

IT STRATEGIC PLANNING

"You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you are going, because you might not get there."

Yogi Berra

BACKGROUND

Henry Mintzberg, former president of the Strategic Management Society, points out that "strategy can not be planned because planning is about analysis and strategy is about synthesis."¹ Failure to recognize this basic distinction accounts for the frequent failure of such exercises, as does an excessive focus on technical detail, lack of suitable leadership, and perhaps most important, failure to align technology to institutional mission and priorities.

Strategic planning involves a structure or framework, a set of procedures (both formal and informal), and of course content. Beyond these basic elements, the underlying assumptions about strategic planning are that the future can be anticipated, forecasted, managed or even controlled, and that the best way to do so is to have a formal and integrated plan about it in place. The process of planning itself may turn out to be more important than the results, and that process requires, as Mintzberg suggests, both analysis and synthesis. Planning simply introduces a formal "discipline" for conducting long-term thinking about an institution, and for recognizing opportunities in and for minimizing risks from the external and internal environments.

Among the hundreds available, perhaps the most well-know model of strategic planning has the SWOT (for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) appraisal of internal and external environments as its centerpiece. But whatever the model, following decades of research across hundreds of organizations, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of strategic planning is mixed at best. So, why plan? Again, the answer may lie in the process itself; like the ritual rain dance, planning improves the dancing, if not the weather.²

But a more sophisticated response is required, especially if strategic planning is to be justified in the context of professional organizations like universities. Strategic planning found its origins and its fullest expression in the top-down, bureaucratic, centralized, and standardized organizations that readily lend themselves to control. This "machine" model hardly applies to what March and Olsen called the "organized anarchies" of academe.³ In the words of the ECAR alignment study: "we might describe colleges and universities as networks of cottage industries rather than enterprises. Aligning priorities in an enterprise is challenging. Aligning priorities within a network of cottage