



Comparison Between Traditional Strategic Planning and Adaptive Action Planning

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Many different approaches are used to plan for the future of an institution. Even traditional strategic planning processes use different vocabulary and tools to build a map of a desired future and strategies to reach that future. The effectiveness of these approaches depends on how success is defined, the level of organizational readiness for change, and the commitment to build actions around the objectives and strategies defined during the planning process.

Human Systems Dynamics (HSD), the application of complexity theory to individual and organizational behavior, introduces new ways to think about and do planning for the future. In this new paradigm, Strategic Planning is replaced with Adaptive Action Planning. The following table summarizes some of the fundamental ways in which HSD-based Adaptive Action Planning is different from traditional models of Strategic Planning.

Traditional Strategic Planning	Adaptive Action Planning
Assumes long-range future is knowable, so you can set reliable long-term objectives and control the environment sufficiently to meet them.	Assumes that the future is unpredictable, so you must work effectively with the circumstances that surround you.
Focuses on setting goals that will pull an organization into the desired future.	Focuses on defining actions that push the organization to live within its desired future.
Divides goals, objectives, roles, and responsibilities into discrete organizational areas.	Focuses on individual and group actions toward common goals.
Works in quarterly or annual cycles to plan the path for the coming year, set expectations, and evaluate performance and communication.	Works in multiple cycles of planning and evaluation that are as frequent as feasible to encourage adaptive change in response to the shifting environment.
Focuses on major threats, shifts, or transformations of the whole organization at the same time.	Focuses on individual and small-group actions that make a difference in the "here and now" with an eye toward the preferred future.
Produces long lists of goals and objectives that are more or less aligned toward a common goal.	Produces a focused action plan for influencing one aspect of the system at a time. This single change begins a cascading process that ripples change across the organization.
Driven by insights and needs of leaders who believe that they see the desired future for the organization.	Reflects the insights and knowledge of the professionals and service-delivery personnel who work in the system every day.
Selects a single set of measures for success of the organization as a whole.	Helps individuals and groups establish and track the measures that are significant to their work.
Establishes a singular description of the current state, desired state, gaps, and strategies to close gaps.	Incorporates diverse perspectives and strategies that encourage on going learning through continuous improvement in all parts of the organization.
Assumes that the forces and influences on the organization will remain stable in the foreseeable future.	Assumes that the environment inside and outside the organization will evolve continually in the near- and far-term futures.
Establishes priorities.	Articulates actions required to accomplish priorities.