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How an outside facilitator helped us create a better strategic plan

Jennifer Nutefall

Introduction

Santa Clara University Library had traditionally articulated annual action agendas which included goals, strategic directions and action items. Often the action agendas would include between 15 and 20 statements with many remaining on the list for multiple years. It became difficult for staff to know what was being accomplished and the library's focus. With the arrival of a new University Librarian in summer 2012, a Strategic Planning Committee was formed and was led by a facilitator from outside the library. The eight-month process resulted in new vision and mission statements and a strategic plan centered around five priorities. One key to the success of the process was the involvement of an outside facilitator. This article provides a brief overview of the literature on strategic planning and facilitation, a description of Santa Clara University Library's environment, details of the strategic planning process and the role and benefits of an outside facilitator.

Literature Review

A search for strategic planning and academic libraries in Library & Information Science Source yields around 300 results. Recent articles address the connection between strategic planning and assessment, the incorporation of futuring and marketing, and strategic planning for specific areas such as digitization and distance education.¹ The majority of the articles do not mention who facilitated the strategic planning process or only mention a facilitator in passing.

More specific mentions of a facilitator can be found in books related to library strategic planning. Riggs states that the use of consultants may be worthwhile for some libraries. He writes that consultants could suggest planning activities or evaluate plans. However he stresses that library management must be the ones to put the strategic plan together.² Matthews also addresses the role of a facilitator or consultant. He states that if a consultant is used then the scope of their responsibilities "must be clearly stated for all concerned, and the library must remain in control. The consultant might act solely as a facilitator for some portion of the process, act as a facilitator and be responsible for creating a draft of the strategic plan, and so forth."³ Riggs and Matthews agree that the ultimate responsibility for the strategic plan resides with the library and the library director.

A review of the business literature shows more frequent mentions of the use of facilitators/consultants to assist with strategic planning. Depending on the business a facilitator can be brought in to help design an effective strategic planning process. The roles a facilitator can play include training the planning team in facilitation techniques, presenting strategies for

overcoming road blocks, and helping create a team that can become self-facilitating and self-sustaining.⁴ Facilitators can also play an enabling role working to “ensure that reluctant participants are involved in the process, that consensus rather than compromise is the primary method of decision making, that the necessary group norms of openness and confrontation develop, and that the group process enhances rather than blocks the development of a functional strategic plan that will provide the vision for directing the organization’s future.”⁵ From this brief review of literature there are clear opportunities for a facilitator to play a role in a strategic planning process. This could involve either training a team/committee to conduct the process, facilitating parts of the process, incorporating planning activities, and reviewing/writing portions of a strategic plan. Each library must evaluate their needs and determine where a facilitator would most benefit them.

Background

Santa Clara University is a comprehensive Jesuit university located 40 miles south of San Francisco in California’s Silicon Valley. The University enrolls 5,435 undergraduates and 3,335 graduate students and offers more than 50 undergraduate and 50 graduate degree programs. Starting in 2000, the University Library formed a Library Planning Council. Their charge was to prepare and prioritize the annual Action Agenda, review proposed projects, evaluate progress, propose changes to strategic directions and recommend modifications to Library Goals. Over the years the Action Agendas became long lists of activities and library staff were unclear on priorities and focus areas. Also, since items stayed on the agenda for multiple years, there was never clarity on whether progress was being made or when an item would be completed. Though the plan had been to tie items from the Action Agendas into the yearly goals for individual staff members this was done inconsistently.

With the arrival of the author as the new University Librarian in August 2012, one of the first priorities was to create a strategic plan for the library. The process needed to be inclusive and participatory. Since the University Librarian wanted to be a full participant in the strategic planning process, and wanted the final plan to be inclusive of the entire library, the decision was made to have a facilitator. The University Librarian also recognized that the process would benefit from a facilitator who had experience in strategic planning and would be able to suggest processes, procedures, and activities to lead to a successful plan. Recommendations were solicited from the Dean of the School of Business as well as the Human Resources (HR) Office. After correspondence with several potential facilitators the author selected Diane Hildebrand from the University’s Learning and Leadership Development office. Learning and Leadership Development is a division of HR that “offers learning opportunities to assist staff and faculty in improving job competency and professional development. They also provide organizational service that assist managers and supervisors to lead their organizations more effectively.”⁶ The facilitator’s background includes degrees in business and organization development and she worked with several corporations, including Sun Microsystems, before arriving at Santa Clara University. One benefit in selecting Ms. Hildebrand was her familiarity with the university combined with a limited knowledge of the library.

Strategic Planning Process

Membership

The first step in the process was to appoint the strategic planning committee. Seven library staff members were appointed, the University Librarian, Associate University Librarian for Public Services, Head of Archives & Special Collections, Science Librarian, University Archivist, Library Systems Manager, and Information Specialist/Technology Support. A student representative and faculty representative were added after the completion of new vision and mission statements.

Communication Plan

The first two meetings of the strategic planning committee focused on creating a communication plan. The communication plan focused on the audience (library staff, Deans, Provost, etc.), the message (what information the committee would want to convey), the frequency of the communication, the method (in-person, email, phone, etc.) and the person responsible for the communication. The communication plan included regular emails to all library staff, and in-person updates at monthly All Staff meetings.

Meetings

The committee met between November 2012 and July 2013 for three hours twice a month. The facilitator was at every meeting and was in frequent communication with the University Librarian in-between meetings.

Mission/Vision Statements

After creating a communication plan and reviewing the goals and timeline, the strategic planning committee undertook the creation of a vision statement and a revision of the mission statement. Since none of the committee members had been involved in creating vision/mission statements previously, the facilitator provided links to several videos on creating vision and mission statements and what the difference is between the two.⁷ The facilitator kept the committee focused, led exercises to brainstorm the library's future, and helped the group complete draft statements over the course of two meetings. The main exercise started with an activity for the committee to imagine the library won a library of the year award in five years. What would the library be recognized for? Why would Santa Clara win the award? The facilitator emphasized that the vision and mission statements should be short enough so that anyone in the library can readily repeat it. Draft statements were completed at the end of two meetings.

Mission/Vision Open Forums

To get input and feedback from the library staff on the new vision and mission statements, a series of open forums were held. The initial forum presented an overview of draft mission/vision statements, the process and activities the committee used to get there, why strategic planning was important to focus on now, and next steps. A week following that initial presentation, small group meetings were held with library staff to solicit feedback and answer questions. The questions used as the basis for the small group discussions were:

Opening Questions:

- Now that you have had a week to think about the vision/mission, what are your initial thoughts about both statements?
- How do the new vision/mission statements speak to you and your role in the library?

Vision Statement:

- Does it feel inspirational to you? If "no" why not, if "yes" please explain.
- What is missing from the vision statement?

Mission Statement:

- How does the new mission statement represent what we will do as an organization to reach our vision?
- What is missing from the mission statement?

The strategic planning committee compiled the feedback received and made slight changes to the mission/vision statements. An email was sent to the entire library staff thanking them for their participation, highlighting areas of discussion, noting the language changed in the statements, and providing the final version of the mission/vision statements.

Strategic Plan Priorities

Over the course of five meetings the committee developed five priorities and then split into teams of two to further refine and define each priority. Each priority statement was accompanied by a brief explanatory paragraph that answered the questions "What is it?" and "Why is it important?" Each team developed two to three goals under each priority, with one to three objectives under each goal. The facilitator kept the committee extremely focused and consistently pushed the committee on whether an item was a goal or objective, whether it was a high enough priority to be included in the strategic plan, and what the real focus was. While the main audience is the library staff, the strategic plan needed to be written in such a way that it would be understood by those outside the library.

Strategic Priorities Open Forums

The open forum process, similar to the mission/vision open forums, was used after the committee drafted the five strategic priorities. An initial forum was held with library staff to review the five draft priorities, the process, and next steps. A week after the forum, small group meetings of library staff were held to solicit feedback and input. The questions used to solicit feedback were:

- Now that you have had a week to think about the draft priorities, what are your initial thoughts about this priority?
- How does this priority speak to you and your role in the library?
- What are some goals/activities you could see under this priority?
- What is missing from this priority and/or all the draft priorities?

Focus Groups

In addition, focus groups were held with students and faculty to get feedback on three of the five priority areas that the committee determined had the most direct impact on the community (engagement, collections, and learning environments).

Role of the Facilitator

Having an outside facilitator offered many benefits and contributed to the development of a straightforward and concise strategic plan. Ms. Hildebrand was able to provide an inside/outside perspective since she works for the University she brought that knowledge to the planning process. However, since she was outside the library, and unfamiliar with library processes, she brought a valuable perspective. Committee members specifically mentioned that they felt having the external facilitator was beneficial for:

- Focus: She kept the committee on topic and focused. If the discussion started to get off topic she was quick to ask if the issue was relevant to the strategic plan or was a topic that needed to be discussed outside the meeting.
- Resources: With the facilitator's background in the business world she had recommendations for numerous resources including books and videos that were used during the planning process.
- Communication: As mentioned, the first two meetings were devoted to crafting a communication plan. The facilitator insisted on this and while some members may have questioned why so much time was devoted to this activity, it turned out to be an extremely useful exercise that the committee returned to during the planning process.
- Non-library perspective: Since the facilitator was not familiar with the library and its terminology, she frequently asked whether certain words/terms were best and would be understood by an outside audience. She forced the committee to pare down complicated topics into easily understood goals or objectives.
- Group activities: The facilitator came prepared with multiple activities to assist with the creation of mission/visions statements and the strategic plan priorities. The activities, combined with work done outside the meetings, allowed the committee to progress more quickly than we would have otherwise.
- Clarification: A continual emphasis during discussions of strategic priorities was "Why is this important?" The facilitator kept the committee focused on the larger goal and would assist the committee in clarifying why an objective was important and in a way an individual outside the library would understand.
- Timetable: At the first meeting the committee outlined a timetable to complete the strategic plan. The facilitator kept the committee on track and would inform us if we were getting behind. That usually meant additional homework outside of the meetings.
- Operational vs. Strategic: When it came time to write the goals and objectives, the facilitator kept emphasizing the difference between operational activities and strategic activities. In the final plan each priority has between two and three goals with two to three objectives under each goal. If not for the facilitator it easily could have become a laundry list of activities.
- Institutional knowledge: The facilitator has worked at Santa Clara since 2011. By having an insider/outsider perspective she was a combination of the best of both worlds.

Conclusion

Is a facilitator necessary? As a library begins a strategic planning process a decision will need to be made on whether to bring in a facilitator. When making this decision questions to consider include who will manage the meetings, plan and implement activities and exercises, keep track of the timeline, schedule meetings, communicate updates, and manage the planning process. These activities could be split between members of a committee, delegated to an administrative assistant, or to a facilitator.

Once the decision is made to use a facilitator one of the first questions should be whether to look internal to the organization (faculty member, HR) or external (outside consultant). Factors that may play into that decision are the needs of the library and any cost that may be involved. Soliciting recommendations, either from Deans or other library directors, can also assist with recommendations. Before contacting potential facilitators it is a good idea to have a general plan of the scope of the work involved. Questions to consider are:

- Would the facilitator attend every meeting?
- How many individuals will be on the strategic planning committee?
- How frequently will the committee be meeting?
- What is the timeline for completing the plan?
- Who will be drafting the strategic plan?
- Are new mission/vision statements being created?
- Is there a communication plan?
- What type of experience is needed from a facilitator?

There are many benefits to using an outside facilitator for a strategic planning process. Facilitation involves a unique skill set and librarians should recognize the benefit of bringing in someone with the knowledge, background, and expertise to lead to the creation of a successful strategic plan. It was the right decision for Santa Clara University Library to use a facilitator for its strategic planning process and the University Librarian strongly believes it led to the creation of a better strategic plan.⁸

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Published: May 2015

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Appendix A

Strategic Planning Committee

Charge and Responsibilities

The charge and responsibilities were created during the first Strategic Planning Committee meeting

Our purpose:

Produce a 3-5 year plan of goals and activities that we will focus on; plan to produce this report by June 2013. This report will be formatted for an external as well as internal audience.

Roles and Responsibilities for each committee member: We will:

- Meet twice a month and engage actively in these meetings;
- develop a common set of readings;
- research articles and other materials that we should read and share with group;
- solicit feedback from library staff, students, faculty etc;
- attend meetings with exception of planned vacations and unexpected illnesses;
- possibly participate in site visits or arrange for speakers
- identify candidates for a site visit and suggest individuals who could come to us.

How will the decision making process happen? It is the expectation that the group will reach consensus; however, the University Librarian is the final decision maker.

How do we bring in the “voice of the customer”? Surveys, focus groups, regular open meetings, create a blog to which all library staff can post (anonymously, if they like) and assign committee members to respond to each comment.