

# Rapid High-Participation Strategic Planning

Sallie Lee, Debbie Morris and Birgitt Williams

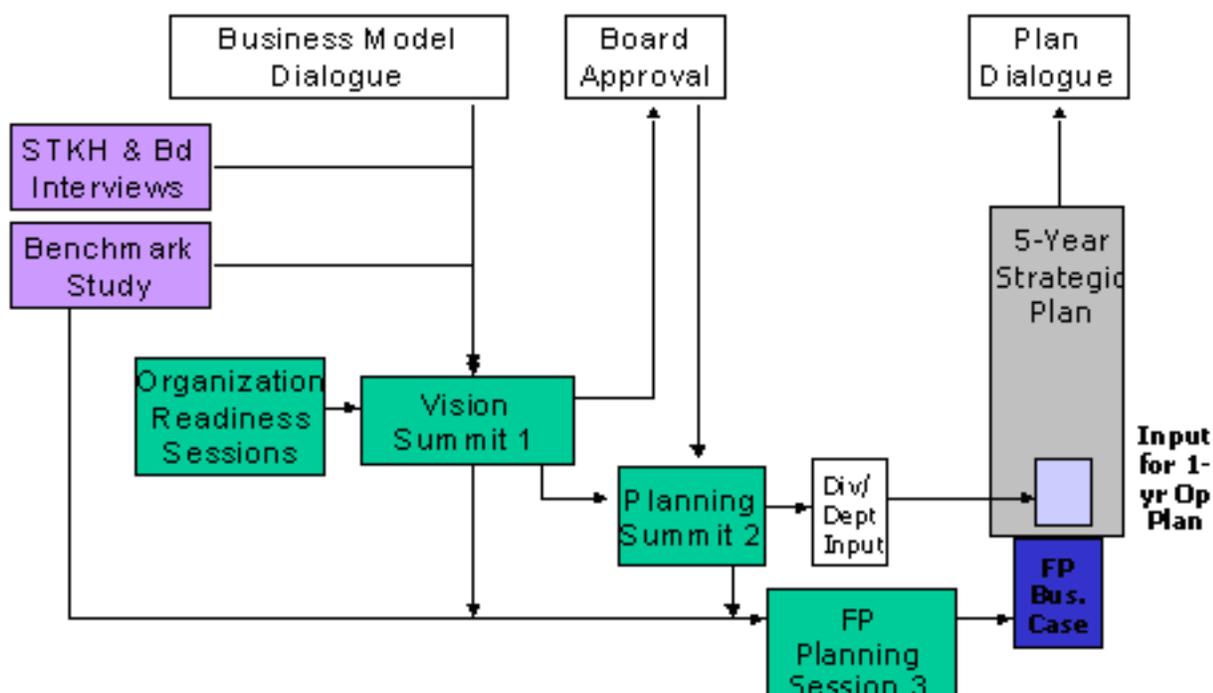
sallie@sharedsun.net, dmorris304@earthlink.net, birgitt@mindspring.com

*The authors together with Ward Williams and Steven Garcia were invited to bid on a strategic planning process for "GWA" (not the actual name). It had the markings of a nightmare project: complete within two and a half months while involving the workforce, a geographically dispersed board, and external stakeholders. The organization runs 24-hours-a-day and some of the leadership believed a for-profit entity was the answer. This article highlights the phases followed and reflections on blending different approaches.*

The situation was stark: What do you do if you've ridden the waves of a big government contract and the rules change? If you lead a large non-profit with shaky financial underpinnings, the response is to shape the future before it shapes you. This article sets out how we did this – and with speed!

We created a multi-layered approach incorporating and blending Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Open Space Technology (OST), Whole Person Process Facilitation (WPPF)<sup>i</sup>, a benchmark study, and OpenSpace-Online Real Time Conferencing software<sup>ii</sup>.

## Process Overview



## Client And Project Background

Founded in the early 20th century, GWA was one of many organizations dedicated to eliminating undesirable social conditions. Today, GWA's budget is approximately \$12 million, with 250+ employees, providing daily services to thousands in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin islands.

GWA faced several significant challenges. Their mission and identity were confused. Over the last eighteen years, a government service contract that provided major revenues was ending. A potential new contract would change some of GWA's core competencies. With privatization of many public services, GWA's ability to fund its central mission was in jeopardy.

The strategic planning process goals were to: build a five-year plan; create a business case within the plan's context informing the decision to launch a for-profit business; and provide input for the 2005 operating plan.

### Phase 1: Preparation

Our first steps with the management team were to establish goals, schedules, and planning parameters or 'Givens', defined as perceived non-negotiables for participants. For example, givens included: The Board as a governance structure and The current mission statement.

Aspects that were open for discussion and possible change included: Current bylaws; Board structure, with data and a clear rationale; The vision going beyond current service categories.

Consultant Birgitt Williams created the concept of 'givens', finding it a critical success factor for long-term benefit to organizations using OST. This concept is not to inhibit discussion but set expectations for post-meeting implementation, ensuring the process does not send people's energy 'out of bounds.'

Next, the consulting team met with the GWA design team. In one intense day, the team built a shared vision of the process, named it, created a graphic, and developed invitations and project plans for each event. They also identified the GWA communities to be represented, given that 24 hour staffing of phones prohibited 100% attendance at each event.

Concurrently, consultants Sallie Lee and Debbie Morris developed appreciative inquiry protocols to conduct and document interviews with stakeholders and Board members. Time constraints and existing demands prevented GWA staff from doing this task. This approach made these stakeholder and Board member voices available in SOME way rather than not at all. Verbatim summaries about trends, opportunities, GWA assets, capabilities and core competencies were provided as inputs to the Vision Summit.

Six organizational readiness meetings, led by Birgitt and Ward Williams, prepared everyone for participative planning. All staff shared 'mad, sad, or glad' stories of the past and present, which helped people complete unfinished business from the past and release energy for planning the future.

These meetings and meetings with the executive team used WPPF, a facilitation process that taps people's intellectual and intuitive wisdom and is congruent with AI and OST.

## Phase 2: Mission Reaffirmation And Vision Development

A one-day AI vision summit led by Sallie Lee and Debbie Morris produced a vision statement using personal stories and inputs from stakeholders, board members, and the employee readiness meetings to confront external realities and discover GWA's moments of greatness and strengths. The sixty participants were from all parts and levels of GWA. The intense commitment to GWA's storied past and promising future was a defining moment, especially for the new Board chairman and GWA CEO.

## Phase 3: Strategic Plan Development

After the Board approved the vision, sixty participants drawn from every level, department and the Board, worked with Birgitt and Ward Williams to develop the agenda for a planning summit using OST. By noon of day 2, participants had crafted GWA's strategic plan, collectively agreed on goals, determined responsibility for each, and identified actions and resources. After the meeting, these plans were further refined by existing work teams.

## Phase 4: For-Profit Business Case Development

In a one-day alignment meeting facilitated by Birgitt and Ward Williams using WPPF™, the management team:

- Established financial parameters for a for-profit business
- Identified parameters were it to become a separate entity
- Aligned and clarified the purpose of a for-profit business
- Identified structural options
- Identified additional options for GWA's financial security

Through the process, the team achieved a level of conversation and alignment absent from earlier discussions. With a clear context set, GWA staff, guided by consultant Stephen Garcia, benchmarked eight nonprofits with successful for-profit businesses. This outward focus helped GWA leaders learn the challenges and opportunities of social entrepreneurship.

The benchmark study then fed into a virtual Open Space Technology meeting, using the OpenSpace-Online® Real Time Conferencing system, to consider a for-profit business. The Internet-based meeting of 40 people from across GWA was a practical, inexpensive approach. The resulting transcript will be used to shape continued planning of a for-profit venture.

After the proposed plan was presented to the Board, executive staff worked with lead consultant Debbie Morris to further align objectives, activities and measures into a strategy roadmap<sup>iii</sup> so that everyone knew exactly how to proceed. GWA's identity, focus and a path came newly alive.

## Outcomes

While too soon for long term results, management and employees are aligned and motivated, with increased clarity regarding GWA's mission and goals. People reported delight in the process, significant personal learning, greater satisfaction, and surprise at the work completed in so little time.

Many were astonished that across the organization, people saw the same problems and opportunities and were now looking to the future together. Senior staff remarked how

several strategies emerged from the summits in a stronger way than they might have otherwise.

Employee passion and dedication were visible to all, and Board members who participated valued the immersion into GWA's inner workings. A comment from the planning summit said it best: "We each came here as an individual to represent our own views and secondly the perspective of our part of the organization. At the end of the day, we were all thinking about the good of GWA as a whole."

### Our Reflections

One surprise was how seamlessly these approaches blended. We believe it is because they share common assumptions and principles: the value of wholeness, of incorporating all voices, and of changing an organization's inner dialogue with fresh thinking and powerful, democratic conversation forums.

As a consulting team, we needed to be flexible. Our willingness to see what was needed and to set aside purity of practice while keeping its essence was a strength. For example, in AI we don't normally focus on sad and mad stories, only the 'glads'. Seeing the value as preparation for the other work, we included all stories in the readiness phase. Along the way, we surprised ourselves at the speed with which we engaged, involved, and innovated with grace and ease, in true partnership with our client system.

#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> WPPF™ is a means of facilitating meetings that taps into the whole person – their intellectual and intuitive wisdom – and creates maximum choice for participants while simultaneously offering a guided facilitation approach. It uses the same principles and laws as an OST meeting as well as on the Four Immutable Laws of Spirit developed by Angeles Arrien. For more, see <http://www.openspacetechnology.com/pfmeeting.html>. We chose this method so that these meetings would share the same foundational assumptions as the large-scale meetings, thus avoiding unnecessary cognitive dissonance.

<sup>ii</sup> OpenSpace-Online® is a system for Internet-based conferencing in real time. From 5 to 75 people can work together on current issues and opportunities through successive phases which mirror a face-to-face Open Space Technology meeting. A virtual facilitator guides participants through the process. At the end of the conference, each participant receives extensive documentation about the meeting content in an HTML format at the press of a button. For more, see [www.OpenSpace-Online.com](http://www.OpenSpace-Online.com).

We chose this method initially because we anticipated holding this conference with experts in social entrepreneurship from anywhere in the world. When the executive team decided to keep the conversation only within GWA, we stayed with our choice for a number of reasons. The method was congruent to the live Open Space Technology meeting that employees had just experienced. Again, we thought it was important to avoid unnecessary cognitive dissonance that may have occurred by shifting from a whole systems approach to another more linear approach. We were also concerned about "meeting fatigue" and believed the online approach would be novel and interesting for participants.

<sup>iii</sup> "Strategy roadmap" refers to a concise implementation map for the whole organization and external audiences. It shows the cause-effect relationships between the internal support staff functions and the external, mission-oriented goals and objectives. It also summarized in a few pages the mission, vision, overarching goals, and top priority programmatic goals, objectives, critical activities, resources required and metrics. The process of creating it distilled and captured the leadership team's commitment to each other and to the organization.