Strategic Planning for Recreation Administrators in Private Sector Recreation Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to describe strategic planning and its implications for administration in private sector recreation organizations. This study consists of three parts. The first part presents the ideology of strategic planning. The second part describes the strategic planning process. Whereas, the third part discusses the strategic planning process for application by recreation administrators in private sector recreation organizations. The strategic planning process suggested for application by administrators in private sector recreation organizations consists of six steps: (1) understanding recreation trends and values of society, (2) understanding the current state of condition of the recreation organization, (3) recreation problem diagnosis, (4) recreation resource analysis, (5) determining strategic planning alternatives, and (6) selection of strategic recreation alternatives. It is concluded that strategic planning may be an effective means of managing for private sector recreation administrators because it provides an opportunity to diagnose management decisions before change is actually implemented.

INTRODUCTION

Society today is changing more rapidly than ever. Changes are taking place so fast that it is hard to keep pace with adaptations. Not only do people change, organizations and social systems also change as well. More specifically, changes in the economy, demographics and values continue to alter not only the recreation environment but also the fabric of recreation organizations. That is, as society changes so do recreation organizations, including the means of providing services in such organizations.

For this reason, planning effectively to better serve and be served has become ever so important in recreation organizations. Yet the type of planning processes traditionally applied in recreation organizations may not be as effective today as they were in the past. That is, both long term planning and short term planning may not be beneficially utilized in all recreation organizations at all times. The reason is that both of these processes tend to simply be extensions of what the organization has traditionally been doing.
With needs changing, not only in part, but sometimes completely, it is beneficial to plan accordingly. Good planning and the implementation of appropriate planning principles can lead to enhanced service provision. The end goal can mean enhanced satisfaction with the recreation experience for participants and survival for recreation organizations.

Strategic planning is an administrative process that has been applied successfully in the field of business. This process, however, has been applied only minimally in the field of recreation and by administrators in private sector recreation organizations. Perhaps the reason is that very little research has been conducted in this area. It is the intent of this paper to build upon this research base and to increase awareness of strategic planning for recreation administrators of private sector recreation organizations. The purpose is to describe strategic planning and its implications for administration in private sector recreation organizations. The purpose is to describe strategic planning and its implications for administration in private sector recreation organizations. To fulfil this objective this paper consists of three parts. The first part presents the ideology of strategic planning. The second part presents the strategic planning process. Whereas, the third part discusses strategic planning for application by administrators in private sector recreation organizations.

**STRATEGIC PLANNING**

Strategic planning is a management process which searches for the best possible future and then determines how to reach it (5). Like most planning ideals the focus is on the future. It is on accomplishing an organization's goals in the most effective and efficient means possible.

According to Denning (2) strategic planning refers to the steps that an organization takes to define its mission and domain. More specifically, strategic planning refers to the strategic goals for that mission and domain, and the policies used to guide managers towards a specific goal. Strategic planning is thus action that is predetermined focusing on fulfilling the specific objectives of an organization.

Edginton, Hanson and Edginton (3) posit that strategic planning is a management process that helps establish and maintain a balance between the organization and the external environment. Moreover, Edginton et al (3) claim that strategic planning is a process directed towards planning while taking into consideration potential changes in the environment. That is, it is a means used to understand change and to prepare to address change sufficiently.

Strategic planning is therefore a process which attempts to reduce the gap in respect to what is happening and what ought to be happening. It is a means used to not only understand the current state of condition of an organization or service, but to also determine ways in which change can take place for improvement. Thus, strategic planning is a process concerned with addressing needs in what is perceived to be the most effective way possible.

The conceptual difference between strategic planning and planning is that strategic planning focuses on the examination of future scenarios resulting from change and determining the appropriateness of each. Moreover, strategic planning is a process in which managers try to measure the merits and drawbacks of alternative outcomes before change actually takes place. For example, if a health club is concerned with
decreasing membership and wants to increase participation, the merits and drawbacks of various alternatives to change such as decreased membership fees, increased advertising, and/or purchase of new equipment are taken into consideration.

Planning, on the other hand, often tends to be perceived as a means of providing what is needed (7). Its focus is primarily on implementing change simply because change is needed. The objective of planning is to determine ways to accomplish a set objectives. These ways usually consist of a number of steps with planning being the first. For Rodney and Toalson (7) the planning process can be summarized to consist of five steps: (1) planning, (2) organizing, (3) directing (4) implementing, and (5) evaluating. Each one of these steps focuses on the end product, that is, achieving the desired outcome.

For Rodney (6), the ideology of planning is based on the achievement of organizational goals through directed change. For Gordon (4) the conceptualization of strategic planning extends a step further from the traditional understanding of planning to include determining the most effective alternative to change prior to the implementation of change. Strategic planning is therefore concerned with the examination of possible alternatives to change and the implementation of the alternative which is deemed to be the most effective and efficient.

THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

The strategic planning process is a means of operation which focuses on strategic management. More specifically strategic planning consists of making and implementing decisions about an organization's future by defining the organizational mission, identifying strategic alternatives, and implementing strategic plans (4).

The process of strategic planning is therefore planned and implemented by the decision makers (i.e., managers, leaders) of the organization. Although a diversity of approaches are used to implement the strategic planning process, two of the most commonly used approaches are those of Denning (2) and Kent and Wilkinson (5).

Denning's process of strategic planning focuses on a conceptualization of the organization's mission and domain, the strategic goals for that mission and domain, and the policies to guide managers toward the strategic goal. More specifically, this process of strategic management consists of five steps: (1) analysis of the environment, (2) analysis of the organization, (3) analysis of key skills required, (4) assessment of problems and opportunities and (5) generating, evaluating and selecting alternative strategies.

Analysis of the environment means the comprehension of the external environment having an impact on the organization. Analysis of the environment refers to understanding how and why the various elements of the industry, product demand, technological environment, and political process affect the organization.

Analysis of the organization, the second step of Denning's process, refers to an understanding of the internal fabric of an organization. Focus is placed on factors such as product and market situations, capital structure, organization structure, and human resources. Emphasis at this stage is
placed on recognizing the organizational resources available, needed, or needed to be changed.

Moreover the third step, the analysis of key skills required extends beyond the understanding of what human resources are available to change. The objective during this step is to determine the critical skills (i.e., new methods of training personnel) needed for success, and how these need to be implemented or learned in order for change to be applied successfully.

The fourth step, assessment of problems and opportunities, takes into consideration what needs to be changed and what opportunities are accessible to the organization to carry out this change. For change to be implemented through strategic planning, problems need to be diagnosed and the necessary resources must be available or at least accessible to alleviate these problems.

The fifth and final step of Denning’s strategic management process is concerned with the selection of alternative choices to correct previously identified problems. During this step, alternative strategies are generated, evaluated and selected, which lead to solving organizational problems. It is at this point that the evaluation of the selected action takes place prior to its implementation.

For Kent and Wilkinson the strategic planning process consists of conceptualizing the best future possible, and then planning how to reach it. From this perspective strategic planning is a process of determining what an organization intends to be in the future. The focus of this process is based on the future and on preparing for the future by trying to understand it’s alternative courses of action.

Kent and Wilkinson’s strategic planning process consists of eight steps. The eight steps can be summarized as: (1) preparing to plan (thinking of what needs to be done to accomplish the organization’s mission), (2) assessing organizational culture (recognizing the norms of behavior of the organization), (3) taking stock (a self-examination of the organization’s current status and of its environment), (4) determining organizational values (describing what the organization stands for and how it can maintain its integrity), (5) determining the organizations vision (describing its preferred future), (6) constructing or reconstructing its vision (expressing the purpose of the organization or the functions that the organization is attempting to fill in society), (7) setting goals (identifying realistic and attainable statements of accomplishment) and (8) implementation of action plans (writing out a list of concrete actions).

From the aforementioned process, the final step which is the implementation of action plans, is critically important because it entails carrying out the strategic plan established during the previous seven steps. According to Kent and Wilkinson the action plan uses the framework provided by the organization’s values, vision and mission to ensure that goals are reached. An action plan thus transforms an idea into action and carries out what needs to be done through action. More specifically it addresses the "what" through activities, the "how" through tasks, the "who" through responsibilities, the "when" through timeliness, and the "with what" through human and financial resources.
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLANNING IN PRIVATE SECTOR RECREATION ORGANIZATIONS

Since recreation is a service oriented field it is beneficial to plan accordingly to better serve the needs of participants. This is particularly important in the private sector because the quality of the service, and more specifically, its propensity to address desired needs enhances the probability of participation, and ultimately the survival of the organization. Through the recognition of the needs of the target population, private sector organizations are better prepared to provide appropriate services addressing these needs. Private sector organizations need to not only conduct need assessments of participants and prospective participants, but to also evaluate these prior to implementing change. This is necessary to articulate what the outcome will be and how the various alternatives to recreation service provision will benefit the organization. Management and decision-makers of private sector recreation organizations may thus benefit and should acknowledge strategic planning as a management alternative since it is one way to find out the success of change for both participants and the organization prior to implementation.

When planning takes place in private sector recreation organizations a number of issues are considered. According to Rodney and Toalson (7) management in recreation organizations are faced with the following questions concerned with planning: (1) what kind of recreation activities are carried out at present?, (2) what kind of recreation program will best serve participants?, (3) what areas and facilities are available at present?, (4) what additional areas and facilities will be needed?, (5) where should they be located?, (6) to what extent should present areas and facilities be used?, (7) what future developments are planned?, and (8) how much money will be available, and how will it be raised?

Research in the field of recreation reveals strategic planning as an alternative method that can be used in the planning process. Similarly to the ideology of strategic planning in the business field, strategic planning in the field of recreation focuses on developing a management process that helps establish and maintain a balance between the recreation service organization and the external environment (3).

Societal values, and those that shape recreation involvement are rapidly changing. Research by Balmer (1) highlights some of these changes to include: (1) a focus on wellness with a high level of concern about personal health and fitness, (2) a growing respect for the environment (3) a shift towards interdependent communities including a focus on integration, and (4) a focus on leadership responsiveness meaning participating democracy.

Strategic planning is a means to prepare to respond to changes to better serve current and future recreation needs. Through the implementation of a strategic management process directed toward planning it is possible to take into consideration potential changes in the environment and strive to adequately address these. Through the opportunity to evaluate a decision before it is applied in practice, the probability is enhanced that the outcome of the decision better satisfies the needs of participants.

Strategic planning is thus, an alternative choice to management which may be applied by private sector recreation
administrators particularly since its focus is to change for future improvement. Although Denning's and Kent and Wilkinson's processes of strategic planning can be applied to private sector recreation organizations these have not been designed with such in mind. For this reason a strategic management process has been designed for implementation in private sector recreation organizations. This process consists of six steps. Illustration 1 graphically presents these six steps.

The first step is to understand the recreation trends and values of society. This basically means staying up-to-date with current trends of society, that is, understanding what recreation services are currently taking place. In sum, to understand what activities are current trends and why.

The second step closely relates to the first, yet is organization specific. Here, recreation administrators examine the current state of the organization in respect to recreation. In other words, the focus is on trying to understand what activities are currently participated in and why. Moreover, the focus is also on trying to understand what recreation activities are needed and valued by participants.

It is during the third step when problem diagnosis, a critical part of the strategic planning process, takes place. Problem diagnosis basically means pinpointing what needs to be changed in order to better attain the missions of the organization and fulfill the recreation needs of participants.

In the fourth step, a resource analysis is conducted. During this step an examination of existing human and material resources takes place. The objective is to understand what human and material resources are at hand and how these can be improved to more efficiently and effectively achieve the mission of the organization and satisfy the recreation needs of members. When the aforementioned steps have been completed, the fifth step, the determination of strategic alternatives takes place. While taking into consideration the mission, recreation needs and values of society, the organization, the human and material resources, and alternative strategies for change are determined. It is during this step that all possible alternatives for change are brought forward and recognized by administrators involved in the decision making process.

Finally, during the sixth and final step, the selection and evaluation of strategic alternatives takes place. At this point, the pros and cons of each alternative are compared and contrasted. It is also at this point when projections are made in respect to which alternative would be the most appropriate for implementation. It is during this step that action is implemented in the form of the selected alternative to improve the functioning of the organization. Thus, action is taking place to fulfill what Edginton, Hanson and Edginton (3) argue, that is, a balance between the leisure service organization and the external environment.

By first understanding recreation trends and values and the current state of condition of the recreation services, administrators in private sector organizations fulfill the first requirement of strategic planning, that is, an attempt to understand the recreation environment. Once this has been done, effort can be placed into comprehending what problems exist making it difficult to reach desired program alternatives. Moreover, it is resources, or the accessibility of resources which will determine what strategic planning alternatives are selected.
When these six steps have been completed and the strategic plan is implemented, outcomes can be evaluated. In doing so, a critical evaluation as to whether or not the strategic plan has functioned according to plan takes place. Only after this has been done can the outcomes of the strategic change be compared to mission objectives thus making it possible to determine the success of the strategic planning process.

CONCLUSION

The strategic planning process, adapted from the field of management, has only recently been introduced in recreation research. As a management process, the objective of strategic planning is to select the most appropriate alternative course of action for the future. In the field of recreation, the purpose of strategic management is also centered around the future. More specifically, strategic planning for private recreation services focuses on determining ways to improve the delivery of recreation services while attaining a balance between the organization and the external environment.

This paper presents a process for the implementation of strategic planning for recreation administrators in private sector organizations. The strategic planning processes of Denning (2) and Kent and Wilkinson (5) have been adapted to design a strategic planning process for application in private sector recreation organizations. This process consists of six steps: (1) understanding recreation trends and values, (2) understanding the current state of condition of the recreation organizations, (3) recreation problem diagnosis, (4) recreation resource analysis, (5) determination of strategic recreation alternatives, and (6) selection and evaluation of strategic recreation alternatives. This process has been established for recreation administrators of private sector organizations considering adhering strategic planning as a management system.

The strategic planning process for private sector recreation organizations can focus on either participant concerns, resource problems or both. Its intent is based on the selection of an alternative to alleviate the problem while recognizing the positives and negatives of the selected course of action prior to its implementation.

With recreation needs and values continuously changing, private sector recreation administrators need to comprehend that the future begins today. In this era of changing needs, recreation administrators need to plan accordingly for the service provision of the future. This is necessary not only to enhance or guarantee participation but to also increase the likelihood of organizational survival. Strategic planning is one way to do this.

Since strategic planning is a relatively new management process in the field of recreation, its applicability to the recreation service industry needs to be further explored. It may be that it is better applied in larger private sector organizations rather than smaller one's. It may also be that it is more applicable for addressing the recreation needs of private sector organizations with small numbers of participants rather than larger numbers. Issues such as these need to be addressed through research. Expanded research should also be carried out to test and compare the strategic planning approach with other planning approaches. More research is needed in this area to more comprehensively explore.
management alternatives for recreation administrators in private sector organizations.

REFERENCES


Illustration 1
Strategic Management Process for Private Sector Recreation Organizations