



Prioritizing Priorities

How to Employ Strategic Planning & Management

~ BY WILLIS CARTER

It would be quite an understatement for me to say that I've learned a lot during my time on the APCO Board of Officers. I've learned the useful skills of how to sleep pretty much anywhere and how to appreciate airport food. I've fought my natural fear of public speaking. And I've learned a thing or two about the different methods of running an organization.

Having spent the past 22 years of my career with the responsibility of managing operations of the Fire Communications Center in Shreveport, La., I considered myself fairly well prepared for the strategic management role of a member of the Board of Officers: I have prepared many budgets, managed many employees, seen the successful completion of many projects through the years and operated in an environment in which strategic planning was part of our cultural transition.

In light of my experience in government, I quickly realized that it's my inclination to look at the strategic planning and management of APCO International the same way that I look at the management of my agency at home. And bear in mind that, in my opinion, there is a difference—albeit a subtle one—between strategic management and strategic planning.

As we all know, managing a government agency differs significantly from managing APCO in that most government agencies are not affected by dramatic fluctuations in revenue. In our government jobs, budget preparation begins with a budgetary fund balance amount, a target if you will. We are asked to take this fund balance and divide it up among the long list of things we need to accomplish—a list that has sometimes carried over several budget cycles. Therein lies the real challenge.

The list of “top” priorities tends to be never ending for governments, PSAPs and APCO alike. Several years ago, I had the pleasure of being a part of APCO strategic

planning sessions. One exercise was to prioritize our priorities. Even at the end of this exercise (which spanned two days), the “immediate” priorities were far greater than what we could accomplish immediately or, for that matter, even in a few years. Because our work is so important, it is always hard to identify *the* most important initiative.

The similarities between the management of my agency and the strategic management of APCO International ended there, but there are certainly some lessons to be learned and applied at home.

My role at APCO has provided me the opportunity to participate in a very different management philosophy. This philosophy focuses not only on the importance of strategic planning, but also on the importance of strategic management in a real-time and dynamic daily environment. Whether your agency is public or private, strategic management is key to this process.

Simply stated, strategic management is a process that begins with the formation of goals and objectives that lead the development of policies and plans to achieve these goals and only then looks at the allocation of resources needed. The general principle behind strategic management is identifying where you are through strategic planning, recognizing where you want to be and figuring out how to get there.

The importance of strategic management continues to grow as the rate of change and competition continue to increase. In his book, *Leading Change*, John P. Kotter says, “The rate of change is not going to slow down anytime soon. If anything, competition in most industries will probably speed up even more in the next few decades.” In our industry, we are probably more aware of this than most. Every day, we watch new technologies and new companies providing those technologies enter the arena. We all understand very well how this competition affects the commercial side of our industry,

but how can we apply this understanding to the practice of strategic management in our agencies?

Overall, development, especially of technology, is driven by consumer expectations and demand. In our case, those consumers just happen to be the public at large. And it's no secret that the public has some demanding expectations of public safety communications. In addition, the public has developed an overall distrust of government organizations and a view that bureaucracy is equivalent to inefficiency. We can manage these expectations and engender trust by applying strategic management to our own operations.

Where do we start? Check out the CDE article, “Master Plan,” in this issue on page 42. If you want to truly dive in, a lot of resources are available to help. If you google “strategic management,” you'll find articles, books and materials specific to strategic management in the public sector.

My real purpose in communicating what I've learned with you is to encourage you to try new ways of thinking. Modifying our typical government process from one in which we focus solely on hitting a number to one in which goals and objectives steer our planning and the daily use of strategic management skills and tools helps us meet the objectives of a strategic plan allows us to better manage our agencies. The result is the ability to provide better services to our public. ||PSC||



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