

SOARING from SWOT: Four Lessons Every Strategic Plan Must Know

By Jen Hetzel Silbert (jen@innovationpartners.com) &
Tony Silbert (tsilbert@innovationpartners.com)

For publication in the August 2007 issue of the *AI Practitioner: International Journal of AI Best Practice*

ABSTRACT

From SWOT to SOAR, this article examines how Appreciative Inquiry's positive, participative approach to strategy development generated sustainable, results-driven outcomes where traditional approaches fell short, yielding four key learnings no strategic plan can do without.

Traditional Approaches: Top-down SWOT!

For many, traditional approaches to strategy development begin with an analysis of external and internal factors, followed by some visioning, then planning. Included in the analysis phase is often a “SWOT,” a thorough examination of internal Strengths and Weaknesses, as well as external Opportunities and Threats. SWOTs are praised for capturing both the positive (strengths and opportunities) and negative (weaknesses, threats); and organizations embrace this approach with the hope of gaining a “balanced” analysis of itself, inside and out.

By exploring the weaknesses and threats, however, organizations often cause more harm than good. More than an avoidable pothole or roadblock, gaping canyons and immovable mountains emerge, giving way to downward-spiraling feelings of hopelessness and fear. These conversations, stemming from repeated analysis of what's wrong or missing, highlight awareness around what *isn't* desired, which carries little momentum to inspire compelling visions of a *most* desired future.

A second typical characteristic of traditional strategy development is top-down, planning, where small groups of senior leadership are responsible for strategy creation. Upon completion, much time is spent developing a roll-out plan (a “plan for the plan”), such as steps to get buy-in from employees, communicate the strategy both internally and externally, and align operations accordingly. Having excluded key implementers from the planning process, there is a need to persuade staff to execute ideas they're not fully committed to, causing significant time delays that boost costs and threaten morale. In our experience, this was usually a 12 – 18 month process, during which people continued to question the direction and how best to operationalize a strategy they did not either fully understand or support.

For years we took on traditional approaches to strategy development... and the employee resistance, doubt, and time-consuming roll-outs that went with it. Then came Appreciative Inquiry.

Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Strategy Development

AI is grounded by two deceptively simple concepts:

- (1.) *What you seek, you find more of* – The more positive and inspiring the strategy development process, the more innovative ideas that will be created and possibilities that can be explored.
- (2.) *People commit to what they help to create* – The more participative the plan creation, the more committed people will be to implementation success.

Having embraced these concepts, we exchanged SWOT for SOAR, facilitating environmental scans that examined key Strengths and Opportunities (similar to SWOT), but with an intentional focus on Aspirations and Results – keeping our eye on what we wanted to move toward (outcomes most desired), not the potholes and canyons to be avoided.

Secondly, we insisted on using participative approaches to strategy development, replacing top-down with more *whole system* invitations to the planning table. This meant bringing implementers to the beginning of the planning process (rather than just in the end), as well as gathering input from customers, partner organizations, policy makers, and more.

Based on our experiences applying a SOAR framework to numerous clients and to our own company, we have learned four key lessons.

Lesson #1: Shift the focus to the positive

In the fall of 2006, a public charity promoting biological conservation and ecological sustainability in Central America came to us seeking a strength-based, participative approach to their ongoing strategic planning efforts. They had recently conducted a SWOT analysis, only to find their daunting list of threats—many beyond their span of control—left staff with feelings of hopelessness and disinterest, stalling subsequent planning and implementation.

Nonetheless, they were hopeful to build on these labors. By shifting their prior focus on weaknesses and threats to aspirations and results using SOAR, they were able to articulate their goals around influence, innovation, and impact in a manner that focused on what's right, while *soaring* beyond what's missing or wrong into new realms of possibility. This resulted in the creation of an engaging strategy within 3 weeks that significantly elevated staff creativity and excitement for implementation, allowing the strategic plan to serve as a “living document” to guide the direction of the organization.

Lesson #2: Involve those who *will impact* and who *will be impacted* by the strategy

To maximize participation in an ambitious timeframe (3 months), headquarters staff, partners, field staff, and board members were invited to this non-profit's planning summit. Persons unable to attend were encouraged to engage in appreciative interviews

that probed for strategy input, such as best practices, opportunities for improvement, and aspirations for 2010.

While inclusive by design, some board members were unable to engage based on scheduling conflicts. In presenting the plan to the directors for approval, there was some disagreement with regard to plan layout and content, which was eventually resolved, but taxing nonetheless. Having not participated in plan development, commitment from this small, yet critical sampling of stakeholders, was not immediate.

In another example, a distribution and logistics holding company successfully recruited broad stakeholder engagement in their strategic planning process. Business partners, suppliers, and customers collaboratively engaged in the SOAR analysis and planning, resulting in the creation of breakthrough strategies a mere internal perspective could not have envisioned alone.

Lesson #3: Prototype and empower

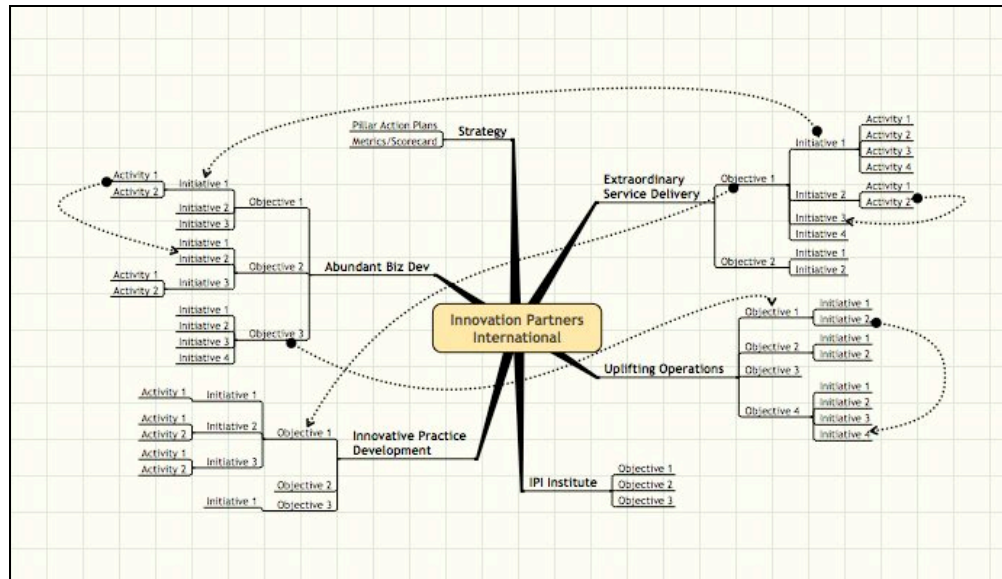
Later that year we worked with a private equity firm specifically requesting a more future-focused approach to strategy development, such as SOAR. During the summit, participants engaged in rapid prototyping of key opportunities/initiatives in which they were able to boldly test new—even wild—ideas together, gaining clarity on what might (or might not) work.

Within two weeks of the summit, many of these pilot programs had already taken shape in the office—even with the project manager away on vacation. By holding the image of results they most wanted to achieve—consistent with the company’s mission/vision and supported by empowering leadership—participants naturally moved in the direction of their compelling goals, owning what they themselves created, and not needing leadership guidance beyond their own inspired authority.

Lesson #4: Sustaining the momentum – nurturing a “living” strategy

As previously noted, a key to sustaining planning momentum was the broadening of stakeholder involvement to include other contractors, alumni, and partners, using an Integration Summit within 3 months of the initial summit. This also afforded the company a quick means of “seeing the big picture” and more effectively integrating similar initiatives between goal areas.

Sustainability necessitated simplicity in communicating the key components of the strategic plan to the diverse parties involved. This called for a “less is more” approach to the plan write-up and presentation, or what we refer to as “Strategy on a Page,” a concept our own company, Innovation Partners International, has adopted for its own strategic plan.



Utilizing mind-mapping tools as an alternative to detailed narrative and data capture, our planning team created a 1-page mind-map that is easy to read and visually appealing. This keeps subsequent planning efforts focused, inspiring action and follow-through with clear direction. More than an *event*, strategic planning was—and continues to be—a robust and engaging *process*. This is the essence of a “living” strategy that can be easily communicated and sustained for years to come.

In Summary

Appreciative Inquiry and SOAR approaches to strategy development lend tremendous potential for success where traditional approaches, such as SWOT, fall short. The lessons presented in this article are just a hint of the learnings yet to come, all of them underlining the essentiality of keeping strategy development *positive* and *participative*.

About the Authors



Jen Hetzel Silbert, MSOD, Principal of Innovation Partners International, specializes in applying Appreciative Inquiry and other strength-based approaches to strategic planning, process innovation, performance improvement, and team and community development. Jen’s consulting and training services have delivered positive change results to hundreds of public and private organizations – small and large – around the world. jen@innovationpartners.com



Tony Silbert, MSOD, Principal of Innovation Partners International, has nearly 20 years experience in organization development, change leadership consulting, training design and delivery. His areas of expertise include Appreciative Inquiry for large-scale change, strategic planning, innovation, team development, and organization design. tsilbert@innovationpartners.com