



## FROM PLAN TO PRACTICE: CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

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While it is true that many of us are thinking about the future – particularly on the eve of a new millennium – it is also true that few of us feel completely prepared for the changes it brings. However, the future is not something that merely happens to us, but a series of paths we can influence. In the words of Louis Pasteur, “chance favors the prepared mind”. In the previous “Environmental Management” column (*Industrial Wastewater*, May/June 1999), we explored the benefits of long-term strategic planning. In this issue, we look at the factors critical to the success of this process, the basic components of which are illustrated in the figure.

A strategy is a specific plan or method(s) designed to achieve an identified goal over a period of one or several years. As examples, an environmental management strategy might involve:

- Eliminating all wastewater discharges, perhaps to avoid permitting problems or address a local sewer moratorium.
- Turning the environmental department into a profit center by selling some competency externally, or perhaps moving toward outsourcing components of the program consistent with a “core competency” mission of the company.
- Integrating the EH&S function with product line business units for greater accountability.

To successfully develop and implement strategies such as these, a number of critical factors must be addressed.

### 1. Plan to Plan

The planning process should be mapped at the outset, using a participatory approach. While some components, such as goal-setting, can be carried out by the environmental manager, others, such as data collection, need the contributions of many, possibly through task forces or outside experts.

### 2. Involve All Stakeholders

It is important to involve all those with the authority to make decisions or who represent institutions with the power to make decisions. Consider involving peer managers, environmental service providers, purchasing staff, even regulators. In addition, to avoid “group think,” and foster collaboration, make sure the stakeholders are a heterogeneous group.

### **3. Run Effective Meetings**

Some of the planning and analysis components -- idea generation, information sharing, and collective decision-making -- can be accomplished through a series of meetings. It is best not to use meetings to organize information, conduct detailed analysis, or “wordsmith” concepts. Try to limit the number of meeting participants to 2 to 7, arrange for a trained facilitator with larger groups, and draw the line at 15 participants. Finally, provide reading materials or assign pre-work ahead of time.

### **4. Analyze Thoroughly and Accurately**

The external and internal analysis components of the process need to be performed with painstaking attention to critical details. Too often, these aspects are treated as unimportant “color-the-square” activities, and not as the important foundation for creative strategizing that they really are.

### **5. Slay the Sacred Cows**

As difficult as it is critical, the decision to abandon programs or philosophies that an organization has long held “sacred,” must be made. In addition to strengthening the strategic plan, eliminating a program that has outlived its usefulness conveys a strong message about management commitment and builds support.

### **6. Be Creative**

Engage in collaborative brainstorming exercises to identify as many strategic alternatives as possible. Consider starting by identifying categories of strategies (regulatory, technological, staffing, financial) before moving on to specific strategic measures.

### **7. Allow for Uncertainty**

During the analysis stage, identify the nature and extent of the inevitable uncertainties. These might include questions about the timing of product line changes or the content of an impending consent order. Recognizing these uncertainties allows consideration of a portfolio of possible actions.

### **8. Measure Progress**

Certainly, what gets measured gets done. Translate the overall strategies into an operating plan that includes milestones and concrete schedules against which progress can be tracked. Also, make someone (or a group) responsible for auditing overall implementation, reviewing (and applauding) progress, and for addressing problems, with corresponding incentives and disincentives.

### **9. Adopt an Iterative Process**

Revisit the plan frequently (more than once per year) to re-evaluate internal and external drivers and make adjustments. Note that the strategic plan should not be allowed to become tied to the annual planning and budgeting cycle, but should remain part of a continuous system of monitoring and modification.

## 10. Reinforce the Message

Consider erring on the side of over-communication, since even the most ardent supporters will eventually become involved in other programs and forget some of the strategic decisions.

Recognize and reward strategic thinking and decision-making that is consistent with the strategic direction and cite specific strategies in day-to-day communication. Finally, consider synthesizing the strategic message into a format to which everyone has access, possibly as a laminated card or an Intranet-resident presentation.

## References

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**Paper published in Industrial Wastewater Magazine**

**By Water Environment Federation**