Tool Profile: Strategic Thinkers Group

Definition

As the name implies, this tool engages a group of people from a variety of levels in the organization—both board and staff—who are generally considered to be "strategic thinkers." These are the people you would describe as "big picture, out-of-the-box thinkers," "creative," and "innovative." This is not an expanded management team nor is it a decision-making group. Rather, its role is to meet periodically to discuss strategic questions such as: "What is the next big innovation in our field likely to be?" "Are we having the impact we want?" and "What might we do differently if we could start over again?" These discussions enable the organization to practice strategic thinking on an ongoing basis and to spark creativity and innovation at all levels of the organization. Membership in the team can change every six months, if you have enough such thinkers to accommodate an evolving group.

When should you use this tool? What outcomes can you expect to achieve by using this tool? And, how will you know if you have achieved them?

Situation: When is this tool useful? ***A Strategic Thinkers Group is useful when your nonprofit…***	**Outcomes: How will you know you've achieved your goals?** ***Indicators and measures of outcomes***
• Is too internally focused.	• Increased awareness of the environment.
• Is organized in silos, effectively resulting in mini-fiefdoms and lack of unity throughout the organization.	• Higher morale, increased interaction across organizational boundaries, improved teamwork, greater investment in organization's success.
• Sees its market position threatened or stagnant, but is stymied in how to respond.	• Better sense of the root causes of the market challenges, new perspectives and ideas.
• Is in a market environment characterized by uncertainty and change.	• Better understanding of the market and enhanced sense of shared responsibility for the organization's destiny.

How should you use it?

To develop this group, start by identifying the 5-8 people from throughout the organization who fit the description above.[1] These are not the usual suspects—executive management, for example—although some of these staff may certainly be included in the group. These are people, both board and staff members, who have shown themselves to have good insight into organizational problems and solutions, and who are attuned to the external environment, have strong external networks, and represent a diversity of backgrounds, experiences and interests.

[1] If your staff is small, you may decide to include all staff and a few board members.

Tool Profile: Strategic Thinkers Group

The culture of this group is important; it must be non-hierarchical, with no authority or lines of management responsibility. The group should meet at least monthly for one hour to discuss a broad question. Good facilitation skills are essential to assure that the discussion is free-flowing and that the culture of the group is maintained. A recorder should post key points on chart paper during the discussion. These notes should be typed up afterwards and distributed throughout the organization so that all can benefit from the ideas generated.

At its first meeting, and periodically thereafter, the group should brainstorm (*see Brainstorm Tool*) the questions it will discuss for the next few sessions, allowing for flexibility if other, more critical questions emerge over the course of time. These should be "big picture" questions, such as those outlined above, as well as questions that are key components of the Strategy Formation session such as:

- What new competitors have entered our market and what does this mean for us?
- What trends are on the horizon that we need to be aware of? What are the implications for us?
- What do we most admire about our competitors and what can we learn from them?

What evidence is there that this is a useful tool?

The concept of an ongoing discussion group is relatively common. However, when such a group is formed it is not always implemented and maintained as intentionally as outlined above. The key distinctions of this group are the criteria for membership, the regularity of its meetings, and the dedication of a block of time to open discussion of a key strategic question. You will be surprised how much can float to the surface in a one hour meeting.

How have others used this tool? (*examples/case studies/research*)

At La Piana Associates we use this tool in our monthly staff meetings and bi-annual retreats where we allocate time to a discussion aptly titled "The Next Big Thing." We set this time aside to identify key trends and new ideas, and consider the implications of these for the sector, our clients, our firm, and ourselves. At one meeting we grappled with how to better reach our target audiences and stimulate innovative discussion with them. A week after this discussion, David La Piana's blog, *The Next Big Thing*, was born. (www.lapiana.org/blog) At a recent staff meeting we grappled with the rapid growth of our firm, which has tripled in staff size in the past 5 years, and the challenge of keeping our non-hierarchical culture while maintaining our quality standards. We emerged from the retreat with a new matrix structure centered on shared accountability for relationships, professional development, and quality. Not bad for a series of relatively brief discussions.