

Chapter 1.2

A strategic plan for a National Federation

Benefits of this chapter

Your strategy creates your success

Finding the right strategy is essential when developing a structure within your National Federation. Like an athlete, each federation must determine its own goals, use the right techniques and swim forward toward the finish.

Taking a closer look at this analogy, swimming toward the finish is your structure; this is how you put your goals into action. While it is important to always keep in mind the finish line, it is equally important to understand the path which leads you there. In order to get there, you must first take a closer look at the goals and the techniques you are using.

You have already taken the time to think about what inspires your federation through the development of your mission, vision and values. Your strong and powerful message can put into motion your strategy and motivate your staff to achieve these goals. Make sure that each goal is measurable and achievable. And remember, a good structure follows a solid strategy.

Introduction

Implementing change of any kind requires a solid strategy (the plan for the future) and a sound structure (the way of deploying resources both human and financial – across your aquatics federation in order to deliver the strategy).

That is why it is essential for your aquatics federation to remember that structure must follow strategy – not the other way around. There is no single structure for a federation to use when organising itself– it all depends on the strategy that shows where to go and how to get there. The strategy must guide the structure. At times the focus is too much on structure and not enough on strategy.

So put the discussion about structure on hold until your federation has worked out a strategy: a plan or roadmap outlining your main objectives and the way to achieve them. A water-polo or synchronised swimming team without a game plan cannot achieve top results in the pool. This is equally true for aquatics federations looking to improve organisational structure, management and development out of the water.

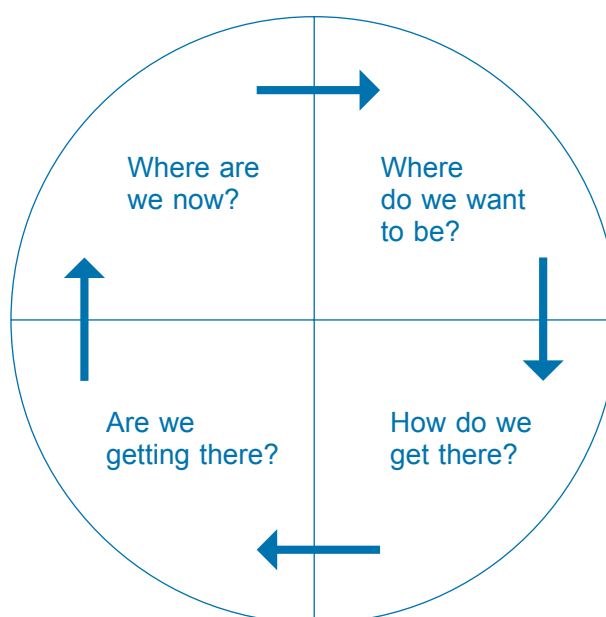
Getting started

The start of any plan begins with figuring out exactly where you are today, where you want to be tomorrow and how you want to get there.

The whole process is continuous; from analysing your current situation and setting objectives for the future, to mapping out the actions needed to achieve those objectives and evaluating progress toward them to make analyses of the new current situation.

It is a circle that should never stop turning. As soon as goals are achieved, new ones should be created.

Diagram 1.2 a



A guideline for strategic planning not only creates a pathway from which to evaluate a federation's progress; it also creates a range of additional benefits associated with the strategy development process.

These benefits include the following four examples:

1/ Delivers motivation to both staff and members

The development of a roadmap for the future of your federation creates energy and clarifies the priorities in an often political and less focused environment.

2/ Depicts the vision

Most federations have outlined nicely formulated visions. However, sometimes these messages run the risk of being seen as too distant in the day-to-day work of the organisation; the strategy brings the vision to life.

3/ Demonstrates leadership

Leaders in National Federations can easily get dragged into operational details, but strategy development is really what leaders are elected to do. By focusing on this, they send a clear signal about leadership.

4/ Duplicates a sponsor's business plan

Corporations operate with business plans based on a business strategy. When approaching a corporation with the aim of securing a sponsorship deal, your National Federation needs to appear as a serious partner with strategies and plans in place.

Five core elements of strategy formulation

When formulating a plan for the future of your federation, the key word is strategy. A strategy must be the result of a strategic process similar to the development of a business strategy for a corporation. The outcome will of course be different, but your inspiration for formulating your strategy should come from the corporate world since they have very good experience and have formulated several models.

The most useful model is the Strategy Diamond.

It lets you focus on five main areas by answering five questions:

1/ Where will we focus our attention? (Arenas)

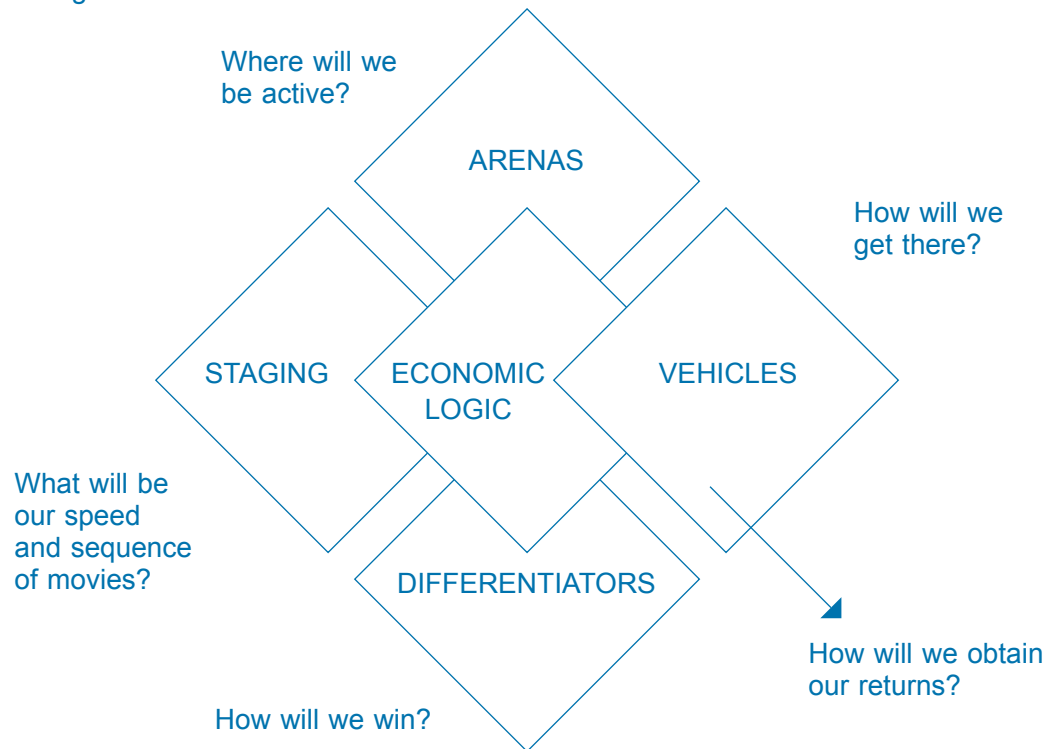
2/ How will we get there? (Vehicles)

3/ What will be our speed and sequence of moves? (Staging)

4/ How will we win? (Differentiators)

5/ How will we obtain our returns? (Economic logic)

Diagram 1.2 b



1/ Where will we focus our attention? (Arenas)

Which “arenas” within our federation are priorities? Answering the first diamond question will help to clarify scope, focus and objectives.

- How comprehensive will our strategy be and where should we be most active?
- What should be our focus in terms of objectives: building our brand, securing sponsorship and/or sport development or something else?

Keeping focus, making key selections and at times leaving things out are important elements of any strategy. Formulating a strategy is about the choices.

2/ How will we get there? (Vehicles)

After the scope, focus and objectives have been formulated as part of answering question 1, the next step will be to identify the “vehicles.”

For a National Federation’s strategy, this mainly means deciding which departments should be targeted:

- Events, grassroots or elite competition?
Which mix of events will provide the most effective way forward?
- Which internal departments should be priority?
- Member services – coaches, officials and sponsors – which should be the focus?

The criteria developed in the selection process will be an important outcome of answering question 2. The carefully crafted set of selection criteria will provide your federation with strong, strategically-based arguments for putting emphasis on certain areas.

3/ What will be our speed and sequence of moves? (Staging)

After having clarified the “Arenas” and the “Vehicles”, the answer to question 3 will determine how to activate your strategy in terms of putting together a timeline and setting the direction for your overall approach for implementation.

When developing your federation’s strategy with up to a ten year time frame, it is crucial to have a clear idea of the “Staging” in order to create synergy over the years by building from one focus to another.

Your federation can choose between two main approaches:

1/ A bottom-up strategy where the idea is to focus on a range of smaller initiatives during the first years in order to gain experience and recognition among your members. Then, after successfully accomplishing these goals, your federation can aim for medium sized initiatives and finally launch an attempt to implement a large initiative like an all-around strategic plan that covers all departments and disciplines. A bottom-up approach makes sense if your federation is relatively small or just beginning to build its strategic plan. In general the bottom-up approach is a meaningful and logical step-by-step process to creating your strategy.

2/ The basic of idea of a top-down strategy focuses on your federation’s decision as to which major transformation it wants to achieve over the next 10+ years, then deciding which medium-sized initiatives you want to achieve in the next 5-9 years, and then deciding which smaller initiatives you want to achieve over the coming 1-3 years. The idea is to “begin with the end in mind” both in terms of planning and – more important – in terms of communication internally and externally. By announcing your ambitions of wanting to instil a new long-term strategy, your federation positions itself very clearly and will have the chance to take a short-cut in terms of getting acknowledgement from peers.

A mix of the two approaches is obviously also an option. The important factor regarding “Staging” in the strategy formulation process is to be able to determine the way forward at least for a five-year period.

4/ How will we win? (Differentiators)

Luckily your federation is the only aquatics federation in your country; however, other sports federations both new and old are coming into the market. With a larger number of sports of interest entering your sporting world, resources can soon become scarce.

As in any competitive market, being different from competitors is one of the keys to success and the notion of differentiators is a core element to any strategy. So how can an ambitious federation be different?

The following questions will help determine ways to create differentiation:

- Will your strategic plan and overall approach be different – like choosing a top-down approach if most competitors apply a bottom-up approach?

- Can your communication and marketing activities provide differentiation?
- Or does your internal set-up and structure offer an opportunity for being different?

There are differentiators to consider depending on the answers to the questions 1-3. It is crucial to include some in order to gain a competitive advantage.

5/ How will we obtain our returns? (Economic Logic)

The last “Diamond Strategy” question may not be the most exciting, but it still needs to be answered clearly and convincingly when developing your comprehensive strategy. It links back to question 1 and the objectives of your plan because in order to successfully implement a strategy, investments are needed and often costs will occur before benefits. That is why it must be part of any strategy to identify, outline and clearly explain how both costs and benefits will develop over the chosen period. Any strategy must include a financial factor that must be able to be explained to your members. This doesn’t mean that you must be making a profit in the strict financial sense (most plans don’t) but the overall “economic logic” must be identified and highlighted – and if it is not there, the strategy is not worth implementing.

The overview on strategy

Simplifying expressions related to strategic planning in your organisation can be set into three core elements:

1/ Focus

A strategy must provide a focus for your federation. It must clarify what the organisation will do and will not do; strategy is about making choices.

2/ Differentiation

A strategy must outline what your federation wants to do differently; different from what it used to do and differential from its competitors (other national sporting federations).

3/ A compelling tag-line

A slogan that explains in a few strong words the focus and the differentiation of your federation. A good strategy only works if it can be easily communicated and understood.



Useful tips

Strategic planning is not about:

- Setting unrealistic goals
Make sure that your goals are attainable,
this will keep you and your members motivated!
- A one-off job
The process is on-going as the planning cycle indicates
- Just talking
Even though strategic planning requires a lot of talking,
that is only the first step
- A guarantee for action
One thing is the plan; it must be followed by a solid process
of implementation and actions to deliver results