

Chapter Five: Strategic Planning at the City University of Hong Kong (Case One)

5.1 Introduction

The first case, conducted during June 1996, concerns a Strategic Planning Task Force (SPTF) within the City University of Hong Kong (CityU). CityU had been transformed from the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong some two years beforehand and was in the process of adapting to university status. A new President (formerly known as the Vice-Chancellor) had recently been appointed and he had created the SPTF in order that it assess how financial resource utilisation in the University could be made more effective. The Hong Kong Government, through the University Grants Council (UGC), had recently indicated that the budget for the 1998-2001 triennium would be cut and the tertiary education institutions in Hong Kong would have to do more with less. The SPTF was one of a number of similar task forces within the University looking at various aspects of its operations. Although created by the President, the SPTF was organised by a senior executive manager in the University. The other members of the group were two senior administrators, the Dean of a faculty and the Head of an academic department. They were assisted by a secretary who customarily worked for the organiser, whom we refer to here as the group leader. The secretary's nominal function was to take notes, but as she was more familiar with University regulations and procedures, she also advised on matters of policy that might affect the SPTF's resolutions. Although not an ordinary member of the group, the secretary's opinion was often consulted not only for procedural issues but for content related matters as well.

The task set for the group was a sensitive one in that cuts in funding can inevitably imply cuts in departmental budgets - for staff recruitment or promotion, for research, and for administrative support. The task was also severely time circumscribed with a specific deadline for a final report given in advance. The duration of the project was to be one calendar month. As a direct result, the group needed to meet frequently in order to complete its work, yet the individual timetables of the group members were sufficiently chaotic to make it impossible to schedule more than one hour per week. As it transpired, one of the two senior administrators

was only able to attend the first and last meetings of the group - at other times he was on leave.

The detailed task for the group was to develop a number of objectives, targets and strategies as components of a strategic resources plan for the university in the forthcoming triennium. Certain goals had already been set out and could not be altered, viz.: maximise income, reduce expenditure, improve resources management. The task force was required to work within these parameters, though it was also free to come up with new ones so long as they did not conflict with those already set. Four meetings of this group were held. The GSS was actively used by group members in only the second, while in the third and fourth meetings it played a minor role as we shall describe.

5.2 The First Meeting

The first meeting of the group was held in the offices of the group leader. At this initial stage, the researcher was not involved with the group. The group leader reported that the five members of the group all had their own diverse ideas about what should constitute the strategic plan. However, this multiplicity of ideas raised significant problems, as it proved difficult to record them all - the secretary attempted to write down key points but inevitably some details were lost. Furthermore, during this one-by-one idea generating session, there was no sense of order to the ideas, so it was difficult to keep track of what had already been said and by whom. There were no topic headings under which ideas could be grouped and no structure made itself apparent. All of these ideas would need to be sorted out by the secretary after the meeting and organised into some kind of order.

Furthermore, the meeting was rather stressful. Since the members of the group could not hide their identities, anything that they said could immediately be attributed to them. Since some group members were academics and others administrators, possible conflicts could arise if, for example, an administrator suggested reducing a type of funding that was crucial to research in a department or faculty to which another group member belonged. A possible consequence of this kind of stress could be a process loss known as production blocking (see 2.3.3.1), Another process loss known as attention blocking occurs when participants stop listening in order to remember what they want to say when they 'gain the floor' (see

Davison and Briggs, 1997). Such process losses can severely reduce the effectiveness of a meeting.

Overall the meeting achieved the objective of stimulating discussion about possible strategies to include in the strategic plan, but there were a number of significant drawbacks as illustrated above. The group leader and secretary realised that a second meeting held under such circumstances might not make much progress towards the ultimate goal of producing a clearly defined set of strategies, targets and objectives.

5.3 Introduction to the Group Support System

At this stage, the GSS was introduced to the group leader by a colleague. He expressed initial interest and was therefore given a demonstration session by the researcher where the edited outputs of the first meeting were entered into the GSS. This permitted the group leader to see how the GSS would work with real data.

Three different GSS tools (Categoriser, Group Outliner and Vote) were demonstrated to the group leader and their potential usefulness for the SPTF was explored. After this demonstration, the group leader decided that the Group Outliner tool would be most suitable for future meetings since it provided considerable flexibility in information structuring and layout. The group leader also committed himself to using the GSS for the subsequent meetings of the group. The demonstration was therefore transformed into a pre-meeting planning session.

A Group Outliner session was set up with the appropriate information from the first meeting keyed into the GSS. This took approximately twenty minutes. Three objectives were specified, and a number of strategies suggested for each objective. This pre-planning session enabled the group leader to sort out and structure all the information generated in the first meeting and this in itself was a valuable activity. Group members would later be asked to comment on the strategies before they could be finalised and targets could be devised.

5.4 Data Collection from the First Meeting of the SPTF

Questionnaires (see Appendix 5.1) were distributed to four members of the group (the group leader and three other members (the fifth member was already on leave)) and to the secretary before this first GSS meeting (the 2nd meeting of the group)

with the request that they complete them and bring them to the meeting. They were specifically requested to answer the questions in relation to the first strategic planning meeting held in the group leader's office. As the first meeting of the group had not been supported with technology, the two technology related questions were excluded from the questionnaire. However, an additional pair of questions asking members how many hours a day they spent using a PC and what they used it for, were included so as to gauge their general PC familiarity.

Analysis of this data reveals some interesting results. A majority (80%) of the respondents did not feel intimidated by the behaviour of other members, nor did they think that others had tried to influence their contributions to the meeting. A majority (80%) also felt that they were willing to present their ideas, though one member expressed extreme reluctance to present ideas. On average, group members felt that they played a useful role in the meeting (average score of 2.2 where a score of 1 indicates that the respondent strongly agreed that s/he played a useful role). Where use of time was concerned, three members (60%) gave a neutral reply, while one each thought that time was used efficiently and inefficiently, respectively. A similar disparity in impression regards the percentage of time spent on serious discussion, with answers ranging from a low of 30% to a high of 70% (average 53%). Perhaps surprisingly, given the rather confused nature of the first meeting, four of the five members rated the group's achievement of consensus at 2 on a 1-5 scale where 1 = "strongly agree that consensus has been achieved". The overall level of satisfaction expressed by a majority of members (60%) was 4 on a 1-7 scale, while two members were marginally more satisfied recording 3 (1 = "highly satisfied"; 7 = "highly dissatisfied"). All five respondents indicated that they used a PC for email, some also using it for word processing, EIS access, and other applications.

5.5 The Second Meeting of the SPTF (The First Meeting with GSS Support)

5.5.1 Planning

The data collected from the questionnaire indicated that communication itself was not a problem, but that there was a clear need to improve the efficiency given the restricted amount of time available. A noteworthy feature of this group was the

extreme time pressure exerted by their other commitments. While members generally arrived on time, they usually had a bare hour for a meeting before they had to rush off elsewhere. It was essential that all of their time be used profitably and that task focus be very strong. Furthermore, the discussion needed to become more structured and an attempt made to move the group towards a consensus. For these reasons, the Group Outliner tool which provides a high degree of structure was most appropriate. We did not foresee major problems with some group members trying to intimidate or influence others. Nonetheless, and at the group leader's suggestion, ideas generated were not identified by their authors (i.e. anonymity was turned on). This ensured that the discussion stayed task and content focused and did not run the risk of personal attacks on individuals or later retribution.

5.5.2 Action and Observation

The group leader started off the meeting by explaining its purpose, in particular the need to start thinking about targets and dates for completion. He presented a chart on an overhead projector so as to illustrate the trend of the University's financial resource utilisation for the next triennium based upon current spending. This was compared with various possible government funding levels so as to illustrate the possible shortfall between funding and expenditure.

After this introduction, the researcher started all members in the Group Outliner tool. The group leader took over again at this point and explained how the information had been entered into the tool (during the pre-planning session). Members quickly understood how the Group Outliner worked. The purpose of the meeting, the group leader reminded the members, was to look at the various strategies and to add comments to them. Typing began almost immediately. Members had little problem with the interface, bar the senior administrator who could not type, and some initial problems co-ordinating the mice. The non-typing member had brought along his secretary who helped him to enter ideas. However, before long he 'single-finger' entered ideas by himself.

During the first thirty minutes, the major activity was typed idea generation - there was very little verbal communication. As the meeting progressed, the researcher progressively introduced various features of the interface, such as comment numbers, the way in which a comment could be appended to the current list of comments, or alternatively inserted before or after an existing comment. This

approach worked well, and it was often the members who asked questions that lead to those explanations. Members used the tool at a fairly simple level, not availing themselves of all the options and typically only entering ideas but not creating new strategies for discussion. The secretary, who is normally required to take notes, found that she did not need to do so as the system was recording all the information automatically. The group leader would occasionally draw members' attention to particular features of the technology or to items for discussion. No verbal complaints were made by any group members about the technology. After 45 minutes, 59 comments had been generated. These were typically not single line comments, but often ran to five or seven lines. At the same time, all of the comments can be considered both serious and relevant to the topic under discussion. There was no evidence of deindividuation resulting in any kind of flaming or other disinhibited practices.

At this stage, the group leader decided that the time had come to review the data input so far. See Table 5.1 for a summary of the data. It became clear that the members had focused most of their attention on the first two objectives, almost entirely ignoring the third objective. All the strategies were generated at the pre-planning meeting, while between one and eleven comments were generated per strategy.

Table 5.1 Summary of Data from the First Meeting

Objectives	Strategies	Comments
Maximise Income	7	32
Reduce Expenditure	4	26
Improve Resource Management	6	1

The meeting now entered a new stage. All members were asked by the leader to look at item 1.1 - the first strategy under the first objective - and to think about how to formulate the comments typed there into targets. A number of *target* headings (1.1.1, 1.2.1, 1.3.1 and so forth) were created by the researcher to include this material. The group leader acted as a scribe and consultant now, verbally consulting with members about the wording of each target and entering information himself. If one member was not happy, verbal discussion continued until unanimity was achieved. In this manner all seven strategies under the first objective were covered

and targets produced. Members disagreed to some extent initially on most targets, but could reach consensus on all eventually. Sometimes the strategies themselves were reworded. The group leader encouraged members to consider dates by when the targets could be achieved. These too were the subject of disagreement, but this was never heated or unfriendly. After a total of 1 hour 45 minutes, all seven strategies in the first objective had targets (a total of nineteen targets). At this time, some members had to leave since they had other urgent appointments. Originally it had been intended that the members would fill in an on-line version of the questionnaire assessing their reactions to the processes of the meeting. Since there was insufficient time to do this, the researcher arranged to distribute the questionnaires on paper to the group members for them to complete.

5.5.3 Reflections

The group leader pronounced himself very satisfied with the use of the tool during this first meeting. He believed that the meeting had been significantly more structured and therefore productive than on the first occasion in his office. The structuring was necessary so as to bring the various ideas together. He thought that a significant amount of work had been done and was optimistic that a second meeting in a similar vein would be very useful. The reported amount of time spent on serious discussion was much higher than in the first meeting of the task force, with 70% and 80% being the lower and upper bounds.

Two members present in this meeting made many verbal and textual contributions to the meeting process and seemed to enjoy the whole process thoroughly. The secretary, who participated as a member and also as an advisor on policy matters, felt that the software had saved much time and increased the accuracy of the recording process. She suggested that it be used in all committee meetings in the university since it would clearly improve productivity and time saving (cf. Grohowski et al., 1990).

The non-typing member was also a non-talking member in this meeting. It would appear that the technology, specifically the keyboard, hindered his participation. However, as with all the other members, he was able to use the software as a form of group memory - all the data is held in the Group Outliner tool and can be accessed easily by scrolling up or down the screen or mouse-clicking to other windows.

The researcher provided technical assistance to the group, helping the members with their interactions and making suggestions as to how the software could be used. However, he did not contribute any content-related comments. After the meeting, he generated a report from the discussions and gave a copy to the group's secretary.

5.6 Subsequent Meetings of the SPTF

As it transpired, although the GSS tools were available for the group to use, the second and third meetings made very little active use of the technology. Instead, the Group Outliner tool was used as a form of group memory. Actual inputting of information was only undertaken by the group leader with all discussion occurring verbally. Thus, for example, the group leader would initiate discussion on one strategy and its comments and engage the other members in a search for appropriate targets. When mutually-agreed upon targets were achieved, the group leader would personally enter that information into the GSS and all members were then able to see the targets on their respective screens, hence the use of group memory.

In the two subsequent meetings, the material generated previously was reviewed in detail. The group leader decided that it would be impractical to do this by entering more comments since it was very likely that this would just generate more and more ideas, without bringing about any sense of focus. A parallel reason for the need to avoid large numbers of extra comments was the very restricted time available. The third meeting was much shorter than the second, lasting only fifty minutes. Most of the discussion in this meeting was between the leader and the non-typing member with occasional interjections from other members. It appeared that this non-typing member was able to play a much more active role when the GSS technology was not being used.

In the fourth meeting, the GSS was used in the same way as in the previous meeting. Since no comments had been previously entered for objective three (Improve Resource Management), the researcher suggested that a short period (five to ten minutes) of idea generation take place. This suggestion was ignored by the group. It transpired that the group leader and his secretary had met in advance to

work out some targets. These were then presented to the group, though they were not all accepted and hence required discussion and modification.

Late in the discussion, the group leader observed that the GSS was not being used much. He apologised for this, but indicated that it was better to talk since a very target-focused discussion was required. He also wanted to impose a more rigid control so as to preserve the focus of the group, with only one person talking at a time. During this meeting, the secretary used the GSS's Personal Log tool to make notes. She later incorporated these notes into the meeting minutes.

5.6.1 Analysis of the Third and Fourth Meetings

After the third meeting, the group leader once again remarked how useful it had been to have the GSS available. He believed that while the GSS tools had only been used to a significant *active* extent during the first meeting, remaining rather *passive* in the second and third meetings as a form of group memory, they had nonetheless played a very significant role in the early stages of the task where the structuration had helped enormously. He believed that similar use of tools in future would be very beneficial to committees and their discussions.

In view of the fact that the GSS software was only used by group members in the first meeting, it was inappropriate to ask them how the GSS affected the subsequent meetings' processes, since the GSS functioned essentially as a background tool and the purpose of asking questions relating to meeting processes was to elicit perceptions that related to the use of the technology.

5.7 Summary

In this case study, the Group Outliner tool was used in early stages of the meeting process to assist a group in its pursuit of strategies concerning resource planning in a University. All members of the group used the tool in the first meeting, but in later meetings the group leader chose to side-line the tool and use it primarily as a form of group memory while concentrating on a more focused discussion verbally. Several members of the group commented that they liked the way that the tool functioned and felt confident when using it. Furthermore, the group leader pronounced himself well satisfied with the performance of the tool and hoped that he would be able to use it in the future. The secretary to the group believed that it made substantial

improvements to the information recording process since it ensured that whatever ideas were generated using the keyboard were securely retained.

As an action research case, the nature of the task was relatively simple - only a single tool was used and, except in the pre-meeting planning stages, a minimal amount of intervention was required from the researcher. However, the decision to intervene in the first place - a decision supported by the group leader on the basis of his hands-on demonstration with the software - was critical. As a simple first case, this provided many learning opportunities for the researcher. It was noticeable that the group leader was quite prepared to take control of the meeting and only use the software when he thought necessary. As it turned out, the group did not have any major problems where the researcher's expertise would have been required.

As a follow-up action to the series of meetings, the group leader indicated that he would seek funds to develop electronic meeting facilities on a more permanent basis in the University since he saw clear potential for the use of the software on a more wide-ranging basis. This development has eventuated with the recent opening of a new conference room with seating capacity for 80 persons. This facility is multi-media equipped, provides laptop ports for all attendees, facilities for simultaneous interpretation, ISDN links, etc. and is an ideal facility for electronic meeting support.