

# Conducting a SWOT Analysis

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## MATERIALS

The materials needed for this activity are:

- ◆ Four 4x6' wall charts located around the room
- ◆ 3x3" Post-It Notes™ and Sharpie™ pens. One Post-It Note pack and Sharpie pen for each participant

## PREPARATIONS

- ◆ Make arrangements so that the session has no more than 24 to 26 participants. If, by necessity, there are more than this number, you may need to adjust the process to accommodate the additional participants during the SWOT sorting and sifting phase of the activity.
- ◆ Prepare the four 4x6' wall charts around the room, labeling each with their respective SWOT titles. You can use butcher paper, newspaper roll remainders, or multiple flip chart pages taped together to create these wall charts.
- ◆ Prepare two flip chart pages and post them near the front of the room. Label one flip chart "Our Internal Environment" and the other "The External Environment."
  - On the **Internal Environment** flip chart page, list some of the key internal organizational systems such as: *communications, teamwork, operations, fulfillment, leadership, supervision, performance management, decision making, quality improvement, etc.*
  - On the **External Environment**, list the key forces external to the organization such as: *social, political, economic, technological, cultural, and demographic.*

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Begin the activity by asking participants to partner up with someone else at their table (or a neighboring table) and discuss the question: *As you reflect upon the environment within which this organization operates, what are the two or three most significant forces that are likely to shape the organization's future success? Give the participants about 3-4 minutes to discuss their thoughts/perspectives.*
2. After 3-4 minutes, reconvene the large group and ask for some examples of the significant forces shaping the organization and its future. Once people have offered several of these forces, ask the large group how the organization should identify these forces. How should it capture the ideas

that they listed? And, how should such issues be integrated into a strategic plan?

3. Respond to the ideas offered by the group by indicating that all models and approaches to strategic planning have some provision for considering and integrating an environmental scan. State that an environmental scan is designed to help the organization identify the forces *internal* and *external* to itself. Based upon this broader awareness of the world in which the organization operates, argue that the organization can then pull together a plan that incorporates this awareness of the surrounding and emerging environment.
4. Describe the four perspectives on the environment: the SWOT analysis.
5. Emphasize that the review of the surrounding environment is done within the context of the organization's vision statement. Remind participants of the current or emerging vision statement (elements of which may have been identified in an earlier activity) and ask them to think about that vision of the future as they consider the four environmental dimensions.
6. Indicate that, first individually and then as a group, we will explore these four dimensions. Ask individuals to locate and obtain one Post-It Note pad and one Sharpie pen at their table. Ensure that everyone has these essential supplies prior to beginning the exercise.
7. Explain the "rules" for using the Post-It Notes for this activity. State that, when presented with a question, they should respond by writing each separate answer on a separate Post-It Note. Ask them to write or print with the Sharpie pen in short, clear "headlines," since others in the room will be attempting to read their Post-It Note.
8. Demonstrate how to use the Post-It Notes by pretending to write something on one Post-It Note, tearing it off and placing the Post-It on a table-top, writing another mock Post-It Note, etc. to show how they should work quickly and how they should make a stack of Post-It's for each of the four questions you'll ask them to consider. Ask if there are any questions and provide clarification if necessary.
9. Tell participants that we will now consider the first of the four SWOT dimensions: **Organizational Strengths**. Display the prepared flip chart page "Our Internal Environment." Direct participants to think of the various dimensions of the organization as listed on the flip chart as they identify the *strengths* of the organization. Ask them to work quickly to identify as many strengths as they can over the next three or four minutes, each strength going on a different Post-It Note and then stacking these in the "strengths" pile. Remind them to read the "Our Internal Environment" flip chart page to ensure that they consider all aspects of the organization's internal environment. Give participants about three to four minutes for completing their "strengths" pile.
10. After about three or four minutes, ask participants to complete the Post-It Note they are currently working on. First remind them that this pile should be

labeled in some fashion (e.g. the top Post-It Note) as the “**Strengths**” pile. Then to turn their attention the next question: the internal weaknesses or opportunities for improvement.

11. Refer again to the “Our Internal Environment” as you invite them to complete a new stack of Post-It Notes, this time focusing on internal organizational **opportunities for improvement**.
12. After a sufficient time has elapsed, ask participants to complete their current Post-It Note and to return their attention to the front of the room. Ask them to label or note this second pile as their “**Weaknesses**” pile.
13. Shift their attention, now, to the forces *external* to the organization. Display the flip chart page entitled “Our External Environment” and guide them through the first of the two external environment considerations: **opportunities**.
14. After a sufficient time interval, complete the SWOT analysis by guiding the participants in developing a new list of Post-its — this final time looking at external **threats**. At the end of the SWOT analysis, participants should have four stacks or groupings of Post-It Notes, each clearly marked as one of the four SWOT dimensions.
15. Once the group has completed all four SWOT dimensions, bring people's attention back to the front of the room and then explain the next steps in the SWOT process.
  - a. Point out the four wall charts, each labeled with the four SWOT dimensions. Indicate that the next step of the process is to have each of them place their Post-It Notes on the wall chart of its respective SWOT dimension. At this stage, tell the participants that all you want them to do is to get their Post-It Notes up on the appropriate wall—without paying any attention to order or structure. Ask them to now move quickly to place their four Post-It Note stacks on the appropriate wall charts and then return to their table.
  - b. Once all of the wall charts are covered with Post-It Notes and participants are back in their seats, demonstrate the next step—organizing the Notes into related or similar groupings—by approaching one of the wall charts and moving related Notes around. Demonstrate that you are moving Notes that are similar to one another together and making a related group or category—as yet unnamed.
  - c. Indicate that that it's their turn next. Tell them that this next step of the process is done SILENTLY. In other words, they are not to talk with one another during the activity. They are to move the Notes around on their wall charts without discussing the Notes or the emerging categories.
  - d. Note that, when disagreements emerge as to where a note belongs, they are to resolve the disagreement without discussing it. If creating new Post-It is required, then give participants permission to do this.

- e. Indicate that they will have approximately seven to eight minutes to sort out their Notes into from five to seven groupings or categories. Stress the importance of five to seven categories—note that fewer than this means that they have likely grouped things together that should be separated, more than this means they may have broken a single issue into too many subparts. Ask if they have any questions about the process.
  - f. If there are only four table groups in the workshop, then simply assign each table group to a different SWOT wall chart. If, however, there are more than four table groups, ask people to approach the SWOT wall chart of their choice—with no more than six or seven people at a chart (you may need to adjust this figure some, but no group should be larger than eight—it's a matter of ease of access to the Notes that limits the group's size). If participants are choosing which SWOT dimension they will focus on, ask people to approach the wall chart and then wait until you give the sign before starting to sort the Notes.
  - g. While people move their Notes and group them on their wall chart, gently remind people of the need for silence during this activity. After about seven minutes, give a two minute warning to speed the groups up with their sorting. Encourage participants to do their best to find a “home” for each Post-It Note.
  - h. Call time. Tell people to remain at their wall charts and note that the next step of the process is to discuss the “categories” that have naturally emerged on their wall charts and then draw a border around each category and label each category (with another Post-It Note or by writing right on the wall chart). Tell participants to take care to NOT use the Sharpie pens for writing on the wall charts (the Sharpie pens will bleed through the paper!).
  - i. Give the SWOT groups another seven to eight minutes to discuss their categories, to define the boundaries of each category, and to label each category. Ask participants to return to their tables once they have completed the grouping and labeling.
16. Highlight some of the major groupings for each of the four wall-charts (SWOT dimensions). As you walk through the major groupings for each SWOT dimension, note that they should be thinking about which issues might be most important to include and address within the strategic plan.
  17. Shift attention to the results identified on the four wall charts. Note that these results will be used in the next step of the strategic planning process: selecting the environmental forces and factors that are likely to have the greatest impact on the future success of the organization.
  18. After participants have an opportunity to review and discuss the categories for each of the SWOT dimensions, give each participant five sticky dots. Indicate that they will individually use these five dots to vote on the five issues/categories that they personally believe are the most important for the

strategic plan to address if the organization is to achieve its vision. Two of these sticky dots should be red or orange and tell participants that these two dots are considered the most important of their five votes. The remaining three dots (green or blue in color) are important but not quite as important as the red/orange dots. Answer any questions people may have about the voting process (e.g., people can place their votes anywhere they wish next to or within a category — just as long as it's clear which category/issue they are voting for).

19. Give people about five-seven minutes to vote.
20. After people have completed their voting (all dots are pasted on the SWOT charts), then count up the number of dots for each category. The red/orange dots count as TWO points while the green/blue dots count as one.
21. The issues that generated the highest vote totals reflect the issues that the group believes are most important to address to move toward the vision.
22. The strategic planning steering committee reviews the results and then makes a final determination of the key strategic issues. This might involving combining two or more issues, re-prioritizing the issues based on factors of practicality, timing, etc.