

# Strategic Management and Planning for Fire Science Organizations

## Well Positioned for an Uncertain Future Strategic Management and Planning for Fire Science Organizations

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## **Abstract**

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As we advance into the twenty-first century, we all recognize that the world continues to undergo, rapid, fundamental change. Relentless physical, technological and social developments provide unlimited need and opportunity for basic and applied scientific research into fire meteorology, behavior, ecology and management as well as firefighter human factors and safety. Global climate change, burgeoning world population, shifting demographics, wildland-urban interface, unsustainable development and rapid technological change provide unlimited areas of inquiry for those who study forest fires on a scientific basis.

The fire research community continues to recognize the necessity and value of intra-national and international cooperation, and that collaboration continues to intensify. At the same time, many of the organizations and institutions charged with conducting this type of research are downsizing, reorganizing and "doing more with less," often much less. This trend calls into question the forest fire research community's ability to increase its knowledge, anticipate needs, and adapt to accelerating change. The future bears challenges that will make the next decade both exciting and difficult for fire scientists.

Fire research organizations and institutions seeking long term success, will understand and readily adapt to the changing needs of their partners and patrons in the fire community, constantly improve their customer service and produce responsive results. This ability to adapt requires organizations to think, plan and manage strategically.

Today, progressive organizations have rediscovered the value of strategic planning, and employ democratic processes that tap the knowledge, experience and talents of people within the organization and its stakeholders. This paper presents a direct, practical and democratic strategic planning model and explores its application to organizations that study forest fires on a scientific basis.

## **Introduction**

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At the dawn of the twenty-first century, relentless physical, technological and social changes shape our world. Environmental and social influences provide unlimited need and opportunity for basic and applied scientific research into fire meteorology, behaviour, ecology and management as well as firefighter human factors and safety. Global climate change, burgeoning world population, shifting demographics, wildland-urban interface, unsustainable development and rapid technological change provide enormous areas of inquiry for those who study forest fires on a scientific basis.

The fire research community continues to recognize the necessity and value of both intra-national and international cooperation, and that collaboration continues to intensify. At the same time, many of the organizations and institutions charged with conducting this type of research are downsizing, reorganizing and doing more with less, often much less. This trend calls into question the forest fire research community's ability to increase its knowledge, anticipate needs, and adapt to accelerating change. The future bears challenges that will make the next decade both exciting and difficult for fire scientists.

## ***Well Positioned For The Future***

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Fire research organizations and institutions seeking long term success, will understand and readily adapt to the changing needs of their partners and patrons in the fire community; constantly improve their customer service and produce responsive results. This ability to adapt requires fire research organizations to think, plan and manage strategically.

Still, organizations resist the need to deliberately create their future in this way.

## ***Strategic Management***

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Strategic management is "the process of managing the pursuit of the organization's mission while managing the relationship of the organization to its environment". Particularly important is the organization's relationship to its stakeholders, or the major constituents in its internal and external environments that are affected by its actions (Higgins, 1993.) One might think of this more simply as taking the time to work on your business rather than in it.

Successful organizations think and plan strategically. They generate alternative strategies and choose from them, the strategy that best accomplishes goals and objectives that fulfill the organization's mission and achieve its vision.

## ***Strategic Planning***

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Formal strategic planning was first introduced to business organizations in the mid-1950s, and through the early 1980s planning increasingly took the form of lengthy, abstract and expensive exercises conducted by small, elite groups using top-down management models. Today, progressive organizations have rediscovered the value of strategic planning, and employ democratic processes that tap the knowledge, experience and talents of people within the organization and its stakeholders (Byrne, 1996.)

## ***Why Plan Strategically?***

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Strategic planning brings structure and focus to an organization's effort, produces better business decisions and can be the most powerful applied team building process available.

An effective strategic plan is not an intellectual exercise, but focused and action oriented, describing what needs to be done to accomplish your organization's mission and achieve its desired future. Strategic thinkers and planners decide what to do today to position themselves well in an uncertain future. Many people believe, wrongly, that planning strategically is making tomorrow's decisions today, or deciding what to do in the future.

A strategic plan describes what should be done today, to make things happen, and achieve a desired future. According to Peter Drucker, "Long-range planning does not deal with future decisions, but with the future of present decisions." (Drucker, 1993)

## ***When Should Organizations Plan Strategically?***

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Ideally, organizations should begin thinking and planning strategically at start-up. However, most often, organizations recognize the need to establish a strategy when they are growing or when they are in trouble. Organizations ought to reexamine their strategy when their leadership changes, when the leadership of a strategic partner changes or when the enterprise enters a phase of renewal. Organizations should always renew their strategy as they approach their current planning horizon, anticipating change and looking ahead while they are still successful.

## ***Evaluate Your Organization's Strategy***

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- Does your research organization have a short, distinct statement that sets forth its purpose, specifies the fundamental reason(s) for its existence; establishes its scope and identifies its unique characteristics?
- Is everyone associated with your organization aware of what the organization is trying to accomplish?
- Does everyone involved with the organization accept its mission and goals and recognize their implications?
- Do you know what trends or changes are occurring or will occur in the next 2-5 years that will affect your organization?
- Do you know if those trends and changes represent threats or opportunities for your organization?

- Do you know your organization's strengths and weaknesses in regard to addressing the threats and opportunities the organization faces?
- Do you know whom you will be serving in five years? Ten years?
- Do your management, staff and your cooperators share a vision of how the future should look for your organization?
- Does your organization have targeted goals, and have they been translated into objectives?
- Does everyone associated with the organization recognize their role and the leadership's role in accomplishing the mission, goals and objectives?

If you answered "no" to any of these questions, your organization would likely benefit from a strategic planning effort.

## ***A Successful Planning Effort Requires***

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- Commitment from the Leadership
- Broad Involvement of Stakeholders
- An Outward Focus
- A Deliberate Process
- Strategic Focus
- Goals that are Balanced Against the Organization's Resources
- An Operational Plan
- A Mechanism to Regain Commitment When Staff or Leadership Changes

The planning organization must develop commitment and support from the organization's leadership and staff before pursuing strategic planning, and the key to commitment is involvement. If an organization seeks the support of others and wants them to be committed to the organization's mission, committed to the organization's vision or committed to the organization's strategic plan, they need to be involved in the development of those products.

The responsibility for setting an organization's direction rests with its management, so successful strategic planning requires the leadership, initiative and commitment of the organization's managers and supervisors. This is not a responsibility to delegate, and strategic planning must be an integrated part of management and leadership, not a stand-alone assignment or task.

## ***Decide Whom to Involve Before You Begin***

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Include anyone who can insure viability and success. Depending on the organization, this might include strategic partners. Organizations that cooperate with, aid or support other organizations should view establishing a shared vision

between their organization's leadership and their partner as a primary objective of their planning effort.

The planning organization must include the people responsible for executing the plan and doing the work. One of the fundamental problems in organizations is that people are not committed to the determinations of other people (Covey, 1989.) You must involve your staff if you expect them to commit to carrying out the plan.

Finally, strive to involve a diverse representation of your "grass roots." Know how the people you serve, the people you depend on and the people who depend on the organization perceive it and what they need, want and expect from it.

Obviously, not everyone can participate in every aspect of your planning process. For example, you should not try to conduct a retreat meeting with more than 12 to 15 participants. However, the organization should look for and create opportunities for broad involvement. When deciding who to involve, think about "stakeholders."

Stakeholders are more than your constituents, your staff, and partners. Stakeholder definitions vary, but a particularly useful definition is "Anyone who has a significant interest in the mission or the accomplishments of your organization and can contribute to your success or interfere with your success." A stakeholder may be a single person, a group of individuals, another organization or an institution.

## ***Strategic Thinking Comes Prior to Strategic Planning***

Before asking people to commit to planning strategically, the organization must prepare them to shift their thinking from a "traditional planning" mind set to one of A strategic thinking. A Strategic Thinking Focus Is Characterized by:

- Continually analyzing emerging trends affecting your organization.
- Viewing planning as a proactive rather than a reactive tool.
- Focusing externally, looking for opportunities and spotting needs outside the organization.
- Guiding decision making with a vision of the future.
- Creating the organization's future vs. reacting to circumstances.
- Stimulating and influencing desired events.

## ***The Essential Elements of an Effective Strategic Plan***

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### **The Mission Statement**

A mission statement is a short, distinct statement that sets forth the organization's purpose, specifies the fundamental reason(s) for its existence; establishes its scope and identifies its unique characteristics (Smith, Bucklin and Associates, 1994). An organization's mission statement helps the organization's leadership, staff, strategic partners and the public know what the enterprise does, for whom and why.

The agency, its managers and staff must all work with a clear and concise mission statement for the organization; one, which they all understand, accept and commit to. Otherwise, each of the parties, working under different perceptions of the actual mission of the organization, will try to lead; each in a different direction.

### **The Organization's Guiding Principles**

The organization's guiding principles perform two important business functions. First, they are statements that identify the philosophical guidelines for all of the organization's activities. They should recognize the needs and expectations of your clients, partners, contributors, staff and other constituents and capture the essence of the organizations philosophy. These few, critical, core values should guide the day-to-day behavior of everyone in the organization if the enterprise is to be successful in achieving its mission. Secondly, an organization's guiding principles provide the sideboards within which its staff can flexibly and creatively pursue the organization's strategic vision.

### **Vision and the Vision Statement**

An effective organization's leaders must identify their collective vision that answers the question "where are we going?" or better yet "where do we want to go?" The organization's vision provides direction for the enterprise. An organizational vision is a realistic, credible, future that the organization wants for itself (Nanus, 1992.) The organization's vision describes the state toward which the organization should work, and visionary organizations pursue a future that is more desirable or more successful than their organization is now. A vision is not a "mission." Your mission describes your organization's purpose, vision describes its direction. According to Burt Nanus, "There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared." (Nanus, 1992)

## Goals and Objectives

Goals and objectives describe how the organization plans to get there or achieve the enterprise's mission and vision. Goals are the specific and measurable accomplishments that the organization seeks to achieve over a specified time. Objectives are the tactics and specific responsibilities the organization will use to reach and achieve the goals they establish. The organization's objectives, including work assignments, personal goals and daily activities of the staff must support the mission, vision and goals of the organization. Objectives provide clarification of the goals, and become the basis of the organization's operational, implementation or action plan and performance plans.

## The Action or Operational Plan

The action plan allocates resources, assigns responsibilities and sets completion deadlines. An effective action plan is essential to producing strategic direction, implementing that direction and producing results. That is, after all, the purpose. The last thing a planning organization wants is a nicely crafted mission statement, thoughtful vision statement and focused goals sitting on the Station Director's shelf collecting dust! An operational plan should accompany any strategic plan.

## Monitoring and Evaluation Methods

The organization's managers must monitor the operational plan and update senior management on how well the organization is achieving its strategic goals. The monitoring function is critically important to accomplishing the organization's goals, since monitoring alerts the organization to make needed mid-course adjustments to objectives, to assure success.

An effective plan should establish monitoring milestones at practical and planned intervals. These are actual calendar dates for review, known to those who are responsible for accomplishing objectives. The measurable performance standards established by the plan's goal statements and the milestone dates established in the operational plan provide tangible review criteria.

On occasion, the organization will need to revise its actions or objectives to achieve its goals. On these occasions, the organization should not revise the goals, but the means to achieving them.

However, with the obligation to insure that the organization is achieving its mission and progressing toward its strategic vision, the agency's senior management should conduct a periodic evaluation of the organization's strategic plan to compare results to planned accomplishments and review whether operational activities are producing the desired results. Significant internal or external environmental change may require changes to goals.

The question of changing the strategic plan often induces a degree of discomfort and sometimes provokes unnecessary tension and conflict within organizations.

Remember that your strategic plan is a statement of very important, but responsive guides to a strategy, or desired future; not a rigid doctrine (Smith, Bucklin and Associates, 1994.) Further, the process of strategic planning is continuous and ongoing, and must adapt to internal and external environmental changes to succeed.

## ***Fundamental Steps for Creating an Effective Strategic Plan***

Many strategic planning models and methods exist, but despite the number of unique approaches available, most are variations on time tested methods and elements including:

- Scanning or auditing the environment in which the organization will be working.
- Analyzing the organization's strengths and weaknesses and opportunities and threats it faces.
- Establishing or re-evaluating the mission and clearly expressing it in a statement.
- Determining a vision for your organization's future and clearly expressing it in a statement.
- Establishing goals that support the organization's mission and achieve its vision.
- Incorporating an action or operational plan that includes very specific objectives.
- Monitoring/evaluating the organization's achievement the plan's strategic goals.
- Adjusting as necessary.

### **Scanning Your Current & Future Operating Environment**

Some strategic planning literature calls this a "Situational Analysis," the "Environmental Analysis," "Environmental Scanning" or a "Situation Audit." Regardless of what an organization refers to it as, this is a critical step, that helps the organization understand what is happening both internally and externally. One cannot overstate the need for a good "audit step."

### **Analyzing Your Organization's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats**

Often called a "S.W.O.T. Analysis," this step provides the organization an opportunity to address these questions. Considering what we learned with our environmental scan, do our trends and issues represent opportunities, threats or both? What strengths does our organization have for capitalizing on the opportunities and overcoming the threats? What weaknesses does our organization have that could keep us from taking advantage of opportunities or overcoming the threats?

The information developed in the audit step, and the SWOT analysis provides the fuel for effective collaborative planning. Planning groups find that the scanning and analysis steps mentally prepare your participants, set the stage for strategic thinking and begin to bring common concerns into focus. Ideally, the organization uses this momentum to identify those opportunities and threats with high impact on the organization, and create an awareness of Acritical strategic issues@ that will require priority attention.

## ***Planning Retreats***

A planning retreat provides an opportunity for a collaborative effort that taps the talent, knowledge and experience present in an organization. Properly conducted, planning retreats also represent a powerful team building opportunity and a tool to build consensus and commonality of purpose. As such, organizations should encourage the participation of their leadership, staff, strategic partners and major stakeholders. However, retreat planners face the difficult task of balancing the desire to maximize participation, while keeping meetings manageable so that they do not waste time or resources and produce results. Ideally, we would like the senior management to be joined by key staff, strategic partners and key stakeholders. However, as the size of the planning group increases, so does the time required to achieve consensus, the overall time needed, and the cost of the retreat.

An organization can still maximize participation and involvement without inviting everyone to the planning retreats. Planning groups often create alternate opportunities to be involved when we find that inviting stakeholders, staff and others would produce an unworkably large retreat group.

Planning retreat participants often arrive with a combination of very high expectations and skepticism, making your retreat a high stakes, risky affair. An organization can assure that planning retreats are productive and minimize the risk involved by engaging a facilitator who has experience working with groups like theirs.

Facilitated planning sessions allow the participants to focus on issues and the organization's future rather than the process and mechanics of the meeting. A skilled facilitator encourages participation, collaboration and consensus, while balancing individual needs, and can guide the discussion of sensitive issues that would be difficult to discuss without outside help.

Well-planned and professionally conducted retreats focus an organization by bringing people together, determining a common course and applying their combined force. As already mentioned, collaborative efforts also represent the most powerful applied team-building tool available.

Unfortunately, organizations often minimize, or even obstruct, these important benefits by severely limiting the amount of time they will contribute to the planning process. The objective is a focused, productive effort that uses people's time economically and effectively. However, the planning group must also set aside enough time to "do the job right."

"Doing the job right" means that the participants can achieve the desired outcomes in the time allotted. However, many groups do not understand that those expectations also require an atmosphere that promotes collaborative effort and thoughtful participation without exhausting people. Participants are there to think and work hard, but people wear out, and that ultimately works against the desired outcome of a positive and productive retreat. Planning retreat schedules should include enough time for comfortable breaks, meals and social time.

Hurried efforts that do not take the time to "do it right" frequently produce anger, frustration, intermittent attendance and other unproductive behaviors. These hasty efforts often come at the expense of sensible process steps, detract from a retreat's focus on the issue at hand, and cause participants to go away feeling frustrated and questioning how effectively the organization is using their time.

### ***For a Plan to be a Success, You Must Implement It!***

Organizations cannot achieve goals solely through good intentions, planning and desire. For a plan to succeed, the organization must implement its goals and objectives and monitor progress. Implementation is the process of translating a strategic plan into results.

The operational plan establishes priorities, identifies time lines, assigns responsible parties and allocates resources. Generally, the staff prepares the bulk of the operational plan with guidance and approval from the agency's leadership. Implementation is delegated, and once the plan is completed, the organization's senior management should turn the plan over to their staff for action.

To implement the plan successfully, all the organization's activities must be in harmony with the plan, and the strategy must permeate every aspect of the organization's operations. The key is to integrate the organization's planning, information and communication, supervision, leadership and human resource functions to assure that the staff has the information, direction, skills, authority and accountability it needs to achieve the organization's strategic direction. The organization's budget represents the most common means of controlling operations, and therefore, the organization's budget must reflect its strategic priorities.

## Conclusion

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As we advance into the twenty-first century, we all recognize that the world continues to undergo, rapid, fundamental change, providing unlimited need and opportunity for basic and applied scientific research into fire meteorology, behaviour, ecology and management as well as firefighter human factors and safety. This ability to adapt requires research organizations to think and plan strategically, deliberately create their future, readily adapt to the changing needs of their partners and patrons in the fire community, constantly improve their customer service and produce responsive results. Fire research organizations and institutions seeking long term success will understand the value of strategic planning; and employ sensible, democratic planning processes that tap the knowledge, experience and talents of people within their organizations and of their stakeholders.

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