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The Year of Living Strategically

By Ellen McGrath

As the year from July 2000-July 2001 began, I took office as Chair of the Online Bibliographic Services Special Interest Section (OBS-SIS) during its business meeting at the AALL annual meeting in Philadelphia. It was a real honor and I was both excited and apprehensive about the challenge. An OBS Strategic Planning Committee had been formed in April 2000, but its real work was yet to begin. One of my goals as Chair was to see that plan to completion and introduce it in July 2001 in Minneapolis. This was of course no small task, but it was a very interesting one, that would give me the opportunity to work closely with lots of great OBS members. On a parallel front, my library, the Charles B. Sears Law Library, University at Buffalo (UB), was also beginning to work on a strategic plan.

In this article, I would like to provide some details of these two specific strategic plans and how they evolved, as well as to describe what I learned about the process of strategic planning. I was on the Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) for both of these efforts. Participating in the development of two plans simultaneously, while confusing at times, was also quite helpful to me. As I learned something while working on one, I often was able to apply it to the other as well. In chronological terms, this is how the plans unfolded.

OBS-SIS

Sally Wambold, OBS SPC Facilitator, had suggested that it would be ideal to have a consultant assist OBS in getting its process off the ground. Unfortunately, the OBS budget did not allow for hiring a consultant. The State, Court & County Law Libraries (SCCLL) SIS Strategic Plan was very well-done and it was one of the models that the OBS SPC had gathered in its initial phase of research. Gail Warren was SCCLL Chair and so was closely involved in the SCCLL process, which did employ the services of a consultant. Gail had enthusiastically shared information she had collected during the SCCLL process with the members of the SIS Council, when she was Chair of that group in 1998/1999. Having attended the SIS Leadership Training led by Gail in 1999, I thought of her immediately. Sally contacted Gail, who was not only willing, but brimming with ideas and initiative. During the 2000 AALL Meeting in Philadelphia, Gail provided the

OBS SPC with a high energy "jumpstart" session. It was held on the morning of July 17, 2000 at the Biddle Law Library, University of Pennsylvania.

As a follow-up to that session, the OBS Board meeting held two days later on July 19, 2000 was devoted entirely to the topic of strategic planning. Sally and some other members of the OBS SPC attended. Flipcharts from the jumpstart session were reviewed, more input was gathered, and a timeline was discussed. In the Fall of 2000, an environmental scan was conducted. Sally divided up the list of OBS members available on AALLNET. An SPC member then contacted each OBS member to ask a few questions about their impressions of OBS and to solicit reaction to a draft OBS mission statement. This informal survey was typically conducted via e-mail and the results were tabulated. These results were then combined with the results of the annual OBS membership survey, available in January 2001. The SPC members then focused on writing the mission statement in March 2001. That was followed by the writing of the rest of the strategic plan over the course of the Spring 2001. The plan was completed and unveiled at a festive celebration during the OBS business meeting on July 16, 2001 in Minneapolis.

UB Law Library

Beginning in late August 2000, a library user survey was researched and drafted. It was pretested on UB Law Library staff, refined, and then distributed to law students, faculty, and alumni during October 2000. A similar discussion about utilizing the services of a consultant took place. Fortunately the Law Library's budget could afford this assistance. Jackie Stroh, a local consultant who had conducted effective sessions for the UB Libraries, was engaged to help in the Law Library's process. The Law Library's SPC began meeting with Jackie in Fall 2000. During Spring 2001, three full-day "retreats" were held off-site for the SPC with Jackie on January 8, February 21, and March 19. Meetings were held with the full Law Library staff in between the retreats, so as to share information and gather feedback. For example, on March 9, 2001, there was a pizza lunch for all staff which focused on the topic of values. SPC Chair Terry McCormack compiled detailed minutes of each retreat as well as all

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other meetings held on the subject of strategic planning. The plan was written in late Spring, comments were solicited from the Law Library's users, and the final version is dated May 30, 2001.

Similarities/Differences

Some of the similarities between these parallel efforts are obvious. Both OBS and the Law Library used consultants in their work. The background of those consultants and the amount of time each SPC spent with her varied widely. But both consultants were essential in achieving the final goal of producing a strategic plan. Both SPCs collected examples of other strategic plans to use as models, though the types of plans naturally varied. OBS looked to plans by AALL, other SISs, and other professional organizations. The Law Library looked to plans by other law libraries and academic libraries in general. Both plans were to be written within the same basic time frame of the 2000/2001 academic year.

Both SPCs were chosen very carefully in terms of membership. For OBS, this meant that a conscious effort was made to have members on the SPC that represented various types of libraries (academic, private, state/court/county) and differing perspectives as OBS members (new and long-time members, active and not as active members). For the law Library, this meant a mix of professional and paraprofessional staff from different functional areas of the library served on the SPC. Both SPCs gathered feedback from their members/users. Both plans included a mission statement. For both organizations, this was the first strategic plan, though there may have been some information in existence already, though fashioned in a less structured way.

On the other hand, there are some substantial differences, not so much in the strategic planning process used, but rather in the very nature of these two organizations. In many ways, OBS is more of a virtual organization. Its members typically only have the chance to meet in-person once a year during the AALL annual meeting. OBS communicates with its members through its print newsletter, its Website, and its electronic mail list. Members of the OBS SPC used these same communication methods in its work, supplemented occasionally by telephone calls and faxes. The jumpstart

session was wonderful and energizing and made interaction between SPC members easy and fun, since we were all in the same room. Sustaining that energy and interchange throughout the course of the following year proved challenging however, given the inability to gather together again as a group, in-person.

For the Law Library, though some of its connections to users are virtual, it is associated with a physical place where its users come and meet face to face with its staff members. The ability of the Law Library SPC to go on retreats with the consultant and to meet together frequently, as well as to meet with the rest of the Law Library staff, made their work slightly easier. This difference extended itself to the gathering of feedback from member/users. Technically it was simpler for the Law Library to distribute to and collect surveys from its users than it was for OBS to do the same with its members. Though in practical terms, I am not sure this resulted in more feedback for the Law Library, since it is also difficult to get someone to fill out a survey in-person.

General Observations

The differences in the products and services provided by these two organizations are significant and are clearly illustrated by the different content within each plan. Yet the process of strategic planning itself was almost identical. The use of a consultant is essential, as I stated earlier. The consultant need not be a "professional" in the sense that s/he has received extensive training and commands a high fee. The consultant must be familiar with and believe in the process of strategic planning. S/he must also be an outsider to the group that is undertaking the process. The latter is important because it gives the consultant the objectivity necessary to see what the members of the group often cannot as they work their way throughout the stages of the process. The consultant keeps an eye on the process, since s/he has no investment in the content and can move the group forward when it gets stuck, which can happen frequently. It amazed me how often in trying to explain to either Gail or Jackie why we do something, it became evident that there was no good reason and that we should rethink it completely. This sort of "lightbulb, thinking-out-of-the-box" experience is mandatory, but less likely to happen without

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an outsider questioning everything carefully. On the bright side, members of both SPCs became better at consciously trying to “shift their paradigm” as the process continued.

The strategic planning process seems a bit overwhelming at first. But both consultants broke it down nicely into a series of specific tasks. In what I think is probably a typical progression, you begin with some definitions and questions. Jackie, the Law Library consultant, spent a good deal of time on definitions, many of which were very helpful to me outside of their strategic planning applications. For example, we spent some time on the definition of consensus. I was a bit surprised to learn from Jackie that consensus does not mean equal agreement. When we collected ideas about what consensus looked like, this is what we came up with:

- Participants will utilize objective tools
- Accurate and complete information is available during the process of determining outcomes
- Process includes collaborative and open communication
- Our “customers” will be satisfied with the results of the outcomes
- Ultimate results will “add value” to our services (there is no point in arguing over issues that do not add value)
- All participants can “live with” result (it may not be first choice of each, but it does not offend anyone on moral grounds)

We also spent time defining an effective meeting process, which ended up as an appendix of the Law Library’s strategic plan. We used this as a guide during our SPC work, but we also utilize it on a daily basis as we conduct meetings in the Law Library.

In terms of questions, for the group under examination, you start by thinking about who are we, what do we do, why do we do it, and how do we do it? The exercise of answering these questions honestly gets you back to basics and ready to think ahead. This cannot be done superficially, you must dig deep and try to cover all the bases. That is why brainstorming in a cross-sectional

group, a staple of the strategic planning process, is so well-suited to this activity. Specific information about products and services are recorded at this point.

SWOT Analysis

A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis is another staple of the process. We began with definitions:

Strengths: Things we know we do well, that can be maximized and reflected in the mission, and possibly made even more efficient. An organization’s strengths may also become a benchmark for other groups to compare themselves to.

Weaknesses: Things we know we do not do well, but that are more or less within our control and could be repaired if they are important to the organization’s goals. We should first identify weaknesses, then analyze them, and determine the level of impact on the organization. Then ask the questions: Do we want or need to fix the problem? Can we live with it? What would happen if we did not fix it?

Opportunities: Things or events that we can identify, evaluate and exploit to the benefit of the organization. Similar to threats, opportunities may cause change, present new possibilities, and impact the mission of the organization. In responding to opportunities, an organization will require flexibility. Opportunities may also require risk analysis, as an opportunity may turn into a threat. Opportunities may be short or long term in duration.

Threats: Actions, factors, events or forces that may compromise an organization’s mission, but the organization may not know its degree of control, influence or involvement. A perceived threat may come from an internal or external source and have a short or long term impact on the organization. In dealing with a threat, people and organizations require acceptance, reflection, and flexibility. Threats may also offer opportunities that may only become visible after reflection.

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In both SPCs, we spent a lot of time brainstorming to gather all the SWOTs. Both consultants emphasized the necessity of identifying the recurring themes or issues and then focusing on those with "high impact." It was acknowledged that time should not be wasted on trying to solve problems over which the organization has little or no control. These should simply be recognized and then the group should move on.

Environmental Scan

Another tool in the process is the environmental scan. There are varying methods of gathering feedback from an organization's customers: formal and informal surveys and focus groups are probably the major ones. Both OBS and the Law Library utilized the survey method. The Law Library hoped to conduct focus groups, but unfortunately ran out of time and was unable to do so. In both cases, there were some surprises in the survey results, so it is essential that you do not assume that you already know what your members/users want.

Mission Statement

Constructing the mission statement was a major phase of each of these processes. The mission statement process illustrates perfectly the overall approach to the strategic planning process. You brainstorm and brainstorm and then boil all the output down repeatedly until you come up with a concise summary. All Law Library staff spent many hours working on the values that were to be reflected in our mission statement. I was surprised to hear someone mention recently that mission statements were becoming outdated. I felt that the process of crafting the mission fed the rest of both of these processes so well, that I am not sure how each SPC would have fared later on without that step.

The Plan

The actual setup of the strategic plan is fairly standard, but there are some differences in terminology. The OBS SPC decided to follow the format of the AALL strategic plan and use the terms: strategic directions, outcomes, and initiatives. The Law Library SPC decided to go with: goals, objectives, and actions. Both sets of terms mean

the same and proceed from the broad to specific. It can get tricky at times determining what goes where within these categories, another time when the consultant's help is needed. At the last level, called either initiative or action, it is essential that you be specific. These must be tangible actions with definite target dates as appropriate. Both consultants emphasized repeatedly that we have to be able to recognize when something has been achieved and, if possible, to measure its success. Otherwise the plan is meaningless.

What else did I learn about strategic planning?

- Give your group time to let discussions sort of settle and then revisit them. Within reason of course--it is important to have an end date in mind by which you must finish the plan, but try not to rush it too much.
- Brainstorming is invigorating and productive, but it can be exhausting too! Another reason to allow time to reflect and recover.
- Try to enjoy the process and let it flow of its own accord.
- Celebrate your final result.
- Make the plan a part of your daily life and consult it frequently to see where you are.

More Planning

I am now involved in another strategic planning process undertaken by the University at Buffalo Libraries system, of which the UB Law Library is a part. The Core Planning Group, the equivalent of the SPCs, began its work in Fall 2001 with the aid of a consultant, Lou Wetherbee. I am involved on one of the subgroups looking at trends in the area of communication.

I would like to extend my thanks to all the members of both SPCs (see list below), as well as to Gail Warren and Jackie Stroh. It was a pleasure to work closely with such dedicated people. Please do take a look at both the OBS and Law Library plans and let me know if you have any comments. After all, you never know when a strategic plan may be in your future!

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- 2001-2004 Strategic Plan of the OBS-SIS is available at:
<http://www.aallnet.org/sis/obssis/sp.htm>
- Mission and Strategic Plan, 2001-2003 of the UB Law Library is available at:
<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/law/RevisedMissionStrategicPlan.pdf>

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