Why SOAR’s Appreciative Inquiry theory may make it a better fit for law libraries.

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Everyone has heard the term “strategic plan” at some point during their career. Strategic planning is a necessary tool used in management, especially at the senior levels. However, despite the level of effort and research put into a strategic plan, many of these plans end up on the shelf for the next three to five years until it is time to update the plan once again. Further, when the strategic planning is primarily completed by senior management, library employees may not fully realize how a good strategic plan can benefit their day-to-day work and guide the vision of the library.
A good strategic plan unifies the goals of the organization, helps steer future decision-making, and guides an organization’s development over the next few years. Many involved in strategic planning are accustomed to using a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) when developing a strategic plan.

However, SOAR analysis (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results) can also be used in strategic planning. SOAR analysis is used when an organization is looking to maximize what it already does well, rather than focus on addressing its external or internal threats.

**SOAR vs. SWOT**

SOAR analysis is based on the concept of appreciative inquiry, also referred to as AI. In an organizational setting, appreciative inquiry emphasizes that when beginning the evaluation process, the organization should start by first determining what it is doing right. By capitalizing on the strengths of what
the organization already does well, and coupling it with the positive mindset of the appreciative inquiry approach, an organization can experience meaningful change in its strategic planning process. How issues are framed and presented becomes more important when using SOAR analysis.

A key distinction between SOAR and SWOT is that SOAR focuses on capitalizing on an organization’s positive attributes by emphasizing the processes that the organization currently performs well. In a library setting, this can be services or skills. This approach is different from SWOT analysis, which focuses on what an organization is missing, or what is threatening an organization’s existence, such as reduced funding or reduced staffing. However, this is not to say that SOAR analysis does not assist in discovering areas of improvement for the library. Instead of listing threats to the organization, SOAR looks for opportunities for enhancement or development.

Another distinction between SOAR and SWOT is that SOAR analysis places a greater emphasis on involving all library stakeholders, whether those stakeholders are external or internal to the organization. The human element is an important part of SOAR analysis because the stakeholders are an essential part of the appreciative inquiry process. Further, the employees are part of the process to execute the vision of the strategic plan.

Benefits of SOAR in a Library Setting
In general, those attracted to library work have a strong interest in helping people meet their needs. The SOAR analysis approach lends itself to this type of work because of the appreciative inquiry involved when using SOAR. Similarly, SOAR analysis can create increased buy-in from library employees and library stakeholders due to the high level of involvement that those groups have in the process. For external stakeholders, one way to engage them is to have focus groups that are led by library employees. However, at a minimum for SOAR to work, library employees must be involved throughout the entire strategic planning process. Input can easily be gathered by visiting departmental meetings or having a staff retreat focused on strategic planning. Finally, all groups should be allowed to view drafts of the strategic plan and offer input before a final plan is completed.
Caveats When Using SOAR

While SOAR analysis has many strengths, there are also some potential drawbacks to consider when determining if SOAR is the best approach for your library’s strategic planning needs. For example, SOAR places a high emphasis on gathering input from all library stakeholders. While it may be easier to gather library employees for input, it can be harder to speak to external stakeholders, such as vendors or partners that are not in your city. Additionally, it takes time to identify the relevant external stakeholders who should participate in the SOAR process. After identifying external stakeholders, it can be hard to find the time to get relevant stakeholders together. It may also be hard to reframe issues in the way required for SOAR. Seeing an issue as an opportunity instead of a weakness may not seem possible or may be perceived as viewing the issue through rose-colored glasses instead of tackling the issue head-on. Finally, similar to SWOT, if the strategic plan sits on the shelf, the process and momentum used to create the plan gets lost.

Final Takeaways

As with SWOT analysis, SOAR works best when senior management is interested in moving the library in a new direction and is committed to working toward new goals. While SOAR may appear to be more time-consuming due to the emphasis placed on multiple parties being part of the strategic planning process, the increased buy-in from employees and external stakeholders makes SOAR analysis a good choice for managers looking to increase employee morale and productivity.