson, Joellen Lambiotte (Pathfinder International), Claire Madden, Mary McGovern, Janice Miller, Sara Pacqué-Margolis (formerly USAID/Mali), Jennifer Rodine, Jon Rohde, Judith Seltzer, and Barry Smith (BASICS).

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Finally, although the experiences on which this monograph is based are drawn from those of MSH staff, I take full responsibility for the opinions expressed about those experiences. They do not necessarily represent those of the Family Planning Management Development (FPMD) project, Management Sciences for Health, or the US Agency for International Development.

Preface

This monograph reflects my personal perspective on the collective MSH experience in managing a strategic planning process. As such, it is biased by my professional background as an organizational psychologist and my passion for getting people in organizations to reflect on where they are going and how they can move in alignment with others toward a future they collectively want to create.

My intent in writing this monograph is to activate a dialogue among facilitators about the strategic planning process, and to inform participants who are interested to know more about what to expect during and from a strategic planning process. While design interventions will surely produce a plan, the outcome of the strategic planning process is hopefully an organization made stronger, more robust, and more resilient to changes in its environment. And this is not just because of the activities or programs that are written into the plan. It is my profound belief that the essence of strategic planning lies in the process itself. It lies in the journey, not simply, as we often pretend, in the destination.

The lessons and examples come from our collective experiences working with programs and organizations around the world, and present what we think is of critical importance in any strategic planning process. Nevertheless, the way in which the lessons are presented and in which the implications are discussed carries my own bias. I have tried to stay away from proposing one particular approach or sequence of steps, as I realize that we do things very differently based on our values, interests, and experiences. In this monograph I present a series of reflections on process, stories about results, ideas for action, and options available to approach the various tasks and challenges involved in facilitating a strategic

planning exercise. I introduce tools and facilitation techniques to appeal to different personality types and temperaments, and to compensate for shortcomings of my own. These help to create a safe space for people with different perspectives on, and different stakes in, the organization. It is only out of a safe space that people are willing to venture beyond their usual positions and truly explore where others are coming from.

I hope that this monograph provides some insights that fit or challenge your basic beliefs, and that the ideas for action are practical enough to experiment with. I also hope that you are encouraged to think about your own fundamental assumptions and how these influence your choice of process approaches. Many of our approaches started off as experiments, and many experiments are still being conducted. I hope that you too will experiment to make the strategic planning process productive and inspiring, oriented toward concrete results, and supportive of the human spirit. Most of all I hope that this monograph will contribute to our collective efforts to strengthen organizations and programs that strive to make this world a better place for all.

Executive Summary

In a time of constant change, complexity, and seemingly increasing chaos, organizations are looking for ways to remain afloat and chart a course that will help them to achieve their goals. One process that is used for this purpose is called strategic planning. Some organizations have done strategic planning before and have an old plan that needs updating. Others feel they need to revisit what they are all about, and where they are going, in response to some actual or imminent crisis or major shifts in their environment or in the way they do business. And then there are those organizations that have been told by third parties, usually funding agencies, to prepare a strategic plan as a condition for continued funding. In all cases, the intent is for the organization to reflect, in an organized and systematic way, on their purpose, goals, history, practices, accomplishments, environment, and challenges with the aim of making choices about allocating resources and aligning their constituents toward a desired future. Strategic planning thus refers to a broad range of organizational interventions that may be stretched out over a long period of time, or compressed into a single event, usually called a strategic planning retreat.

Key Lessons

The process of strategic planning can be imagined as a journey embarked upon by an organization, part of an organization, a project, or even a national program. The guide on this journey can be someone from inside the organization or an external facilitator. Over the years, MSH staff have been those external facilitators in many strategic planning exercises. It is from these experiences that the following six lessons have emerged:

Lesson One: Secure Commitment from the Top

Initiate the strategic planning process by exploring expectations, clarifying outcomes, and negotiating with the top leadership to secure the commitment and resources that are fundamental to the success of the strategic planning exercise.

Lesson Two: Involve a Broad Cross Section of People

Negotiate for the participation of a broad spectrum of staff and stakeholders in the strategic planning process in a politically and culturally sensitive way.

Lesson Three: Recognize and Manage the Impact of the Organizational Culture

Provide opportunities and a safe space for a group to improve its ability to work together. Look for ways to help people examine the impact of the organizational culture on the way the work is done.

Lesson Four: Collect, Comprehend, and Use Valid Information

Create structures and processes that allow participants to introduce, critically review, and validate information.

Lesson Five: Set a Clear Overall Direction

Anchor the overall strategic directions to a common picture of where the organization wants to be at some future point in time as well as to current realities.

Lesson Six: Secure a Link with Operational Plans

Secure a strong connection between the organization's broad strategic directions and its work planning and budgeting processes.

Reflections on Process and Practice

This monograph is a reflection on the process of strategic planning and the practices of facilitators and groups engaged in this task. It is written from the perspective of an external facilitator who is the person to help (facilitate) the group dynamics inherent in this organizational exercise. This monograph is written with a bias, namely that a strategic planning process is best guided by an outsider. We believe that an outsider provides a neutral presence,

is able to pose questions in a manner that insiders cannot, and brings insights and experiences from elsewhere that enrich the deliberations. We realize that this person has a tremendous influence on the process of the deliberations and on the outcome. The facilitator brings with him or her deeply held values about the world, about people, and about the work. These fundamental beliefs manifest themselves in the choice of approaches, in the design of the process, and how it will be conducted. For instance, those who believe in the power of numbers and data will bring this belief into the design of their strategic planning process. Others who strongly believe in the wisdom of people at any level in the hierarchy will create space in their design for this wisdom to emerge.

Another bias in this monograph is our belief that during the strategic planning process an organization (or unit or program) discovers its own resources at a deeper level, through the wisdom and commitment of its staff, the energy that is released by having an organizational conversation about something people care deeply about, and the creativity that is always there if we can just let go of conventional outcomes. All of this then becomes available to tackle the thousands of challenges that health and other development programs are confronted with, on a daily basis and in the long run.

Despite the more than 2000 articles and books that have been written about strategic planning over the last 30 years, there is no particular design sequence or structure that has proven to be better than another. Thus, this monograph is not about how to best structure a strategic planning exercise to produce a plan. For an excellent review of the major schools of thought about strategy (planning and management) and the processes and tools they use, the reader is referred to Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (1998). This monograph looks rather at the challenges faced both by the organization and the facilitator (internal or external), and discusses how he or she might address them in ways that add value to the organization's efforts to plan its future.

Introduction

The Evolution of Strategic Planning

Strategic planning has its origins in the military world and was used to describe the grand design behind a war or a battle—the earliest book we know about strategy dates from about 300 B.C. (Sun Tzu translated by Wing, 1988). It was later embraced by the financial analysts of the corporate world as a way to enhance competitiveness and increase market share. Since the 1960s, strategic planning has been practiced by top executives with the technical assistance of a new corporate elite—the strategic planners—who, fed on the famous Harvard case studies, were produced in increasing numbers by the world's elite business schools.

The initial focus of corporate strategic planning was on reason, logic, and the analysis of large amounts of data. During those early years the strategy field was dominated by what Mintzberg, et al. (1998) call the *prescriptive* schools (voiced most clearly by the Harvard Business School) which prescribed ideal strategic behavior of organizations. One of the criticisms of the oldest of the prescriptive schools, the Design School (strategy formation as a process of conception) relates to the role of the external environment, which was relegated to being an object of analysis rather than an (inter)active player in the strategy formulation process itself.

In the 1980s a shift began to take place, as the changes in the external environment created a situation of nearly perpetual turmoil caused by the greater interconnectedness of the world's economies and its various players: corporations, governments, and civil society. This inspired several new schools of thought about strategic planning, concerned with describing, rather than

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prescribing, the strategic planning process and later with integrating various elements (content, structures, context) into new configurations or transformations, especially those concerned with strategic change. Some of these schools focus on positioning or entrepreneurship, others on the cognitive aspects of strategic planning, planning as a learning process, as a collective process, or as a negotiation process. Many of the later schools have allocated a more prominent role to the external environment and its various players.

While these approaches were being experimented with in the commercial, for-profit world, the non-profit and public sector realized that their traditional planning practices were no longer sufficient to deal with an external environment that was changing continuously and rapidly. Strategic planning became important for any type of organization, in any part of the world, and in any sector.

Today, none of us works in a stable and simple environment. Peter Vaill (1989) opens his book *Managing as a Performing Art* with a chapter titled "Permanent White Water," in which he disabuses the manager who thinks of himself as paddling his canoe on a still lake, believing that he can go wherever he wants using the means under his control. Although the manager accepts the existence of temporary turbulence, there is the notion that the still lake is the normal situation to which one will always return. Vaill claims (and this is borne out by experience), that this is an illusion, and that these days the white water is the permanent state of affairs, and the still lake is a rare occurrence. For example, in the world of international health programs and organizations, political changes can wipe out years of painstaking efforts to develop a strong health infrastructure. Financial crises in one part of the world affect donor support elsewhere. The emergence of new diseases jeopardizes the health status of previous healthy individuals, and if these are predominantly members of the current labor force (think of AIDS), this has an immediate effect on the country's economic productivity. Political turmoil creates streams of refugees, potential epidemics in the making, and stretches already tight health budgets. What seemed solid, secure, and predictable is being questioned. Thus, a continuous succession of financial,

economic, technological, and political changes affects people and programs anywhere in the world in ways that are becoming impossible to predict.

In this new reality, there is, as there never was before, the need to act quickly from a set of shared values, rather than from detailed blueprints, a focus on the quality of goods and services both within and outside the organization, and the realization that people are an organization's most important asset. This rapid response mentality introduces elements in the strategic planning process that go beyond financial and market share considerations. Fundamental questions about the mission and values of the organization and the alignment of personal and organizational goals, as well as its interdependence with other players in the external environment, need to be addressed.

Variations on a Theme

For nearly three decades Management Sciences for Health (MSH) has been involved in the evolution of strategic planning activities in the nonprofit and public sector around the world. MSH's collective experience covers a broad range of client organizations: non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in health care delivery; research and teaching institutions in developing countries; federal and local government institutions within the US and abroad (the development of national plans), US private voluntary organizations (PVOs) that work internationally, and projects funded by philanthropic foundations.

Despite the differences among the approaches used by MSH staff to design and facilitate strategic planning exercises, our work has a number of characteristics in common:

- These exercises are not routine. They are significant events that bring people together who do not ordinarily sit together to plan.

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- These events are relatively new for many organizations.
- The stated purpose of the strategic planning exercise is to develop a number of broad strategic directions that will help the organization overcome current challenges and fulfill its mission in the future. Current challenges tend to be related to new or changing health care priorities, the organizations's financial health, issues in staff relations or staff morale, professional credibility, political developments, and/or major changes in the external environment.
- There is an expectation that the exercise will bring coherence to the organization and its programs, ultimately resulting in the development of feasible operational plans.
- In some regions, the strategic planning exercise is imposed or mandated by a funding agency as a prerequisite for further funding.

The differences in facilitators' approaches manifest themselves in the underlying philosophy about planning in general, the processes and tools we use, the nature and scope of participation, the role of the facilitator, and the length, intensity, and formality of the exercise. For example, some of us believe that organizational planning requires having an overall view of the organization that people lower down in the hierarchy usually do not have. Some of us prefer a rational, problem-focused approach over a more visionary, creative one. We differ on the starting and ending points of the strategic planning process. Some of us start with an environmental analysis, others with the vision, and others with a review of the mission or the organization's history. Some plans end with broad strategic directions, or broad goal and strategy statements, which are passed down the hierarchy to lower-level units to develop operational plans based on these broad directives. Other strategic planning exercises continue all the way down to detailed implementation plans with tasks and responsibilities assigned, which are then revisited periodically. There are also many variations on the duration of the process and the variety of stakeholders involved.

Thus, the experiences and the approaches used to facilitate the process are all quite different but fit within the parameters of our definition of strategic planning. The definition we propose here is *any attempt by an organization or public sector entity to reflect, in an organized and systematic way, on its purpose, goals, history, practices, accomplishments, contexts, and challenges with the aim of making choices about allocating resources and aligning its constituents toward a desired future.* This is the common theme that holds the variations together.

Key Design Considerations

Strategic planning is first and foremost a process, even though those who request our assistance usually have the resultant plan in mind. When we are asked to help with a strategic planning process, we almost always get involved in the design phase. We have learned that if we are not, we really should have been. Despite any differences in our individual approaches, the strategic planning process is always consciously designed. The design is influenced by three key factors:

- the stage of development at which the organization currently operates;
- the organizational culture;
- the values, experience, and psychological make up of the facilitator.

The stage of development of the organization. By this we mean the current make up and history of the organization, and the degree to which the organization is able to reflect on its past and present, and has systems and structures in place to help it do this. It is a key factor in the design, and in particular in the selection of particular tasks, exercises, and processes that will lead to the desired end product. Over the years, MSH has developed a model of stages of organization development, which guides many of our management interventions. At each stage, the organization struggles with some critical questions that it has to resolve before it can move on to the next stage. These questions relate to its ability to formulate a clear and achievable mission, develop and use effective strategies, maintain an appropriate organizational

structure, and institutionalize systems that support program strategies.

The organizational culture. The degree of openness, transparency, trust, and the steepness of the hierarchy are just some of the critical cultural factors that come into play when designing a strategic planning exercise. How open or closed, how inclusive or exclusive the process will be depends to a great extent on the culture of the organization. How the organization handles bad news and what happens to the messengers of this news determines whether there will be a true spirit of inquiry or whether the group will follow some pre-determined path with few surprises about the final outcome. Other factors, such as the personality of the director, especially if he or she is also the founder of the organization, and the personalities of key personnel will define acceptable structures and processes. Finally, cultural (ethnic and national) elements, and the values and aspirations of those involved, will have an impact on the spirit with which the strategic planning is going to be conducted.

The personality of the facilitator. This person brings into the process a set of expectations, life experiences, world views, values about people, about work, about life, biases, styles, and preferences. All of these influence the interactions with key players during the design process, and help shape the final design and implementation of the process. There are interactions among all these variables at all times, thus contributing to the fluidity of the process.

Sometimes there is also a fourth factor: when the strategic planning process is imposed by a funding agency. The goals, intentions, policies, and constraints (including often unrealistic time lines) of this outside agency get woven into the fabric of relationships, and the facilitator takes on one more key role: negotiating the different internal and external agendas in a way that works for all.

Thus, it would be impossible to select one particular process or set of steps for organizations or facilitators to follow. Rather, there is a whole range of possibilities from which we can make our design

choices. These relate to the desired degree of structure for the process, the sophistication of the analyses (conducted before or during the meetings), the amount of time spent in small groups versus plenary sessions, and the role of the facilitator in dealing with the dynamics and pushing for a deeper level of reflection (by asking certain probing questions, confronting, and/or bringing in information that is not being brought up by the group).

Purpose and Structure of the Monograph

As an organization, MSH faces the eternal challenge of maintaining a certain level of consistency, quality, and integrity in designing and facilitating strategic planning exercises, while at the same time allowing staff the freedom to respond to the needs of the situation according to their own personal values, psychological make up, professional experience, and world view. Our intent in preparing this monograph is to share key lessons that have emerged out of our practice in the hope of setting a number of parameters to guide the design of future interventions, and to share our experiences with others without necessarily prescribing a correct way.

The monograph is organized into six sections, one for each lesson. Each section reviews key elements, how they influence the strategic planning process, and implications for facilitators. Each lesson has a sub-section called "Ideas for Action," in which we suggest exercises, describe processes, or ask questions, which are designed to help meet the challenges inherent in the lesson. Throughout the monograph, there are examples drawn from MSH's experience that illustrate the issues being discussed. Where it is relevant, we offer ideas about how to adjust the process if the strategic planning exercise has been mandated by a third party such as a funding agency.

Finally, it is our intent that this monograph will be useful to anyone about to begin a strategic planning process, either as a facilitator or a participant, and those who are interested in knowing more about what to expect during and from a strategic planning process.

Lesson One: Secure Commitment from the Top

Initiate the strategic planning process by exploring expectations, clarifying outcomes, and negotiating with the top leadership to secure the commitment and resources that are fundamental to the success of the strategic planning exercise.

Lesson Two: Involve a Broad Cross Section of People

Negotiate for the participation of a broad spectrum of staff and stakeholders in the strategic planning process in a politically and culturally sensitive way.

Lesson Three: Recognize and Manage the Impact of the Organizational Culture

Provide opportunities and a safe space for a group to improve its ability to work together. Look for ways to help people examine the impact of the organizational culture on the way the work is done.

Lesson Four: Collect, Comprehend, and Use Valid Information

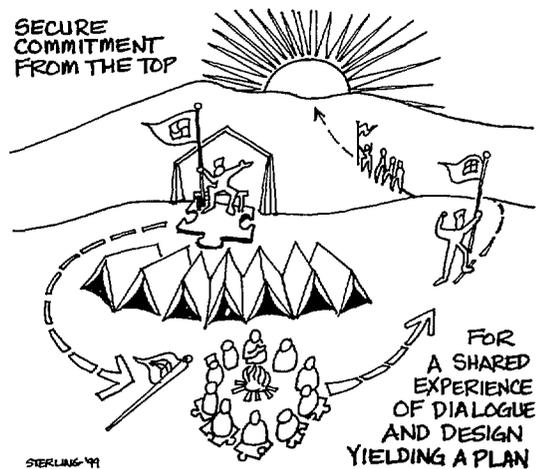
Create structures and processes that allow participants to introduce, critically review, and validate information.

Lesson Five: Set a Clear Overall Direction

Anchor the overall strategic directions to a common picture of where the organization wants to be at some future point in time as well as to current realities.

Lesson Six: Secure a Link with Operational Plans

Secure a strong connection between the organization's broad strategic directions and its work planning and budgeting processes.



Lesson One: Secure Commitment from the Top

Initiate the strategic planning process by exploring expectations, clarifying outcomes, and negotiating with the top leadership to secure the commitment and resources that are fundamental to the success of the strategic planning exercise.

Usually, when key officers in an organization invite us to help conduct a strategic planning exercise, we assume there is commitment from the top. It is generally a good idea, however, to verify the extent and origin of the commitment. Sometimes we think the director is supportive because of the language he or she uses. Later, we might find out that we understood the same words differently and that we were all committed to different things. We might also find ourselves working within units or divisions of a larger organization and produce plans that do not really reflect the strategic directions of the entire organization, or worse, attract anger or jealousy from elsewhere in the system. Finally, there is the situation in which the strategic planning exercise has been imposed by a third party, producing a plan that doesn't really reflect what the organization wants for itself. Unequal power relations (as is commonly the case between Western donors and developing country NGOs) may produce plans that further one particular agenda at the expense of another.

We tend to rely on interviews with individuals (especially senior staff and board members) and meetings to explore the level of commitment, clarify expectations, and agree on outcomes. There may also be a paper trail that can shed light on the motivation for embarking on a strategic planning exercise. Sometimes we cannot tell if there is serious commitment until the strategic planning process is underway. But we can infer commitment if:

- top leadership has issued a formal directive authorizing the formation of a steering committee and/or staff participation;
- the director or president say words of encouragement at the beginning of key events;
- the most senior officials are present and fully engaged in all the deliberations;
- the director or president is present at all reporting sessions, listens with intent, responds to proposals and, whenever needed, gives the group his or her blessings.

Common wisdom tells us that the top leadership must be supportive of the strategic planning process. Proceeding without their support is a waste of everyone's time. This is absolutely true if we consider that a strategic planning process requires resources to execute it and implement its outcome. People need permission to devote their full attention to planning, conducting, and participating in the exercise, and afterwards, to implementing the outcomes. If top leadership suggests that strategic planning is done on one's own time, unpaid, or during weekends or vacation, only those whose commitment to the organization or to the program goes beyond the call of duty will participate, and maybe no one will participate in a next round. Even if these people produce an impressive and wonderful plan, it is unlikely that their plan will get the necessary resources or moral support for implementing it.

However, we have had many experiences where interest at the top was either lukewarm or non-existent (because the exercise was

imposed), and where the strategic planning process was even considered a political liability. Why did we proceed? We have found that it sometimes pays to light many fires at the periphery (whether this is at a provincial or district level in the public sector, or in a branch office, a division, or program unit in the private sector). Although this limits the scope of the exercise, it can have the positive effect of building trust, giving hope, setting an example, getting people to talk, and, in doing so, removing fear or scepticism. At other times we have found that the ground is much more fertile at lower levels. Thus, securing commitment from the top may require some initial detours.

When the boss doesn't care. . .

The director seemed hardly interested in the strategic planning process. He went through all the motions with a thinly-veiled contempt for having this process imposed on him (which it was). His behavior during the entire process seemed to indicate boredom or even disdain and gave a message of "I don't care." This was sometimes exacerbated by statements indicating that this process and its results were irrelevant, and unlikely to be used by his organization. Nevertheless, and in spite of this behavior, there was great enthusiasm among the participants, many of whom had never sat together with their colleagues and peers from other organizations and ministries to discuss issues about which they all deeply cared. Thus, although the results in terms of actual strategies and plans might never be implemented, the bridges that were built, the connections that were made, and the things that were learned about people "on the other side," were a significant change in the usual way of doing business, and may well have been the primary outcome of the process.

Implications

In our experience, the critical ingredients of a strategic planning process are trust and expectations. If there is no trust between the facilitator and the top leadership, the whole exercise risks being superficial. Difficult, delicate, or potentially embarrassing issues

will not and cannot surface. Similarly, if a strategic planning exercise does not meet the expectations of the organization's top leadership, the dismissal of whatever results came out of it can—albeit temporarily—ruin a facilitator's reputation, and by extension his or her organization's reputation, in addition to creating cynicism among staff. Thus, the very first actions of the facilitator are critical in laying the foundation for trust. This has several practical implications for the facilitator.

He or she needs to try to put himself or herself “in the client's shoes” and try to look at the world through the client's eyes. By listening with respect and concern for the client's apprehensions, the facilitator can try to anticipate obstacles, address concerns and fears, and clarify what the process can and cannot produce. This is a time to explore the meaning of words (“what exactly do you mean when you say *sustainable*?”), the expected outcomes of the strategic planning process, and to identify the resources needed to meet those expectations.

If the strategic planning exercise is mandated by an external agency, the facilitator must be willing to discuss and explore with the organization's top leadership (as well as with the funding agent) the expectations about the type of plan to be prepared, and the role of each party during the strategic planning process. If the leadership of an organization is ambivalent about embarking on a strategic planning exercise, and if the facilitator is available on a continuous basis to the leadership of the organization, he or she may use the time to develop a coaching relationship until the leadership is ready for the strategic planning exercise.

Sometimes commitment from the top leadership cannot be secured. In that case the facilitator has to explore ways to change the scope and level of the intervention. Alternatives include canceling the exercise, postponing it, or reducing the scale. One could argue that in this case the exercise can no longer be called strategic planning.

Ideas for Action: To Secure Commitment from the Top

Find out who is in charge. Incorrectly identifying the top leadership may severely compromise the implementation of the outcomes of the strategic planning process. Organizational politics often come into play around this issue. For example, when units within larger bureaucracies initiate a strategic planning exercise, before their organizational “parent” is ready to do so, one has to find out where the interest or commitment stops (and why): at the unit’s head or at the next level up? Probing questions about why there is interest in strategic planning and what will happen with the results are likely to reveal where the critical decision-making power resides, and whether this person or these persons are committed to the process and to following through on the outcomes.

Listen and ask questions. Even when a strategic planning exercise is imposed from above, or by an outside funding agency, you can still secure commitment. Listen for the concerns of the director, board members, and staff and connect the strategic planning process to their concerns. For example, the leadership of an organization may be concerned about the impact of reduced donor budgets, increased competition, political instability, or just bad personal relationships with key stakeholders. Explore ways in which the process can address those concerns. Listen carefully for what is going on. Take advantage of your role as an outsider, someone who can ask tough, seemingly naive, or sensitive questions with a light touch in a way an insider cannot. Contradictions, statements or actions that don’t make sense are worth exploring further. They may contain some clues on how to proceed.

Explore personal expectations. A strategic planning exercise can be seriously derailed if the person in charge has certain personal expectations that are not being met. One such expectation can be that his or her behavior or management practices will not be questioned, or that the facilitator should do a piece of work that should be done by the group (or otherwise expecting to use the facilitator as an extra pair of hands). There is a risk that the focus will turn to the one unmet expectation and overshadow all the

expectations that were met and all the positive outcomes. These expectations may be limited to the facilitator's role and deliverables, or to actual outcomes of the strategic planning process itself. We have seen a positive experience turn sour simply because of an unmet (or not previously clarified) expectation that the facilitators were to write the actual strategic plan.

Clarify outcomes, determine follow-up, and agree on process.

Working with top leadership to plan the strategic planning process is essential. This allows you to clarify the expected outcomes and gauge the commitment and resources needed to conduct an exercise that will meet their expectations. Asking some of the following key questions can facilitate this exploration:

- Why is the strategic planning exercise being done?
- What concrete and not-so-concrete outcomes are expected from this exercise?
- Should a steering committee be established to manage the strategic planning process? If yes, who should be included on the committee?
- How will the process be designed? Will there be a design meeting? How long will it take?
- Who should participate in the design meeting and in the strategic planning exercise? Will senior officials take part in all or just some of the deliberations?
- How will support from the top leadership be visible to the organization? Will a formal directive be issued?
- When should the strategic planning exercise take place and where should the meetings be held?
- Will the top leadership provide the material and psychological resources (support, encouragement) needed to support the outcomes of the strategic planning exercise?
- How will momentum gained during the exercise be maintained?
- Will there be any follow up? When, and how?

Change the scope and level of the intervention. There are times when you cannot secure commitment from the organization's top leadership. Assume that there are good reasons why they are not completely convinced that strategic planning is a good idea.

Maybe the previous strategic planning exercise was not a good experience (nothing changed, it was a waste of time and other resources, or something went wrong).

Top leadership may be fearful and nervous about embarking on an unknown journey with facilitators whose skills have not been experienced first hand, and with no particular reason to trust that this will be a good thing. A director could feel threatened by an expert outsider who might “expose” his or her felt incompetence. Or it may be that there are hierarchial and cultural hurdles that are not obvious to an outsider, but that need to be addressed before bringing certain groups together. And there may be resentment because the strategic planning has been imposed by a third party. If it is not possible to withdraw from the assignment, and chances for success are rapidly diminishing, the alternative is to negotiate to reduce the scale of the assignment and work with one small part of the organization. There are probably some places further down the hierarchy where there is some enthusiasm or commitment for initiating a strategic planning process, even though it is small in scope. Such a change may require re-labeling the intervention as team building or work planning. Remember that the rest of the organization will be watching closely. If this goes well, more may be possible later, on a larger scale.

Deal with resistance to change. When confronted with situations such as the one mentioned above, we often conveniently call this “resistance to change.” It is convenient because it puts the responsibility for change outside oneself. Yet resistance to change is not usually because people (and organizations) resist change itself. Change is, after all, a constant in our lives. But the resistance relates more to *being changed* by someone else, a feeling most of us can relate to. Empathy, true listening, and real respect and caring for the client’s concerns are the qualities that a facilitator has to bring into the relationship. If you encounter such “resistance to change,” it may be a reminder that you may need to change your approach in order to demonstrate that you are trustworthy or to prove that you are different, and that the process you propose will bring about a different, positive result.

Revisit the purpose of the process. Whenever things become cloudy or confused for yourself or for your clients, look again at the purpose of the strategic planning exercise. If you expect a plan, a clear blueprint that will guide the organization over the next five years or so, for which resources will be made available, top leadership support is indeed critical. However, if you are more interested in demonstrating a process that allows people to work together in different ways, across boundaries, and to learn to appreciate the wisdom of various stakeholders, the actual plan becomes secondary. Even without top support, a lot can be accomplished. This also makes it possible lay the groundwork for later planning processes that will lead to the desired blueprint. One could also argue that the strategic plan will be outdated in a number of years, but that the skill of working with, and listening to, a diverse group of people is an eternal skill that is critical to survival in this complex, global, and interconnected world.

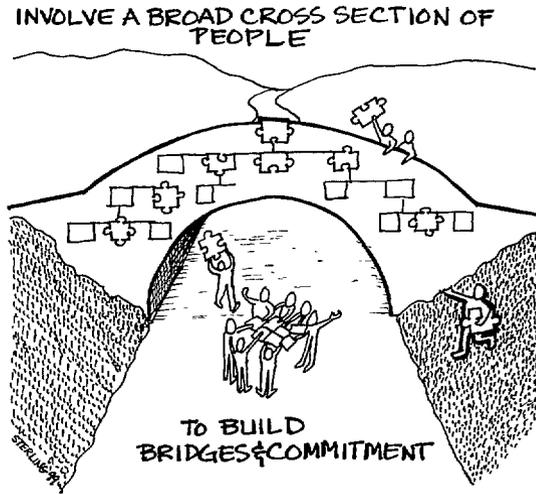
Coach the leader. Executive coaching could precede or accompany a strategic planning process. Coaching is a process in which an outside consultant develops a close “helping relationship” with the executive over time. The nature of the relationship may change as the trust level increases. While designing and conducting a strategic planning process, the facilitator potentially has an opportunity to start working with top executives to improve their communication style or their management style. Later this relationship may change the consultant’s role from being a teacher or a coach to being a sounding board, a confidante, or a supporter. The old saying “it is lonely at the top” is still very true everywhere in the world. The political context in which chief executives operate makes it hard or risky for them to confide in anyone who is part of the system.

Address Third Party Complications. If a funding agency has imposed the strategic planning exercise on an organization, extra steps have to be built into the process of securing top-level commitment to address the following:

- Clarify if the donor is interested in a strategic or a programmatic plan. Remind the donor that a strategic planning process helps an organization make choices about

allocating resources and aligning its constituents toward a desired future. A strategic plan may not be to the liking of a donor, because it is essentially an act of independence. Although donors like this in theory, as they support organizational sustainability, they also tend to be interested in seeing that grantees identify and schedule activities that produce specific mandated results on the donor's terms.

- Determine whether the donor expects the plan to encompass the entire organization or just the sector, department, or unit funded by the donor.
- Clarify whether the donor expects that the completed plan be circulated first to the donor for approval before circulating it to staff and external stakeholders.
- Explore the donor's expectations regarding its role in the strategic planning process. This includes the extent to which donor representatives will participate in structuring the process, help identify data requirements, and participate in small groups and plenary sessions. Also, determine the nature of the donor's contact with the facilitator and the organization.
- If it becomes evident that top management's lack of support for the strategic planning exercise is linked to resentment about the role and influence of the donor, the challenge is to bridge the concerns of the organization and the donor's expectations for the planning exercise. A solution usually emerges from this dialogue and is likely to involve changing the scope and level of the intervention.



Lesson Two: Involve a Broad Cross Section of People

Negotiate for the participation of a broad spectrum of staff and stakeholders in the strategic planning process in a politically and culturally sensitive way.

In most of the strategic planning exercises we have facilitated, the participants tend to include senior managers and sometimes advisors from key funding agencies. Although we suggest in the previous lesson that commitment from the organization's top leadership is critical to the success of the strategic planning exercise, by itself this is not enough. It is true that people at the top have generally the experience, perspective, and depth of knowledge of the organization and its context to make informed strategic decisions. However, the impact of these same decisions on staff lower down the hierarchy—on their work, on their lives, and on the quality of services they deliver—is not always thought through clearly. For example, a strong customer focus, including extending clinic hours, can create resentment among providers who do not get their paychecks on time, who are concerned about their own personal safety after hours, or who already lack the minimum supplies for doing a decent job during current hours of operation. Sometimes people at central headquarters are not aware of these operational issues at the local level.

Being inclusive of people at different levels in the organization has two practical objectives: to get all the critical information to help shape the decisions in the first place, and to make sure that those affected by the decisions have had a chance to point out unintended side-effect. This should help to avoid, or at least minimize, protest or resistance during implementation. The strategic planning process benefits from the involvement of all levels of staff and management in the organization and all sectors that have a stake in the success of the organization. Ideally, this inclusiveness brings to the process a better understanding of the complexities of the issues and challenges involved in redirecting an organization. It can create opportunities for building relationships and ownership of the plan across functions, across departments, between levels, and even across organizations when whole networks are involved.

Although inclusiveness is not an absolute good, and in some cultures not encouraged, we believe that being more inclusive is better. Leaving out the perspectives and viewpoints of people lower down the hierarchy silences a critical set of voices. This has often been justified because these voices provided information that was considered biased or anecdotal, and thus not scientific or methodologically valid. Yet, we have come to see that those missing voices often describe organizational realities, issues, challenges, and potential solutions to organizational problems in novel and useful ways.

Implications

Broadening participation in the strategic planning process has several implications for the facilitator:

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- The facilitator needs to help the client understand which people and which groups hold critical information, have particular power or influence, and those who will be affected by the outcome of the deliberations. These are what we commonly refer to as stakeholder groups. We consider these critical to the organization's survival and growth.

- When establishing a steering committee to plan and oversee the process, or conducting a design meeting or stakeholder analysis, the facilitator has the delicate job of urging inclusiveness without pushing for involvement that could be a political liability or culturally inappropriate.
- In cultures where interaction between staff and their managers or between clients and their service providers is strained and uncomfortable, very formal, or even non-existent, the facilitator has to convince the decision makers that there are benefits to listening to these voices. Some low-risk ways of involving such non-traditional strategic planning participants could be to use focus groups, share drafts of the plan and results frequently, use committees or organizational surveys, develop unit or division plans, or allow observers to sit in on some of the deliberations. Involvement that goes against the grain of prevailing societal norms creates unnecessary stresses and unauthentic relationships. Over time, equal participation in working sessions may become a reality if the facilitator structures the process so that people feel comfortable voicing their opinions. This usually means working frequently in mixed small groups rather than in plenary sessions. In any case, the inclusion or exclusion of any group outside senior management has to be gauged in relation to potential risks and benefits.
- When designing the strategic planning process for either homogeneous or diverse groups, the facilitator should be aware of people's preferences for taking in and processing information, learning styles, and personalities in order to use the wisdom that everyone brings to the process.

Resistance

It is easy to find reasons for not including a broad cross section of stakeholders, including staff at lower levels of the organizational hierarchy. We have heard all of the following exclamations: "We can't have everyone making decisions!" "These groups are so polarized that they couldn't possibly be in one room together!"

“Lower-level staff are just going to make demands for salary increases!” “It just complicates matters!” “Our internal matters are none of their business!”

The facilitator has to help the reluctant senior managers or director deal with these fears. Sometimes this can be done by clarifying what certain words mean, or reasoning through the implications of certain actions. For example, there is often confusion between participation—giving people room to voice their opinions—and collective decision making. Collective decision making can be achieved by voting or reaching consensus. Voting implies that the majority rules, while consensus means that everyone can live with the decision and support it.

People who have no awareness of the role and influence of group dynamics also tend to underestimate the conflict-reducing effect of good meeting design and careful structuring of the process. Fears about unreasonable demands for salary increases could come from a history of contentious labor relations or a lack of awareness of employees’ commitment to the organization and its goals. In organizations where the top levels rarely interact with the bottom levels, assumptions and inferences replace facts about motivation, commitment, and work philosophy.

Finally, although including people with different viewpoints appears to complicate matters in the short run, not involving them complicates matters even more in the long run because then the outcomes of the deliberations have to be sold to those who may be resentful about their exclusion from the process. If outsiders have a stake in the organization, even internal issues become their issues, so, in the long run, excluding them tends to create more problems than it resolves.

Participation or inclusion in deliberations does not mean that everyone has an equal voice in all of the decisions that are being made. If voting or consensus-based decision making is not appropriate, it should not be done. There are always situations where groups have different, even conflicting, agendas, but that does not mean they should not talk together.

Reasons for Involving a Broad Spectrum of People

Hearing the stories behind the numbers. The voices from lower down in the hierarchy provide insights into the experiences hiding behind the statistics, and the numbers. They can report that the water problems a clinic has struggled with for years are caused by a leak in the main water pipe, down by the gate. They can point out that the signatures required from husbands are always forged, and thus a meaningless bureaucratic hurdle, leading people to cheat. They can bring up that none of the cars are working because there is no budget to maintain them. They can reveal that people are making so many errors because they are preoccupied with their own and their family's security and thus cannot concentrate on the job. They can indicate whether people are used at their full capacity or not.

Seeing the complexity. The more different the levels and parties who are involved, the more complete the picture of current reality becomes. Each voice adds a new perspective. This can be overwhelming, but it also shows people how complex the situation is. Anyone who has moved through organizational corridors has heard people proposing simplistic solutions to complex organizational problems. When those people are exposed to other perspectives and hear directly from the people involved what it is like to be at the top, middle, or bottom and what the particular pressures are at that level, they will realize that their simplistic solutions might solve one problem but will surely create others elsewhere in the system.

Creating ownership and getting commitment. In the same way that homes inhabited by their owners are generally better maintained than rented homes, strategic plans that are owned by the staff and other stakeholders are more likely to be implemented than those that are imposed. The ideas expressed in the plan are no longer someone else's ideas. Resistance disappears. People are inspired and feel encouraged to try out these new ideas, because the plan has the stamp of approval of the entire organization. Contrast this with the strategic plan that has been developed at the top in a closed and exclusive process. Such a plan is unlikely to attract a lot of energy and enthusiasm. An impressive planning

document, presented as the new “contract” by which the organization has to live for the next three to five years, is intimidating, especially for people not used to reading lengthy and lofty reports. Such a document does not inspire people to change their ways, take risks, or try new things.

Building bridges. Involving a broad spectrum of people also creates opportunities for building relationships and building bridges across functions, departments, organizations, and levels. If an accountant and a program officer who had never worked together before have developed a strategy or an action plan together, sitting at a table, working side by side for several hours, an important new relationship is created. If the entire group has listened to their proposal, analysis, or strategy, and applauded and accepted it, the two have something in common that will create a bond, no matter where they are positioned in the wider organizational structure. They have struggled together as employees or stakeholders with an organizational issue that is important to both of them, and they have discovered a caring, an intelligence, and possibly a passion that they did not know existed. They have worked together as human beings, rather than as caricatures of accountants and program officers. From now on they will be less hesitant to call each other on the phone, or visit each other’s office. Now there is a bridge between two people who saw no reason to talk with each other before.

Connecting and discovering. . .

Drivers and doctors sat side by side during a strategic planning retreat and discussed ways to improve outreach. One of the drivers mentioned the boredom of sitting outside waiting in the car for his boss—the doctor—to be finished with her meeting. In this conversation the doctor learned something about the driver that she had not thought much about before. Combining this with the knowledge that drivers hang out during this time in cafés, on street corners, in mechanics workshops, or in markets with other men, led the group to decide to train the drivers to do outreach work among the men with whom they are in contact while waiting for their bosses to conclude their business.

Acknowledging interdependence. Using a narrow definition of insiders (key decision-making staff) and outsiders (everybody else), and limiting the strategic planning exercise to insiders might have worked in a stable and simple environment, but that is no longer the prevailing context. We can no longer pursue independence. Interdependence is the new reality, no one and no organization can survive alone anymore. But it comes at a price—more ambiguity, more confusion, and less control. This is hard to accept for people, organizations, and even whole countries that are used to filtering out what is desirable and thus can be let in, and what is undesirable and thus needs to be kept out at all costs.

With global communications becoming increasingly accessible, such control is quickly becoming an illusion. We are too inextricably connected to each other beyond the usual work relationships. When we look at problems or challenges now, we have to look at the systemic relationships that exist between our own organization and its environment. When something is good for us but damaging to another entity in the environment, it will not be good for us in the long run. There are now many more situations where sharing information or resources is to everyone's benefit, because my success depends on your success. In fact, the more we all know, the better we all get. This is in contrast to the traditional and narrow corporate strategic planning mind-set that guards information as confidential (if you know this about me I will lose and you will win), assuming a limited pie, also referred to as a "zero-sum game." The increasing use of partnerships and networks to implement complex programs requires a degree of openness and sharing that was unheard of not so long ago, and which feels, to some, as highly risky business (giving away the company secrets).

Increasing the organization's responsiveness. Central-level decision makers in health programs are far removed socially, economically, and geographically from the most needy target groups. Although service providers may not hail from the population groups they serve, they are closer to them. Often they have some significant insights to contribute regarding how to best reach these groups. During the strategic planning exercise, the

service providers can introduce their perspective and bridge the gap between the organization and their clients. Ideally, representatives from client groups are involved in the strategic planning group, through the use of focus groups, or, if it is acceptable, in some or all of the deliberations.

Who Should Be Involved?

Strategic planning exercises are becoming more inclusive. Organizations all over the world realize that a variety of stakeholders, both within and outside the organization, have something to contribute to the development of strategy. At the same time there is ambivalence about having a diverse group of people involved in the deliberations because of a fear that this inclusiveness may complicate matters. In fact, inclusiveness and exclusiveness each complicate matters. The complication of being inclusive is managing the group process with so many different stakeholders, viewpoints, and interests. The complication of being exclusive is the fact that the resulting plan has to be “sold” to all the groups who were not involved. If there is resentment about being excluded, the selling is going to be even more difficult. If key players are not included in a collective planning exercise that affects their work, the potential for a negative backlash increases. At a critical point in time, the organization may find itself without the support of those key players who were excluded earlier. In order to decide who should be involved, the focus and scope of the exercise need to be kept in mind.

Working with different stakeholders. . .

At the 1996 Zimbabwe National Family Planning Council (ZNFPC) strategic planning retreat, only half the participants were from ZNFPC. The other half represented the Ministries of Health, of Education, and of Information, and various religious and non-governmental organizations working in reproductive health. This was an important change from its previous strategic planning exercise five years earlier, which had not involved as many outsiders. The focus of this second retreat was the national program, not the Council itself as an organization. Thus, the group of stakeholders changed and the decision of who to include became very important.

Strategic planning is not entirely a top management affair any longer. More and more strategic planning exercises now involve people from various parts of the organization, board members, clients, and customers. If the focus of the exercise is to develop a national strategic plan (for child survival, for family planning, for HIV/AIDS prevention), involving competing service providers is self-evident. It may even be appropriate to include political opponents. By engaging them in the development of a shared vision, they will now share the responsibility for achieving it, making it more likely that they will participate in the search for acceptable solutions.

The inclusion or exclusion of people is often a political act. Organizational, tribal, religious, and ethnic politics may come into play around this issue. But how broad should the span of participation be?

Respecting all the voices. . .

In a highly stratified society, a mixed strategic planning and team building exercise took place with the staff from the Ministry of Health who were responsible for family planning services, and staff from the bilateral USAID project managed by MSH. The highest-ranking government official was open to the idea of including people down to the lowest level. Staff from the highest and lowest rungs of the governmental hierarchy present at the retreat worked side by side for a week, called each other by first names, and, for the first time ever, listened to each other's views about the program, and to each other's ideas and concerns. Everyone agreed that this temporary leveling of the hierarchy had significantly altered people's views of each other, and of the contributions each had to offer to the work.

Secretaries, clerks, receptionists, drivers, cleaners? Should people at the lowest rungs of the organizational ladder participate? What special knowledge might they have that could be important? Or is the relationship between the support staff and their supervisors and others in the hierarchy important in itself? From a humanistic standpoint, one could argue that it is always better to be inclusive, and have people feel part of a larger whole, because it puts their small contributions into a context that has meaning. Even the most mundane task, such as sweeping a floor, can acquire a new meaning if it is placed within the context of a larger goal, such as "creating a clean and inviting environment for our clients."

Tapping sources of knowledge. . .

In a strategic planning exercise in West Africa, the facilitator suggested that the representatives from the lowest levels, such as drivers and secretaries, be involved. The first reaction of the top leadership was one of disbelief, followed by reluctance. After some urging, the director was willing to give it a try, justifying their inclusion by reasoning that the drivers had to drive the participants to the venue site anyway, and the secretaries could be there to type the proceedings as well. At first, the support staff themselves were reluctant to participate. The driver literally inched his way into the discussions over several days, standing outside the door on the first day, inside on the second. On the last day, he had a seat at the table and a clear voice when one of the operational strategies that emerged related to conserving resources, and touched upon the domain that he was eminently qualified to talk about: the vehicle maintenance program.

Hierarchical superiors? When a unit or department within a larger bureaucracy initiates a strategic planning exercise before its organizational "parent" does so, the inclusion or exclusion of hierarchical superiors can be problematic. Should the boss of the unit's director take part in the exercise? What if there is a history of conflict or jealousy? Inclusiveness is not an absolute good. If there are suspicions of dishonest intentions or fears that "a snake is being led into the nest," including a hierarchical superior may not be such a good idea. Conducting a strategic planning process in an atmosphere of deep mistrust and suspicion is a real challenge. However, these considerations have to be weighed against the implications of excluding the superior, which may severely compromise the implementation of the outcomes of the strategic planning process. Our own sense of trust and degree of cynicism will come into play and will influence how hard we, as facilitators, push for inclusiveness and whether we take the attributions that are being made at face value. Thus, as co-designers of the process, we have the delicate job of urging inclusiveness without pushing for what would, politically, make no sense at all. Since facilitators are usually outsiders, it is difficult

to gauge the reluctance for inclusion. Is it a fear for loss of power, is it violating the norms of “how we do things here,” or is it really a bad political move, no matter how one looks at it?

Competitors? In the commercial sector in various parts of the world, experiments are being done using large and all-inclusive planning exercises. In most of these large group methodologies, the inclusion has extended beyond the examples we gave above to include not only customers but competitors as well. With the constant establishment and dissolution of alliances in the business world, the word “competitor” is too static. Competitors become strategic partners in alliances and large networks that temporarily pursue common goals. If the focus of the strategic planning exercise is a national reproductive health program, all parties should be involved whether they compete or not. Representatives from the government, the NGO community, religious groups, private provider organizations, the for-profit sector, and international (bilateral and multilateral) agencies that provide essential funds are all key players with a stake in the program, and should thus have a seat at the table.

Clients and Customers? The hierarchical distance between patient or client and service providers, who are sometimes themselves low in the hierarchy of the service organization, is a big obstacle. Imagine what it might feel like for a client to enter a conference room and be asked sit among and participate on the same footing as senior management. Our experience with inviting secretaries, cleaners, and drivers to participate in the strategic planning process has given us a clue about how difficult it would be to overcome these status differentials.

At MSH, we don’t have experience in actually bringing patients or family planning clients in as participants in the strategic planning exercise. We only do this indirectly, with the clients’ views and wishes represented as qualitative data from focus groups or exit surveys, or through our informal chats with patients in the waiting room of a clinic or hospital. The closest we have come to bringing in the customer or client into the strategic planning exercise itself is through the use of field visits during the strategic planning exercise. But even if we succeeded in overcoming the status

hurdle, we would still be confronted with literacy and numeracy skills that are so varied that it is difficult to design a process that accommodates these differences, especially as one plans to conduct a more or less traditional strategic planning exercise with many documents to read, financial projections to understand and analytical exercises to conduct. Obviously, the process needs to be fundamentally altered if clients and customers are to be included.

There are, of course, the internal clients, colleagues from other departments. They are easier to accommodate in the process because they share a common frame of reference. Since they are usually represented among the senior management team (accounting, personnel, contracts, etc.), they are, by definition, part of the process. The facilitator should be attuned to possible rivalries between program staff and administrative staff (especially accounting staff), and should help each group to expand its view of the other. Small mixed groups working on common tasks can do wonders!

Opponents? Certain aspects of family planning programs are controversial, such as adolescent programs, the issue of abortion, charging fees, or the mix of methods made available. Family planning organizations and groups have a tendency to exclude their adversaries from the discussion about strategic directions. The exclusion easily exacerbates the differences in viewpoints, since the two opposing parties are only exposed to each other's rhetoric, and usually have few opportunities to sit together and explore where the strong views come from. Sitting together through a strategic planning process may reveal that there is actually some common ground from which new strategies can be explored together. In Nigeria and Kenya, during a series of planning exercises about adolescent family planning services, older midwives and their younger colleagues explored their disagreements about providing adolescent girls with contraceptives. If the facilitator can keep the exploration focused on what the two groups have in common (no one wants to see a school girl get pregnant) rather than on blaming, accusing, and finding fault, both parties can begin to understand the reasoning behind one another's positions and explore solutions to the problems everyone acknowledges.

Ideas for Action: To Involve a Broad Cross Section of People

Explore appropriate ways of involving people. There are many ways to involve people and many levels from which people can be involved. In highly stratified cultures, where involving lower-level staff is unusual and uncomfortable for all parties, it is better to step lightly and proceed slowly, while trying to demonstrate and model the benefits of involvement. Such involvement can range from surveying the needs of key stakeholders (the results of which are analyzed and then fed into the strategic planning process as data) to their full presence and participation in the actual deliberations. In between lie a range of options, including periodic presentations and explanations of outcomes of the various steps in the planning process to the rank and file, small departmental-level discussions (focus groups) about issues and concerns which are then fed upwards in the hierarchy, conversations with people in the field, or preparatory meetings to develop recommendations to the decision makers.

Establish a steering committee. A small group of five to ten people representing a cross section of the organization makes the task of organizing the strategic planning process manageable. In steep hierarchical organizations, such a steering committee would probably consist mostly of senior managers. In organizations that have a flatter organizational structure, a steering committee may include staff from lower levels, and even clients or representatives from client organizations. The committee should be established several months before the strategic planning exercise starts, so that there is time to think through all the options, reserve the necessary space, decide who to invite, solicit input in the design process, and develop and circulate preliminary agendas.

Conduct a design meeting. This is a critical preparatory meeting. It is essential to produce the commitment and gather resources that are fundamental to the success of the strategic planning exercise. A wide range of sponsors of the strategic planning process should participate in the design meeting, including: the steering committee (if there is one), top decision makers in the organization, the facilitator, influential staff at lower levels, and any outsiders who are critical to the success of the strategic

... planning exercise. During this meeting, the group considers a number of questions that have previously received top leadership concurrence.

- Why are we doing a strategic planning exercise?
- What concrete and not-so-concrete outcomes do we expect from this exercise?
- Who should be participating?
- When should we do it?
- How much time can we realistically spend on the exercise?
- Where should we do it (in-house, off-site)?
- Is top leadership supporting the process and the expected outcomes of the exercise (with resources, psychologically)?
- Does this process need to be tied to other organizational processes, such as the budget cycle (to make sure that the necessary funds get allocated)?

Conduct a stakeholder analysis. Stakeholders are people who have a stake in the organization. That means that they are invested one way or another in the success of the organization, as a client or patient, a staff member, a board member, a government official, a community, or a supplier of goods or services to the organization. In some schools of thought even competitors are considered stakeholders. Among key stakeholders are those who hold important information, who have authority and resources, and who are affected by what the organization does. The following questions may help to find out who the stakeholders are:

- To what people, organizations, or institutions is this organization related?
- Who is the organization dependent upon?
- Who is dependent on the organization?
- Who would miss the organization if it ceased to exist?
- Who would be pleased to see it succeed?
- Who are potential adversaries of the organization?¹

¹ See Spencer, 1998: 126

Asking these questions during the design meeting is a good starting point for finding out who needs to be invited to participate in the strategic planning process. Such stakeholders might include clients or patients, administrative staff, support staff, professional staff, volunteers, board members, key government officials, representatives from relevant professional organizations, from other regulatory agencies, from other ministries, from training institutions, labor unions, funding agencies, and even those who are currently seen as the competition (they may become allies).

Ideally, representatives from all these groups are part of the strategic planning process. This ensures that the concerns, perspectives, and interests of these diverse groups are heard and acknowledged. This is also a kind of “insurance policy” that will increase the chances that the outcomes of the strategic planning process will be implemented.

Getting buy-in. . .

New USAID bilateral projects, as part of their contractual requirements, often did project planning on their own within weeks of setting up in a country. It has become more common now for projects to conduct a strategic planning exercise with key counterparts and clients: the Ministry of Health at the central level, key regional staff, representatives from the districts, as well as key players from the private voluntary sector. Such exercises allow key stakeholders to help shape the project vision and its key strategic directions from which project staff can then extract their marching orders.

Structure the process. As the diversity of the group increases, so does the need to adapt the process. The traditional format of sophisticated presentations, highly intellectual debates, plenary question and answer sessions, and a heavy reliance on written analyses is not appropriate when there are people in the room who are intimidated by, or unfamiliar with, sophisticated or scientific terminology, and elaborate charts and graphs. In addition (and this is important even in seemingly homogenous

groups), preferences for taking in and processing information, learning styles, and such personality characteristics as introversion and extroversion, are likely to be varied. The process needs to be designed in such a way that it appeals to all styles and preferences because each one complements the other. Thus it is vital to the quality of the deliberations and conclusions. The following are examples of commonly observed styles and preferences:

Extroverts versus introverts. Extroverts have a tendency to think aloud, talk a lot and quickly, and present rough ideas. It is in the process of debate, conversation, and discussion that their ideas get polished. Interaction with others is imperative for them. Introverts, on the other hand, need some time to reflect by themselves. They dislike having to present unpolished ideas and prefer to withdraw and think things through. Quiet reflection is imperative for them. One can see how most planning meetings support extroverts and punish introverts. To avoid this bias, facilitators could suggest a few minutes of quiet reflection, individual brainstorming, or jotting down ideas, followed by small group (two to four people) sharing of ideas, before starting a plenary discussion.

Abstract thinkers versus concrete thinkers. Abstract thinkers get irritated when others bring up details in a discussion that they prefer to conduct on an abstract level. Concrete thinkers get frustrated by the high level of abstraction and the lack of practical views in discussions that they feel remain dissociated from real life. Both groups are needed in a strategic planning process, but at different moments in the process. When the group is trying to look at the big picture, to conceptualize the issues the organization is facing, the abstract thinkers are more adept. For implementation planning, the group wants to take advantage of its concrete thinkers, who will, in all likelihood, think of all sorts of practical implementation issues. The facilitator needs to be aware of these different strengths and put them to use where they are most needed.

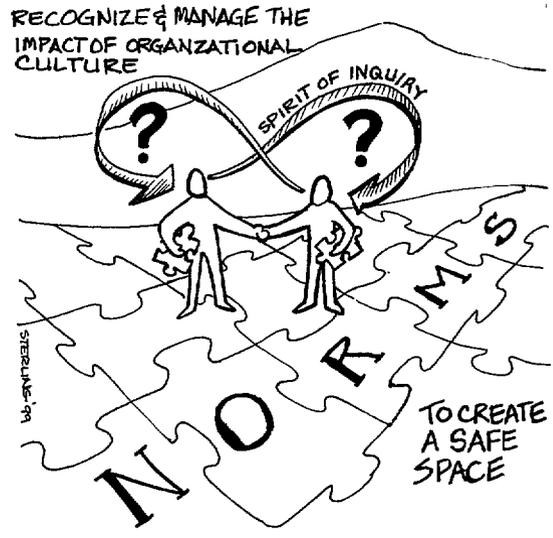
Sequential thinkers versus random thinkers. Sequential thinkers have a tendency to follow a step-by-step process: first you do this, and then this, and then that. They are a very good

source of energy and ideas during the implementation planning phase. Random thinkers are good at taking several ideas and synthesizing them. Both strengths are needed at different points in the process. Random thinkers do better at brainstorming, and should be given free reign. Sequential thinkers are better at prioritizing and turning vague ideas into implementable actions.

Observers/thinkers versus experimenters/doers. Some people prefer to observe what happens, reflect on it, and make recommendations, or extract ideas. Others prefer to roll up their sleeves and try something out before thinking it through in great detail. Again, in a strategic planning process there is room for both, but not usually at the same time.

The above differences are just a few of the many differences one is likely to encounter when a large group of people gets together. There are no formulas for managing these differences, but a good facilitator is aware of them and draws on the strengths of each group as a function of the specific task at hand at each point in the process. He or she needs to carefully think about the process and the participants—the styles and types of behavior and thinking that each is likely to bring, and when that behavior will promote or impede the process. This means gently holding back the sequential thinkers when a brainstorming is going on, or encouraging the experimenters to develop their ideas when the group seems reluctant to move on. This also means giving the introverts a chance to develop their ideas before opening a discussion, and reminding the extroverts to remain silent for awhile longer.

In addition to structuring the process to bring in the strengths of the various styles and preferences, the facilitator can increase the psychological safety of the group by acknowledging and naming these differences. This makes it more likely for people to listen to each other and respect the contributions of their opposites. Introverts are usually quite relieved when the facilitator indicates that he or she understands their need for some quiet reflection time, and has built it into the structure of the task. In a predominantly “thinking” environment, “doers” could use some encouragement when they question the practicality of an idea.



Lesson Three: Recognize and Manage the Impact of the Organizational Culture

Provide opportunities and a safe space for a group to improve its ability to work together. Look for ways to help people examine the impact of the organizational culture on the way the work is done.

One of the primary responsibilities of the facilitator is to create and maintain a safe space, a working environment that invites all participants to engage fully and contribute their best thinking, their highest aspirations, and their full creative potential to the deliberations. This can be accomplished by using interventions to improve a group's ability to work together and minimize interference from old patterns of behavior or organizational norms that get in the way of doing the work and of realizing the vision. These interventions include:

- Periodically examining how the group interacts and communicates.
- Analyzing contradictions (which can be customs, habits, structures, attitudes, systems, procedures, behaviors, strategies) to the vision or goals.

- Creating a mechanism for recording difficult issues to be dealt with at a later time, in another context.

It is essential to identify participants' expectations and concerns about the strategic planning exercise, and to instill confidence that the facilitator can deal with the potential occurrence of dysfunctional behaviors that might create an embarrassing or compromising situation, especially for senior staff, or behaviors that reaffirm a sense of powerlessness among lower levels. As an outsider, the facilitator has the advantage of being able to name and confront such behaviors and, intentionally or unintentionally, disconnect them from their cultural context by bringing to the surface (that is, by naming) the assumptions or norms that keep them alive. For example, an unstated norm may be that the director has to have all the answers, or can never show any doubt, or always has to speak first. An external facilitator can state this in a way that makes it possible for the group to reflect on this: do they want to keep it that way? Insiders tend not to see these behaviors as manifestations of norms that can be questioned, and even if they do, it is often very difficult, if not impossible, for them to raise the issue. Outside facilitators can pretend to be naive and simply articulate an observation. Once articulated, people can, maybe for the first time, look at the phenomenon by itself. For example, a boss who always interrupts subordinates can be called on this, preferably with a touch of humor, by the facilitator, who is not in a subordinate relationship with him or her.

A facilitator needs to be sensitive to the dynamics of the interactions among all the participants and use this intuition to guide people's participation in the various tasks. In some situations, if time permits, it is useful to create opportunities for participants to assess how they communicate in a group setting and the roles they assume in the group's interactions.

The facilitator bears responsibility for moving the group along in its deliberations. He or she must make sure that they identify and address the critical issues before them. This may require addressing people's expectations about the strategic planning exercise, addressing their fears and concerns about the decision-making process, and addressing potential conflict. But it also means setting norms to work together and challenging the group

when these are not respected. Such interventions build trust, create excitement, and help to establish an environment in which a spirit of inquiry can safely emerge. These are the conditions that will allow the group to focus on the ultimate goal of the strategic planning process and bring its collective wisdom to the table.

Implications

Knowing and managing expectations. Facilitators of the strategic planning process need to manage the expectations of the participants. Mismatched expectations will almost always produce unwelcome outcomes, resulting in frustration at best and cynicism at worst. Everyone needs to be clear about what this process is all about and what it is not. People come to a strategic planning meeting with lots of questions, whether it is a multi-day exercise or a series of short meetings over a period of time. Some of these questions might be:

- Why are we meeting here?
- What is the purpose of this exercise?
- What is the expected outcome of this exercise?
- What difference will it make for me?
- What difference will I make? Why was I invited?
- Will I be penalized if I say the wrong thing (or if I state my thoughts/feelings honestly)?
- Will I be able to live up to the expectations that got me invited to this event?
- Will anyone use the results?
- What happens next?

Many of these questions will never surface unless they are validated and acknowledged at the beginning of the process. It is important for the facilitator to anticipate the questions people will bring into a strategic planning process and, through written and verbal communication, answer as many as possible. Internal facilitators can address these beforehand by “walking the halls,” listening to people’s fears and concerns and explaining what a strategic planning process is, and what it can and cannot do. External facilitators are sometimes in a position to do this as well,

especially if they have worked with the organization for some time and are known to the staff.

Dealing with fears about the decision-making process. There are two sets of fears that are particularly important to deal with in a straightforward manner. Both have to do with the decision-making process. One is the fear of management that there are going to be demands from other stakeholders that they cannot honor, or that there are going to be hidden agendas, attacks, or incidents that may embarrass them publicly. There is often fear that things may get out of control. Thus, it is important that top management understands what is meant by participation, and also that they agree that people in other parts of the organization, or even from the outside, have something useful to contribute. All this will need to be explored long before the actual planning exercise. A steering committee or a design meeting are good places to do this, but sometimes words cannot convey what real participation can do, and people just have to experience it.

Discovering common ground. . .

During the initial phase of their strategic planning process, the staff of a South Asian public health consulting firm was divided into five working groups to look at each of the organization's key results areas. Each group worked independently to analyze their results area and identify new events and directions for the organization. A plenary was then convened to share conclusions. During the early stages of the process, the senior management team was reluctant to whole-heartedly support the process because they had not participated in the working groups. This made them anxious about the quality and "correctness" of the conclusions that the groups would draw from the exercise. However, as soon as senior management and project staff got together to share findings from the groups' work, they realized they had similar views. This shifted the mood and created a spirit of collective commitment, excitement, and responsibility.

Fears about unmanageable conflict or attacks are often justified. Conflict is more likely to emerge if the planning process focuses on problems, which have a tendency to exaggerate differences, especially differences in strategies (“how to get someplace”). The mood in a room can change dramatically by simply focusing on what people want to create together, not on what they want to get rid of. One of the best “inoculations” against conflict is to start by creating an image of what everyone in the group wants, and to look for the glue that binds the group together. This vision usually reflects the values that led people to where they are. In human service or social development organizations, most people are there because they care about making life better for others. Among public health workers at all levels, these values are usually right below the surface, and are easy to uncover. Sharing dreams, if they go sufficiently deep (beyond the superficial material wants) has a transformational effect on the mood of a group. Once people realize that they are all pursuing the same ideal, much of the petty competition vanishes.

The other fear is often expressed by people lower in the hierarchy and presents itself as cynicism (“Nothing will change.” “Why bother?” “They are not really interested in what we have to say.”) or powerlessness (“They are not going to listen to me because I am so low in the hierarchy.” “My opinion is not respected.” “They won’t change a decision because of me.”).

In cultures (societal and organizational) where participation is not the norm, we often find unrealistic expectations on both sides of the organizational divide about what participation will bring (chaos or total veto power). The essence of strategic planning as a collective reflection is that it remains collective. No one should participate in a strategic planning process thinking that because of his or her opinion, major decisions are going to be changed. This applies equally to the board president, the executive director, or a newly empowered service provider. If the top decision makers expect to be able to go completely against the prevailing sentiment of the group, the strategic planning process will be a charade. Similarly, the newly empowered lower-level worker needs to understand that if there is no support (financial or otherwise) for

his or her great idea, that this may be an idea that is either not that great, or an idea whose time has not yet come.

Setting and enforcing norms. It is becoming increasingly common for workgroups to set norms for working together at the outset. The facilitator can simply ask the group what norms it would like to set for the meetings, record the answers, and post them as a reminder. It is important to refer to this list whenever a norm is broken, thus modeling to the participants that it is okay to remind offenders. If that is not done, the exercise becomes rather pointless, and a waste of time.

Naming the pattern. . .

Before the strategic planning process started, the facilitator observed how the group behaved in meetings. Extroverts dominated the meetings. Frequent interruptions left many trains of thought unexplored. As the person in charge, the director led the meeting. His was a rather hands-off style. Personal agendas were given ample time to be played out through challenges and seemingly endless methodological nitpicking. When it was time for a decision, everyone was exhausted. To make things worse, he was known to walk angrily out of meetings, leaving a frustrated group behind. As a neutral outsider, the facilitator was able to expose and name some of these behaviors. This allowed the group to examine its ways of working together. They agreed to develop a set of ground rules (one speaker at a time, no interruptions, time limits on monologues) that would be enforced during meetings. The results were immediately visible, even though lapses into old behavior happened frequently. Nevertheless, meetings became shorter, more focused, more productive, and more participatory. The group began to be known for its efficient meetings.

Norms usually pertain to such behaviors as listening, treating people with respect, not interrupting, sticking to the time schedule, and actively participating in all the sessions.

Classic examples of such norm violations include:

- Male staff constantly interrupting female staff (both young and old);
- People in charge (male or female) frequently cutting off those who are lower on the hierarchical ladder;
- Only those who talk fast and loud getting the floor;
- Senior people arriving after the start of the session, reading newspapers, doing crossword puzzles, or making personal phone calls;
- A constant coming and going of people, cell phone interruptions, private conversations, and people being called out of the session;
- The leadership, consciously or unconsciously, belittling or degrading the outcomes of intense deliberations by middle managers, without any reference to their commitment and enthusiasm, let alone their experience and expertise.

As an outsider, the facilitator may be the only one who actually notices these violations because the group is so used to these behaviors. By naming them, the group can then decide whether they want to change the practice or adjust their list of norms. The facilitator must do this confrontation with some care and sensitivity, or even with a touch of humor ("It seems that you have to talk really loud and hard to get heard in this group." "Well, you don't seem very impressed with the quality of the work these people have done all day." "Do you really think we will get anything done with this coming and going of people? How shall we manage this in a way that it doesn't interrupt our work?"). The tension surrounding such unproductive norms can be neutralized, and people can actively engage in articulating new norms for working together.

Avoiding embarrassment. Sometimes, during group discussions, "dirty laundry" will appear. In an internal strengths and

weaknesses analysis, problems will undoubtedly be revealed, and specific strategies, such as more frequent meetings or a review of promotion and recruitment policies, might be proposed without having to go into uncomfortable or threatening further disclosures. More embarrassing issues related to perceived incompetence, unethical behavior, and other unmentionables, are not suitable to address openly with a large and diverse group. The problem is that embarrassment creates a high level of anxiety, immediately affects the mood of the group, and compromises the safety of the work environment. It will be nearly impossible to recreate that earlier safe environment. Thus the facilitator must be prepared to spot the potential for embarrassment early and manage the process so as not to create or aggravate the situation. This may require a short break in which an appropriate course of action can be discussed with the appropriate person(s). Or this may mean parking the issue temporarily in a "parking lot" on the side until it is clear what to do about it. The facilitator probably should, for once, not probe deeper when people use general terms that refer to specific and potentially embarrassing behaviors ("There are problems in the accounting office." "The boss has inappropriate behavior."). Later, such issues can be probed further outside the spotlight of the large group meeting.

Neutralizing counterproductive or dysfunctional behavior. This refers to individuals whose behavior interferes with the group process by hindering the group's progress and consistently violating agreed upon norms. If this behavior goes unchecked, it may eventually dissolve any sense of excitement and safety experienced by the rest of the group. Worse, it may create a level of cynicism that pervades subsequent sessions and which the facilitator will have a hard time overcoming. This kind of behavior tends to be displayed more in plenary sessions than in small groups. In fact, when much of the activity is done in small groups, such difficult people tend to disappear, to attend to other "more important" business. Sometimes the group takes care of the problem. But when the person is powerful, the help of someone at his or her level or a private conversation that focuses on the purpose of the session may be needed.

Establishing a spirit of inquiry. When people start working together toward common goals in small groups and across traditional boundaries, something interesting happens. When people step out from their traditional turf, prejudices both to individuals and to the functions people hold are reduced. Walls that exist between divisions (between accounting and program staff for example), or between training and program staff, are all social constructs, boundaries that we make up. By experiencing this, reaching across boundaries and accomplishing common goals, people begin to break down walls. This is much easier in small groups than in large groups, and easier in mixed groups than in homogenous groups.

Some people believe that organizations in which dysfunctional behaviors and norms flourish and are tolerated are unlikely to benefit from a strategic planning process because they will probably interfere with any implementation activity. Others believe that the dysfunction can be exposed and dealt with during the strategic planning process. Again, these two positions derive from some fundamentally different assumptions about the strategic planning process and about how organizations function. There is no right or wrong. If one believes that the strategic planning process should focus exclusively on the organization's work in the outside world (its services and products) then the internal dysfunction is only relevant in so far as it gets in the way of organizational performance. In this case, one could argue that the dysfunction needs to be dealt with first, and separate from the strategic planning exercise. It is an internal issue and should not be exposed while external stakeholders are present. This is tantamount to publicly hanging out the dirty laundry, which most organizations prefer to avoid.

Ideas for Action: To Manage and Recognize the Impact of the Organizational Culture

Create norms and articulate expectations. The most common way to create norms and learn about people's expectations is to simply ask and record. A facilitator can sometimes collect expectations beforehand. Another, more engaging way, allowing the facilitator to collect information on both at the same time, is to ask the group

to brainstorm about the following question: "What would need to happen to make sure that this (strategic planning) exercise would be a total flop?" After a minute of startled silence people usually respond eagerly. Record the answers. The next step is to review the answers and explore together how to prevent this from happening. The responses tend to cover both norms and expectations, and thus save time. Post them and refer to them as needed.

Reflect on the process periodically. A practical way to help a group overcome some of its dysfunctions is to institute the practice of looking from time to time at how the group members interact as they work on a task. This could happen during regular "time-outs," during routine end-of-the-day or end-of-task large group reflections, by using a video tape, or spontaneously, when the facilitator notices (group) behavior that gets in the way of completing the task. Ornstein, et al. (1997) developed a practical way of looking at the communication pattern of a group by exploring the degree to which people have moved away from the facts and have inferred generalizations, which are then treated as "truths"; the degree to which speakers acknowledge personal feelings and reasoning processes; and people's willingness to consider other points of view.

The facilitator may use any or all of the questions from the list on the next page. By doing so he or she develops a norm that makes it acceptable to inquire into people's reasoning processes or acknowledge people's feelings. This makes the group more disciplined about drawing inferences, making generalizations, and seeing the connection between the cognitive and affective elements in their conversations. Such inquiry makes it much more difficult for people to grand-stand, intellectualize, dominate, or dismiss others. As such, it is a good way for people to open up to each other and may serve as an antidote to dysfunctional behaviors displayed by individuals.

Process Reflections	
Questioning	Asking questions as a means for uncovering underlying assumptions, probing feelings, etc. ("When you said that, what were you thinking of?" "What made you uncomfortable about that?")
Directing	Instructing people where to look or what to ask to clarify thinking processes. ("Think of this as an example of. . . , notice your reactions to. . .")
Modeling	Restating a statement so that it becomes lower in inference, higher in ownership and more open. ("Did you mean to say that you felt angry because. . .?")
Informing	Providing data or frameworks that the people seem to lack (by providing a model, explaining a theory).
Refocusing	Using role plays or role reversals to see other perspectives, or demonstrating similarities between apparently disparate situations, or between complex and simpler problems.
Accepting	Accepting feelings and acknowledging confusion, bewilderment, anxiety.
Sharing	When the facilitator reveals or shares his or her own feelings, assumptions, reasoning processes.

[Source: Ornstein, et al. (1997)]

Use instruments. When people experience or cause problems in their interactions with others, this may be due to people not understanding others' personal styles or preferences. Some people operate on a highly abstract and conceptual level, others are very concrete and focus on immediate and direct experience. Some are quiet observers and others need to try things out first. All of these styles are important for an organization to function effectively, yet

some are more valued than others. This can create a homogeneity that is stifling and even counterproductive. Personality types, learning styles, and management styles are some of the ways that we can distinguish differences among people. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory, and Situational Leadership² are some of the many instruments that can help people determine their own styles or preferences and get an appreciation for the styles and preferences of others. This and any other skills training may precede or follow a strategic planning exercise as part of an effort to improve people's skills in working together.

Analyze contradictions to the vision or goals. The focus of this analysis is the contradiction between what a group says it wants to be, and what it currently is. The key question is: "If this is where you want to be (the vision, the goal), how come you aren't already there?" or, "What has kept you from realizing your vision?" An important feature of this process is that it is not examining what is missing or lacking (vehicles, money, staff, etc.), but rather forces one to look at what is present (an obstacle), what is preventing them from achieving the goal or vision? The outcome of this analysis then becomes the focus for the next step: "What actions can we propose to remove these obstacles, these "blocking presences?" A contradiction analysis often reveals elements in the culture that need to be examined because they prevent the organization from doing what it needs to do in the external world.

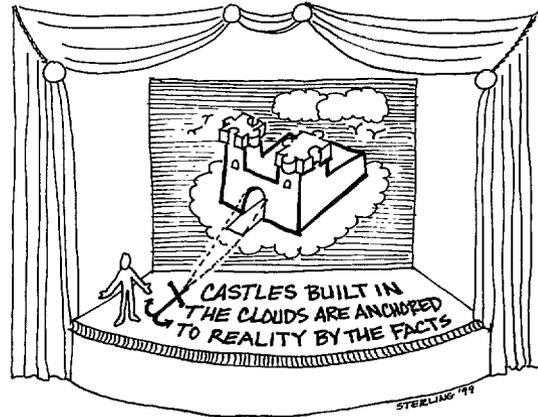
Conduct a SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. SWOT is still a mainstay of most strategic planning exercises. The strengths and weaknesses deal with what is internal to the organization, and may thus reveal problems related to or resulting from the organizational culture. The opportunities and threats focus on the external world. There is considerable critique on this analytical

² For a list of places where these instruments can be purchased, please refer to the References and the List of Instruments at the end of this monograph.

tool (see Mintzberg, et al., 1998:38). A SWOT analysis is more likely to generate useful information if it is done in direct relationship with the vision or goals: "If this is our vision, what are the (internal) strengths and weaknesses that we bring to this endeavor as an organization?" If the analysis is done before a vision or goals have been articulated, it risks becoming an exercise in futility, with the positives and negatives merely being a list of opposites that cancel each other out. We have seen SWOT lists of nice but irrelevant strengths, or lists of things that are lacking that suggest as the only solution an increase of whatever it is that is lacking ("lack of money, so we need more," or "lack of staff, so we need more").

Create a temporary "parking lot." When, during a planning session, issues arise that fall outside the scope of the current session (yet they are recognized as important) the facilitator may create a special place to temporarily "park" the issues until such a time when they can be discussed more thoroughly, or delegated to a committee for further exploration. When using this "parking lot," it is important to refer back to the issues periodically, to cross off those that have been addressed or are no longer issues, and add new ones as they arise. It is important to review the list one last time at the closing of the strategic planning process to make sure that each issue has been or will be addressed.

51-
VALID INFORMATION IS THE BACKDROP
AGAINST WHICH PLANNING IS PERFORMED



Lesson Four: Collect, Comprehend, and Use Valid Information

Create structures and processes that allow participants to introduce, critically review, and validate information.

The facilitator has to make sure that the strategic planning process is structured in such a way that sufficient valid information is introduced, “digested,” and synthesized. He or she has to watch out for too much or too little information, which can either slow down the process or make the conclusions hollow. Valid information is information about the context in which the organization operates that is not negotiable, that is usually accepted as fact, or that can withstand objective testing. We could consider this objective information. But there is also information of a more subjective nature, about what people believe is happening inside and outside the organization and what the implications are for the organization’s future directions. This information only becomes valid after it is critically reviewed and explored by the group and a common meaning has emerged that informs the selection of strategic directions.

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Implications

The methodologies used for collecting data, analyzing it, and presenting the results vary in relation to the facilitator's preferred approach, the numeracy and literacy levels of the individual participants, the organization's maturity, and the group's comfort in working together. There is no evidence that any one methodology makes the strategic planning process more solid and the results more reliable.

The facilitator guides the group to synthesize and align valid information to establish strategic directions for their organization. For example, the SWOT-with-a-Twist analysis (see *Ideas for Action*, page 66) organizes and frames the issues that are then clarified and tested against the group's mission and core values, and, if valid, used by them to extrapolate implications for the future.

There are organizations that are data-rich and information poor; that is, they have a lot of numbers and statistics but little is analyzed and interpreted for use in decision making. There are also organizations that are data-poor. They have little to go on. The kinds of information an organization needs to have and analyze for planning purposes are well documented in various MSH publications (see *Related MSH Publications*, page 115). Therefore, the focus of this lesson is about introducing, critically reviewing, and validating information during the strategic planning process.

A strategic planning process without the input of valid information would produce only castles in the sky, nice dreams that are disconnected from the realities of today. Valid information is key for several reasons:

- **It forces the group to look reality straight in the face.** Critical reflection on data sets detailing performance outputs can reveal that the expansion of program activities was implemented without considering the impact on existing projects. Financial data can expose immediate needs to bring in new sources of revenue. Caseload

analyses can identify individual high-performing clinics that can be used to benchmark other clinics' performance.

- **It takes the information gatherers on a journey** inside their organizations, or, if that's where they have buried themselves, outside their organization, to see what the larger world offers. This in itself is a learning experience. Sometimes top management does not know how their organization's strategies or policies affect workers and clients, and people working at lower levels have only a very limited view on what takes place at a policy level. This is an opportunity to get each group to "look through a different window."
- **The information gathering exercise in itself is an intervention.** When asking for data or information that is not easily available, or not available at all, it raises issues about information systems or reporting formats. In some organizations this in itself is enough to get people together and improve a situation. In other situations the information gathering creates a "big picture view" for people who, previously, had only a partial understanding of what the organization was all about.

Making data collection a learning experience. . .

A regional strategy development committee was convened to conduct a thorough document review, a series of field interviews, and to compile a background document with pertinent information to inform the strategic planning exercise. The four-member team learned a tremendous amount from doing the data collection, and had a better view on their program. As insiders, they were also able to communicate their findings well and rally the interest of their colleagues when they presented their findings to the participants in a strategic planning workshop.

What Makes Information Valid?

There are two broad categories of valid information. One is the type of non-debatable information that illustrates the facts about the context in which the organization functions. This is information that one cannot argue with, that cannot be contested or refuted by the group, such as "USAID will pull out of this country by the year 2000," or "Ninety percent of our funding comes from one single source." The second category is other information, of a more subjective nature, about the context that could be interpreted in different ways. This information only becomes valid after a group has submitted it to a critical review.

Non-debatable or non-negotiable information. This is information about facts or givens about the context in which the organization operates. It can be regarded as a painted backdrop on a stage. It is critical information that is needed to inform the deliberations, prevent the development of plans that are out of touch, and stop denial and wishful thinking. Such information provides a common frame of reference. Examples include:

- figures on the organization's financial health (last year's revenues, expenses);
- staff expansion or lay-offs;
- generally (or universally) accepted technical guidelines (treatment protocols, WHO guidelines or definitions, national norms and procedures);
- public statements about donor strategies;
- demographic and health status indicators;
- national or international commitments (goals of the national health plan, or the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development [Cairo, 1995] or the Declaration of the Fourth World Conference on Women [Beijing, 1995]);
- audit or evaluation reports;
- client statistics.

The participants in a strategic planning exercise cannot change, dismiss, or ignore such information. Arguing with such information, or rejecting it, is pointless and would be a case of

denial. It is like a rope that anchors whatever dreams they have about the future onto the reality of today. The guiding assumption is that the information does not need to be validated through a group process, defended, or justified, but serves simply as a reminder when they begin to think about the future of their organization or program. The sharing of this type of valid information is often an eye-opener when people learn things that others thought they already knew. It expands their view of reality.

Getting people on the same page. . .

During a strategic planning exercise in central Africa, non-governmental workers heard for the first time about regulations related to the prescription of contraceptives that government workers thought were well known. In another part of the continent, professional staff were surprised to learn about the multitude of funding sources, the amount that came from each, and how precarious their financial situation was. In the US, the staff of a private voluntary organization discovered that terminology used widely in the organization was interpreted very differently by people in different functions.

Information that needs to be validated by the group. There is also information that people carry in their heads. This is a mixture of facts, interpretations, assumptions, anecdotes, convictions, and personal meaning that people have attached to specific data or observations. Such information often gets presented as if it were the objective truth. But these are not facts. This is information that needs to be understood in context and which only becomes useful to the group after critical reflection and inquiry in which a collective meaning is assigned that helps to understand the context in which the organization exists, and the implications about choices to be made. Only then does this kind of information become valid. This is information that leads people to draw conclusions that are debatable.

One fact, two viewpoints. . .

An older nurse comments on the increase of sexual activity among young school girls, shaking her head in disapproval as she recounts this piece of information. In her mind, this is the truth, and the organization should do something about this deplorable situation. She wants to see fewer girls come for contraceptives. A media specialist interprets the same information very differently: "It seems that our campaign to educate school children has paid off. The girls are overcoming their reluctance to go to the clinics and ask for help. That is a good sign, since we know that sexual activity among school children is a fact of life."

It is the facilitator's task to structure the process so that the group can explore values and assumptions embedded in these pieces of information so that they can collectively assign new meaning to them and extrapolate implications for the organization's work. Such a process, which is best done in small groups, will allow the participants to learn more about each other and collectively broaden their view and understanding of the organization's practices, accomplishments, and challenges.

Examples might include program- or issue-oriented information such as the following:

- Validation of data showing an increase in clients following intensive television and radio advertisements could lead a group to deepen its understanding of the multiple factors that have led to this result.
- A review of costs for maintaining a laboratory and income generated from laboratory services could lead participants to consider related issues about meeting government criteria for laboratories and turnover of laboratory technicians before proposing to continue laboratories as a key service delivery function.

- Findings about attitudes toward AIDS among young adolescents could require a group to rethink their assumptions about appropriate messages.
- Findings from a quality study leads to a deepening understanding of existing and desired management practices in health clinics.
- Assumptions about why integrated services are difficult to implement can be explored as people check their reasoning against that of others in a small group discussion.

Approaches to Collecting Information

Information can be collected before or during the actual strategic planning process, or through combination of the two. There are no rules about what is best, just a number of advantages and disadvantages that need to be considered.

Information gathering done beforehand. It is a common practice to hire one or more (local or expatriate) consultants to conduct research and record their findings in a report, which is then presented and used as input during the strategic planning exercise. Sometimes a small group of staff is given this task.

Changing times, changing methods. . .

In one country, MSH was involved in two consecutive strategic planning processes for family planning, which were conducted five years apart. The first time, a single organization was in charge of family planning. Expatriate consultants gathered information over a long period of time in collaboration with local counterparts. Elaborate analyses made it possible to establish specific numerical targets for the plan.

The second strategic planning process, initiated five years later, took place in a different environment, with more active players, and in which roles were less clear. This time the environmental analysis was conducted by a local expert. She presented her findings during the strategic planning exercise in a passionate lecture, richly illustrated with examples and personal experiences. Both information gathering methods proved effective but for different reasons: the first time, planners came up with specific numerical targets, which the organization adopted as its goal. These were not only reached but surpassed in the following five years. The second time, it was the qualitative and emotional aspects that galvanized the participants and helped create common ground for a much more diverse group of players, as everyone could relate in one way or another to her findings and conclusions. This temporarily set aside the many rivalries that plagued the group. A list of numerical targets would not have had the same effect.

Information that is collected and analyzed beforehand has gone through several filters by the time it reaches the group convened for the strategic reflection. This applies even to information we usually consider objective, such as financial reports. For example, one can present a building that is owned as an asset. But it can also be presented as a liability that drains away money every month. The latter presentation may trigger a search for a way to reduce monthly payments. The filters are the biases, beliefs, and assumptions of those who did the research. They influence what the group gets to hear, because findings are usually summarized and key conclusions already drawn. It is unlikely that the group

gets to see all the raw data; besides, it would be very unwieldy. Even if the complete report is made available to the audience beforehand, a bias is still there. Both the researchers and the audience are handicapped by our tendency to find what we are looking for.

There are implications for the presentation of such data and the choice of a presenter. The facilitator has to carefully think through the purpose of the presentation: is it to show the audience new things that are expected to affect their decision making, or is it to galvanize people and help find common ground? There are masterful presenters, who can present their data in such engaging ways that people are spellbound and, in their minds, “enter” into the data, making them real and compelling. Such a presentation can galvanize a group into action by raising issues and confronting reality in ways that appeal to people’s sense of responsibility, even moral duty to work together. However, there are probably many more bad presenters out there who, in long, boring, and unimaginative lectures, or, conversely, in smooth and polished but unenthusiastic presentations, dull peoples’ spirits and appeal to the need of some people in the audience to assert themselves as smarter or wiser by challenging the presenter on irrelevant methodological points. Here, the risk of fragmentation and divisiveness is real, as the listeners are not engaged at a deep level. This is also a shortcut to polarization, especially if the views expressed are not popular with a particular subgroup or certain individuals.

Another approach is to let people representing different parts of the organization prepare a brief presentation to share information that they believe others need to know, or simply to remind people about the context in which the organization operates. The information presented by the different units is often new to other units. Organizational divisions have formidable boundaries, and things one unit takes for granted are complete news to another. Such presentations can be given orally, one after the other (there are some limits to how long people can, and should, sit still, passively listening). The key information points also could be handed out in bullet format to every participant, posted on walls,

or placed on round tables with people moving freely to the table that has something new to offer to them.

Information collected during the actual strategic planning process. Information collected from among the participants during the strategic planning process can be considered to be information (or data) collected in “real time.” Real time refers to right now, and it means that the information they bring with them, in their head or in specialized documents, is based on their knowledge of what is going on. Some of this information is non-debatable, as described above. Usually this means it is backed up by published documents. Other information may be biased, incomplete, or even wrong. This is where validation by the group becomes important. In this scenario, groups sit together around a table and discuss what they want their organization to look like in the future, what they see as their strengths and weaknesses, obstacles to the vision, or proposals they could make to remove obstacles and implement the strategic directions. The facilitator should ensure that this specialized knowledge and expertise informs the deliberations in a way that enriches the quality of the decision. For example:

- The anthropologist or local nurse, who knows the customs relating to the AIDS death of a spouse, can shed some light on how best to educate the community about AIDS.
- The chief accountant knows the reporting strings attached to various donor funds and can help the group think through the implications of having multiple donors for one program.
- The doctors, nurses, and public health specialists can add their knowledge about disease patterns, common side effects, and quality of care, to make sure that proposed training strategies are in sync with the latest findings.

In these situations there is an assumption that everyone who participates carries a piece of the whole puzzle. The bits and pieces are put on the table during various structured small group reflections, which are intended to deepen the group’s understanding of what is happening inside and outside the

organization that is of importance. The various pieces of data and information are presented in an informal and anecdotal fashion, and thus come with more context and nuances than if they had been embedded in a research report. However, for this to work, there needs to be a broad variety of expertise and experience present in the room. For example:

- Staff from finance and accounting have the latest financial analyses.
- Medical staff have information about case management, treatment protocols, and knowledge about diseases, disease patterns, and new technologies.
- Demographers know the morbidity and mortality patterns and demographic data and trends.
- Administrators have the data to show facility use, coverage, and service statistics.
- Donor representatives have information about current trends, priorities, and long term strategies of their agencies.
- Government staff come with knowledge about national health goals and government policies and regulations.
- Service providers come with knowledge about rumors in the community, common side effects, and stories about availability, access, and clinic use.

They do not necessarily have to have all this information in their heads, but they should know where to find it, and preferably have this reference material available in the meeting room.

There are, however, drawbacks to relying on information that is in the room. It presupposes that people actually have the necessary and relevant information in their heads or at their fingertips. It also becomes more difficult to see trends over time, unless people are aware of such trends and can articulate them clearly.

Another approach, instead of, or in addition to, bringing the environment into the meeting room through presentations, information, and people's knowledge, is to bring the participants out into the environment. Even a very short field trip, lasting no more than half a day, can do wonders to bring field realities into view.

Checking reality . . .

Participants in a strategic planning exercise for the national family planning program went on a half-day field visit in the local area near the strategic planning venue. The larger group divided into smaller groups, and each explored a particular aspect of the program. One group went out to a hospital, another to a clinic, a third to a youth center, and a fourth to a supervisor of the community-based distribution (CBD) workers. The group that met with the CBD supervisor spent most of its time chasing the supervisor. This field trip allowed central-level planners to experience first-hand some of the travel and work conditions of the CBD supervisor. They realized how little time is actually spent in client contact, and how much time and effort is spent traveling from one place to another.

Challenges in Generating Valid Information

When useful information is unavailable. When information systems are inadequate or when information is poorly managed, there is not much to go on. One implication is immediately obvious and should be reflected in the decisions the group makes about future actions: the improvement of its information collection and management capacity. The group needs to acknowledge that its strategies are based on very incomplete and possibly incorrect information, and thus plan a review of their conclusions in the near future. The facilitator needs to watch out for the possibility that the group hides its insecurity about making choices behind a need for more information. No matter how much information there is, organizations will always want more. There is a point at which the facilitator may want to suggest that the information the group has is good enough for now, and move on.

Gaining collective ownership of the conclusions. It is the facilitator's responsibility to structure the process so that information is collected, analyzed, and presented before or during the strategic planning exercise in a way that encourages critical reflection, supportive criticism, and ownership of the conclusions.

Small groups are good vehicles for reflecting on information presented. Once the information is introduced, the facilitator structures the process so that small groups discover as much of the context for strategic directions as possible, and have a chance to reflect on the information, digest it, and finally extrapolate implications for the future. In all of these cases, the reflection in small groups is a critical design feature. It neutralizes attempts at individual grand-standing, one-upmanship, and other behaviors that are aimed more at enhancing the speaker's status than about contributing to the collective understanding. Such interventions only activate defense attack sequences and do nothing for creating excitement, alignment, or ownership.

To construct a plan that will be used, the information that supports the choice of strategic directions has to be owned by all participants, staff, and other stakeholders responsible for implementation of the proposed activities. Ownership is not necessarily an expression of full agreement with the information. Ownership can be the outcome of interaction among participants with different perspectives, and a resolve to come to common agreement on how the information illuminates potential new directions.

Determining the level of analysis. The context in which the information is to be used, and the people who have to work with it, will determine how rigorous or sophisticated the analyses should be. If numeracy and literacy levels are very uneven in the group, sophisticated analyses will need to be simplified or altogether abandoned (in favor of storytelling for example), to avoid alienating those who are not familiar with the jargon. Sometimes an exercise can help to make the implications of certain numbers more real. However, if the planning group consists of experts who are well versed in analytical thinking and data interpretation, the facilitator may want to create more

opportunities for sharing and analyzing raw data (although one could argue that these experts might benefit from some anecdotes to add context to the data). In such cases, more complex analyses are appropriate. It is still unclear, however, whether such extensive analyses make the process more solid, and the results more reliable.

Bringing the numbers to life. . .

Participants in the national family planning strategic planning meeting had very different skill levels in dealing with numbers. In addition, very few reliable figures were available. The group struggled to understand the implications of committing to certain prevalence or target rates. By using simple worksheets, the task became more concrete as the group explored such questions as "How many people will need to become family planning acceptors by a certain date if we commit to a prevalence rate of 25% for a population of nine million?" and "How do the numbers change if we commit to a prevalence rate of 15%?"

Addressing third party complications. For organizations that depend on one or more donor agencies for a substantial portion of their operating budget, the process of collecting and analyzing information for a strategic plan may require capturing the performance indicators and specific results the organization has committed to produce for each donor over specific time periods. This task, which is either routine, or in all likelihood, completed before the actual strategic planning exercise, will raise issues about the capability of the information system to record and periodically tally the data sets that are reported to each donor. It is an opportunity to assess if any changes are needed to improve the efficiency of the system and facilitate the preparation of donor reports. The challenge is to use the reality of these commitments to donors in a way that does not disrupt the group's creation of a vision or goals for the future.

One approach is to have the group analyze if donor-financed projects are in keeping with the organization's mission. Once this

is established, the group can examine how these commitments will affect their capacity to initiate new directions. Ultimately, this could lead to confronting the organization's dependence on donor financial support and the impact this has on the organization's ability to choose its own future directions.

Ideas for Action: To Collect, Comprehend, and Use Valid Information

Reflect on and digest the information presented. This helps participants move from a superficial, descriptive level to a deeper level of understanding about the implications of the information presented to them.

Helping a Group Reflect on and Synthesize Information: Process and Questions

Before the presentation of information: In plenary session, introduce the group to the questions (listed below) they will be asked to consider after the presentation of information is completed.

After the information is presented: In small groups (preferably made up of people who do not usually work together, and who know little about each other's work), participants explore their individual and collective responses to the questions presented earlier (which are posted on the wall).

Alternatively: In plenary, the session can be conducted with the facilitator asking some of the following questions.

Objective level

*What part of the presentation caught your attention?
What phrases or parts of the document did you highlight, or jumped out at you?*

Reflective level	<p><i>What feelings were generated, brought up, or raised for you in listening/reading?</i></p> <p><i>What surprised you? What made you angry?</i></p> <p><i>(Or, when talking about feelings is still a bit risky: What things did this presentation/document remind you of?</i></p> <p><i>Did you find your mind wandering off? When? Where to?)</i></p>
Interpretive level	<p><i>What new insights did you get from this presentation/document?</i></p> <p><i>What are the implications of what you just heard?</i></p> <p><i>What was confirmed? What was not confirmed?</i></p> <p><i>What is the relevance of this presentation document for our reflection today?</i></p> <p><i>What are the most important findings?</i></p>
Decisional level	<p><i>Which conclusions need immediate action? Which can wait?</i></p> <p><i>How can we integrate the most important conclusions/findings into our deliberations today?</i></p> <p><i>How can we act on the findings we have selected?</i></p> <p><i>What part do we agree on, where do we need to explore, talk, research more?</i></p>

[Based on *The Art of Focused Conversation*, developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs and described in Spencer (1989) and Stanfield (1997)]

Analyze strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats: SWOT-with-a-Twist. A SWOT analysis is a mainstay of most strategic planning exercises. Yet, many times the SWOT exercise degenerates into the mindless creation of a list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that are disconnected from the vision, the mission, and from each other. In a criticism of this process, Kearns (1992) observed that human/social service agencies in using a traditional SWOT analysis process were very good at exaggerating strengths or downplaying weaknesses.

SWOT pitfalls. A group can fool itself by classifying a threat as an opportunity in disguise, without realizing that current weaknesses exacerbate the threat. Conversely, a group may

focus too much attention on its weaknesses, expecting that all these need to be remedied, without reference to their competencies, core mission, or fundamental mandate. There is often a "deficit" mentality with people focusing on all the things that are lacking, rather than on the strengths, capacities, and resilience of people one finds so often in social service agencies. Finally, there is the action-oriented mind-set of many nonprofit organizations to develop strategies and action plans before the group has sufficiently clarified the strategic policy choices it is facing. SWOT-with-a-Twist forces the group to explore these first.

Kearns' response to these SWOT pitfalls is to conduct a SWOT as an iterative process as outlined below.

SWOT-with-a-Twist Exercise
<p>Round 1: Guide the group to identify external opportunities and threats. Then, for each opportunity or threat identified, ask the group the following questions:</p> <p>"Which of our strengths will help us capitalize on this opportunity or avert the threat?"</p> <p>"What weakness(es) will prevent us from capitalizing on this opportunity or averting this threat?"</p> <p>The following provides an example.</p>

INTERNAL FACTORS	EXTERNAL FACTORS	
	Opportunities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved economy • New emerging middle class 	Threats: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased competition from other service providers
Strengths: Reputation Clinic location	[This is about leveraging and competitive advantage] <i>How do we use our excellent reputation to draw this new (paying) middle class to our clinics?</i> <i>Are clinics offering what these potential new clients want or need?</i>	[This points to ways that resources may be mobilized to avert threats] <i>How do we distinguish ourselves from others?</i> <i>How can we use satisfied clients to draw people to our clinics?</i>
Weaknesses: (systems) Primitive accounting system High staff turnover	[This points to places to invest or divest] <i>How do we price our services for these potential new customers?</i> <i>How can we retain good staff to serve the new customers?</i>	[This points to ways to control damage] <i>How do we know whether we recover our costs and stay competitive price-wise?</i> <i>How do we gain and maintain trust in the quality of our services?</i>

Round 2: Lead the group to identify other strengths and weaknesses not yet mentioned and relate them to opportunities and threats. Alternately, a number of large matrices like the one above could be made and posted around the room. Individuals can wander around and in small groups discuss critical issues and add them to the matrix.

Round 3: Guide the group to examine the matrix they constructed and the critical issues identified in each category.

Round 4: Frame each issue as a question, so that it can be clarified further, and tested against the group's mission and core values.

For example: If a health services agency has an excellent reputation (strength), and the improved economic situation of the community has led to the emergence of a new middle class, the issue can be framed as: "How can we leverage our excellent reputation to draw this new (paying) middle class to our clinics?"

Round 5: Guide a focused conversation to explore these questions: "How does the issue relate to the agency's mission and core values? How will the issue affect other stakeholders? Which assumptions are buried in the issue? Does it relate to another issue, and if so, can they be combined, or does it need to be addressed immediately?"

Result: When all the issues have been explored in a similar way, the group is ready to make choices and select a number of strategic directions.

[Source: Kearns (1992)]

Conduct field visits. The purpose of the field visit is to gain a better understanding of what it is like to "be in the field," both from a client's perspective and from a field worker's perspective. Such an experience can be quite an eye opener for people who work out of large offices in the capital city. A minimum of a day and a half is needed for adding field visits to the strategic planning exercise, if it is indeed feasible for small groups to visit a program relatively close to the workshop site. Transport has to be

organized beforehand, and the receiving sites need to be informed ahead of time.

An introduction to the exercise is important, and some sort of guide needs to be prepared ahead of time (see the example on the next page), indicating the information to seek and the way in which the information is to be presented to the larger group. In Zimbabwe, we learned that half a day for visits, half a day for preparing skits, and then presenting them, was too short. The skits were very informative, and needed a little bit more "digestion" than we had time for. In addition, we would recommend that the field visit hosts (directors of clinics, supervisors, etc.) be part of the entire strategic planning exercise, and thus exposed to the skits and the lessons learned from those.

Sample Field Visit Guide

Purpose:

To remind ourselves of the challenges and opportunities, hopes and dreams, worries and frustrations, and fears and joys of those working in the field (and doing the real work), so that we can take all these into consideration when we develop the strategic plan for the national family planning program.

Points to cover, questions to ask and to explore:

Introduce yourselves: who are you and why are you visiting (see the purpose above)

Questions you might want to ask:

- Tell us about your work.
- What services do you offer?
- Tell us about your hopes and dreams for family planning.
- Tell us about your worries and frustrations regarding the family planning program.
- Tell us about your pains and your joys in doing this work.
- What works well in your program and should be preserved?
- What doesn't work well in your program and should be changed?
- What opportunities and/or challenges do you see in family planning for the coming five years?

Ask any other questions/issues raised by your explorations in the last few days or things you would like to confirm or refute in the field.

Sample Field Visit Guide

Things not to do:

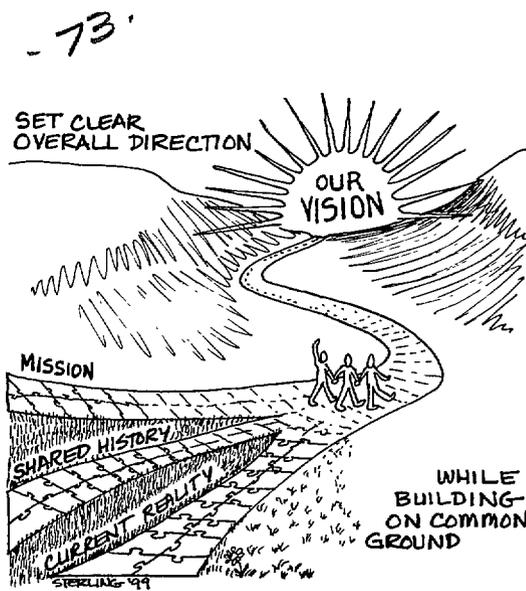
Don't make any promises you cannot keep.
Do not openly judge, criticize, assess, or evaluate the people/program you are visiting. This is NOT a supervision visit nor an evaluation. You are interested in a field perspective!
Do not treat the people you meet any differently from how you would want to be treated yourself, if you were to receive such a delegation.

Thank you and goodbye:

(Optional) Give your host(ess) a small gift as a token of your appreciation for the time they have freed up to spend with you, and their willingness to answer your questions.

Prepare for the skit:

You have one hour to prepare a 5-minute (maximum) skit or role-play. Choose a situation that depicts something you observed, saw, heard, or were struck by. Something you would like to highlight to the other groups: a typical or striking situation, a problematic or potentially problematic situation, attitude, conversation, something that is symptomatic of a larger/deeper problem, something that illustrates an opportunity or a challenge, etc. You can decide whether everyone participates or whether a smaller group does the acting. Manage yourself!



Lesson Five:

Set a Clear Overall Direction

Anchor the overall strategic directions to a common picture of where the organization wants to be at some future point in time as well as to current realities.

The purpose of a strategic planning exercise is to come up with a set of broad strategic directions that will help the organization address current challenges and position itself to remain strong and competitive in the future. The point of departure for reaching consensus on these directions requires that the group recognizes its common ground. Common ground can only be found if the participants in the process are willing to learn about the organization from each other and engage in a series of conversations to explore where the organization has come from, where it is now, what it is all about, and where it is heading.

Implications

The role of the facilitator is to help the participants in the strategic planning exercise move through this process in a way that builds increasing commitment and engagement to the work that needs to be done. A basic requirement is the search for common ground,

ideas, principles, values, beliefs, hopes, and actions that everyone can agree on.

Finding common ground may be easy when the planning group is relatively homogenous and at hierarchical levels that are in close proximity. Yet for strategic directions to galvanize the entire organization, and key stakeholders outside of it, a more diverse group will better represent and articulate the organization's current reality. However, the inclusion of a wide variety of stakeholders in the strategic planning exercise—people with very different perspectives who might never before have worked together—makes finding common ground more difficult. In fact, this task may appear to be so daunting that the alternative of keeping the planning process restricted to the senior inner circle becomes very attractive. An understanding of our inter-connectedness will extend our conception of who the stakeholders are, and where the common ground is. Thus, the common ground has to be common to a much larger network of relationships than ever before in the organization's history.

Ways to Find Common Ground

Common ground can be found in many ways. The most important one is to give each other time to tell one's story, to be heard, so that the particular perspectives and the wisdom of each group of stakeholders can emerge and be woven into the common picture that is being created.

Discovering common values and aspirations. As a very first step in a strategic planning exercise, introductions can be structured in such a way that people not only share their names, positions, and organizational affiliations, but also one accomplishment or piece of work that was deeply satisfying or inspiring to them in the last year. This has a leveling effect and tends to increase people's respect for one another, independent of hierarchical or professional status.

Exploring a group's history, or the history of a movement. A collective review of the organization's or program's past allows everyone to own part of the history, and see how they have all, in

various ways, contributed to the current state of affairs. Moreover, this process can also fill in information gaps, and bring everyone up to a common level of knowledge.

Reviewing the past together. . .

In 1996, during the development of its second strategic plan, the Zimbabwe National Family Planning Council invited various stakeholders to participate in the process. One of the first exercises was to fill in a time line, presented as a 6 by 30 foot banner on the wall. Each participant was asked to think of significant events in the development of the national family planning program and discuss them in small groups. Each group then posted their ideas and explained events. There were many revelations, good memories, and surprises about things people did not know or had forgotten.

Reviewing the mission statement. A mission statement describes, in very broad terms, what the work is, why it is done, and for whom³. Sometimes the values are explicit, sometimes they are implied. Usually the mission statement is reviewed in light of the results of the environmental analysis or a SWOT analysis. In the public sector, mission statements are sometimes referred to as (policy) mandates and cannot be changed easily, as they are issued by formal decree. Reviews of the mission statement are, therefore, more common in private organizations. Such a review allows the group to determine whether the mission statement is still appropriate given the changing environment. Mission statement reviews are particularly helpful when the external environment has significantly changed, or when an organization is unfocused in its work, has attracted many new staff, has difficulty setting

³ A mission is not to be confused with a vision. The mission indicates the broad path along which the organization travels (for instance, "to improve the health and well-being of families"). The vision indicates a specific destination point (all parents exhibit health-promoting behaviors; all children eat three balanced meals a day; each area has access to a clinic within a certain radius, etc.).

priorities, or gets distracted by projects that fulfill the needs of outside funding agencies or that offer immediate, albeit temporary, financial relief.

Creating a vision. Seeing a group piece together a common vision is a powerful experience. Sometimes there are surprises, for example when a statement surfaces about how the people in the organization are working together. Traditionally, when organizations established goals, these were usually external and had to do with targets about coverage, or disease prevention, or quality of services. But with the process of visioning, a new element has been added: the element of the individual's dream for a better future. The power of the visioning process is that it taps into fundamental individual aspirations. When the collective visioning exercise is preceded by an individual visioning exercise, this connection becomes even more marked. Some participants are moved to the point of tears, because the process gets them in touch with some very deeply held values, beliefs, and wishes about life, which had been repressed by daily routines.

To get to the vision of an entire group, the facilitator guides the participants in finding common ground by building on their individual aspirations. Once the collective vision is defined, the group examines what obstacles exist that could prevent them from making their newly defined organizational vision a reality.

Creating a vision story. . .

A group of health professionals from various Primary Health Care (PHC) sub-disciplines, many of whom had never planned anything together, joined forces for two days to come up with a common vision for PHC in their province. The group was asked to dream a bit and imagine that a reporter, many years from now, would visit their province to report on the extraordinary accomplishments in PHC. What would the story be like? Individuals began to write down what they wanted to see happen, then compared notes in small groups. At last a powerful story emerged. This story was read aloud in many places after that, and each time it left the group silent, with a smile on everyone's face, nodding, "Yes, that's what I want too!"

There are many different opinions about the process of visioning. For some, it is too time-consuming, too vague, too irrational, too intuitive, or too unrealistic. Some people prefer to call the process goal-setting, and would likely want to do this after the environmental assessment has been completed, so that the goal-setting is clearly informed by an understanding of the environment. The intuitive mind would want to start with the visioning process, unfettered by the constraints of current reality, to get at peoples' deepest hopes, dreams, and desires. Only then will he or she want to look at current reality and explore the obstacles to the vision.

Reflecting collectively on research or assessment findings. In small mixed groups, people use a series of questions to explore their own and each other's reactions to a presentation of an assessment, or of research findings they have just heard, before reaching agreement on a set of conclusions or recommendations (see Lesson Four).

Setting strategic directions. Strategic directions are broad directions or proposals that, if implemented well, will overcome the identified obstacles and lead the organization toward its vision. Examples of such directions are: to improve the quality of

our services; to streamline our internal management processes; to increase our visibility; to reduce our dependence; and to diversify our services. The directions are stated in abstract terms and do not articulate particular activities. However, they do indicate where the organization needs to put its efforts and its resources in order to realize its vision. Strategic directions can pertain to both internal and external issues.

What about our real work?

When the strategic directions had been articulated, one staff member noted that nearly all of them had to do with the group's own internal organization and processes, and that there wasn't much about the real work in the outside world. The director, who had not been too happy with the entire exercise in the first place, seemed relieved and pointed out that the strategic planning process was thus not very useful. As it turned out, the organization was in considerable internal turmoil, and there were many questions about the competence of its leadership. The internal focus of the strategic directions reflected the preoccupations of the staff and was realistic and appropriate in view of the work that needed to be done by this group so that it could more effectively attend to its real work in the outside world. If the group had followed its own advice and revisited the produced plan after some time, more externally focused strategic directions would probably have emerged. Unfortunately, the plan was completely abandoned, which aggravated the internal crisis.

Approaches to Developing a Clear Overall Direction

A facilitator can structure the process so that the group creates its future directions inductively or deductively. An inductive process means that the group starts with individual experiences, hopes, and wishes, and works from there toward a consensus on abstract themes or principles (whether this is a vision, a mission or a strategic direction). The deductive process starts with an exploration of the larger themes (that may have arisen out of an organizational or environmental assessment), which are then

formulated as a mission, a vision, or set of strategic directions. They are then operationalized into programs, activities, and, finally, tasks. Both approaches guide the group toward the articulation of where the organizations wants to go, and how, in broad terms, it expects to get there. Both can be applied to the discovery of common ground.

- An *inductive approach* to setting strategic directions might start with an exercise letting individuals express their dreams and hopes with concrete images of a future desired state. From these individual concrete images, the group develops a more abstract vision that is inspiring and compelling to everyone—because each person can recognize his or her own vision in it. This exercise is then followed by a “return to earth,” with the question, “So how come we haven’t already achieved this vision?” This question starts the next step in the process, called a contradictions analysis (see page 48), to help the group members determine what is preventing them from achieving their vision. Once a group understands this, it can be more realistic in setting objectives that help the group move toward the realization of its vision. People propose a number of broad actions to overcome the identified obstacles. These are then grouped according to common intent, which become the objectives. Similar objectives are then grouped into a strategic direction (see examples on pages 90 and 91). Most organizations end up with two to four such strategic directions. At each stage in the reflective process, concepts are developed out of people’s individual ideas, thus grounding the outcomes in people’s own experiences.
- A *deductive approach* to setting strategic directions starts with having the group analyze reports on the current situation, including assessments of trends projected into the future. Such reports may include an environmental or organizational assessment, audits, recent research findings, and economic or financial projections reports. The group uses abstractions (trends, major issues and challenges, and current performance) to articulate a number of key issues.

These are then formulated as strategic directions. In this process, the goals and visions are developed from a thorough examination of reality, thus solidly anchoring all the outcomes on firm ground. Working from the general to the specific, the group then suggests detailed activities to implement each of the broad strategic directions.

Selecting the right process. Personality types, preferences for taking in and processing information, and learning styles are just some of the factors that influence the selection of the approach. The inductive approach can be difficult for people who are used to deductive reasoning processes common to most academic traditions. Combining inductive reasoning and dreaming can be unsettling or appear silly to those who prefer to analyze problems first. Conversely, for people who love the freedom of the visioning process and the close relationship with concrete individual experiences, the deductive and highly analytical reasoning process can be too impersonal, too abstract, or depressing when confronted with the realities of resource constraints, poverty, backwardness, and a score of other problems that have no easy solutions. In the end, the two processes come together and run along parallel tracks, possibly toward a similar plan. But the mood created by each of these processes is likely to be very different.

As facilitators, we exhibit the same preferences or dislikes as our participants for one or the other of these processes. Facilitating one process will feel good, easy, and right. The other will not only feel wrong, but will probably not be executed well either. In an ideal world, facilitators work in pairs, complementing each other's skills and preferences. If they recognize their differences, they will be able to divide the work to the benefit of all. If they don't, or aren't willing to work through their differences, they probably should not work together, because they may jeopardize the creation of a safe environment for the participants.

Ideas for Action: To Set a Clear Overall Direction

Appeal to people's passion. The purpose of setting directions is to mobilize human and financial resources to achieve a goal. The best way to do that is to appeal to more than just the intellect. It is, and always has been, a passion for certain outcomes that mobilizes people, and the resources they control, so that they can put their energy into activities that will lead to the desired outcomes. The process of setting directions is like holding out a magnet and attracting all kinds of resources.

Find common ground. There are now many methodologies being developed and fine-tuned to work with groups as large as 2000 people. In all of these approaches, finding common ground as a point of departure is critical for taking future concerted action.⁴

Clarify values. Value clarification exercises have always been used by social workers and counselors to help them explore their own values and feelings in connection with a particular issue or client population. In the public health field, value clarification exercises are used extensively in HIV/AIDS programs around the world. Their purpose is to make implicit values visible. As such it can also be used in organizations.

The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), a well-known NGO in Bangladesh with over 20,000 permanent staff, which implements a variety of profit-making enterprises as part of its holdings, is currently engaged in an organization-wide effort to articulate and formulate its values in order to preserve that what has allowed it to grow, be successful, and yet stick to its mission of alleviating poverty and empowering the poor.⁵ Through a process of brainstorming, small-group discussion, and sharing ideas in plenary, employees explore, clarify, and articulate the values that

⁴ Publications marked with an * in the bibliography describe various (very) large group processes that are currently being used worldwide.

⁵ Dr. Salehuddin Ahmad, personal communication.

act as glue, holding the organization together and keeping it true to its mission. Sometimes this exercise is implied in the review of the mission statement, or in writing a mission statement if none existed.

Create a historical time line. The purpose of this exercise is to create a common picture of an organization's past, recreate its evolution, and illuminate its changes over time. If a group is demoralized or recently has been negatively evaluated, the time line may focus on the group's accomplishments to boost morale. It can also be used to get people "on the same page" or help newcomers understand what happened before they joined. This is a time for storytelling, reliving the good memories, and taking pride in one's seniority, especially for those who are low in the organizational hierarchy, but have been around for a long time. Watch the sparkle in their eyes when they have the floor and tell the good stories. Many times the larger group catches some of the initial enthusiasm and passion that characterized the early years. It's a powerful source of energy that is free for the taking. One approach to doing a time line exercise is described here.

Time Line Exercise

Use a long roll of “butcher” paper, or a series of flip charts posted one next to the other to represent the physical time line.

Establish the beginning and ending date of the time line. For the past, this could be the founding date, or in the public sector, the start of the program that is being discussed. The ending date could be either the present, or the date that the vision will be achieved (5 to 10 years into the future). Establish the number and size of intervals on the time line based on significant dates and the “age” of the organization or program. Sometimes two-year intervals are appropriate, at other times five-year intervals.

If the group is small, the facilitator may ask everyone to stand in front of the time line at the date that they joined the organization or became involved in the program. Each person is allowed a few minutes to talk about what it was like (or what key event happened) when they joined.

If the group is too large to do this (larger than 20 people), the facilitator asks everyone to reflect on significant events from the organization’s past, and then to break into small groups to share their memories. The small groups select a number of critical events from the ones that were shared, and writes each one on a separate Post-It Note™, an index card, or half a sheet of paper. In plenary, each small group sends a representative to the front to put up one card and explain the event. This continues in “round robin” fashion (one event per group, going around and around until there are no more cards to put up.) This gives everyone a chance to stand in front of the whole group and talk about “the good old times.”

End the time line exercise with a reflection, highlighting accomplishments, “how far we have gone,” listening to surprises, and firmly establishing this as the foundation on which to build.

Articulate individual aspirations. For an organizational vision to have personal appeal, it needs to be connected to a personal vision. Senge (1990) observes that “genuine caring about a shared vision is rooted in personal vision.” When there is no articulated personal vision, the facilitator can help bring it to the surface by asking the people in the room whether anyone has a clear picture of him or herself (this can include a drawing, as well as a statement) at some distant point in the future, and how that influences his or her life now. “How does it relate, if at all, with your life at work?” “Has anyone tried to develop such a vision but found it very difficult?” “What were some of the reasons that this was difficult?” Senge, et al. (1994:202) present a list of statements explaining why this exercise may be difficult:

“I can’t have what I want”

(contradicts what we learn as children; you cannot always have what you want)

“I want what somebody else wants”

(or what you think someone else wants)

“It doesn’t matter what I want”

(what I want is not important)

“I already know what I want”

(it may have changed over time, it is not a done deal)

“I am afraid of what I want”

(fear of losing control over one’s life, fear of consequences)

“I don’t know what I want”

(don’t believe in yourself, sense of powerlessness and despair)

“I know what I want but I cannot have it at work”

(fear of incompatibility with work)

Usually people like to share their visions (but no one should be forced to). A closing conversation serves as a bridge to the organizational visioning exercise. Some questions to facilitate this conversation include: “What are some of the images that you have

drawn?" "How easy or difficult was this?" "What feelings came up as you were doing this?" "Did you hear any of the statements (mentioned above)?" "What insights did you get about the role of a personal vision?" "How might this affect the organizational visioning exercise?"

Create a collective vision. Visioning is a powerful tool to discover common ground and where the collective passion is leading the group, especially when a group is diverse. A half-day sample session design is described below.

Creating a Vision
Focus Question: What do you want your organization to be in Year X?
<p>In plenary: The facilitator sets the stage by asking people to imagine that their program or organization has won a prestigious award in the year X and that they are taking a group of reporters and photographers around headquarters and to the field to proudly show them what has been accomplished since their visioning exercise so many years ago.</p> <p>The facilitator asks the group: "As you look around (in this future setting), what do you see, hear, smell, feel? Try to be as concrete as you can (things one could see in a picture) rather than using abstract terms such as 'high quality services.' Instead describe what you see that denotes quality services, for instance animated discussions around health topics during the weekly information sessions, clean grounds, private examination rooms, nurses having time to explain procedures to patients, running water in all clinics, etc. Individually, describe as many scenes as you can before sharing these ideas in your small groups." (This is for the introverts, who will need some time to think on their own.)</p>

Participant Tasks	Facilitating the Process
<p>In small groups: Participants compare their lists of images, then reach consensus on the five or six most compelling, inspiring, exciting ideas. They should try not to combine images into higher level abstractions, but stick to the separate, concrete images presented by the individuals. Each person must defend their ideas, the more passion the better!</p> <p>Each small group writes the essence of the selected five or six selected images on separate sheets of paper. Only one image (one idea) in a few words should be on each piece of paper, using key words in large letters that can be seen from the back of the room when posted to the front wall.</p> <p>Each table puts the 5 or 6 pieces of paper in front of them.</p>	<p><i>As the groups do this, the facilitator circulates to make sure only one idea gets put on one piece of paper, that the ideas/images remain concrete, and posts one paper as an example in the front of the room to demonstrate the appropriate size of the letters, so it can be read at the back of the room.</i></p>

Participant Tasks	Facilitating the Process
<p>In plenary: Round 1: The facilitator asks each group to select the one most exciting (or inspiring) image in front of them, collects it from each group, and reads each one aloud as it is posted on the front wall. Participants may want to ask questions for clarification.</p>	<p><i>The facilitator's challenge is to distinguish between questions that are sincere requests for clarification, and those that are actually challenges to the idea presented. Ask the questioner to help rephrase the idea so that it becomes clearer. No ideas are discarded because someone doesn't like it. If ideas are unacceptable because of some real constraints or adverse political implications of having the idea publicly up on the wall, have the director make a clear statement explaining why the idea at this point cannot be included.</i></p>
<p>Round 2: The facilitator asks the groups to select the most <i>achievable</i> image. Using the same process as in Round 1, add one image from each small group to the wall. Then ask for another idea that is different from the ideas already up on the wall.</p>	<p><i>This gives the facilitator a quick view of the spread of the ideas in the group and the degree of convergence or divergence.</i></p>

Participant Tasks	Facilitating the Process
<p>Round 3: Select images that go together because they concern the same thing. Categories will gradually emerge. As they do, ask the group to give them titles (much like chapter headings in a book). Most of the time five to eight categories of images that are achievable and inspiring emerge from this exercise.</p>	<p><i>The facilitator's task is to resist the temptation to group too many things together at this point, and question when images get grouped together because they have a word in common. Probe to see whether the idea behind them is similar. If not, keep them apart.</i></p> <p><i>When there is disagreement on where an image goes, it is best to remember that it is not that important where an image finally lands, but what is important is the conversation around the image, as people explore what it is all about. Sometimes an image gets duplicated on another piece of paper, or cut in two if there is more than one idea contained in the image.</i></p>
<p>Round 4: For the pieces of paper remaining with each small group, invite one person from each group to come to the front and place these images in the appropriate category, or place it to the side if the image does not seem to fit into one of the established categories.</p>	<p><i>When everyone has returned to their seats, review each image added to each category. Then review the images that are not in any category ("orphans"), and explore with the group whether they are really not connected to any of the categories; usually they are. Seldom are there orphans remaining.</i></p>

Participant Tasks	Facilitating the Process
<p>Round 5: Review the final titles of each of the categories of images. Guide the group (now we are at a much more abstract level) to visualize the categories as a large chart representing the vision of the organization. Ask the group whether this is indeed what they passionately want, and whether this is inspiring. Ask if something is missing. Make sure there is consensus that the vision is accurately captured.</p>	<p><i>For some organizations, those that are very fragmented and divided, this is usually a big challenge. If the group gets stuck, call a break. If fatigue or irritability prevails, stop the exercise and remove the pieces of paper (making sure to mark where they belong), and, after hours, try to complete the exercise with a small group. The next day or after lunch, the resulting vision can be proposed and discussed with the entire group for approval. That usually takes care of the paralysis.</i></p>

[Developed by the Institute for Cultural Affairs, Spencer (1989)]

Develop strategic directions.⁶ Start with a clear, focused question stating the task. For example, “What are the broad actions that will help us reach our vision?” or “What do you propose as actions to overcome the contradictions we just identified?” Individuals write down as many proposals as they can think of, then compare their lists with the others in their small group. Each group selects the five or six best ideas. It is important to impose limits, as forced choice compels the groups to only select their best ideas. Encourage participants to defend their ideas if they really believe in them, and to try to convince others to select it. This puts some passion in the process, an important ingredient to actually getting the proposals implemented later.

The facilitator asks for each group to forward its boldest or most exciting proposal. These are then posted on the wall in front of the group, so they have to be written in large letters, concisely, and each on a separate piece of paper. In a second round, the facilitator may ask for a proposal that is more conservative. These are also

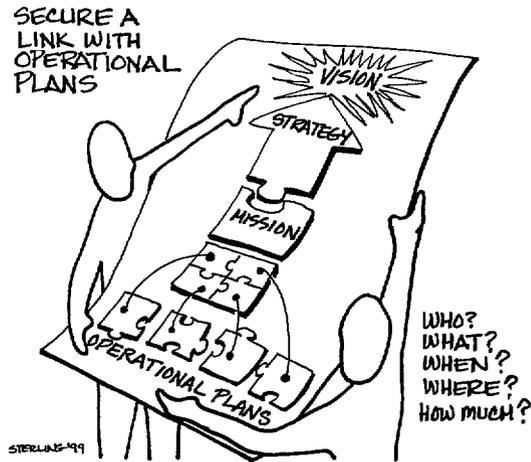
⁶ Summarized from Spencer (1989:101–103)

added to the wall. As proposals with similar intent get added, the facilitator asks the group whether they can be put together, thus creating a cluster of proposals. By asking the group to articulate the intent of the various proposals in a cluster, an objective is created, which the facilitator writes down and posts above the cluster. One by one, new proposals are added, until each group has handed in all the proposals it has selected. The various clusters are then reviewed and those that seem to go together grouped together along with their associated proposals. At this point, there might be several groups of intention-clusters.

The last step in the process is to name each cluster of intentions/objectives, by asking the group to contemplate the following question: "If we accomplish this objective and then that one, we are going in a particular direction. . . what is the name of this direction?" The final result might look something like this:

Proposals Grouped by Intention/Objective			
Intention: <i>To educate the public</i>	Intention: <i>To develop service standards and protocols</i>	Intention: <i>To streamline work processes</i>	Intention: <i>To improve financial management procedures</i>
Proposals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To conduct public education campaigns • To develop informational materials • To organize promotional visits to workplaces • To develop a new logo 	Proposals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To review current practices and standards • To bring standards up to date • To review training curricula • To disseminate new protocols 	Proposals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To review current procedures • To computerize selected operational processes • To improve delegation 	Proposals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop purchasing policy • To upgrade computer system • To train staff in budget monitoring • To improve review procedures

Proposals Grouped by Intention/Objective			
Intention: <i>To increase service delivery points</i>	Intention: <i>To improve client satisfaction</i>	Intention: <i>To develop staff skills</i>	Intention: <i>To explore new funding sources</i>
Proposals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To review locations of current SDPs • To upgrade health posts • To explore new service delivery approaches 	Proposals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop client satisfaction surveys • To conduct surveys • To share survey results with staff 	Proposals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To institute a performance monitoring system • To develop training strategies for improving staff efficiency 	Proposals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop fundraising capability • To identify new sources of funding • To conduct staff training in grant writing
Intention: <i>To create new partnerships</i>			Intention: <i>To reduce wastage</i>
Proposals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To create links with schools • To create multi-sectoral coordination committees in other ministries 			Proposals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify sources of wastage • To develop resource usage monitoring systems
Resulting Strategic Directions (for each cluster of intentions/objectives)			
To increase use of services	To improve quality	To increase efficiency	To decrease donor dependence



Lesson Six: Secure a Link with Operational Plans

Secure a strong connection between the organization's broad strategic directions and its work planning and budgeting processes.

The design of a strategic planning exercise should include securing a link with the operational plans and the development of budgets to implement the broad strategic directions adopted during the process.

Both strategic and operational planning are made up of a series of *whats* and *hows*. By asking "What are we going to do?" we create a vision, identify goals on a strategic level, establish objectives, and agree on program outputs at an operational level. By asking "How are you going to do this?" we clarify our mission, select strategies at a strategic level, schedule activities, and identify tasks at an operational level.

Implications

If there are no wheels under the strategic plan it won't go anywhere. The wheels of the strategic plan are the operational plans to implement the strategic directions, to overcome whatever obstacles have been identified and move closer to the vision. The

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step from broad strategic actions to concrete activities is not an easy one. Although it may appear as a simple step of just translating abstract ideas into specific tasks, this is not quite the rational process it appears to be. In fact, this is often the most difficult step in the entire strategic planning process, because this is where “the rubber hits the road.” It is not uncommon to run into resistance at this point. There are at least three reasons for this.

First, getting from the abstract to the concrete is always difficult because it confronts us with such unpleasant realities as the need for money, time, and people to do the work. Since most organizations feel chronically short of these three resources, having to fit in even more work is daunting and discouraging.

Second, turning abstract ideas into concrete action forces people to distinguish between something that seems like a good idea and something for which you are personally willing to take responsibility and be held accountable. This may be risky if the consequences of not being able to complete the task or organizational status or future are unclear.

Third, strategic planning is a political process, because it influences decisions about how resources are allocated. Whether the strategic planning process focuses on an organization or a national program, there are various parties with different agendas. At this stage in the process, resource allocation becomes real, and goes hand in hand with clarity about responsibilities.

Sometimes it is hard for outside facilitators to understand what is going on, or why a group gets stuck. We need to be aware of the possible reasons so that we can interpret delaying or resisting tactics for what they are, and use all our tact and intuition to push for the completion of this vital step. But sometimes that is not possible.

Acknowledging the political process. . .

In a strategic planning process for a national program, with participants from multiple organizations and agencies, the hot issue of who was going to do what came out into the open at this stage. With competition for meager resources and leadership, this was a politically delicate step. When the group had to decide who would do what by when, we witnessed the entire strategic planning process coming to a screeching halt. The group became paralyzed, as it was not even clear who had the authority to make the final decisions. As facilitators, we pushed for completing the process, until it became clear that this was not going to happen. We left them with a partially completed strategic planning process at the end of the retreat. Eventually things were ironed out, but that happened long after the event was over.

Approaches to Linking Strategic Vision with Operational Planning

Most organizations are familiar with operational planning in one form or another. They undertake annual planning exercises, and some have an elaborate planning process set up, consisting of multi-year rolling plans and one-year work plans. The challenge of the strategic planning process is to secure a strong connection to the already existing annual work planning process, or if none exists, to follow the exercise through all the way down to individual tasks and budgets. There are a number of ways to do this:

Include the operational planning process in the strategic planning exercise. In this approach, the planning process starts with an examination of the current environment, an envisioning of the future (or vice versa), followed by the establishment of broad strategic directions. The next steps are to brainstorm and then prioritize activities to implement the broad directions, and appoint task forces or workgroups to develop detailed action plans and budgets. A key to this process is that responsibility for implementation remains with people in the room. The advantage

of this approach is that the process is followed all the way through, and at the end of the strategic planning exercise the group has a set of very concrete tasks to show for all the cost and effort. On the other hand, it extends the process by a couple of days. The group may need some time to digest the implications of its planning deliberations before rushing into commitments. Also, only tasks for which people are willing to take responsibility will be implemented, which may leave some tasks out because the appropriate people were not present.

Taking responsibility publicly. . .

At the end of a strategic planning exercise, the group developed detailed plans to implement three broad strategies. A first impulse was to delegate these activities to people not present in the room. The facilitator pointed out that the people to whom the work was delegated had not been part of the process and that the new activities would be for them just another job ordered from above. Moreover, these people already had a full load of work and the added work was unlikely to receive a very high priority. Finally, since they were not present at the time, there was no chance to make a public commitment, and thus be accountable to the larger group. At this, the group decided only to schedule activities for which people in the room were willing to take public responsibility. After some negotiation, several people walked up to the front of the room and signed their name to a particular set of activities. With applause they were rewarded for publicly taking responsibility.

Set up a committee to develop operational plans. Another approach is to consider the strategic planning process completed with the formulation and rough budgeting of the strategic directions. Special committees are then appointed to translate these broad directions into operational plans. A staff member or a consultant can be called in to help the group develop concrete actions for each of the broad strategic directions. This can be done by doing more in-depth assessments of the current situation and developing a list of alternatives that are then reviewed, costed out, and the implications assessed. The time lag may jeopardize swift

implementation of new strategic directions, and the momentum created during the strategic planning process risks getting lost. On the positive side, the absence of the time pressure to produce something quick may increase the quality of the operational plan, and facilitate more realistic budgeting.

Using consultants. . .

In one Central American organization, one of the stated strategic directions was a renewed focus on improving quality and productivity. We were hired to work closely with the appropriate functional staff and conduct an in-depth assessment from which to propose alternative ways to implement the selected strategies. We costed out the various alternatives after extensive consultations with key stakeholders and made recommendations to the client organization. The organization closely monitored implementation and we undertook frequent follow-up visits to support the responsible staff.

Delegate the preparation of operational plans. A third approach is to send the strategic directions or goals down the hierarchy and let divisions or departments develop their own implementation plans within the boundaries set by the outcomes of the strategic planning process. At some fixed point in time, all the department heads come together to present and defend their plans, usually to senior management, who then decide on resource allocations and see to it that the departmental plans are all in alignment with each other and with the larger organizational strategic plan. This approach gives the departments more freedom and autonomy to carefully plan their piece of the work. However, it may be more difficult to maintain the sense of collective responsibility so carefully cultivated during the strategic planning process. Short-term departmental rivalries can quickly obscure the long-term common vision.

Developing strategic and operational plans across levels. . .

The strategic plan for the health program of the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa was prepared and approved by the top management team of the province, using information from all levels. These plans justified the allocation of resources to reach the desired goals. This plan was then disseminated to the lower tiers of the health system. Staff at all levels were asked to draft operational plans in order to translate the general strategies outlined in the strategic plan into a comprehensive package of specific activities. They were asked to select activities that could be implemented within given resource constraints. The planning process moved from the bottom up, with higher levels including in their plans the support required by the lower levels.

Costing the Different Strategies

Costing different strategies developed during the planning exercise is addressed in depth during operational planning. The costing out of alternative strategies is important. When the organization does not have sufficient and accurate data available to establish the cost of the different strategies, top management has to agree to go forward on the basis of estimated costs and establish procedures to monitor expenditures during the implementation process, and thus improve its data. At times, staff may exhibit an entrepreneurial zeal to find the resources to implement new directions that have no obvious financing available.

Of course, cost issues are addressed prior to finalizing the broad strategic plan. However, costs are most likely to be aligned with available resources during operational planning. Depending on circumstances, the use of cost information is approached differently. (Please refer to Related MSH Publications at the end of this monograph for materials on costing and estimating costs of services.)

Cost information is readily available. When information is available about the cost of services and products provided or programs conducted, cost issues can be an integral component of the planning process.

Making choices. . .

A South Asian family planning NGO, as part of its strategic planning exercise, reviewed cost savings strategies. Analyzing the cost savings that had resulted from the opening of one regional office, the group decided to cut back expenses of the central office by opening two additional regional offices. It also looked at how grants were distributed for community-based family planning initiatives and changed its allocation formula. Finally, the organization began testing a strategy of charging fees for services in two sub-districts and realized cost savings by reducing the wastage of contraceptives, which, when formerly distributed for free, were not actually used.

Cost information is incomplete. When cost data are incomplete or not available, those working on the costing exercises may need to prepare cost estimates based on prior organizational experience. In those cases, top management has to be willing to take the risk of finalizing operational plans using those estimates. This experience should trigger a resolve to give high priority to the development of a system that will allow managers to monitor and compare current and projected costs and revenues, simplifying the task for a next exercise.

Cost assessments help identify new resources. Another approach is to use informed cost assessments; however, once it is recognized that resources are not available to implement a new direction, top management will need to agree to provide staff with some small concessions to find the money, equipment, or assistance needed to activate a new strategy.

An adjunct to this approach is the assumption that if some people in the organization have a real passion to undertake something, and the rest of the organization acknowledges that the action fits

within the organizational mission and broad strategic directions, their passion and commitment will push them to find the resources (money, people, or time) to undertake what needs to be done. Rather than being constrained by a current lack of resources, their passion fuels a focused and dogged search for the necessary resources. This can open hitherto unopened, or undiscovered, doors and move the organization faster and farther than it would have gone had it stuck to what is currently possible. If top leadership can tap into that spirit and sanction the entrepreneurial determination to move ahead, a selected activity can be put into the plan with the only resource being some leeway to allow finding needed resources.

Going after new resources. . .

MSH has worked with a network of women's organizations whose members realized, during a reflection about its future, the need to become more "Internet-literate," partially as a way to hook up with sister organizations in other countries and partially to access funding sources across the globe. Although at the time there were no resources to implement this idea, the interest that fueled it was sufficiently strong to lead to a successful grantwriting exercise that brought in the necessary resources to pursue this idea further.

Ideas for Action: To Secure a Link with Operational Plans

Plan for follow up. A good strategic planning process is not over after the plan is finalized. To maintain a close link with operational planning and budgeting requires periodic review sessions so that the strategic plan becomes integrated into the ongoing planning and monitoring process. Although as outside facilitators we do not have the authority to call such follow-up meetings, we should try to encourage the leadership, the sponsors, or the steering committee to consider periodic review meetings part of the strategic planning process. A review, conducted half a year later (with or without an outside facilitator), allows the organization to see what has happened, where there were flaws in the reasoning, and where enthusiasm still remains, where it has

gone away, and why. This follow up will help the group see what support is needed to keep or get something going, and gives people a chance to reflect on the strategic planning process, notice what is different now as a result, whether bridges with other stakeholders are still in place and being used (and with what results), and how they can do it better next time. This is how strategic planning becomes part of an ongoing strategic management and organizational learning process.

The following table shows a format for an operational plan that lends itself well to plenary review and periodic revisits.

Developing an Operational Plan at the End of a Strategic Planning Exercise	
Step 1:	Based on the identified strategic directions, the group brainstorms on actions that need to be initiated in the next six months (or whatever the period of task-planning that is considered).
Step 2:	Create a large chart on the wall (see example below) with a column for each action selected.
Step 3:	Agree on who has overall responsibility for which action by writing that person's initials after the action.
Step 4:	The responsible person, preferably with others, states the victory (what will be in place that will show that we have succeeded) for the action in X months, and writes this on a piece of paper, and puts it in the appropriate column in the "VICTORY" row. The word victory is used intentionally: It denotes something to celebrate rather than a chore to be accomplished. The wording of the victory should be SMART: specific, measurable, appropriate, realistic, and time bound. The last criterion is determined by the range of the planning period. Only after the victory has been established can the detailed tasks be determined.

<p>Step 5: For each month, the responsible person or group indicates on Post-It Notes™ what specific tasks need to be initiated. These notes are then put in the appropriate place on the chart. (It is important to use pieces of paper that can be moved easily.)</p>
<p>Step 6: The larger group convenes around the chart and looks at the overall plan. Duplications, sequencing, and gaps can now easily be discerned, and the Post-It Notes™ moved around as needed. This may be a period of negotiation between different unit or department heads (“I cannot do this until you do that, so could you move this up to February?” or, “We are having this big conference in March, so I wouldn't plan your workshop then.”)</p>
<p>Step 7: When all the tasks are on the chart, each of the people whose initials are on the chart presents his or her group's plan by reading aloud the VICTORY and the tasks to the larger group. People can ask for clarification, add pieces of information that are relevant to scheduling, add missing tasks, or combine tasks with those listed in other columns.</p> <p>Estimated costs and additional resources to implement each activity can be included on the chart or separately discussed with the responsible staff.</p>
<p>Step 8: At the end of the last month on the chart (April in this example), the planning group schedules a meeting to review the victories one by one, extract lessons learned, and create a new chart for the next six months.</p>

[Based on The Action Planning Methodology developed by the Institute for Cultural Affairs, see Spencer (1989)]

The final result of this exercise might look something like the table on the next page. In the larger strategic planning sequence, it follows the broad strategic directions, indicating how these are going to be implemented. The format can be used to review the previous period and then be reconstructed to plan for the next period.

Sample Operational Plan for the Period of November–April 1999					
Month	Tasks/Activities by Strategic Direction				
	Finalize IEC Strategy (AC)	Improve Accounting System (FD)	Systematize In-service Training	Bring Leaders on Board	Etc.
November	Convene meeting to develop first draft	Review and select software packages	Conduct curriculum review workshop	Select key opinion leaders	
December	Review and finalize planning document	Install new package and train staff. Start pilot test	Create new materials	Hold design meeting with key leaders	
January	Reproduce documents	Review results and obtain feedback from users	Finalize curriculum; orient new trainers	Develop campaigns	
February	Organize dissemination workshops	Make changes and implement organization-wide	Set up training for first batch of participants (20)	Develop materials	
March	Dissemination workshops in Regions A, B	Update old files	Invite participants; arrange site, logistics, meals	Set up workshops in regions	
April	Dissemination workshops in Regions C and D	Update old files	Conduct training	Conduct first regional workshop	
VICTORY	IEC strategy accepted by all key stakeholders	New accounting system is up and running	Tested strategy to train staff with new curriculum	Public statements by four key leaders in support of family planning	

Keep the vision, mission, values, and strategies alive. A strategic plan that is a living plan should always be present, if not in people's minds, then at least physically, in the form of well-worn documents or pieces of paper posted on bulletin boards, that are available everywhere in the organization. This takes some practice and discipline.

If we are maintaining contact with the organization after the strategic planning exercise is completed, and particularly if we stay in a coaching relationship with the leadership, we have a responsibility to remind people to keep the strategic plan alive and maintain the momentum gained by the collective reflection. Although it is primarily the leadership's responsibility, ideally everyone should be able to inquire whether what is being discussed is consistent with the organizational mission and values: "Is it in agreement with the mission?" "Will it lead to the vision?" "Does it fit any of the key strategic directions?" Or "Which of the key strategic directions does it fit?" The response to this inquiry can be: "Yes it does, and therefore we should proceed," or "No, it doesn't, and therefore we should either not proceed at this moment, or review our vision (or mission or values or strategies) in light of changes in the environment."

This process prevents the strategic plan from becoming irrelevant and encourages constant inquiry into what the organization is all about, and therefore where it should be going and what it should be doing. Asking such questions will eventually become second nature as staff at all levels start to memorize the fundamental principles that govern the life of the organization.

Keep operational plans alive. The following processes can be used to support and monitor the implementation of operational plans:

- Include the following topics on the agendas of periodic staff meetings of departments, units, or regional or district offices: review progress, next steps, support needed from other levels in the health system (or organization), and lessons learned.

- Develop, at any level, short-term action plans (1–3 months) for certain priority activities.
- Make sure that supporting activities from another level are included in that level’s operational plan.
- For national health plans, hold quarterly 1–2 day facilitated workshops at the regional level for the group of regional and district staff who developed the plan, so that they can jointly review progress and discuss modifications. Hold a quarterly one-and-a-half day facilitated workshop at the provincial level for the group of provincial and regional staff members who developed the plan, so that they can jointly review progress and discuss modifications.
- Districts, regions, directorates, units, or departments can affix their operational plans on the wall, so they can refer to them during meetings, and update them as needed.

In all this, it is important to emphasize what can realistically be accomplished by asking questions such as, “What is possible?” “How do we do it?” “How can we work together?” “What coordination is necessary?” If a group focuses on formal progress reporting formats or critical inspection (fault-finding), staff tend to disengage from the process, and it becomes another chore. Keep the emphasis on continuous progress and improvement over time, and on learning rather than on meeting specific deadlines.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of the strategic planning process is to make an organization stronger, more resilient to changes in the environment, and to rally the troops to make the dreams come true. The inherent problem of a strategic plan is that it is most needed at a time when an organization has the least resources (time, money, people) to create it. Strategic planning calls for sitting back and undertaking reflective inquiry instead of running around trying to put out fires with less water, fewer buckets, and fewer people than before. Ideally, strategic reflection should be done before the fires start and before the resources disappear, when things are still all right. Unfortunately, that is the time when organizations tend to be complacent, pleased with themselves, and see no need to reflect on what they are doing.

We hope that this monograph will be of assistance to those who help organizations (their own or others') hold conversations about their future and about their environment when things are going well. This conversation is a starting point for the organization to reflect, in an organized and systematic way, on its purpose, goals, history, practices, accomplishments, context, and challenges with the aim of making choices about resource allocation and aligning its constituents toward a desired future. This is how we have defined strategic planning.

In this monograph, we have looked at the *process* of strategic planning rather than the resulting plan. Consequently, we have paid particular attention to the facilitator of this process. MSH has played this role in many places. On the basis of six key lessons that have emerged out of our collective experience, we have presented a number of challenges that all of us who facilitate strategic planning exercises are constantly faced with. We have tried to present them in such a way that they initiate a dialogue,

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an organizational conversation, among those charged with leading the strategic reflection. The examples are drawn from our own experience to illustrate common challenges. The examples of exercises, questions, and interventions are intended to help a group deepen its reflection and improve the quality of the final result. But we also stress that the plan itself is not necessarily the most important outcome of the strategic planning process. The act of collectively reflecting on something that matters to all of us is a powerful experience, and valuable in and of itself.

We have tried not to prescribe a particular process or a set of steps, but rather have focused on exploring the challenges we have all experienced. In the discussion, we present different approaches which stem from different philosophies about planning and about organizations. As facilitators, these philosophies are important because they distinguish us from one another. What works for one person may not work for another. Our own psychological make-up, our biases, and our life's experiences lead us to be comfortable with one approach and not with another. Never could we prescribe one particular way without betraying this one insight. Thus, it is important to pay attention to the person of the facilitator and the facilitation process in tandem; they (often implicitly) guide the choice of a particular approach or a particular set of tools.

In the end, this monograph may have raised more questions than answers. We believe that this is positive, as questions are a good first step in designing the strategic planning process, and inviting others to reflect together. Questioning requires slowing down and searching for answers. Questioning requires the discipline of reflection, contemplation, and clarifying one's own thinking. Doing this during the good times will be invaluable to an organization when the bad times hit. We hope that this monograph not only will help internal and external facilitators to think through the complexities of facilitating a strategic planning process, but also those who lead a unit, a department, a division, an organization, or a program before they embark on this fascinating journey.

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List of Instruments

Learning Styles

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Situational Leadership

Leadership Effectiveness & Adaptability Description (LEAD). Copyright 1979, 1988, 1993. Center for Leadership Studies, Inc., 230 W. Third Avenue, Escondido, CA 92025.

MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator)

Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc. 3803 East Bayshore Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303. (Need a license to purchase.)

Related MSH Publications

The following publications published by Management Sciences for Health may be useful for facilitators and participants alike in planning for and participating in a strategic planning process.

The Manager

This quarterly continuing-education management series focuses on specific management topics, and includes “Working Solutions” from the field, tools and techniques, and a case scenario for staff development and training. (Available in English, Spanish, and French)

Cost and Revenue Analysis Tool: CORE

This spreadsheet-based tool is designed to help health managers improve the efficiency and financial viability of their services. (Available in English, Spanish, and French)

The Family Planning Manager’s Handbook: Basic Skills and Tools for Managing Family Planning Programs

This practical guide for managers of health and family planning programs includes chapters on planning, work planning, staffing, supervision, training, management information, contraceptives logistics, financial information, and sustainability. (Available in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, Bangla, and Portuguese)

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