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Public Sector Strategic Planning Facilitation: Developing Country Perspective

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Synonyms

Public sector consultancy; Strategic planning

Definitions

Consultants	Individuals who conduct specialized studies and recommend specific action plans
Strategy	A plan that includes goals and actions to achieve these goals based on available resources

This article explores consultancies in the public sector and consultants' role in strategic planning. Consultancies in the public sector pose different challenges when compared to the private sector. Radnor and O'Mahoney (2013, p. 1556) confirm that such differences between the two sectors have been documented, but "material detailing the impact of public sector engagements on the consultancies" has received less attention, and "there is relatively little literature that specifically focuses on the consultancy experience...."

Some organizations engage consultants for the preparation of strategic plans, while others do so "in-house." However, whether strategic planning is an "in-house" effort or prepared by external consultants, involving stakeholders throughout the entire process is imperative (Aldejwi 2014) "in determining eventual ownership of the process" (Bevan 2000, p. 303). "... it is likely that someone inside the company already knows the 'right answer' and unlikely that even the best consultants in the world can come up with a dazzling surprise in six weeks" (Jackson 2010, p. 57). "Management consultants [may] steal your watch and then tell you the time... stories of consulting assignments gone astray [are not unusual, thus you must]... make sure that your consultants earn their keep" (Jackson 2010, p. 56).

Gaps in public sector consultancy (Radnor and O'Mahoney 2013) are evident in extant literature. In addition, George (2017) questions whether

A. Farazmand (ed.), *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_4147-1

strategic planning "works" under public sector conditions. Also, "there are few studies. . .which examine the impact of public sector engagement on the products that consultancies develop" (Radnor and O'Mahoney 2013, p. 1555). Thus, there is still much to learn "about the efficacy or 'success' of such consultancies" (Bevan 2000, p. 289).

Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF)

MSAF was established as a Commercial Statutory Authority (CSA) in 2011 (MSAF 2012). For 2012 and 2013, the MSAF Board decided that external strategic planning facilitators be engaged to facilitate MSAF's inaugural and second strategic planning process and documentation of MSAF's strategic documents. In 2014, the MSAF Board opted to utilize an internal facilitator.

2012 – Facilitator #1

An external consultant was engaged who carried out extensive strategic planning training of both the management and staff. He also carried out SWOT analysis as well as conducted four workshops over 8 days (supporting management in compiling critical data and developing draft MSAF strategic documents) and a 2-day strategic planning workshop (including government and maritime industry representatives, MSAF Board members and, management and staff). Draft strategic documents were finalized by the external consultant and vetted by the CEO in quarter 1, 2012 with approval granted by the Ministry of Public Enterprises in 2013. Nevertheless, these strategic documents only come into effect when approved. MSAF management was left with no other choice but to implement the draft strategic documents in 2012, as though documents were approved.

2013 – Facilitator #2

Another external consultant was engaged to facilitate the strategic planning process and the documentation of MSAF's strategic documents. This consultant carried out data collection, conducted a 1-day strategic planning workshop (including the same key stakeholders as consultant 1), and developed draft MSAF strategic documents. The consultant opted for limited interface with MSAF management and staff throughout the consultancy. Draft strategic documents were finalized by the consultant in quarter 2, 2013, with approval granted by the Ministry of Public Enterprises in 2014. MSAF management opted not to implement the draft 2013 strategic documents which left MSAF somewhat directionless in 2013.

2014 – Facilitator #3

The MSAF Board decided that "in-house" facilitation of MSAF's strategic planning process and strategic document preparation be undertaken by MSAF's CEO. The facilitator requested heads of departments (commencing September 2013) to source, analyze, and compile data (and undertake a SWOT analysis) and to draft their departmental sections' strategic documents for presentation, discussion, and in-principle approval by the MSAF Board in a 2-day strategic planning workshop. Cross-functional meetings were facilitated with department heads to ensure departmental analyses are consolidated into meaningful strategic presentations and documents. A 2-day strategic planning workshop in November 2013 (including the same key stakeholders as consultant 1) netted MSAF Boards' in-principle approval of the draft strategic documents. Draft strategic documents were finalized by this facilitator in quarter 2, 2014. However, this was not formally approved by the MSAF Board due to the imminent expiration (in September 2014) of the CEO's employment contract and the desire of the Board to allow an incoming CEO to prepare strategic documents. The MSAF 2014 strategic documents were never approved. MSAF management was thus left with no choice but to implement the draft strategic documents in 2014, as though the documents were approved.

MSAF's former chairman directed that no strategic planning documents be prepared until recruitment of a replacement CEO. Up until recently, only an acting CEO had been appointed. Additionally, MSAF has been without a Board since May 2015; however, a new Board has been appointed in 2018. No strategic documents have been published by MSAF since 2013.

Strategic Planning Process

The strategic planning model and methods adopted by the three strategic planning facilitators were confirmed by the facilitators as being based on modified versions of Bryson's (1995) linear, ten-step strategic planning process (Fig. 1).

Each facilitator tailored process steps based on their preferred approach and peculiarities of the enterprise and environmental conditions at that time.

Step 1: Initial Agreement

Facilitator 1 confirmed through meetings the line Ministry, Board, and CEO's commitment to the strategic planning process; however, management and staff were initially not in agreement or committed as they lacked foundational understanding of strategic planning and the need for such. Facilitator 2 also confirmed the Ministry, Board, and CEO's commitment to the strategic planning process. However, only one introductory meeting was arranged with the management. Management was informed that they would be required to participate in the strategic planning process by provision of requested information. The facilitator adopted a directive, top-down approach and presumed the right decision-makers were represented in the management, who clearly understood the process and willingly participated in the process. No planning group was established, no training was provided, and no agreement, commitment, or support for the process by the management was achieved. To the contrary, MSAF management expressed offense at the approach adopted by the facilitator. Facilitator 3 (the CEO) was aware of the Ministry and MSAF Board's commitment to the strategic planning process and was equally committed. This commitment was also evident and confirmed by the management and key staff. The CEO agreed to the strategic planning process suggested by management and the proposed strategic planning group, and an inclusive and delegated approach was adopted.

Step 2: Organizational Mandates

MSAF was bound to comply with domestic legislation [Public Enterprise Act (1996), MSAF Decree (2009), and the Marine Act (1986)] that spell out the governance structure, purposes, functions, and particulars relating to MSAF as a CSA and also to international maritime safety conventions of the International Maritime Organization (IMO). These mandates were understood by the CEO, MSAF management, and key staff; however, these needed to be explained to Facilitators 1 and 2.

Steps 3 and 4: Vision (3), Mission, and Shared Values (4)

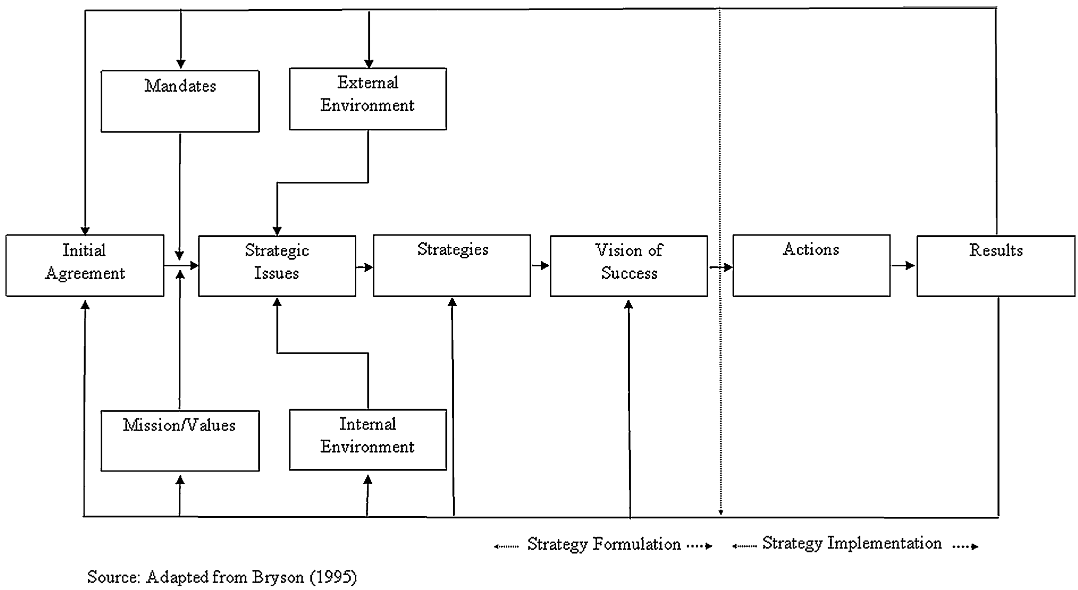
Each strategic planning facilitator developed the vision statement early in the strategic planning process (at step 3) and contrary to Bryson's ten-step strategic planning process where the vision statement is developed at step 8. Facilitator 1 established MSAF's inaugural mission statement (with input from the planning group and stakeholders). This mission statement remained unchanged by Facilitators 2 and 3. Facilitator 1 also established MSAF's core values (with input from the planning group and stakeholders). Ironically, Facilitator 2 maintained the inaugural mission statement that referenced the core values of MSAF yet did not stipulate any core values in the strategic plan. Facilitator 3 retained the inaugural core values which were documented in the strategic plan.

Step 5: SWOT

Facilitator 1 carried out a SWOT analysis involving participants (management, staff, and external stakeholders). Facilitator 2 did not carry out a SWOT analysis, rather opted to undertake a stakeholder analysis to identify potential parties impacted by the strategic plan, what was relevant to those parties, and their current and future expectations of MSAF. Facilitator 3 carried out the same analysis as Facilitator 1.

Step 6: Strategic Issues

Facilitators 1 and 3 identified a series of "challenges" that would impact MSAF's service provision and strategies adopted, covering the timeframe of the strategic plan. Facilitator



Public Sector Strategic Planning Facilitation: Developing Country Perspective, Fig. 1 Strategic planning process

2 opted not to identify any strategic issues and relied solely on stakeholder analysis.

Step 7: Strategies to Meet Objectives

Facilitators 1 and 3 (by consensus with the management group) listed strategic actions planned to be taken to address the issues identified and to enable goals and objectives to be met, whereas Facilitator 2 opted not to identify impediments and associated activities to address those impediments.

Step 8: Simple, Practical Implementation Plan

Facilitators 1 and 3 (by consensus with the management group) documented logical and workable implementation plans to bring about strategic ends. Facilitator 2 compiled organization-wide metrics and ratios for each functional area, covering a 3-year period and a Corporate Performance Framework for 2013. Accountability for attainment of metrics and ratios was not specified. Considering Facilitator 2's limited involvement of management in this process step and limited explanation provided (regarding the metrics and ratios), management and staff did not understand the projections and, hence, did not commit to attain such.

Step 9: Re-evaluation, Approval, and Implementation

Facilitators 1 and 2 followed this step, ultimately resulting in approved strategic plans for implementation; however, both facilitators were not engaged in implementing the strategic plans. In spite of the delay in drafting and approval of the inaugural strategic plan, the unapproved strategic plan was implemented by management and staff. Management and staff were not committed to implementing the strategic plan developed by Facilitator 2. The plan was thus not implemented, leaving the enterprise directionless in 2013. The strategic plan developed by Facilitator 3 was not formally approved by the MSAF Board due to the pending expiration of the CEO's contract of employment. MSAF management, therefore, opted to implement the unapproved strategic plan, rather than leave the enterprise directionless in 2014.

Step 10: Reassess Plan and Process

MSAF management reviewed progress and made adjustments (where necessary) toward attainment of the strategic plans implemented and reported on a biannual basis to the Board and line ministry and annually to the Minister for Public Enterprises.

Findings

The three strategic planning facilitators espoused to MSAF management and staff the criticality of planning and formulation of strategy to strategic planning. Only Facilitators 1 and 3 established inclusive, empowered, cross-functional management and staff planning groups that were actively engaged in planning and formulating the process and allowed for buy-in, collaboration, and ultimately commitment by those group members, resulting in simple, implementable strategic plans. While the inaugural strategic plan was implemented, the strategic plan facilitated by Facilitator 3 was not implemented due to a Board decision relating to recruitment of a CEO. Facilitator 2 merely set aside 1 day to meet the MSAF management individually and adopted a mechanical, top-down approach which alienated and offended management and staff. Hence, poor commitment of management and staff to the strategic planning process resulted in the non-implementation of the strategic plan.

Due to promotion of a high degree of vertical and horizontal communication, Facilitator 1 was able to establish a high degree of employee strategic planning perception congruence which supported strategic planning and implementation. Facilitator 2 failed to communicate and develop congruence; hence strategic planning was "painful" as indicated by employees, and management were disinterested in and unwilling to implement the strategic plan. Facilitator 3 was only able to establish congruence at the Board and planning group levels; hence, strategic plan implementation would have been challenging. Management were congruent with Facilitators 1 and 3 and with the unified direction provided to employees by Facilitator 1. Facilitator 3 failed to gain unification of direction with employees as the strategic plan was never approved. However, because management did not agree with the facilitation approach adopted by Facilitator 2, management was not congruent with Facilitator 2, and this disunity was evident to employees.

Facilitators 1 and 3 supported the planning groups through provision of extensive planning training, communication, encouragement, and motivation and encouraged communication among departments and sharing of goals. These facilitators ensured that planning group members were removed from their day-to-day roles (for planning group meetings and activities) for the absolute minimum time, so as to mitigate the impact on their workloads. These facilitators educated planning group members sufficiently to help them realize and accept that organizational direction and interests take precedence over personal and functional interests. In contrast, Facilitator 2 spent such minimal time with management that their responsibilities were only marginally increased. Under these circumstances, personal and functional interests did take precedence over organizational direction and interests as management was not committed to the organizational planning process.

Facilitators 1 and 3 established planning groups with member selection as agreed by senior management. Training and coordination of the planning groups by those facilitators allowed the opportunity for experimentation and creativity by planning group members. Facilitator 2 opted not to establish planning groups, rather merely met with management individually over 1 day to source information and provided no training or coordination. This resulted in management disengaging from the strategic planning process, the "know-how" of management neither being harnessed nor developed, and produced a strategic plan "they [management and staff] did not own."

Facilitators 1 and 3 realized MSAF was a highly institutionalized, bureaucratic organization and worked hard at encouraging the planning group to be creative to "own" the planning, monitoring, and control of the strategic plan and extensively communicated with employees so that they understood and agreed with the new strategic direction. Facilitator 1 was reasonably successful in achieving these objectives as the strategic plan implementation was "owned" and driven by the management and staff and implemented rapidly. While Facilitator 3 was able to secure commitment of the planning group and management toward the "new" strategy, because approval of the strategic plan was not secured, employees lacked commitment for the implementation of strategic plan. Facilitator 2 chose to unilaterally control the whole strategic planning process.

Facilitator 1 frequently communicated organization-wide to develop strategic consensus by management and staff for strategy development and implementation. While Facilitator 3 frequently communicated with the Board and planning group, little vertical communication to staff was possible as the strategic plan was never approved. In contrast, Facilitator 2 adopted a strict top-down facilitation and communication approach with minimal vertical communication, creating a barrier to communication with management and staff and inhibiting strategy development and implementation. Counterproductive dialogue by management and staff ensued.

Facilitator 1, through extensive strategic planning training and support provided to the planning group and key staff, and with ongoing involvement and communication, was able to develop management and employee commitment to the planning process with congruency of self-interests to organizational interests. Facilitator 2, on the other hand, failed to involve management and employees and, hence, failed to gain their commitment to the planning process, resulting in employee self-interest prevailing and implementation failure. Facilitator 3 established trust and commitment of management to the planning process but not in all employees due to the inability in obtaining approval for the strategic plan.

The MSAF Board and CEO were consistently supportive of the strategic planning process throughout this study. However, three successive strategic planning facilitators were utilized. Facilitator 1 was charismatic with a high degree of interpersonal skills which allowed the facilitator to develop buy-in of the planning team and helped develop a clear strategy that was communicated consistently organization-wide. This approach allayed concerns and aligned employees to the new strategy. Facilitator 2 gained no buy-in of management to the strategic planning process, which was evidenced by inconsistency between management and the facilitator and the inconsistent messages being sent to employees, which destabilized the organization. Facilitator 2 while being technically skilled lacked charisma, interpersonal skills, and empathy for management and employees. Facilitator 3 was charismatic, established rapport with management and staff, and was able to convince the Board and management to commit to and support the new strategy. Since the strategic plan was not approved, inconsistent messages were sent to the management and employees, resulting in their lack of commitment to the implementation of the strategic plan.

MSAF exhibited an institutionalized, bureaucratic, governmental culture which if not managed appropriately could hinder strategic facilitation and implementation. Notwithstanding, Facilitator 1 was unfamiliar with the culture of MSAF, however quickly grasped the nuances of the organization, and was able to work successfully within and with the organization. Facilitator 2 also was unfamiliar with (and made no attempt to understand) the culture of the organization, was viewed as an "outsider," and faced many obstacles and resistance when facilitating the strategic planning process. Facilitator 3 was intimately familiar with the culture of the organization (as CEO, he was part of the culture), and the culture under his guidance encouraged strategy facilitation.

Conclusion and Research Implications

This study offers a unique perspective on the use of "in-house" and "external" strategic planning facilitators in the public sector and the approaches adopted. Unlike some studies, we argue that management should focus on ensuring that the process results in a simple and implementable strategic plan to drive organizational performance, as opposed to getting lost in the "in-house" versus "external" facilitator debate.

In spite of the best of intentions, applied efforts, strategic planning facilitation, and incurred expense of public enterprises, public enterprises often operate with no strategy, an unapproved strategy or a strategy doomed to fail.

Cross-References

- ► Accountability
- ► Accountability and Governance in Fiji

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