

## Light a Fire with the Strategic Planning Tetrahedron

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“Plans are nothing; planning is everything.”  
- Dwight D. Eisenhower

It's not enough to *have* a plan. Plans without a quality planning *process* are little more than glorified “to-do” lists with minimal ownership for action by anyone other than the author. So, when you see the need to mobilize people and resources for the longer term (i.e., three years or longer), you'll need a high-quality strategic planning *process*.

For example, The American Tree Farm System (ATFS) has undergone several changes in the last 10 years, and state Tree Farm Committees across the country are adapting by considering how they will meet the new standards of recognition or certification. Knowing the importance of a quality planning *process*, ATFS is providing grants and facilitators to support state Tree Farm committees.

When you decide it's time for your team, committee, or board to plan more comprehensively or for the longer term, you'll need to know and use the principles below.

### **Strategic planning requires four critical components**

As in the fire tetrahedron, we know that it takes four elements for combustion to occur (heat, fuel, oxygen and a chemical reaction). Similarly, the *strategic planning* tetrahedron has four critical elements to ignite long-term results. These are the following:

#### ***1. Collect an honest assessment of the current condition***

Much like a forest management plan needs an accurate on-the-ground appraisal of the current situation, a strategic plan requires an honest assessment of your team's current condition. Depending upon the nature of your organization, you may need to assess your financial status, technologies, competitive position, talent pipeline, marketing plans, customer opinions, employee satisfaction, communication, and teamwork, just to name a few.

A classic methodology taught in business schools all over the world is the “SWOT analysis” (i.e., strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats). Another method currently being used by the ATFS is a self-evaluation “dashboard.” This interview-driven evaluation gives the Tree Farm committees a realistic snapshot of their current status relative to best practices and updated requirements for recognition or certification.

#### ***2. Construct a shared description of the desired future state***

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If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. Therefore, not only do leaders need to envision "what good looks like" in the future, they also have to make sure that everyone on their team has the same shared vision of where they're going. The clearer this is to the rest of the organization, the more likely you are to get there as well.

For example, ATFS facilitators, like Dave Halley (halleydave@aol.com), are asking workshop participants to write a vision letter in advance of the workshop. In this exercise, participants are asked to imagine their committees three years hence and describe their successes *after* the planning workshop. Their visions are then used during the workshop as an effective way of bringing the committee's individual visions into one.

### ***3. Establish a prioritized set of observable and measureable action items that will move you from the current condition to the desired future state***

Once you and your team has established a clear picture of your current condition and articulated your desired future state, you will see the gap that needs to be crossed. At that point, it's time to determine action steps.

ATFS facilitators do this by helping to isolate the potential focus areas evidenced in each committee's desired future state (e.g., financial sustainability, communication, customer service, and leadership). But since all organizations have limited time and resources, the goal is to conduct a kind of Pareto analysis, which rank orders the focus areas that will have the greatest impact.

Once focus areas are chosen, you'll need to brainstorm and prioritize observable and measureable action steps under each. By adding *who will do what by when*, the result is a manageable, concrete, and impactful plan of action that can be implemented, monitored and celebrated at appropriate milestones.

### ***4. Earn involvement of those who are going to have to execute the plan***

The strategic planning *process* takes time, but that time can be wasted if not enough of the critical players are "in the room" to take part or sufficiently consulted or informed along the way. This is the kind of factor that causes well-intentioned plans to be derailed or dust collectors.

The goal here is to develop *ownership* (or "buy-in") for the resulting plan. But "buy-in" can't be bought. It has to be *earned* by getting the major players involved as early and directly as possible.

To earn "buy in," consider the following:

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- Consider who should be part of the process and what might happen if certain thought leaders, doers, or critics are *not* there.
- Communicate the objective, costs, and benefits, and “what’s in it” for your stakeholders.
- Get advice, input, and preferences from participants on the smallest things, such as when and where the planning will take place.
- Provide choices and options along the way so that people can volunteer for what’s most interesting to them.
- Be flexible in how you accomplish the four factors but inflexible in the fact that all four need to be addressed in the strategic planning process.

There is no cookie cutter method for developing a strategic plan, but there are key principles that need to be recognized and employed. Include these four elements in your strategic planning process, and you’ll ignite a long-term fire that you can’t do without.

### ***It’s the nature of leadership.***

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