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STRATEGIC PLANNING FROM THE BOTTOM UP: A UNIT STRATEGIC PLAN THAT PUSHES CHANGE

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Citation	Perrin, J. M. (2017). Strategic Planning From the Bottom Up: A Unit Strategic Plan That Pushes Change. <i>Journal of Library Administration</i> , 57(6), 712–722. https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1340771
Citable Link	https://hdl.handle.net/2346/96425
Terms of Use	This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in <i>JOURNAL OF LIBRARY ADMINISTRATION</i> on 25 August 2017, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1340771

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Abstract:

This article describes an example of a unit level strategic plan, its formation, and its effects in implementation. The argument is presented that unit level strategic plans can help libraries by giving individuals specific goals that are tailored to their strengths and make up for the unit's weaknesses.

Keywords: Strategic plan, Library Administration, Library Management, Digital Libraries

Strategic Planning from the Bottom Up: A Unit Strategic Plan that Pushes Change

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Library strategic planning seems to be based on an institutional administration's tolerance for risk. I have seen strategic plans forge interesting but harmful paths while also seeing plans fall flat by keeping things the mostly way they are. Leadership that is tolerant of risk often leads to bold plans like reducing a library's physical book collection by half to make room for more study space (Acadia 2016). Risk *intolerant* leadership, on the other hand, gives us strategic plans that become mission statements by just stating that the library will do what it has always done, only now it will be done "excellently." I sometimes want to remind people that the whole point of a strategic plan is to be, well, strategic by targeting a specific audience, need, or goal in order to meet a particular agenda. I realize just about every organization assumes it could not possibly function without a strategic plan these days, but a badly formed plan will never be used, so it might as well not even exist. Why is library strategic planning so difficult?

The strategic plan movement developed out of business culture and within a completely different world from the ones most library faculty and staff inhabit mostly in terms of "their sources of professional recognition, the targets of their work efforts, their relationships with competing organizations, and the degree of homogeneity of the task across organizations" (Bernasconi 2011). The same is true of the cultural differences between public and school libraries and the business world. Libraries are not in competition with each other; they are not rewarded the same was a as a business with skyrocketing financial gain; and innovation is more about the services they can offer rather than a product they can sell. Success or failure in the commercial world is based on sales and market growth. If your company provides one specific, tangible product or service, then it's relatively straightforward to develop a single strategic

direction that will help guide your employees toward success. In libraries, the end product is a little less clear cut. A single library might have many different departments and units providing many different services that are not always obvious to patrons, and a generic strategic plan might only speak to a few of these units' individual needs. Administrators know this about strategic plans, and this is why these plans tend to be vague and risk intolerant. Often, library leadership is working too hard to keep the building's lights on to justify taking risky strategic directions.

I want to propose a possible simple solution to this problem: individual library departments and units should develop their own long term strategic plans, and those plans should be bold and maybe a little risky. In fact, I believe the success of the library as a whole depends on each individual unit finding their own path to success and their own measures. What follows is an example of such a plan, how it was developed, and how any library unit can independently go through the steps and come up with a unique strategic plan that should tolerate the right amount of risk.

BACKGROUND

In our large academic library, the Digital Resources Unit (DRU) was created in 2012 after years of committee-led digital initiatives. This unit is housed under the library's technology department and is primarily an open access publisher. We publish both born-digital items produced by students or faculty as well as older, rare items that we have scanned in our digitization lab. We curate digital collections throughout the digital lifecycle. Our work is a bit different from other departments because the more work we finish, the more work we create for ourselves in having to maintain the collections. We're not just putting stuff online but monitoring

its use, enhancing it, organizing it, and preserving it. The unit also supports digital scholarship in the university by consulting on external faculty projects using our experience with metadata, digital preservation, and our technical infrastructure and knowledge. We recently added a web librarian to the DRU to maintain the library's website. Her work is a natural fit for us since organizing our website is much like curating a digital collection, and she deals with many of the same challenges and technology. The whole unit is preparing to attain more experience with open source digital library software to start creating digital exhibits, working with linked data, and providing more support for digital scholarship on campus.

We were a small, four-person operation when our work started in 2012. We spent our first year tackling the metadata and organizational messes that had piled up since the library had begun scanning eight years previous. Collection production slowed down as we refined our processes and workflows. After the processes were fixed, the unit added more metadata and digital preservation faculty, and production began to build again. Over the course of four years, we got our heads above water and were able to focus on collection consistency from the beginning to end of the digital lifecycle. Our jobs could finally become routine, which meant we could focus on other projects. In 2016, the unit broadened its scope to include other aspects of digital libraries beyond just producing digital collections. The faculty and staff of the unit wanted to build tools, support open access, and make a national impact. Mostly, they saw what other bigger schools were doing and wanted to make a similar impact. The unit members asked for a strategic plan to help guide the whole unit toward the goal instead of having individuals work alone.

WHERE ARE WE NOW? (S.W.O.T. ANALYSIS)

In order to develop a good strategic direction, we needed to write down the current situation. A good way to start with that is a SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) (Berry n.d.). At LITA 2016, Hong Jing presented a SWOT analyses for a digital initiative (Jing 2016). This analysis matched the DRU's situation very well for the most part. Similarities include that the unit had strengths in metadata, preservation, and technical skills. The unit also has weaknesses of budget, staffing, and lack of external support. The opportunities identified by Jing were very different from the opportunities identified for the DRU, which shows that even with incredibly similar units, there can be divergence in a strategic plan. This is an example of why it is so important for individual units to do their own analysis, because every unit's situation is different.

I conducted a SWOT analysis which revealed certain qualities of the DRU that would not have shown up in a library-wide strategic plan. These revelations were all things that had to do specifically with the individuals I had working in my unit and their respective strengths and weaknesses, which led to the opportunities and threats for those people shown in Figure 1. If I had a different set of people working for me, the whole board would look different. It's important to keep in mind that a strategic plan needs to take advantage of the strengths of the particular group you have and their unique situations.

[Place figure 1 here]

There are a few key aspects of the SWOT analysis to mention. First, our unit is a small unit, especially compared to other libraries that are working at the national level. While this could be seen as a weakness, it is also a strength in that it makes us agile. The unit is small enough to change direction and had in the past when it was necessary. Our small size does also

show up in the threats because we have a limited number of people, a limited workforce, and so we are limited as to the size of projects we can take on. We are also vulnerable to being hijacked by others to meet their agenda instead of our own. One person being taken away to do another project would severally cut down our resources.

The same set of skills that made us valuable for other working groups also makes us valuable, period. The group is developing the technical knowledge for both creating and managing technology projects. A number of people in the unit had experience writing successful grants, meaning that we could make up for our lack of a dedicated budget. Grant funding also meant our ideas had to be vetted by an external entity, and it ensured a basic level of documentation of our work.

Our university is located in the far northwest corner of one of the largest U.S. states, and we are at least 300 miles from our nearest peer institution. The isolated nature of our city means that collaboration is always going to be difficult. Casual communication with other schools has been limited to conferences and occasional working groups. Shrinking budgets mean travel will become more difficult in the future, limiting our face-to-face time with other movers and shakers. Our isolation, however, also shows up in strengths because dealing with distance nationally is just as hard as dealing with it locally. It means we need to take advantage of webinars, virtual meetings, conference calls, and other non-physical ways of connecting to other entities across the country, which leads us into some of the unit's opportunities.

One of our goals as tenure-track faculty is to develop national reputations, or to prove national impact. While this is not a requirement for tenure, it is required for promotion after tenure. The growing technical savvy of some of the DRU faculty has opened up possibilities for them to help develop open source software that could have a national digital libraries impact.

This work would, delightfully, not require them to travel. Seeking grants also has the potential to be done locally and to take care of the weakness of not having a dedicated budget. Those in the unit could also affect national efforts for developing best practices and documentation for more specialized areas that are still developing like digital preservation and digital publishing. They had unique skills and experience that would make them valuable in affecting national policies and best practices, which again, can be done from a distance. Another way of affecting the national landscape of digital libraries was to increase our digital content. We already had a lot online, but doubling our efforts to publish open access materials and break down the barriers to open publishing would help to solve some of these problems for others as well.

One weakness that is difficult to deal with is the lack of a career path for non-faculty staff. The only chance for promotion is if they received Master's degrees in library science, and even then there is no guarantee that they will be able to get a job in the library after that. This weakness had to be addressed in the plan, although it would have been easier to ignore it.

THE PLAN

I shared this SWOT analysis with my unit to get their feedback, and I gave them my vision for the unit in the next five years. I see our Digital Resources Unit possessing a stellar national level reputation. To achieve this, we needed to prioritize national conferences and pay more attention to the national grant landscape for our area. We must identify what projects are funded and find out what national-level problems we can tackle at a local level. In our SWOT analysis I recognized a few guiding mottos that will help guide our initiatives.

“Big results require big ambitions.” This is a quote from Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, which is fitting given his philosophy of ever-present change as a central force. The

unit was not going to do anything amazing if they did not have big ambitions both independently and as a group. I encouraged my employees to think about the next phase in their respective developments and to work toward it, even if that next phase was not with the unit. One goal of the strategic plan had to be helping our four untenured faculty members achieve tenure and promotion to Associate Librarian and getting our three tenured faculty promoted to the full Librarian rank. Faculty seeking promotion to Librarian must prove they are capable of making a national (or international) impact on the academic world. Publications, presentations, and national level service absolutely must be part of any strategic plan that involves faculty. I created a simple rubric to track the unit's progress toward these goals.

[Place figure 2 here]

The completed rubric was enough to show the unit that their contributions were significant and that the unit as a whole has immense potential. I created targets for the next five years for the whole unit, and we clarified together what specific tasks are needed in order to develop a national reputation.

“Focus on local effort with a global impact.” This was a tagline for a conference I attended, and I realized it made sense for us as a unit. If we could focus on what we could do locally, it would help us control our scope. If we focused our efforts on the seemingly little things that have the potential to make a global impact, then we would be using our time and effort for the greater good. This analysis, if nothing else, has made it clear to me what my goals are for the people who report to me and has provided me with a number of actionable tasks that I can take on in my role as supervisor.

“Maximize the amount of work not done.” This quote is from the Agile manifesto, which is a document of principles that have guided agile software development. However, this principle is also a good lesson to adopt for small units (Madhavi 2015). The truth is, we cannot do something new if we’re too busy maintaining, so a portion of our time needed to be spent reducing the amount of work we’re doing to make more time for new projects. Workflows need to be reworked to become more streamlined and engaging in what I call “targeted quality reduction.” The trick to targeted quality reduction is finding the minimum requirements that would make our customers happy, rather than gold-plating projects with pretty but ultimately unnecessary features. I admit, this approach is not a conventional business expectation. You’re expected to fill your day with tasks or risk being seen as a slacker, but if you’re constantly doing nothing but busywork, then you’re not thinking and you’re not changing. Reducing busy work includes reducing the amount of time spent in meetings that are for the betterment of other areas of the library and not our own. Following this motto makes sure people have time to think about their work and re-work it to be more effective and less consumed with time-wasting tasks.

“Start small and form partnerships.” I learned this concept from a LITA blog about winning technology grants, but it is great advice for our small unit (Perez 2016). Starting small means recognizing that each member of the unit has specific skills set and that bigger projects are tackled with others who have complementary skills. As a small unit, we also need to properly vet our ideas to make sure they are sustainable at our scale, and if they are not, then we need to seek partnerships that can fill in the gaps we lack. In this way, we increase the potential output by making up for our small unit size. Reminding employees to form partnerships actually prepares them for national level grants where collaborations strengthen grant proposals.

“Create stretch goals and develop your skills.” Every year, I ask the unit to develop personal goals. Because there is a perception of being graded on the success or failure of those goals, everyone has a tendency to choose things that are easily attainable. This motto reminds everyone to push themselves a bit by creating at least a few goals, so-called “stretch goals,” that are a bit challenging. Maybe create three easily attainable goals, but then give yourself one stretch goal. For example, the DRU needed more experience with open source software to keep up with the kinds of digital library development happening on open source software like Fedora, Omeka, Hydra, and Archivematica. If we wanted to make a national impact, then we needed to get experience and get involved with these systems. The unit also needed to start getting some experience with things like linked data, data management, and other issues that are starting to be national issues. Each individual needs to spend some time looking at what is coming down the pipe in their area, and preparing for it by creating stretch goals even if they do not become an expert in a year or manage to significantly change the workflow. The goal here is experience.

Fitting our two non-tenure track staff members into the same strategic plan presented a different set of challenges and opportunities. They did not need to make a national impact in order to succeed, but that did not mean they would not benefit from such pursuits of success. I wanted to make sure they were being given the time to develop their skills and be part of an environment that would set them up for better future jobs, even if those jobs were not with the DRU. I as a supervisor have to not only come to grips with the idea that it is probably better for them to leave but to encourage it once they reach a certain level of competency. Once they become better than our pay scale can reward, I need to support their active search for alternative, better employment. I realized that by helping them move on, it is possible that our unit would

earn a reputation for producing great staff that would do great work somewhere else. We would also get a fresh pair of eyes every few years, helping our work change and grow.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing the plan was less straightforward than writing it was. I originally thought that the plan would have to be reconsidered and discussed during every weekly unit meeting, but what I found instead is that it was better used as a guide for me as a supervisor in my one-on-one interactions with my employees. Someone would come in asking if I had an opinion about whether or not it would be better for them to go to either a small, regional conference or a larger, national one, and thinking back to the strategic plan, I would gear them toward the national conference. Faculty would come to me for advice about a grant, and I found myself repeating the mottos of starting small and forming partnerships. As I talked to individuals about their annual evaluations and what kind of goals they should set for themselves next year, I looked to the strategic plan. I made sure they put on a stretch goal to increase their skills. As our library administration asked me for feedback about various initiatives and my unit's involvement, I ended up looking back at the SWOT analysis to see where I needed to guard against weakness and maximize our strengths. Ultimately, the strategic plan has been more about me being a better supervisor and leader. Even if the employees never looked at the plan again, it wouldn't matter because I still use it daily to organize the unit's priorities.

Given our ambitious goals, I realized I needed to pay more attention to what was going on nationally and internationally. I started reading successful grant proposals for digital library initiatives, and following various organizations and software development projects more closely. Since I can only make it to a few conferences a year, I try to make up for it by reading the

proceedings of the top digital library conferences like Open Repositories, Joint Conference on Digital Library, and Digital Library Federation Forum.

CONCLUSION

Unexpectedly, as a result of this strategic plan, the DRU is now aware of how we guard our time and energy. Teamwork outside of the unit is encouraged, but I try to keep it to a reasonable level. I've suggested that people attempt to spend only 20% of their time in external meetings and work for others, while 80% of their time is reserved for unit-related work. There are no consequences for breaking this percentage, just encouragement to keep an eye on how much time is going toward someone else's agendas.

As a supervisor, this small unit strategic plan has also changed what I do day to day. I am more aware of what is happening nationally as I pay attention to conferences that my unit could not attend, and grants that are being funded. I have developed a national awareness, which makes me a better decision maker at the local level. It helps me mentor my employees as they strike out to try to do more interesting and creative ideas.

The people outside of the unit seem to be fascinated. Some are concerned that this strategic plan would be destroyed by the library-wide strategic plan, but this has not happened. One of the reasons for this is that nothing in this plan is against the goals of administration. If anything, library-wide plans tend to ignore the aspirations of individuals and the specific environment of our unit and the ecosystem of our national and international peers in the digital library field. For our library, with faculty status, getting a national reputation by publishing and presenting will get them raises and promotions. Creating an environment where national impact

of a small local unit is considered and rewarded is a benefit to those employees and the library as a whole.

The benefits that the unit has had with this strategic plan were worth the time it took to develop it. The differences this strategic plan has to the overall strategic plan of the library has me convinced that most library groups (no matter how small) would benefit from developing their own specific strategic plan. Strategic planning from the bottom up can help support institutional level strategic plans by giving individuals motivation, goals, and a purpose.

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