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STRATEGIC PLANNING BEST PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT: *Strategic planning is a business concept that's useful to all businesses and organizations, no matter its size or resources. Strategic planning is incorrectly positioned as a tool only available to big businesses. With the help of a practical and realistic approach to strategic planning, the plan is organization-wide or focused on a major function such as a division or a department. The strategic planning is a management philosophy that serves the purpose of helping an organization does a better job, because planning focuses the energy, resources, and time of everyone in the organization in the same direction. In this article, the author presents some of the practices of strategic planning, why organizations use and don't use such philosophy in their organizations, benefits and pitfalls. The paper also gives a clear roadmap of the major steps involved in the strategic planning process inside an organization.*

KEYWORDS: **Planning, Strategic Planning, Best Practices**

What is Strategic Planning?

One of the earliest definitions of strategy comes from the ancient Greek writer Xenophon. Strategy is knowing the business you propose to carry out. This definition stress that strategy requires knowledge of the business, an intention for the future, and orientation towards action. Kenneth Andrews (1971, P.66) defined strategy as the pattern of major objectives, purposes, and essential policies, or plans for achieving those goals.

Strategic Planning, in the broadest of deciding in advance what you intend to do and how you intend to do it, is not, of course, just a business activity (Smith, 1990, p.121). Strategic planning and management are more than a set of managerial tools. They constitute a mind-set, an approach to looking at the changes in the internal and external environment that confront the manager (Crosby, 1991, P.8). Strategic Planning is as systematic process through which an organization agrees on- and builds commitment among key stakeholders to- priorities that are essential to its mission and responsive to the environment (Allison, Kaye, 2005, p.1).

Strategic Planning can be defined as the art and the science of formulating, implementing, and evaluating cross-functional decisions that enable an organization to achieve its ultimate objectives (David, 2009, p.4).Strategic Planning can also be defined as the set of processes used by an organization to assess the strategic situation and develop a strategy for the future (Shafritz, 2005, p.699).Strategic planning was defined as-A procedure that includes the analysis of a situation and the synthesis of data into an integrated system of decisions, resulting in definable and measurable action steps that produce an articulated result" (Mintzberg, 1994, p.107).

The last few decades have seen several generations of strategic planning. SWOT analysis model dominated strategic planning of the 1950s. The 1960s brought

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qualitative and quantitative models of strategy. During the early 1980s, the shareholder value model and the Porter model became the standard. The rest of the 1980s was dictated by strategic intent and core competencies, and market-focused organizations. Finally, business transformation became dominant in the 1990s" (Gouillart, 1995, p.14).

Subsequent newer models of strategic planning were focused on adaptability to change, flexibility, and importance of strategic thinking and organizational learning. Strategic agility is becoming more important that the strategy itself, because the organization's ability to succeed has more to do with its ability to transform itself, continuously, than whether it has the right strategy. Being strategically agile enables organizations to transform their strategy depending on the changes in their environment" (Gouillart, 1995, p. 20).

According to (Wikipedia encyclopedia, 2011), strategic planning suggests ways (strategies) to identify and to move toward desired future states. It consists of the process of developing and implementing plans to reach goals and objectives.

What Strategic Planning Is Not?

Everything said above to describe what strategic planning is can also provide an understanding of what it is not. For example, it is about fundamental decisions and actions, but it does not attempt to make future decisions. Strategic planning involves anticipating the future environment, but the decisions are made in the present. This means that over time, the organization must stay abreast of changes to make the best decisions it can at any given point - it must manage, as well as plan, strategically (Steiner, 1979, P.55).

Further explanation of what Strategic Planning is not can be the following:
1- Strategic Planning doesn't predict the future: although strategic planning involves making assumptions about the future environment, the decision is made in the present, planning deals with the futurity of current decisions. Forward planning requires the choices be made possible events in the future, but decisions made in their light can be made only in the present. Overtime, an organization must monitor changes in its environment and assesses whether its assumptions remain essentially valid. If an unexpected shift occurs, major strategic decisions may have to be revisited sooner than they would in a typical three-to-five-year planning cycle.

2- Strategic Planning is not a substitute for the judgment of leadership: strategic planning is a tool; it is not a substitute for the exercise of judgment by leadership. Ultimately, the leaders of any organization need to ask themselves; what are the most important issues to respond to? And how shall we respond? Just as a tool such as a hammer doesn't create a bookshelf, so the data analysis and the decision-making tools of strategic planning don't make the decisions. There is no right answer. Strategic planning merely supports intuition, reasoning skills and judgment that people bring to the work of their organization.

3- Strategic Planning is rarely a smooth predictable linear process. Strategic planning, although structured in many respects, typically doesn't flow smoothly from one phase

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to the next. It's a creative process, requiring flexibility. The fresh insight arrive at today might very well alter the decisions made yesterday. Inevitably, the process moves forward and backward several times before the group arrives at the final set of decisions (Allison and Kaye, 2005, P.4).

The Difference between Strategic Planning and Long Range Planning?
The major difference between strategic planning and long-range planning is in emphasis. Long-range planning is generally considered to mean the development of a plan of action to accomplish a goal or set of goals over a period of several years. The major assumption in long range planning is that current knowledge about future conditions is sufficiently reliable to enable the development of these plans. Because the environment is assumed to be predictable, the emphasis is on the articulation of internally focused plans to accomplish agreed-on goals.

The major assumption in strategic planning, however, is that an organization must be responsive to a dynamic, changing environment. Therefore, the emphasis in strategic planning is on understanding how the environment is changing and will change and on developing organizational decisions that are responsive to these changes (Olsen, 2007, P.35).

Although many use these terms interchangeably, strategic planning and long-range planning differ in:
1- Their emphasis on the "assumed" environment. Long-range planning is generally considered to mean the development of a plan for accomplishing a goal or set of goals over a period of several years, with the assumption that current knowledge about future conditions is sufficiently reliable to ensure the plan's reliability over the duration of its implementation. In the late fifties and early sixties, for example, the U.S. economy was relatively stable and somewhat predictable, and, therefore, long-range planning was both fashionable and useful (Alliance-online, 2005).
2- Long-range planning and strategic planning are often used as synonyms, buy there is a difference: strategic planning aims to exploit the new and different opportunities of tomorrow, in contrast to long-range planning, which tries to optimize for tomorrow the trends of today (Morrison, et al., 1984, P.30).
3- Long-range planning is usually inwardly focused and consists of monitoring trends of interest to the institution, forecasting the expected future of these trends, defining the desired future for the institution by setting goals, implementing policies and actions, and evaluating the effects of these actions and policies on the selected trends.
4- In contrast, strategic planning begins with environmental scanning, a process of studying the external environment via newspapers, literature, and periodicals for emerging issues that pose threats or opportunities to an institution. Each issue is then evaluated about its possible impact. The environmental scan and evaluation are combined with the conventional long-range planning process to produce six stages of strategic planning: (1) environmental scanning; (2) evaluation of issues; (3) forecasting; (4) goal setting; (5) implementation; and (6) monitoring (Morrison et al., 1984). This model allows for both internal and external issues to be considered during the planning process.
According to Allison, and Kaye (2005, P.8), these concepts can be summarized as the following:

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Long Range Planning:
1- Views future as predictable, assumes the current trends will continue.
2- Focus on setting long-range objectives.
3- Assumes a most likely future and emphasized working backward to map out year-by-year sequences of events.
4- Asks the question: What should be done each year for the next three to five years?

Strategic Planning:
1- Views future as unpredictable.
2- Views planning as a continuous process.
3- Consider a range of possible futures and emphasizes strategy development based on assessment of the organizations internal (Strengths and Weaknesses) and external (Opportunities and Threats) environment.
4- Asks the questions: Based on our current understanding of the environment, are we doing the right thing? How can we best use our resources to achieve our mission?

Benefits of Strategic Planning

Successful strategic planning improves the focus of an organization in that it generates: an explicit understanding of the organization mission, and the organizational values among staff, board, and external constituencies. It is also a blueprint for action based on current information, broad milestones with which to monitor achievements and assess results. It provides Information that can be used to market the organization to the public and potential funders.

Strategic planning improves the process of people working together in that it creates a forum for discussing why the organization exists and the shared values that should influence the decisions, fosters successful communication and team work among the board of directors and staff, lays the ground work for meaningful change by stimulating strategic planning and focus on what is really important to the organization's long-term success, brings everyone's attention back to what is most important: seeking opportunities to better accomplish your mission (Allison and Kaye 2005, P.3, 4).

Based on David (2009), strategic planning has the following benefits:
1- It allows for identification, prioritization, and exploitation of opportunities.
2- It provides an objective view of management problems.
3- It represents a framework for improved coordination and control of activities.
4- It minimizes the effects of adverse conditions and changes.
5- It allows major decisions to better support established objectives.
6- It allows more effective allocation of time and resources to identify the opportunities.
7- It allows fewer resources and less time to be devoted to correcting erroneous or ad hoc decisions.
8- It creates a framework for internal communication among personnel.
9- It helps integrate the behaviour of individuals into a total effort.
10- It provides a basis for clarifying individual responsibilities.
11- It encourages forward thinking.
12- It provides cooperative, integrated, enthusiastic approach to tackling problems and opportunities.
13- It encourages a favourable attitude toward change.

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14- It gives a degree of discipline and formality to the management of the organization.

How is Strategic Planning in Non-Profit Organizations Different from Planning in for-profit Business and Government Entities?

What is similar about strategic planning in non-profits, for-profit and government entities is the essence of strategic planning-in an organizational setting, deciding what to accomplish, and how to go about it in response to a dynamic operating environment. What is different is the nature of internal and external factors that bear on the essential task.

The governance of organizations in the three sectors is quite different, and has significant applications for strategic planning. A board of directors governs both non-profits and for-profit businesses, whereas government organizations are governed by a wide variety of publicly elected bodies. The boards for non-profit business represent-or are- the literal owners of the business. Non-profit boards represent the public interest. For non-profit businesses, especially in the past 20 years, have emphasized customer satisfaction to a greater degree than either non-profits or government. For-profit businesses have invested heavily in market research, and in attempts to improve quality as they compete for customer business. Because the direct customers of the product and services of non-profits and government organizations typically pay only as small portion of the cost, the funders-whether foundations or taxpayers- have had a much greater influence than customer satisfaction on the strategies of the organization in these not-for profit sectors. Finally, values and orientation to a mission have typically been the whole mark of non-profits and less influential in for profit businesses and government (Allison and Kaye, 2005, P.11, 12).

The Big Strategic Planning Pitfalls

Strategic planning can yield less than desirable results if you end up in one of the possible pitfalls. To prevent that from happening, Olsen (2007) gave a list of the most common traps to avoid:

1- Relying on bad information or no information: A plan is only as good as the information on which it's based. Too often, teams rely on untested assumptions or hunches, erecting their plans on an unsteady foundation.

2- Ignoring what your planning process reveals: Planning isn't magic: You can't always get what you want. The planning process includes research and investigation. Your investigation may yield results that tell you not to go in a certain direction. Don't ignore that information!

3- Being unrealistic about your ability to plan: Put planning in its place and time. It takes time and effort to plan well. Some companies want the results but aren't willing or able to make the investment. Be realistic about what you can invest. Find a way to plan that suits your available resources, which include your time, energy, and money.

4- Planning for planning sake: Planning can become a substitute for action. Don't plan so much that you ignore the execution. Well-laid plans take time to implement. And results take time to yield an outcome.

5- Get your house in order first: Planning can reveal that your house isn't in order. When an organization pauses to plan, issues that have been buried or put on the backburner come to the forefront and can easily derail your planning efforts. Make sure

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that your company is in order and that there are no major conflicts before you embark on strategizing.
6- Don't copy and paste: It's easy to fall into the trap of copying the best practices of a company similar to yours. Although employing best practices from your industry is important, other organizations' experiences aren't relevant to your own. Organizations are unique, complex, and diverse. You need to find your own path instead of following a cookie-cutter approach.

Strategic Planning is involved in a complex process that takes an organization into an uncharted territory. It doesn't provide a ready-to-use prescription for success; instead it takes the organization through a journey and offers a framework for addressing questions and solving problems. David (2009) mentioned some pitfalls to watch for and avoid in strategic planning are these:

1- Using strategic planning to gain control over decisions and resources.
2- Doing strategic planning only to satisfy accreditation or regulatory requirements.
3- Too hastily moving from mission development to strategy formulation.
4- Failing to communicate the plan to employees, who continue working in the dark.
5- Top managers making many intuitive decisions that conflict with the formal plan.
6- Top managers not actively supporting the strategic-planning process.
7- Failing to use plans as a standard for measuring performance.
8- Delegating planning to a ―planner‖ rather than involving all managers.
9- Failing to involve key employees in all phases of planning.
10- Failing to create a collaborative climate supportive of change.
11- Viewing planning to be unnecessary or unimportant.
12- Becoming so engrossed in current problems that insufficient or no planning is done.
13- Being so formal in planning that flexibility and creativity are stifled.

Why some organizations do no Strategic Planning?
Some organizations do not engage in strategic planning and some firms do strategic planning but receive no support from the managers and employees. According to David (2009), some reasons for poor or no strategic planning are the following:
1- Poor reward structures: when an organization assumes success, it often fails to reward success. When failure occurs then the organization may punish. In this situation, it is better for an individual to do nothing and not draw attention than to risk trying to achieve something failed and be punished.
2- Firefighting: an organization can be so deeply embroiled in crisis management and firefighting that it doesn't have time to plan.
3- Waste of time: some organizations see planning as a waste of time because no marketable product is produced.
4- Too expensive: some organizations are culturally opposed to spending resources.
5- Laziness: people may not want to put forth the effort needed to formulate a plan.
6- Content with success: particularly if an organization is successful, individuals may feel there is no need to plan because things are fine as they stand.
7- Fear of failure: by not taking action there is a little risk of failure unless a problem is urgent and depressing. Whenever something worthwhile is attempted there is some risk of failure.

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8- Over-confidence: as individuals amass experience they may rely less on formalized planning.
9- Prior bad experience: people may have a previous bad experience with planning, that is, cases in which plans have been long, impractical, and inflexible.
10- Self-interest: Organizations that have achieved status or self-esteem through effectively using an old system, it sees a new system as a threat.
11- Fear of unknown: people maybe uncertain of their abilities to learn new skills, of their aptitude with new systems, or of their ability to take new roles.
12- Suspicion: Employees may not trust management.

What are the Keys and Tips for Effective Strategic Planning?

1- Pull together a diverse, yet appropriate, group of people to make up your planning team. Diversity leads to a better strategy. Bring together a small core team — between six and ten people — of leaders and managers who represent every area of the company.
2- Allow time for big picture, strategic thinking. We tend to try to squeeze strategic planning discussions in between putting out fires and going on a much-needed vacation. But to create a strategic plan, your team needs time to think big. Do whatever it takes to allow that time for big-picture thinking (including taking your team off-site).
3- Get full commitment from key people in your organization. You can't do it alone. If your team doesn't buy into the planning process and the resulting strategic plan, you're dead in the water.
4- Allow for open and free discussion regardless of each person's position within the organization. Don't lead the planning sessions. Hire an outside facilitator, someone who doesn't have any stake in your success. When you do, people wonder whether you're trying to lead them down the path you wanted all along. Encourage active participation, but don't let any one person dominate the session.
5- Think about execution before you start. It doesn't matter how good the plan is if it isn't executed.
6- Use a facilitator, if your budget allows. Hire a trained professional who has no emotional investment in the outcome of the plan. An impartial third party can concentrate on the process instead of the result and can ask the tough questions that others may fear to ask.
7- Make your plan actionable. To have any chance at implementation, the plan must clearly articulate goals, action steps, responsibilities, accountabilities, and specific deadlines. And everyone must understand the plan and their role in it.
8- Don't write your plan in stone. Good strategic plans are fluid, not rigid and unbending. They allow you to adapt to changes in the marketplace. Don't be afraid to change your plan as necessary.
9- Clearly articulate next steps after every session. Before closing the strategic planning session, clearly explain what comes next and who's responsible for what. When you walk out of the room, everyone must fully understand what they're responsible for and when to meet deadlines.
10- Make strategy a habit, not just a retreat. Review the strategic plan for performance achievement no less than quarterly and as often as monthly or weekly. Focus on accountability for results and have clear and compelling consequences for unapproved missed deadlines (Olsen, 2007, P.32).

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The Major Integrated Steps in Strategic Planning?

The organization begins strategic planning by identifying its vision and mission. Once these are clearly defined, it moves on to a series of analyses, including external, internal, which provide a context for developing organization's strategic issues. Strategic programming follows and the organization develops specific strategies including strategic goals, action plans, and tactics. Emergent strategies evolve, challenging the intended tactics, and altering the realized strategy. Periodically, the organization evaluates its strategies and reviews its strategic plan, considering emergent strategies and evolving changes. It usually takes several years before strategic planning becomes institutionalized and organizations learn to think strategically (Ansoff, 1994, P.105).

Figure one clearly illustrate the process of strategic planning:

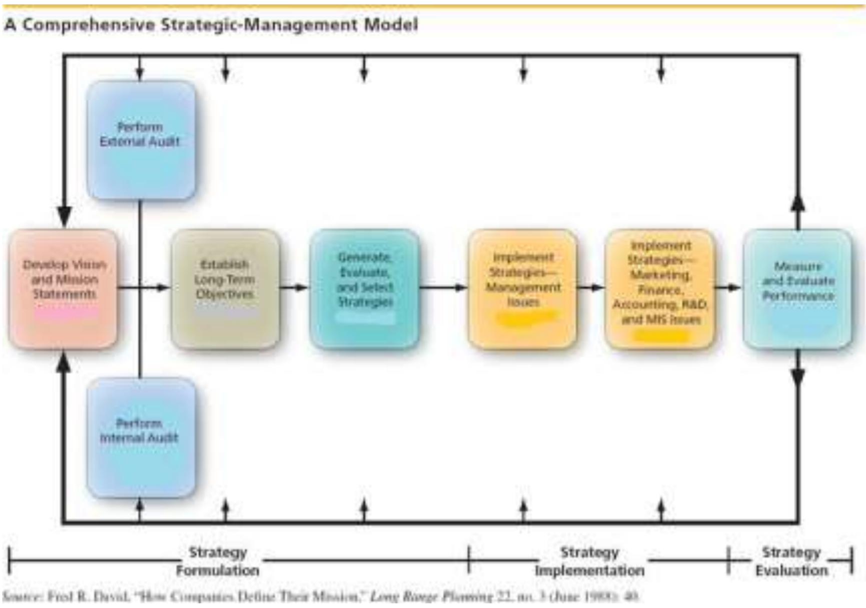

Figure 1: Comprehensive Strategic Planning Model
Source: David (2009)

Vision and Mission

Vision is formulating a picture of what your organization's future makeup will be and where the organization is headed. What will your organization look like 5 to 10 years from now? (Olsen, 2007, P.39). A clear vision statement provides the foundation for developing a comprehensive mission statement, and answers the basic question, what do we want to become? (David, 2009, P.50).

A Mission describes your organization's purpose — the purpose for which you were founded and why you exist. Some mission statements include the business of the organization. Others explain what products or services they produce or customers they serve (Olsen, 2007, P.38). Some authors define it as creed statement, a statement of purpose, a statement of beliefs, a statement of philosophy, a statement of business principles. And a mission statement answers the question of what is our business (David, 2009, P.51).

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Benefits of a Strong Mission Statement

1. To ensure unanimity of purpose within the organization.
2. To provide a basis, or standard, for allocating organizational resources.
3. To establish a general tone or organizational climate.
4. To serve as a focal point for individuals to identify with the organization's purpose and direction, and to deter those who cannot from participating further in the organization's activities.
5. To facilitate the translation of objectives into a work structure involving the assignment of tasks to responsible elements within the organization.
6. To specify organizational purposes and the translation of these purposes into objectives in such a way that cost, time, and performance parameters can be assessed and controlled (Macmillan, 2005, P.70).

Figure 2: Mission Components
Source: David (2009)

Internal and External Audit

Once the vision and mission are clearly identified, the organization must analyse its external and internal environment (Lynch, 2000, P.120). The environmental scan, performed within the frameworks of the Five Forces Model and SWOT, analyses information about organization's external environment (economic, social, demographic, political, legal, technological, and international factors), the industry, and internal organizational factors (managementhelp.org, 2005).The organization's external environment includes the organizations macro environment and industry. Macro environment includes economic, social, demographic, political, legal, technological, and international factors. Industrial analysis is performed within the frameworks of Porter's Five Forces Model. Which includes five forces namely potential entrants, other stakeholders, suppliers, substitutes and Buyers. Industry profit potential depends on these competitive forces.

A strong force can be regarded as a threat as it is likely to reduce profit. In contrast a weak force can be seen as an opportunity (Porter, 1980 In Hunger and Wheelen, 2001, P.200). The internal environment includes human, organizational and physical resources. These resources constitute the internal strategic factors which determine strengths and weaknesses of the organization that determine the firm's ability to deal With opportunities (El Farra, M., 2004, P. 144).

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SWOT Analysis

SWOT analysis identifies factors that may affect desired future outcomes of the organization. The SWOT model is based on identifying the organization's internal strengths and weaknesses, and threats and opportunities of the external environment, and consequentially identifying the company's distinctive competencies and key success factors. These, along with considerations of societal and company values, lead to creation, evaluation, and choice of strategy. SWOT's objective is to recommend strategies that ensure the best alignment between the external environment and internal situation (Hill & Jones, 1992, p. 14).

Porter's Five Forces Model

The five forces model developed by Michael E. Porter guides the analysis of organization's environment and the attractiveness of the industry. The five forces include the risk of new competitors entering the industry, threat of potential substitutes, the bargaining power of buyers, the bargaining power of suppliers, and degree of rivalry between the existing competitors (Porter, 1985, P.3). Environmental scan identifies external opportunities and threats, evaluates industry's overall attractiveness, and identifies factors contributing to, or taking away from, the industry attractiveness (Hax & Majluf, 1996, p.27). Through organization's choice of strategy, it can alter the impact of these forces to its advantage.

Long term objectives

The goals and objectives give organizations the overall strategic direction (Stoner and Freeman, 1986). The importance of organizational objectives is demonstrated by the fact that an evaluation of the strategy formulation process includes a discussion of the organizational goals and targets (Poole, 1990). As indicated by Wheelen and Hunger (2006), objectives are the final consequences of an arranged or planned action in which they should be communicated as an activity. They stressed also that long-term objectives specify the organization’s mission. The achievement of organization’s objectives should facilitate the accomplishment of an organization’s mission.

Strategy implementation

The implementation phase is a process deals with building the yearling objectives, programs and budgets to facilitate the strategies (David, 2009). Bower et al. (1991) mentioned that implementation includes components needs to be established such as short term objectives, programs, procedures and budgets. Wheelen and Hunger (2006) stressed out that when the organization has its strategies and goals settled; it must place them into action through developing operational objectives, programs, budgets and procedures. Figure 3 clearly explains the outputs of strategy implementation process.

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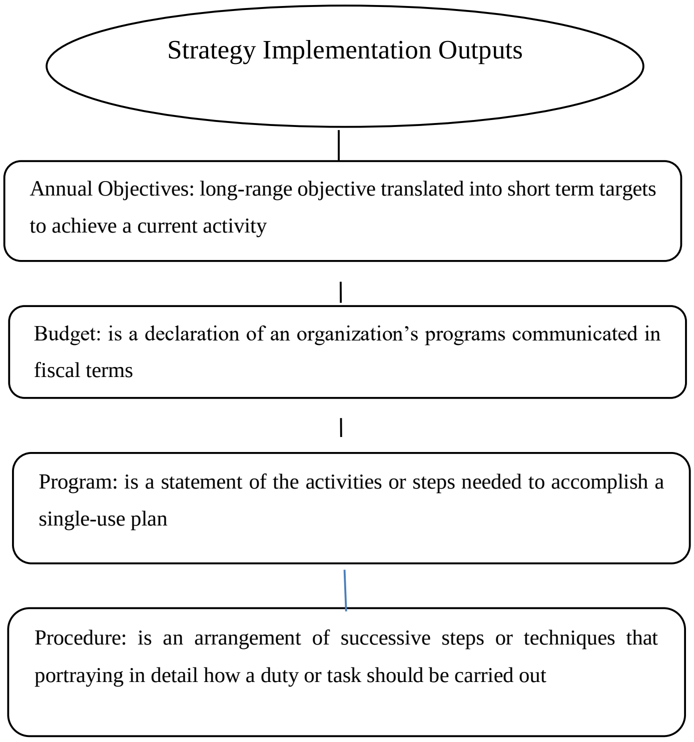

Figure 3: Strategy Implementation Outputs.
Source: adapted from Wheelen and Hunger (2003)

Evaluation of Strategy

Periodic evaluations of strategies, tactics, and action programs are essential to assessing success of the strategic planning process. It is important to measure performance at least annually but preferably more often, to evaluate the effect of specific actions on long-term results and on the organization's vision and mission (Rowley et al., 1997, P.310). The organization should measure current performance against previously set expectations, and consider any changes or events that may have impacted the desired course of actions. Wheelen and Hunger (2006) said that strategy evaluation is a process in which an organization's activities and performance outcomes are critically assessed to compare the real performance with the coveted performance.

CONCLUSION

Strategic planning is the most exciting of the management disciplines. Strategic planning is about success and failure, about the ability to plan wars and win them.
Organization's ability to practice strategic planning is important to develop an organization and make it more effective in achieving the economic and social goals, subsequently it will develop skills, surpass competitively, and be keen of market conditions, customer needs, and so this organization will achieve ability to compete, develop, and increase performance effectively, this leads to firm growth in revenues, market share, expansion locations, and finally increasing manpower.

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