

Undertaking a SWOT analysis

When your organization is planning for the future, you may need a prompt to start people thinking strategically. One [exercise](#) to instigate creative thought is a SWOT analysis.

SWOT Analysis - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

A SWOT analysis can be undertaken by the board, the staff, or by your clients/members, or by all three groups (and if the groups come up with different answers, that's interesting too). It will throw up material that can help you to think differently about the work you do and help you to change where you need to change.

A SWOT analysis creates a picture of your organization and its place within its operating environment and beyond.

Instructions

1. Set aside three to four hours for the task.
2. Invite no more than eight people to take part.
3. If possible, engage an outside facilitator who isn't directly involved with the people involved and who is able to maintain an objective stance. It is important that uncomfortable facts and sore [points](#) are faced and organizational "sacred cows" are challenged. To do this properly, a facilitator will need to be briefed very carefully in advance, so that the group knows that their context is well-understood.
4. Hand out individual pages to participants. Draw a square on each and divide each into four sections. Give each of the four sections one of the following titles:
 - Strengths
 - Weaknesses
 - Opportunities
 - Threats
5. Draw a copy on the whiteboard.
6. Begin by asking your group to consider the following questions from their own points of view and from the points of view of the people with whom they deal.

Strengths:

- What are the advantages of your organization?
- What do you do well? (What do you boast about?)

Tell them not to be too modest, but be realistic.

Weaknesses:

- What could be improved?
- What is done badly (what's embarrassing?)
- What should be avoided?
- What should you be doing that you can't?

Your organization's strengths and weaknesses should be considered from an internal and external basis – do other people (your clients, your consultants) perceive strengths or weaknesses that you don't see? What do others think your organization is good at? Do your competitors do any better? Face unpleasant truths.

Opportunities:

- What good [choices](#) are you facing?
- What are the next steps?
- What are the trends in your community?

Useful opportunities can come from such things as changes in technology, changes in government policy, or changes in social patterns, population profiles, or lifestyle changes.

Threats:

- What obstacles do you face?
- What is your competition doing? What is it planning?
- What are your funders doing? What are their plans?
- Are the required specifications for your services changing?
- How is the demand for your services? Are your clients less satisfied or more satisfied?

Do you have finance or cash-flow problems? Are your staff members all settled, or could they leave a gap suddenly? Could you do what you're planning if that happened?

7. Have everybody fill in the list individually.
8. Transfer all of the ideas on the blackboard/whiteboard/butcher's paper together.
9. Brainstorm – there are no wrong answers, there are no stupid suggestions. Save the caution for the wind-up.
10. At the end of the [session](#), pull all the answers together and see where they fit and where they don't. Don't just take consensus as right; leave enough time to discuss all of the ideas put forward. The aim is to allow for change, not to reinforce the norm.
11. Ask the group:

- How can we use our strengths to take advantage of the opportunities?
- How can we use our strengths to overcome the threats?
- What do we need to do to overcome the weaknesses before we can take advantage of the opportunities?
- How should we minimize our weaknesses to ward off the threats?

Warning

The SWOT analysis is only a part of the planning process. It is a combination of a creativity tool and a checklist. By itself, it will not give your organization a strategic plan, nor a timetable of objectives.

The next stage is to turn your SWOT list into a series of recommendations for your organization's leadership to consider before they develop their next strategic or business plan. Accepted recommendations may result in realigning of organizational goals and will certainly help them to focus on what actions need to be taken.