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Strategic Planning in Human Service Agencies

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Recent public policy initiatives including deinstitutionalization, deregulation, decentralization, and privatization have resulted in: (a) rapid growth in the number of private not-for-profit organizations; and, (b) competitive environments. These conditions have forced agencies to examine their planning processes to determine if agency goals are appropriate for meeting market demands. An exploratory study of 154 human service agencies examined if and how strategic planning was used to respond to these conditions. The Chief Executive Officers for those agencies reported that strategic planning was replacing incremental planning as a preferred planning model. However, the choice resulted because of pressure from outside influentials not because of a perception of increased competition. Despite this, agencies choosing a strategic planning model were generally rigorous in its application. One-half of the sample reported a "major" change outcome for the agency as a result of the planning process but broad participation by stakeholders impeded substantial change. Questions are raised about using strategic planning when major change is not sought and/or broad participation by stakeholders is important.

During the last twenty years, the number of private, voluntary, service organizations (PVSOs) increased dramatically. The vast majority are operated as not-for-profit (as opposed to for-profit and governmental) organizations under the Internal Revenue Service Code. Although growth in this third sector (Weiner, 1982) of the nation's economy reflects a range of concerns, e.g. promotion of the arts and protection of the environ-

ment, it is particularly apparent in the social service field where a multitude of new agencies were organized to provide supportive services to maintain independent community living for persons previously institutionalized including the elderly and persons with physical, developmental, or mental disabilities. Few would dispute the notion that an increase in the number of PVSOs coupled with a public policy stance promoting local decision-making and less regulation substantially alters the organizational environment. Stripped of the protection previously afforded by governments' categorically specified funding patterns and non-competitive purchase of service awards, PVSOs now also face a fast-growing number of for-profit health and social service organizations offering services attractive to middle class "private pays." In short, PVSOs find themselves in an increasingly competitive environment.

Today, both public administrators and PVSO management are searching for an optimum mixture of competition and regulation. Furthermore, government agencies are placing more responsibility on PVSOs to gauge the needs of their constituencies and demonstrate organizational effectiveness in meeting those needs. Therefore, it is important to examine this sizable sector of our economy to determine how PVSOs are responding to the challenges of their new market conditions. One area that can be expected to change is management's planning function. Of particular interest is the extent to which PVSO management has forsaken planning decision structures based on a monopolistic, regulated environment and incorporated in their stead decision structures designed to deal with a competitive environment. Other responses are, of course, possible. For example, agencies may abandon the search for an independent niche. An early report from a nationwide study of the influence of competitive and cost containment forces on health and social service agencies serving the elderly recommends voluntary homemaker/chore agencies merge with large home health agencies (Wood & Estes, 1986-87).

Historically, PVSOs relied upon a "disjointed incrementalism" (DI) decision model, first labelled and elaborated by Lindblom (1959). Incrementalism, also referred to as "partisan mutual adjustment" or "muddling through" urges practitioners to analyze policy choices which are successive "limited comparisons"

with existing procedures. The model assumes the best solution for any given problem is the one which inspires the most consensus, a consensus achieved through a partisan mutual adjustment process. Praised for its ability to describe decision making behavior in the "real" planning arena of pluralistic politics, DI is nonetheless criticized for its reliance on consensus-building and existing policy thrusts, its relative neglect of contextual considerations, the short-time frame perspectives it embodies, and the small degree of change which usually results when it is adopted. Lindblom's original article spawned numerous critiques of both incremental and rational comprehensive planning processes. The main themes of the debate are captured by Dror (1969), Etzioni, (1967, 1986), and Lindblom (1979).

Until the mid-1970's, PVSOs thrived in an environment especially congenial to the consensus, coalition, domain consensus values featured in the DI model. During that period, Federal social policy attempted to create an efficient system of service delivery through the design of comprehensive delivery systems without gaps and duplications—in short, a subsidized monopolistic system which sought to dampen competitive forces. Because the DI model mandates a collapsed time frame, limited solutions and accepts a limited environmental analysis, it is an appropriate planning choice in a stable, highly regulated non-competitive environment.

Today's new and more competitive environment is stimulating PVSO management to adopt a "strategy planning" model which was developed in the corporate sector to select future directions. In 1980 the United Way of America, following the corporate example, changed the name of its planning division to "Strategic Planning." Of the 800 member organizations with full-time staff affiliated with the United Way of America, 62 percent had completed a strategic plan development process by 1984. Franchise systems such as the Red Cross, Boy Scouts, Family Service Associations and the Girl Scouts have also adopted strategic planning (SP) and provide technical assistance to their affiliates to help them develop strategic plans.

Strategy planning, deeply rooted in such "synoptic traditions" (Hudson, 1979) as rational, comprehensive and long-range planning, is the term used by private sector management theor-

ists to describe those planning processes "which one did to counteract what a competitor did or was likely to do" (Steiner, 1979). Hofer and Schendel (1973) suggest strategy planning is an appropriate response to environmental change. Clearly, it is seen as a management tool to gain competitive advantage.

There is general agreement that strategic planning encompasses those processes and tasks required to choose organizational goals and develop and implement a plan to achieve them. Strategic planning assumes complex social phenomena can be understood, that means can be connected to ends and their relationships predicted, that alternative means can be identified, and that a "best" means can be selected, implemented, and evaluated. Strategic planning's emphasis on long-range perspectives, comprehensive environmental analysis, and on extensive solution search lends itself to informing management decision processes in a competitive environment. The model is praised for its capacity to identify a broad range of solution options and its potential for promoting fundamental change. It is criticized for its tendency to support elite decision-making and unwillingness to admit knowledge limitations on achieving comprehensive perspectives and predicting the consequences of alternative means. Limitations notwithstanding, SP is widely used in the corporate sector. There is a considerable literature concluding that strategic planning and formal strategy analysis do have a positive impact on the performance of business organizations as measured by profit and market share (Beard & Dess, 1981; Herold, 1972; Schendel et al., 1976; Schoeffler et al., 1974; Thompson & Strickland, 1983).

It has often been the case that management innovations are developed for private for-profit firms. As these innovations become more widely known they are adopted by the not-for-profit sector. In order to determine the degree to which this is occurring with respect to strategic planning three principal questions were defined to guide an exploratory study of PVSO management planning activities:

1. What prompts PSVOs to use SP?
2. What planning process variations occur when strategic planning is undertaken by PVSOs?
3. What affects strategic planning outcomes?

Because the study was primarily interested in SP processes within PVSOs, the sample was purposely constructed to net a large number of SP users. Three urban areas (two Southwestern and one Eastern) were selected which were identified by the United Way of America as receiving SP emphasis from the local United Way. Each of the three United Ways supplied a complete list of all organizational affiliates, and it is that list which comprised the total sample.

Data were solicited by mail questionnaire from the sample's Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). The eight page mail questionnaire sought detailed information on a number of organizational and environmental characteristics including size, funding sources, planning capabilities of the staff and CEOs, services offered, affiliation, perceived environmental changes, and data on planning activities, knowledge and use of planning aids, planning outcomes, and satisfaction with the planning endeavor.

The 154 responding organizations represented 56% of those receiving the survey instrument. Eighty-eight (57%) had selected a strategic planning process, 93 percent of those within the last six years. All of the PVSOs are human service organizations, but do differ in services provided, target populations, and annual budgets. Included in the sample are such agencies as advocacy organizations, family service agencies, neighborhood and half-way houses, hospitals and community based health and mental health agencies, residential care facilities, etc. Annual budgets ranged from under \$100,000 for a volunteer management assistance organization to over \$100 million for a large hospital.

What Prompts PVSOs To Use SP?

To examine just what influences an organization to adopt SP, differences were explored between PVSOs that used SP and those that did not. Three types of factors were posed as potentially influential: funding sources, organizational characteristics, and market conditions.

1. Funding Sources: sources of operating revenues for the agency.
2. Organizational characteristics: organizational size; management trained in SP; new management; national or state affiliation; past planning experiences; staff-board planning

resources; availability of agency data to guide planning; perceived mission flexibility.

3. Market conditions: changing clients, pressures to plan from funders or affiliates, increased direct competition (competition with organizations offering similar services/products) or indirect competition (with organizations offering different services/products but dependent on same sources for capital); changing service products; pressure to expand or contract; perception other organizations are using SP; conflict re-growth/cutback.

Factors selected were culled from a combination of sources including the author's experiential convictions based on previous consulting activities, interviews with key informants, and reports in the literature.

A regression analysis (using dummy variables) was conducted with factors identified in a preliminary bivariate analysis which suggested a predictor effect on PVSOs use of SP (Table 1). (Note: The equations used do not conform to standard Ordinary Least Squares assumptions. Therefore, a sample of the estimated equations was reestimated using Probit analysis, and the size of the coefficients and tests of significance did not vary.) The regression analysis produced a set of predictors accounting for a modest amount of variance (25%) distinguishing between those PVSOs using SP and those that do not. Obviously, those organizations required to adopt an SP model by an external source do so. The remaining factors, although significant, individually account for a very small amount of the variance. Data do not support the hypotheses that managers in the sample choose strategic planning because they perceive competition in their environment. Managers use SP because, put quite simply, they are required or encouraged by an external source to do so.

Further confounding the issue of choice in the selection of SP is the fact that an awareness of increased indirect competition was negatively associated with SP use. Additionally, the negligible effect of an awareness of direct competition in the organizational environment (which did not achieve significance in the regression) suggests SP appears to occur for reasons largely unrelated to the purposes for which it was created. If indeed CEOs choose SP primarily because of external pressure, then there is

Table 1

Regression Analysis of Decision to Do Strategic Planning

N = 154

Dependent Variable = Choosing to Develop an SP

| Variable | b (unstandardized) | F Value | R Square Change |
|--|--------------------|---------|-----------------|
| The plan was required | .41 | 21.1* | .13 |
| The agency received funds from the United Way | .21 | 7.5* | .06 |
| The agency was large | .17 | 5.2* | .03 |
| The agency received funds from membership dues | .15 | 4.4* | .02 |
| The agency was experiencing indirect competition | -.13 | 3.3* | .02 |
| The agency had limited staff/board resources to devote to planning | -.14 | 3.3* | .02 |
| R Square | .28 | | |
| Adjusted R Square | .25 | | |
| Constant | .39 | | |

*Meets test of significance at .05 level.

reason to expect PVSOs using SP will blend some aspects of the old way of doing things (DI) into their SP decision models.

What SP Planning Process Variations Occur in SP?

The extent to which a "pure" SP model or a "blended" SP-DI model is used is explored by examining variations in the planning process within the sample PVSOs reporting SP use (N = 88). A pure SP process would encompass, for example, completion of the entire set of prescribed tasks (see below), high echelon stakeholder (e.g., board members and the CEO) participation and control, the use of technical consultants, and/or de-

cisions made on the basis of technical merit as opposed to reconcilable differences. A blended model would be in evidence if some model tasks are not completed, where CEO support is stronger than CEO involvement, and where widespread stakeholder participation, the use of process facilitators, and consensus decision making are present.

Completeness of Tasks

Strategic planning commonly specifies a series of direction-setting tasks that must be accomplished before management's implementation and monitoring activities can occur. Although variously termed in the literature, the menu of planning tasks requires a determination of desired organizational purpose, an audit of internal capacities and external markets, a forecast of opportunities and threats, and the selection and documentation of an appropriate plan of action which will enable the organization to accomplish its stated mission. To facilitate examination of the SP process in the sample organizations, six planning tasks were identified:

1. Mission Analysis (purpose)
2. Internal Audit (organizational strengths and weaknesses)
3. External Audit (market conditions)
4. Forecasting (major trend analysis)
5. Strategy Identification and Selection
6. Plan Document Development

Fifty-six percent of the PVSOs choosing SP completed all six SP tasks. Only 7% completed three or fewer. Mission Analysis, Forecasting, and Plan Document Development were each completed by at least 90% of the organizations. The task receiving the least attention was the External Audit (75%). Customarily, the External Audit and Mission Analysis are considered to be essential tasks for gaining strategic advantage (Drucker, 1974; McConkey, 1981; Wechsler and Backoff, 1986). The lesser attention to environmental scanning and analysis suggests external environmental considerations were relatively neglected and call into question the bases used for strategy identification and selection. The data here suggest PVSOs have yet to give equal parity to the external environment, a prerequisite to the achieve-

ment of the comprehensive view of organizational choices required by SP. The SP task structure did, however, force more environmental surveillance than would be expected from organizations accustomed to using DI planning procedures.

On the whole, the number of tasks completed by the SP user organizations suggests a rather faithful adherence to SP model recommendations. So does the attention to Mission Analysis by organizations belonging to a sector which has earned a considerable reputation for ambiguous organizational goals and objectives (Demone & Harshbarger, 1974; Drucker, 1977; Newman and Wallender, 1978; Lewis & Lewis, 1983). On the other hand, a hint of lingering comfort with DI analysis is suggested in the lesser attention devoted to the External Audit.

Stakeholder Participation

The sample PVSOs reported widespread involvement by high echelon stakeholders including CEOs, board members, and management staff; much less involvement by non-management staff and outsiders. CEOs were involved in all six tasks in 70% of the planning efforts; comparable figures for board members and other management staff are 51% and 48% respectively. Contrast that with direct service "front-line" staff who were involved in all tasks in only 11% of the cases. Outsiders and clerical staff participated in all tasks in less than 5% of the cases. A picture emerges of an elitist planning process.

Table 2 details stakeholder participation by SP task, controlling for the number of tasks completed. Elites participate most frequently in the principal decision-making phases—Mission Analysis and Strategy Identification and Selection. Management staff and non-managerial service staff participate most often during the Internal Audit. External stakeholders are most involved during the External Audit, but the relative paucity of participation points to the earlier observation concerning the lack of attention devoted to the External Audit. The degree to which processes are elite controlled is confirmed in the mean participation scores demonstrating all non-management stakeholders are involved much less than powerful stakeholders. A process which is structured to minimize the required number of decision actors is compatible with rational, comprehensive

Table 2

Percent of Organizations With Stakeholder Participation by Task

| Stakeholder | Mission Analysis | Fore-Casting | External Audit | Internal Audit | Strategy Selection | Plan Document Development | Mean Participation SCORE |
|-------------------------------|------------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Elites | | | | | | | |
| CEO | 98 | 87 | 81 | 88 | 99a | 87 | 90 |
| Board Members | | | | | | | |
| Board Members | 91 | 77 | 71 | 78 | 97a | 77 | 82 |
| Insiders | | | | | | | |
| Other Management Staff | | | | | | | |
| Other Management Staff | 72 | 79 | 72 | 80a | 77 | 63 | 74 |
| Direct Service Persons | | | | | | | |
| Direct Service Persons | 47 | 50 | 46 | 53a | 52 | 32 | 47 |
| Clerical Staff | 21 | 18 | 33a | 28 | 27 | 12 | 23 |
| Outsiders | | | | | | | |
| Community Rep | | | | | | | |
| Community Rep | 25 | 29 | 43a | 25 | 30 | 13 | 28 |
| Clients | 20 | 23 | 40a | 30 | 29 | 10 | 25 |
| Affiliates | 17 | 24 | 35a | 23 | 24 | 12 | 23 |
| Funders | 15 | 18 | 33a | 20 | 21 | 6 | 19 |

a = Stakeholder High

models and considered to be desirable in promoting change-oriented decisions (Rein & Morris, 1965).

Role of Consultants and CEOs

Forty-five percent of the organizations reported using consultants during the SP process. The most frequent use (42%) occurred during the External Audit, historically a relatively unfamiliar task for PVSO managers. Forty percent reported relying on consultants to help design an SP process—in essence to provide the nuts and bolts of the “how to.” Finally, 23% used consultants for formal documentation of the final plan. Thus,

consultants were used for substantive, technical contributions to the planning process. Less than one-fifth of the sample PVSOs reported using consultants as facilitators—those persons skilled in providing environments which stimulate contribution and decision making. Facilitation was most often used in the initial phase—Mission Analysis. However, only one-third of the organizations using facilitators credit use of facilitators as important to planning success.

The high degree of involvement (participation) by CEOs throughout the planning process was shown in Table 2. A similar percentage of the responding organizations reported strong CEO support (encouragement) for SP. Thus, the CEO role included equal doses of involvement and support. Since the majority of the questionnaires was completed by CEOs, the support figure may be suspect. Thompson and Strickland (1983) suggest that the most important task of management is direction setting and argue, as does Steiner (1979), that CEOs have a responsibility to be involved deeply in SP processes. PVSO managers apparently agree. In any case, CEOs are the most active actors in the SP process, and appear to be shouldering much of the responsibility for conducting SP within their organizations.

Decision Strategies

Ninety-one percent of the organizations reported using consensus as a basis for planning decision-making. The response raises a number of conceptual issues regarding SP-DI orientations. Because 75% of the organizations indicated that SP helped them resolve conflicts, it is not unlikely that consensus masks a considerable measure of negotiation, persuasion, and even confrontation to set the stage for the final consensual agreement. However, an elitist, top-down planning process—the predominant mode in this sample—would suggest a higher probability of achieving an early consensus than a planning process giving equal weight to opinion from several hierarchical levels or horizontal constituencies. As suggested earlier, the DI model is most closely associated with a consensus decision criterion. If agreement is reached because technical, non-political criteria are met, a consensus strategy begins to shade into the strategies implied in the SP model. However, because CEOs so overwhelmingly

valued consensus as a decision strategy, it is probable that a commitment to DI planning processes is carried over to SP activities.

What Affects Planning Outcomes?

A final area of concern was the relationship, if any, between planning process variations and the types of outcomes proposed by the plan. The DI model is most closely associated with producing a recommended set of minor, incremental changes. The SP model promises fundamental, major change outcomes. The two outcomes, major or minor change, were defined by the respondents. In those cases where the respondent concluded that the plan proposed major changes, at least three of the following were proposed: (a) change in mission; (b) addition of new service; (c) elimination of existing service; (d) change in staff; (e) change in organization structure.

One-third of the PVSOs reported that their plans proposed only minor changes; a similar percentage reported only major change outcomes; 17% indicated both major and minor outcomes; and 10% indicated their plans proposed no changes for agency operations. Clearly, SP is causing organizations to seriously challenge accepted ways of doing business since nearly one-half of the agencies report major change outcomes. Additionally, failure to propose major changes does not necessarily mean that the process was a failure because it is conceivable that SP will affirm that existing goals are appropriate and should be continued. However, failure to identify major changes during the SP process does raise questions regarding the appropriateness of using a time-consuming, expensive process (SP) where no change or only minor change outcomes result, as occurred in almost half of the cases in this sample.

Table 3 identifies the influence of SP planning process variations and organizational and market conditions associated with plans that propose major changes for the organization. Forty percent of the variance is explained. Completing all the required tasks and the use of consultant expertise to develop planning processes were positive influences. Widespread stakeholder participation, a carryover from the DI model, detracted somewhat from securing major change recommendations. Neither a con-

sensus strategy nor CEO involvement influenced outcome one way or another.

While few of the organizational or market conditions were related to the decision to adopt SP, several factors were associated with plans proposing major organizational changes. Size is the only organizational characteristic predicting a major change outcome. However, all but one of the market factors made a difference in plan outcome. One of the important predictors defining a competitive arena, experiencing indirect competition, was negatively associated with the achievement of major change. All other market factors had a positive influence on a major change result, confirming the hypothesis that changing market conditions will influence the degree of organizational change.

Funders and affiliates believing so strongly in SP that they are disposed to require its adoption can take comfort that an external requirement produced plans promoting major change. Organizations did not just "go through the motions" to satisfy funders.

Conclusions

PVSOs are in a period of dramatic change. National commitments to deregulation, deinstitutionalization, and decentralization provide a climate in which organizations, though operating in an increasingly competitive and risky environment, have endless opportunities to add products and penetrate new markets. Champions of strategic planning suggest that all organizations will benefit from developing a strategic plan and that benefits are especially great for organizations experiencing competitive conditions.

Although two-thirds of the large organizations (budgets over \$750,000) and one-third of the smaller organizations (under \$750,000) reported experiencing direct and/or indirect competition, that fact had little to do with a decision to use SP. The overriding characteristic of those organizations developing a strategic plan is that they are required/encouraged to do so. Once an SP process was engaged, however, the organizations generally adhered to SP model requirements with a considerable steadfastness. The organizations most judiciously honoring the "how to" manuals produced plans resulting in major changes.

Table 3

Regression Analysis of Factors Associated With Plans That Propose Major Changes

Dependent Variable = Major Changes Proposed by Plan
N = 88

| Independent Variables | b (unstandardized) | Fstat | R2 Change |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|-------|-----------|
| <i>Planning Process Variation</i> | | | |
| Completed all Tasks | .21 | 5.3* | .112 |
| Used Consultant to Develop Process | .31 | 12.4* | .045 |
| High Stakeholder Participation | -.19 | 4.1* | .021 |
| Contextual Factors | | | |
| <i>Organizational</i> | | | |
| Large agency | .22 | 6.1* | .027 |
| <i>Market Conditions</i> | | | |
| Pressure to Expand | .27 | 6.8* | .023 |
| Pressures to Plan | .22 | 5.1* | .017 |
| Pressure to Contract | .46 | 4.6* | .020 |
| Perceive Others to be Doing SP | .18 | 4.5* | .035 |
| Conflict re Growth/Cutback | .20 | 4.3* | .059 |
| Increased Direct Competition | .18 | 4.3* | .079 |
| Changing Clients | .18 | 3.3* | .019 |
| Increased Indirect Competition | -.173 | 3.2* | .018 |

Constant -.33, R Square .49, Adjusted R Square .40

*Significant at .05 level

Little attention has been focused on identifying the conditions suitable for SP use rather than incrementalist methods. Although most of the publications addressing the merits of various planning models do incorporate or imply conditions in their critiques, none claim comprehensiveness. Clearly SP is an expensive process, requiring a considerable investment of resources including time and money. If the process yields only incremental adjustments, questions need to be raised about whether SP is necessary.

From the perspective of the CEO, the implications are somewhat troublesome. If managers wish to propose major changes, then this study suggests the planning process should be structured to assure that all SP tasks are attended to, that consultants are used to assist in process design and analysis of the external environment, and that broad participation be held to a minimum. Many CEOs are unaccustomed to methods for conducting the External Audit task. The tendency has been to use general forecasting techniques such as census analysis as substitutes for more definitive market analyses. Until market analysis models for PVSOs are developed, a productive analysis of environmental conditions (an SP requirement) will continue to be problematic for many PVSOs.

Finally, many CEOs in human service organizations have been strongly influenced by human relations theorists who value broad participation for, among other reasons, the probability that plan implementation will be enhanced when those who carry out the plans are involved in formulation. The finding pointing to a negative relationship between broad participation and a major change outcome may cause discomfort if managers believe they must choose between the two goals of promoting innovations and increasing stakeholder commitment to the organization. The dilemma can be somewhat tempered if managers are careful to identify the who, when, and why of appropriate stakeholder participation in particular SP tasks rather than assume an individual's participation is needed throughout the process. Again, managers may choose to sequence the major change/stakeholder commitment, using SP when major change is needed and turning to an incremental analysis with broad stakeholder involvement once the change is secured.

There is no reason to believe that competitive forces will wane. The more likely case is that competition will increase for all PVSOs in both their capital and client markets. The risks associated with changing organizational direction that may result from adopting SP methods must be evaluated in light of risks of doing nothing different and relying on what worked in the past.

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