Strategic planning and Habermasian informed discourse: reality or rhetoric

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Abstract

This paper analyses the inherent inconsistencies of the traditional strategic planning process that has resulted in the rise of a movement entitled emergent strategic planning. This in itself, although a move in the right direction, has its own set of failings. Instead an alternative approach is proposed grounded in an argument-based discourse utilizing Habermasian insights. It advocates the use of a methodology incorporated with Decision Assurance theory. The theory argues for the use of an epistemically robust, collectively oriented decision-making framework that minimizes power and authority and utilizes decision inputs across the organization. This process has been integral to the current strategic planning process utilized by Murdoch University during the latter half of 2001 and into 2002. It concludes however that the claim of collaboration and participation in this example of a University forging a new strategic direction is more a case of rhetoric rather than reality.
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1. Introduction

Traditional strategic planning is antediluvian. Strategic planning is a corporate managerialist, top-down model operating usually in an economic rationalist framework. The prevailing process has come under increasing scrutiny and critique from a growing and diverse range of authors and consultants (Desai, 2000; Entrekin and Court, 2001; Gan, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994; Mulhare, 1999; Wright et al., 1999) who advocate a shift towards an emergent approach to planning issues.

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   This study chronicles an inside account of the development, acceptance and implementation of a process utilized by Murdoch University in Western Australia in its current strategic planning round. The process is ongoing and has as its central aim the engagement of the various groups with the organizational community, including students, academics, administrators and senior management to engender a higher degree of "ownership" of the final outcome(s). This aim is to enable groups of internal stakeholders a fairer and more equitable involvement in crucial decision outcomes. The critical question is whether this was achieved or was the whole exercise one of dramaturgical game playing with the notion of supposed empowerment of the workforce.

   The paper is constructed in three main sections. The first part analyses the strategic planning process that prevails in the majority of organizations. The second part introduces the notion of a more effective framework and theory (Decision Assurance) that is argued to deliver epistemically enhanced, collectively oriented decision-making outcomes. The Habermasian insight of the ". . . force of better argument" is a key feature in this section. The final part will document and critique the current process and outcomes(s) that have been constructed and accepted as integral to the current Murdoch University planning process.

2. Strategic planning and control

2.1. Traditional/intentional strategic planning

   The approach invariably taken is captured in the following statement in Bartol et al. "*Top management* [emphasis added], in consultation with the board of directors and middle management, develop strategic plans. They typically cover a time horizon of three to five years or more into the future." (Bartol et al., 2001, pp. 185–186) The two key elements identified here are, firstly, the pivotal and often perceived as the exclusive role, right and responsibility of top management and, secondly, the extended time frame of such plans.

   Mintzberg, one of the leading gurus in the field, identifies that the literature on planning has ". . . literally hundreds of models of a process by which strategy could supposedly be formally developed and operationalized" (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 35). However, he argues that these are all built on the same conceptual framework. This basic model requires an external and internal appraisal of the organization: strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities (SWOT analysis). This then feeds the strategy creation process followed by evaluation and choice amongst strategic alternatives and then implementation of the chosen strategy. Mintzberg goes on to clearly state that there are three basic premises.[1] These premises and the basic model have dominated the planning landscape but are now being questioned

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[1] 1. Strategy formation should be controlled and conscious as well as a formalized and elaborated process, decomposed into distinct steps, each delineated by checklists and supported by techniques.

   2. Responsibility for the overall process rests with the chief executive in principle; responsibility for its execution rests with the staff planners in practice.

   3. Strategies come out of this process fully developed, typically as generic positions, to be explicated so that they can then be implemented through detailed attention to objectives, budgets, programs and operating plans of various kinds (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 42).