

A STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS THAT HAS YIELDED SIGNIFICANT RESULTS

THE EXPERIENCE OF TWO MICHIGAN COURTS

BY BRENDA J. WAGENKNECHT-IVEY AND KEVIN J. BOWLING

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, the 20th Circuit Court and Ottawa County Probate Court — two western Michigan trial courts — embarked on a strategic planning process, culminating in the first, joint long-range strategic plan for the two courts. The strategic plan sets forth its strategic priorities and comprehensive strategies for addressing important, long-term issues such as resources, access to the courts, efficient and effective operations and services, collaboration with partners, and organizational structure and employee interests.

Since 2004, the courts have remained focused on their strategic direction and priorities, and have successfully implemented and followed the strategic plan, completing many shorter-term strategic projects. In short, the courts have not only developed a strategic plan that has proven to be a useful strategic roadmap for the courts' leadership and staff but also have succeeded in sustaining their focus and momentum for more than three years.

The purpose of this article is to share with other courts the strategic planning experiences of these two courts, including a description of the planning and implementation processes they used, benefits realized from the process to date, and lessons learned. We hope that the relevant history of these trial courts may inspire and help other judicial officers and court executives to pursue and successfully use long-range strategic planning in their efforts to improve the courts and ultimately to improve the administration of justice.

OVERVIEW OF OTTAWA COUNTY, MICHIGAN

To put this experience in context, it will first be helpful to understand Ottawa County. Until recent years, this western Michigan county was viewed as a rural, agricultural area with a notable Dutch population in its southern city of Holland. The county seat, Grand Haven, is a beach/boating community nestled on the shore of Lake Michigan and is a summer tourist destination. Several years ago, the county population began a rapid growth spurt, and now the estimated population is 270,000 within a county of 565 square miles, representing an 11.7 percent increase in population over a seven-year period, according to the U.S. Census.¹ The county is comprised of six cities, one village, and 17 townships. There are 11 county commissioners and six elected county officials.²

LOCAL COURT ENVIRONMENT

A brief description of the local court environment also provides some important contextual information for understanding the strategic planning experiences and lessons learned.

Although part of Michigan's "One Court of Justice" (Michigan Constitution, Article VI), the trial courts in Michigan are largely funded at the local level. Judicial salaries are the notable exception; they are paid through a state appropriation to the supreme court. The Michigan trial courts include the general jurisdiction circuit court, and the probate and district courts, both with limited jurisdiction.³

The 20th Circuit Court has four elected judges and 161 staff, and the probate court has one elected judge and six staff. Locally, the 20th Circuit Court functions within three primary divisions:

1. The Trial Division, which includes appeals, civil, criminal, domestic relations without children matters;
2. The Family Division — Friend of the Court Office, which includes domestic relations with children, primarily Title IV-D (child support enforcement) matters; and
3. The Family Division — Juvenile Services, which includes juvenile detention, treatment, and casework services.

These divisions are further identified on the organizational chart in the strategic plan (www.miottawa.org).

For many years, these circuit court divisions, as well as the probate court, operated as totally autonomous units. One desired outcome of the strategic planning process was to break down the "silos" between these divisions and improve communication and collaboration among court divisions and between courts.

Within this general environment, a decision was made in 2003 (prompted by a change in court administration) to embark on a long-range strategic planning process for the two courts. Previously, some strategic planning had been done in the Juvenile Services Division, but since court divisions historically operated as independent units, the benefit of the planning was never shared with other divisions, nor was the chief judge aware the planning had taken place. Thus, the newly hired court administrator, with approval of the chief judges of the two courts, outlined a plan to build on the Juvenile Services Division planning process, expand the effort courtwide, and to include both circuit and probate courts.

Given the task at hand, the court's leadership team (i.e., the court administrator and senior administrators from each division), decided to hire a strategic planning consultant to assist the courts. The courts selected Dr. Brenda J. Wagenknecht-Ivey, president of PRAXIS Consulting, Inc., of Denver, Colorado, given her expertise in strategic planning, her experience working with courts nationally and internationally, and her direct knowledge of and experience with the Michigan court system from prior work, including assisting the

Michigan Supreme Court in the development of its strategic plan. On that basis, the courts successfully applied to the State Justice Institute (SJI) for initial funding to begin a comprehensive strategic planning effort in 2004. The strategic planning process designed and used by the courts built on the strategic planning approach designed for courts in the early 1990s per an SJI grant as well as the Visioning and Strategic Planning Core Competency published by the National Association for Court Management (NACM).⁴ In addition to SJI funding, the courts received funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance's Criminal Courts Technical Assistance Project through American University to partially support its ongoing implementation efforts.

DEVELOPING THE LONG-RANGE STRATEGIC PLAN

There were three phases to the courts' initial strategic planning process. Phase 1 focused on forming a strategic planning task force and establishing a meeting schedule. Phase 2 included gathering information from justice system partners, community leaders, other local stakeholders, and court staff. Finally, the content of the strategic plan was developed by the task force through a series of facilitated meetings in Phase 3. Each phase is described below. (Refer to the attached Gantt chart for more detailed information and the timeline.)

PHASE 1

Forming the Task Force and Designing a Process and Schedule

One of the first tasks of the strategic planning process, which began in 2004, was to establish a strategic planning task force. The charge of the task force members was to work together to develop a long-range strategic plan for the circuit and probate courts. The task force was created by special invitation of the chief judges of the circuit and probate courts. Care was taken to insure the task force included people from all areas of the courts, including judges, administrators, mid-level supervisors, professional staff, support staff, unclassified staff, and union officials. The task force consisted of 20 individuals.

This phase also included (1) finalizing a project schedule to include task force meeting dates and (2) preparing for the focus group meetings of external justice system partners, community leaders, other local stakeholders, and court staff. Developing a meeting schedule up front for the entire strategic planning process was instrumental in clearing calendars and enabling task force members to attend all task force meetings.

PHASE 2

Gathering Input from Stakeholders

Phase 2 of the process included conducting six focus group sessions of external stakeholders and court staff. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather information and views from attendees to inform and ultimately assist the task force in developing a strategic plan for the courts. Examples of the information gathered included (1) participants' expectations of the courts, (2) local or regional trends impacting the courts, and (3) big issues the courts must address in the years ahead, to name a few. In sum, the focus group sessions ensured that the views and ideas of external stakeholders and court staff were included in the strategic planning process.

PHASE 3

Developing the Strategic Plan

This phase, which included a series of facilitated task force meetings (see Attachment A), focused on developing the content of the courts' strategic plan. Specifically, the task force developed mission and vision statements, completed a trends analysis and organizational assessment, and identified strategic issues, long-range goals, strategies, and strategic projects for the courts to pursue. Each task force meeting was a working session that included (1) walking through a comprehensive strategic planning approach developed and facilitated by Dr. Wagenknecht-Ivey and (2) a variety of large and small group sessions that were extremely effective in engaging members, encouraging creativity, and building consensus among task force members.

For example, at one of the facilitated meetings, task force members (1) reviewed social, demographic, and other trends impacting the courts, (2) assessed the implications of these trends on the courts, (3) constructed several plausible future scenarios given the interactions of the various trends, and (4) began to develop proactive and responsive strategies to address the likely future implications on the courts. Engaging in a comprehensive trends analysis helped the courts anticipate some of the likely future pressures and demands they will face and develop effective long-term responses and strategies.

The task force completed its charge by the end of 2004, thus completing the courts' first, joint 2005-2007 Long-Range Strategic Plan (www.miottawa.org). The strategic plan includes: (1) the mission and vision statements of the courts; (2) the courts' long-range strategic issue areas (e.g., resources, access to courts, efficient and effective operations and service, collaboration with partners, and organizational structure and employee interests); and (3) long-range goals, objectives, and strategic, shorter-term projects in each of the strategic areas. Summaries of stakeholder assessments, trend analysis, focus group summaries, etc. also are contained in the appendices of the first strategic plan.

IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGIC PLAN

The courts committed substantial time and resources to developing the strategic plan. The courts' leadership team and task force members were equally insistent that it would be a useful roadmap to the future. To that end, building on lessons learned from other organizational experiences and based on the existing court culture, the courts took deliberate steps to ensure the strategic plan was implemented and followed. Below is a brief description of the actions taken by the courts to ensure implementation.

First, the strategic plan included a list of specific, strategic initiatives/projects to focus on during the first year. Naming strategic initiatives/projects helps to identify concrete things an organization can complete, moving it in a desired future direction.

Second, the courts conducted an "all staff" meeting in January 2005 to communicate the importance and substance of the plan. The assembly was received favorably by the staff and judges; consequently, it has been repeated in 2006 and 2007 as a method of communicating the status of strategic planning projects, celebrating successes, recognizing court staff, and maintaining focus and momentum on the courts' strategic priorities.

Third, the courts formed five strategic issue implementation/action teams, which were organized around five strategic issue areas:

- Team 1 Resources
- Team 2 Access to Courts
- Team 3 Efficient (Timely) & Effective Operations and Service
- Team 4 Collaboration with Partners
- Team 5 Organizational Structure & Employee Interests

In 2005, court staff volunteered to be on the various implementation/action teams. As needed, a few team members were recruited, especially where specific expertise was needed. In subsequent years — 2006 and 2007 — a majority of the original team members have chosen to remain on their respective teams, some new volunteers have been added, and a few team members have rotated to other teams.

The implementation teams have been a very effective way to build enthusiasm for, and generate momentum and follow-through on, the courts' strategic projects. The courts have realized secondary benefits from using cross-functional implementation teams, including increased courtwide collaboration and communication and enhanced knowledge of both courts. In sum, the courts are pleased to report that many staff have volunteered to work on these teams, all of which have remained active and focused on their strategic projects for more than three years. Examples of some of the strategic projects that the implementation teams have worked on or completed include:

1. Conducting a court user satisfaction survey
2. Developing a technology master plan
3. Enhancing employee training
4. Improving the court intern program
5. Improving public service by studying the need for and expanding public court hours
6. Establishing new bench/bar training activities and much more

Fourth, a kick-off meeting with the co-team leaders and all members of the implementation/action teams was conducted in January 2005. The purpose of the kick-off meeting was to help orient team leaders and members to the task at hand and ensure that the teams got off to a fast and productive start. In particular, goals of the meeting included conveying the charge and expectations of the teams, helping the teams get organized by completing a team charter, providing them with information about the development of the strategic plan and on becoming a high-performance team, and providing them with time to begin working on an action plan for their specific projects. Each year the courts have repeated an organizational meeting with the implementation teams, although in recent years it has been less extensive than the first year.

Fifth, the courts established a Strategic Planning Oversight Team (SPOT). At the request of members of the task force, they transitioned to become the new SPOT, demonstrating their commitment to following through on the strategic plan. The SPOT meets three

times per year to discuss progress of the five implementation/action teams; to review the status of strategic projects; to build support and enthusiasm for strategic projects; to maintain focus on goals, objectives, and priority projects; and to acknowledge and celebrate accomplishments. SPOT and the five teams have continued their work throughout 2005, 2006, and into 2007, making great strides on a variety of court strategic projects.

Sixth, the leadership of the courts continues to remain focused, and to review and monitor progress, on the strategic plan. For example, the senior leadership team, comprised of the court administrator and division directors from the two courts, has added a standing agenda item at its biweekly meetings. Thus, at each meeting, they discuss the status of the strategic planning activities. Further, the court administrator meets regularly with the chief judges of the two courts — and the other judges as appropriate — to discuss the progress and status of strategic planning initiatives. Also, the division directors discuss strategic planning activities at their staff meetings. Initially, the leadership team reviewed and approved specific action plans from each of the five implementation teams to insure they were on the right track and had adequate resources to proceed.

Finally, the courts have continued to communicate and share information about strategic planning activities through their bimonthly newsletter, annual report, and the like. Accomplishments and progress are communicated and shared at every opportunity, keeping focus on the courts' strategic priorities.

INSTITUTIONALIZING STRATEGIC THINKING AND STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

The NACM core competency emphasizes the importance of institutionalizing strategic thinking and strategic leadership, moving beyond the mere development of a strategic plan. Additionally, it stresses the need to differentiate among operational thinking, strategic planning, strategic thinking, and strategic leadership. Specifically, many court leaders are focused on the operational requirements of running courts daily, leaving little time for reflection or time to anticipate problems and issues that affect the courts capacity to deliver services over the long-term. According to the NACM core competency materials, strategic thinking enables leaders to anticipate, promote, and sustain change.⁵

In Ottawa County, the shift to strategic thinking and strategic leadership has been a difficult process and has not yet been fully achieved, although progress is being made. Some of the steps taken include (1) periodic judicial briefings so the judges are aware of and can provide support for strategic activities and projects; (2) a permanent change in the leadership team biweekly agenda, which now includes a regular update on strategic planning initiatives; and (3) development of a communication plan to insure regular updates about project status to all staff and improved efforts to communicate among implementation teams to avoid duplicating efforts or working at cross-purposes on similar strategic projects. In sum, the courts' leadership team continues to strive for a balance between tending to operational matters while remaining focused on the courts' long-term, strategic direction and priorities.

BENEFITS GAINED FROM THE STRATEGIC PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES

The processes described above have yielded significant benefits for the two courts. Below is a brief summary of a few of the benefits realized to date. The strategic planning and implementation processes have:

1. Fostered long-term and courtwide thinking and planning.
2. Enhanced courtwide communication and collaboration.
3. Involved and engaged many managers and staff in ongoing improvements efforts, accomplishing many strategic projects that have improved services and justice to the public.
4. Provided the courts' judicial and administrative leadership with a strategic roadmap outlining priorities, which provides focus and assists in making management, operational, and funding decisions.
5. Provided the courts with a tool to communicate its priorities and resource needs to funding sources, stakeholders, and partners.
6. Increased the accountability of the courts by using the strategic plan as a tool to assess progress and accomplishments.
7. Demonstrated how the strategic planning process can achieve desired goals and be reasonably blended within existing caseloads and court workloads.

LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned from the courts' strategic planning experiences are listed below. They are provided in hopes of helping other courts around the country succeed in developing and implementing a strategic plan and successfully transitioning to strategic thinking and strategic leadership.

Forming the Task Force and Designing a Process and Schedule (Phase 1)

1. Insure there is commitment from the bench prior to announcing the start of a strategic planning effort. Ongoing judicial support is key to any strategic planning and implementation process.
2. Develop a meeting schedule at the beginning of the process and stick to it. Doing so allows task force members to plan ahead and helps to assure high attendance at strategic planning meetings.
3. Carefully select task force members. That is, select a diverse group of people from all areas and levels of the court who are formal and informal leaders within the organization. Also, select people with the right mix of knowledge, skills, and

abilities, including those who are willing and able to: (1) see the "big picture," and think long-term and for the good of the entire court (rather than their respective division/area); (2) share diverse views while collaborating with and listening effectively to others; (3) commit to attend and participate actively at the meetings; and (4) actively support the process among their peers.

4. Carefully select an external consultant, if possible. If you have the benefit of using an external consultant, ensure that he/she understands the court environment and designs a strategic planning process to meet your court's unique needs. Also, ensure that he/she has the requisite knowledge and experience to facilitate an engaging process while assisting and teaching task force members the steps of strategic planning and how to develop the content of the strategic plan.

Gathering Input from Stakeholders (Phase 2)

5. Determine what information you want to gather from stakeholders to help inform the strategic planning process **before** you identify stakeholder groups and/or participants. Defining the purpose of your data gathering efforts and determining the type of information you want to gather will help you identify the appropriate stakeholder groups and specific participants.
6. Inform stakeholder participants up front as to how their input will be used in the formulation of a strategic plan. For example, advise them that their ideas and input will be summarized and shared with the strategic planning task force. The task force will consider and use their ideas/input as it deems appropriate in the development of the strategic plan.
7. Assure focus group participants that their ideas/input will be anonymous. Specifically, assure them that there will not be any individual attributions (to them) in the written summary. Be cautious in writing up the summary so as to adhere to this promise of anonymity.

8. Use an external consultant to facilitate the focus group sessions, if possible. An external person is more likely to be viewed as a neutral, impartial information gatherer.

Developing the Strategic Plan (Phase 3)

9. Establish operating agreements at the onset of a strategic planning process that will foster healthy group norms among members of the task force. For example, promote open communication, equal and active participation of all members, productive resolution of differences, and working toward consensus.
10. Avoid drafting sensitive statements or lengthy documents in a large committee setting. When it is time to wordsmith

a final mission statement, vision statement, strategic plan, etc., it is more efficient to gather the necessary input from the task force and assign the task to a small working group/ subcommittee with good writing skills.

11. Continually show task force members where they are in the strategic planning process and how the various steps are contributing to the development of the strategic plan. It is important to show continual progress to avoid frustration or loss of momentum.
12. Care for, nurture, and develop members of the task force throughout the process. That is, recognize the additional work they have undertaken, value their contributions and participation, support them along the way, and teach them the steps of strategic planning so they can continue the efforts in the future. Doing so yields great benefits, including improved satisfaction and overall morale, improved trust and relationships among members, greater creativity and risk taking, a feeling of hope and purpose, and enthusiasm for participating in implementation efforts.
13. Celebrate the completion of the strategic plan. Thank and recognize task force members for their hard work and contributions to this important activity.

Implementing the Strategic Plan

14. Establish reasonable timelines and workloads for completing the strategic projects. Specifically, if a strategic planning task force identifies many projects to work on during the life of a plan, it helps staff morale to establish a reasonable timeline so staff do not feel they have to accomplish all projects immediately or in the first year in addition to the regular court workload.
15. Develop a standard protocol for allowing staff to request to be on or opt off an implementation team. That is, it is helpful to have a standard protocol that allows staff a gracious way to opt on or off implementation teams in the event they find there is a project they really want to work on or if they discover they cannot handle the extra workload in addition to their regular job.
16. Use a court newsletter or some other means of regular communication with staff to: (1) inform staff of strategic planning updates and progress; (2) recognize the efforts of staff as they achieve project milestones; and (3) maintain enthusiasm for strategic planning in general.
17. Encourage and thank the staff who are not involved with strategic planning implementation teams but who keep the court offices running while other staff are gone, attending strategic planning meetings and doing strategic project work.

18. If possible, use the assistance of a trained, strategic planning consultant to help keep implementation efforts on track and to serve as advisor to the court's leadership and implementation teams as needed.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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NOTES

1. Additional social/demographic data are available in Attachment 1 of the revised strategic plan.

2. Further county information is available at www.miottawa.org.

3. The jurisdiction of the circuit includes the following types of legal matters: general jurisdiction; criminal/felony, civil > \$25K, domestic relations, and juvenile, etc.; the jurisdiction of the probate court includes: limited jurisdiction; estates, guardianships, mentally ill cases, etc; and the jurisdiction of the district court includes limited jurisdiction — criminal-misdemeanor, civil < \$25K, traffic, small claims, etc.

4. Drs. Brenda J. Wagenknecht-Ivey and John A. Martin were the primary authors of both the SJI strategic planning approach and the NACM Visioning and Strategic Planning Core Competency Guidelines.

5. www.nacmnet.org, Core Competencies, Core Competency Curriculum Guidelines, Visioning and Strategic Planning, NACM/PDAC, July 3, 2003, p.4.

20TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT & OTTAWA COUNTY PROBATE COURTS

**Strategic Planning Process & Timeline
(July 23, 2004)**

	JUNE				JULY				AUGUST					SEPT				OCT				NOV					DEC								
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4					
1. Meet w/Mgt. Team to Finalize SP Approach & Timeline; Plan Focus Groups				▲																															
2. Plan for & conduct User/ Stakeholder & Staff Focus Groups							■					■																							
3. Strategic Planning Process Mtg. #1 SP Taskforce Mtg. (1 day – July 23)								▲																											
Mtg. #2 SP Taskforce Mtg. (2 days – August 25 & 27)													▲																						
Mtg. #3 SP Taskforce Mtg. (2 days –Sept. 29 Tentative & Oct. 1)																		▲																	
Mtg. #4 SP Taskforce Mtg. (1 day – October 22)																							▲												
Mtg. #5 SP Taskforce Mtg. (1 day – November 19 Tentative)																												▲							
4. Begin Implementation: Kick-off Team Mtgs. & Comm. SP to Judges & Staff (Dec. 16 & 17)																																	●		

▲ Taskforce Meetings ● Implementation Team Mtgs. & All Judge/Staff Mtg. ■ Stakeholder & Employee Focus Groups