



SWOT + Causal Utility

PURPOSE

To identify, organize, and prioritize the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (i.e., SWOTs) that influence the planning, design, development, implementation, and evaluation of most any program or project.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT APPLICATIONS

Brainstorming alone rarely provides the useful information required to make guide a needs assessment. By using Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (i.e., SWOT) analysis in combination with Causal Utility we can combine the benefits of brainstorming with the value of a systematic approach to defining relationships and making decisions about what to do next. During a needs assessment you can use this combination during data collection (for example, when working with focus groups), during data analysis (for example, when reducing needs assessment findings to select recommendations), and/or during the decision-making that follows a needs assessment (for example, selecting the "right" set of performance improvement interventions to accomplish desired results).

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Advantages

- Combines the value of an environment scan based around SWOTs with the utility of a systematic process for relating identified elements and making decisions about what to do next.
- Guides groups through a process whereby individual SWOT factors can be prioritized in relation to other SWOT factors, rather than simply producing a list of items that are each given equal value in future decision-making.

Disadvantages

- The process of transitioning from the brainstorming SWOT identification to the assigning of values to each element can be challenging for group members who haven't been through a SWOT process before.

GENERAL PROCEDURES

1. Identify internal and external stakeholders for the SWOT analysis. These partners should represent an array of business perspectives, such as internal partners from marketing and shipping as well as external partners like suppliers and clients. The perspective that each partner offers to the analysis provides useful information in

determining the appropriate strategic direction to any forth-coming performance initiative.

2. In a meeting (or over email) have group members identify Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat (SWOT) from their perspectives. You may want to provide a context to identification process. For instance, are you looking for SWOT factors impacting on just your program or unit, or are these SWOT factors that are/will impact the entire organization. The context will provide boundaries for the discussion and help you identify SWOT factors that will best guide your needs assessment.
3. In most situations, begin your SWOT analysis by asking participants to brainstorm ideas to fit into the following four categories:

Strength: An internal competence, valuable resource or attribute that an organization can use to exploit opportunities in the external environment

Weakness: An internal lack of a competence, resource or attribute that an organization requires to perform in the external environment

Opportunity: An external possibility that an organization can pursue or exploit to gain benefit

Threat: An external factor that has the potential to reduce an organization's performance

4. When you have identified an adequate number of SWOT factors, categorize them into a 2x2 SWOT matrix (see Figure 1 below). Most SWOT analyses identify strengths as *enhancers* to desired performance, and weaknesses as *inhibitors* (both within the control of an organization). Likewise, opportunities are identified as *enhancers* to desired performance, while threats are *inhibitors* (both outside of an organization's control). For example, your strengths could include employee knowledge, reliable suppliers, new technologies, while your threats include new competitors, employee recruitment, limited raw materials. Figure 1 displays a common format for classifying factors.

Figure 1. A conventional SWOT matrix (Leigh 2006)

SWOT Analysis

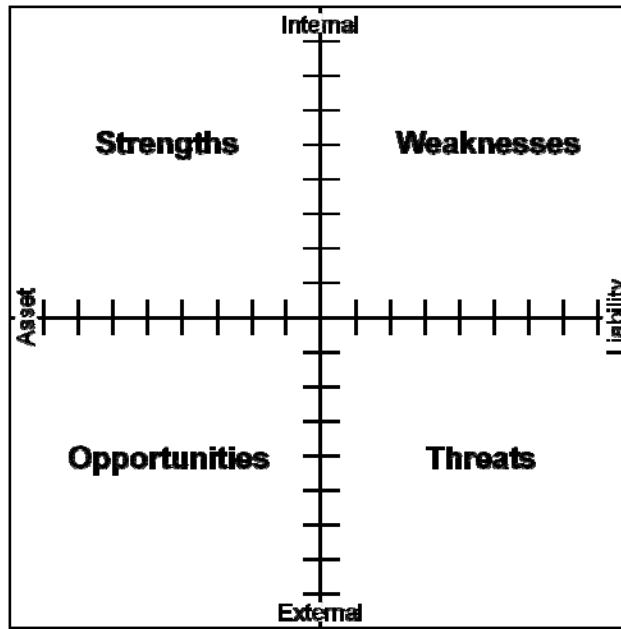
<p style="text-align: center;">Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•••••	<p style="text-align: center;">Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•••••
<p style="text-align: center;">Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•••••	<p style="text-align: center;">Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•••••

5. To enhance SWOT factors you will want to work with the group members to define their relative value or importance within the organizations context. You can do this by using a continuum along each of the X and Y axis of your SWOT matrix (see Figure 2 for an example). Use the continuum of internal-to-external control for the X axis and assets-to-liabilities for the Y axis. Individual factors can then be plotted within the matrix based on their relationships to other factors. To assign these relationships you can ask additional questions related to the cost and causality of each, for instance...

- *How much is each factor currently and potentially costing my organization, its partners, and society?*
- *How much control does my organization have over each factor?*

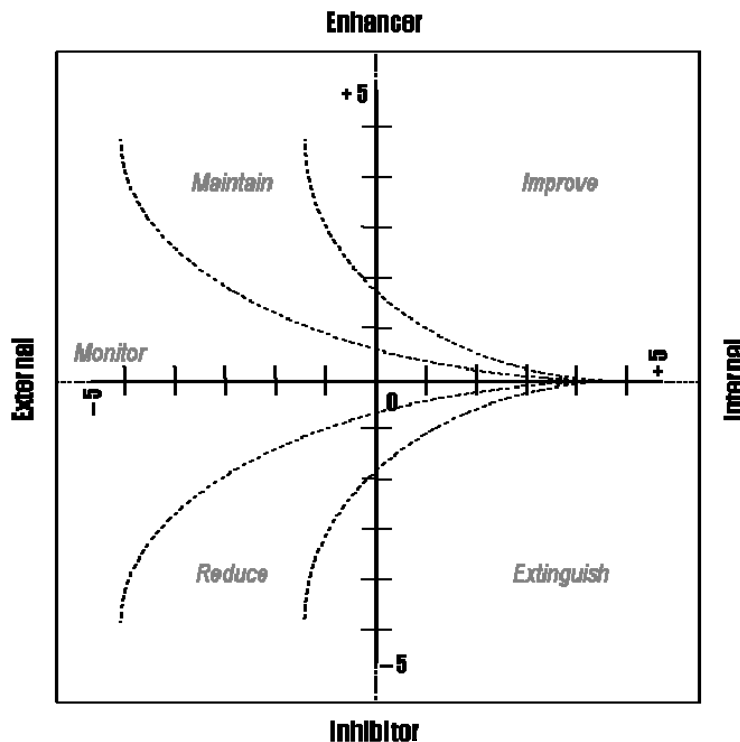
Place each SWOT factor along the appropriate continuum, thus defining their relationship to other SWOT factors.

Figure 2. Expanded versions of the SWOT matrix (Leigh, 2006)



6. Use the plotted SWOT factors to determine which factors should be fixed immediately, improved upon over time, sustained, and/or monitored (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Making decisions based on a SWOT matrix (Leigh, 2006)



7. With each SWOT factor plotted into the Matrix from Figure 3, prioritize the factors in order of importance to achieving desired performance objectives.
8. Use the prioritized list of SWOT factors to guide your decisions.

Tips for Success

- When identifying SWOT factors use an open brainstorming process that allows everyone to share their ideas.
- Avoid ambiguous SWOT factors; link each factor to a specific and measurable indicator to ensure that everyone is using the same operational definition of the factor.
- Work to build consensus around the placement of SWOT factors within the matrix, though there is often many opinions on where individual factors should go on the continuums of internal-external and assets-liabilities.

References and Resources

- Leigh, D. (2006). SWOT analysis. In Pershing, J. (ed.), *The Handbook of Human Performance Technology*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.
- Watkins, R. (2007). *Performance By Design: The systematic selection, design, and development of performance technologies that produce results*. Amherst, Ma:HRD Press.