Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat [SWOT Analyses]

What is a SWOT analysis and why should you use one?

When do you use SWOT?

What are the elements of a SWOT analysis?

How do you create a SWOT analysis?

How do you use your SWOT analysis?

Opposition is an inevitable part of change and one that can significantly impact your community organizing. However, if you know how to take stock of the oppositions within and without your effort or group, you are more likely to plan and act effectively.

That's where SWOT analysis comes in. SWOT can help you handle both ordinary and unusual situations in your community health or development initiative, by giving you a tool to explore both internal and external factors that may influence your work.

What is a SWOT analysis and why should you use one?
The name says it: Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat. A SWOT analysis guides you to identify the positives and negatives inside your organization (S-W) and outside of it, in the external environment (O-T). Developing a full awareness of your situation can help with both strategic planning and decision-making.

The SWOT method (which is sometimes called TOWS) was originally developed for business and industry, but it is equally useful in the work of community health and development, education, and even personal growth.

SWOT is not the only assessment technique you can use, but is one with a long track record of effectiveness. Compare it with other tools found in the Community Tool Box (especially Chapter 3) to determine if this is the right approach for your situation. The strengths of this method are its simplicity and application to a variety of levels of operation.

When do you use SWOT?
A SWOT analysis can offer helpful perspectives at any stage of an effort. You might use it to:
- Explore possibilities for new efforts or solutions to problems.
- Make decisions about the best path for your initiative. Identifying your opportunities for success in context of threats to success can clarify directions and choices.
- Determine where change is possible. If you are at a juncture or turning point, an inventory of your strengths and weaknesses can reveal priorities as well as possibilities.
- Adjust and refine plans mid-course. A new opportunity might open wider avenues, while a new threat could close a path that once existed.

SWOT also offers a simple way of communicating about your initiative or program and an excellent way to organize information you've gathered from studies or surveys.
What are the elements of a SWOT analysis?
A SWOT analysis focuses on the four elements of the acronym, but the graphic format you use varies depending on the depth and complexity of your effort.

Remember that the purpose of performing a SWOT is to reveal positive forces that work together and potential problems that need to be addressed or at least recognized. Before you conduct a SWOT session, decide what format or layout you will use to communicate these issues most clearly for you.

We will discuss the process of creating the analysis below, but first here are a few sample layouts—ideas of what your SWOT analysis can look like.

You can list internal and external opposites side by side. Ask participants to answer these simple questions: what are the strengths and weaknesses of your group, community, or effort, and what are the opportunities and threats facing it?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERNAL</th>
<th>EXTERNAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaknesses</td>
<td>Threats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Or if a looser structure helps you brainstorm, you can group positives and negatives to think broadly about your organization and its external environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positives</th>
<th>Negatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>strengths</td>
<td>weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assets</td>
<td>limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resources</td>
<td>restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opportunities</td>
<td>threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prospects</td>
<td>challenges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And here's a third option for structuring your SWOT analysis that might be appropriate for a large initiative that requires detailed planning or many alternatives. This more elaborate "TOWS Matrix" is adapted from Fred David's Strategic Management text (see "Print Resources"). Here a working table guides you to identify strategies by matching items in each quadrant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ksdflskdjflskjfasdfsaf</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. sdfasdfsaf</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
David gives an example for Campbell Soup Company that stresses financial goals, but it also illustrates how you can pair the items within a SWOT grid to develop strategies. (This version of the chart is abbreviated.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPPORTUNITIES</th>
<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Western European unification  
2. Rising health consciousness in selecting foods  
3. Demand for soups increasing annually | 1. Current profit ratio increased  
2. Employee morale high  
3. Market share has increased | 1. Legal suits not resolved  
2. Plant capacity has fallen  
3. Lack of strategic management system |
| Opportunity-Strength (OS) Strategies | Opportunity-Weakness (OW) Strategies |
| Acquire food company in Europe (S1, S3, O1)  
Develop new healthy soups (S2, O2) | Develop new Pepperidge Farm products (W1, O2, O3) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THREATS</th>
<th>THREAT-STRENGTH (TS) STRATEGIES</th>
<th>THREAT-WEAKNESS (TW) STRATEGIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Low value of dollar  
2. Tin cans are not biodegradable | 1. Develop new biodegradable soup | 1. Close unprofitable European operations (W3, |
| Threat-Strength (TS) Strategies | Threat-Weakness (TW) Strategies | |
This example also illustrates how threats can become opportunities (and vice versa). The limitation of tin cans (which aren't biodegradable) creates an opportunity for leadership in developing biodegradable containers.

See "Checklist and Tools" for a basic SWOT form that you can use to prompt analysis. Whatever format you use, though, don't be surprised if your strengths and weaknesses don't precisely match up to your opportunities and threats. You might need to refine, or you might need to simply look at the facts longer, from a different angle. Your chart, list or table will certainly reveal patterns.

**Listing Your Internal Factors: Strengths and Weaknesses (S, W)**

Internal factors include your resources and experiences. General areas to consider are:

- Human resources - staff, volunteers, board members, target population
- Physical resources - your location, building, equipment (Does your building have a prime location? Does it need renovations?)
- Financial - grants, funding agencies, other sources of income
- Activities and processes - programs you run, systems you employ
- Past experiences - building blocks for learning and success, your reputation in the community

Don't be too modest when listing your strengths. If you're having difficulty naming them, start by simply listing your characteristics (e.g., we're small, we're connected to the neighborhood). Some of these will probably be strengths.

Although the strengths and weakness of your organization are your internal qualities, don't overlook the perspective of people outside your group. Identify strengths and weaknesses from both your own point of view and that of others-those you serve or deal with. Do others see problems--or assets--that you don't?

How do you get information about how outsiders perceive your strengths and weaknesses? You may know already if you've listened to those you serve. If not, this might be the time to gather that type of information. See "Related Sections" for ideas on conducting focus groups, user surveys, listening sessions, and meetings.

**Listing External Factors: Opportunities and Threats (O, T)**

Cast a wide net for the external part of the assessment. No organization, group, program, or neighborhood is immune to outside events and forces. Consider your connectedness, for better and worse, as you compile this part of your SWOT list.

Forces and facts that your group does not control include:
• Future trends - in your field (Is research finding new treatments?) or the culture (Do current movies highlight your cause?)
• The economy - local, national, or international
• Funding sources - foundations, donors, legislatures
• Demographics - changes in the age, race, gender, culture of those you serve or in your area
• The physical environment (Is your building in a growing part of town? Is the bus company cutting routes?)
• Legislation (Do new federal requirements make your job harder-or easier?)
• Local, national or international events

As a tool designed for businesses, the major threat to success for most SWOT practitioners is "the competition." Programs to improve the health and well being of individuals and communities might not have competitors in the market sense, but there could be overlap in services with other agencies that you need to consider. Or perhaps preferences for funding aren't favoring you-you're interested in health promotions, but treatment is getting all the resources.

So it can help to think of the "competition" in a broad sense as you consider threats to your effort. Perhaps the competition for your target population's time and attention exists in a competing unhealthy habit, such as smoking, or in a societal force like tobacco advertising, or even in the lure of couch and TV, which occupy time that might be given to exercise.

**How do you create a SWOT analysis?**

**Who develops the SWOT?**

The most common users of a SWOT analysis are team members and project managers who are responsible for decision-making and strategic planning. But don't overlook anyone in the creation stage!

An individual or small group can develop a SWOT analysis, but it will be more effective if you take advantage of many stakeholders. Each person or group offers a different perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of your program and has different experiences of both.

Likewise, one staff member, or volunteer or stakeholder may have information about an opportunity or threat that is essential to understanding your position and determining your future.

**When and where do you develop a SWOT analysis?** A SWOT analysis is often created during a retreat or planning session that allows several hours for both brainstorming and more structured analysis. The best results come when participants are encouraged to have an open attitude about possibilities. While you might "SWOT" in conjunction with an informational or business session, the tone when creating a SWOT analysis is usually collaborative and inclusive.

When creating the analysis, all people involved are asked to pool their individual and shared knowledge and experiences. The more relaxed, friendly and constructive the setting and environment, the more truthful, comprehensive, insightful and useful your analysis will be.
How do you develop a SWOT analysis?

Here's one way to proceed in a gathering to produce your analysis. (For more ideas on meeting strategies, see Chapter 3, Section 3: Conducting Public Forums and Listening Sessions and Section 6: Conducting Focus Groups and Chapter 12, Section 7: Organizing a Retreat.)

1. Designate a leader or group facilitator who has good listening and group process skills, and who can keep things moving and on track.

2. Designate a recorder to back up the leader if your group is large. Use newsprint on a flip chart or a large board to record the analysis and discussion points. You can record later in a more polished fashion to share with stakeholders and to update.

3. Introduce the SWOT method and its purpose in your organization. This can be as simple as asking, "Where are we, where can we go?" If you have time, you could run through a quick example based on a shared experience or well-known public issue (even the new TV season).

4. Depending on the nature of your group and the time available, let all participants introduce themselves. Then divide your stakeholders into smaller groups. If your retreat or meeting draws several groups of stakeholders together, make sure you mix the small groups to get a range of perspectives, and give them a chance to introduce themselves.

The size of these depends on the size of your entire group-breakout groups can range from three to ten. If the size gets much larger, some members may not participate.

5. Have each group designate a recorder, and provide each with newsprint or dry erase board. Direct them to create a SWOT analysis in the format you choose—a chart, columns, a matrix, or even a page for each quality.

a. Give the groups 20-30 minutes to brainstorm and fill out their own strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats chart for your program, initiative or effort. Encourage them not to rule out any ideas at this stage, or the next.

b. You can provide these tips for listing:

- As you list, keep in mind that the way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas. Refinement can come later. In this way, the SWOT analysis also supports valuable discussion within your group or organization as you honestly assess.
- In the beginning, though, it helps to generate lots of comments about your organization and your program, and even to put them in multiple categories if that provokes thought.
- In the end, it is best to limit your lists to 10 or fewer points and to be specific so the analysis can be truly helpful.

6. Reconvene the group at the agreed-upon time to share results. Gather information from the groups, recording on the flip-chart or board. Collect and organize the differing groups' ideas and perceptions, using one of the following methods.
Decide beforehand how you will gather the input. There are at least two ways to do so:

a. Proceed in S-W-O-T order, recording strengths first, weaknesses second, etc.

b. Or you can begin by calling for the top priorities in each category—the strongest strength, most dangerous weakness, biggest opportunity, worst threat—and continue to work across each category.

There are also two ways to take information from the groups.

a. Ask one group at a time to report ("Group A, what do you see as strengths?") You can vary which group begins the report so a certain group isn't always left "bringing up the end" and repeating points made by others. ("Group B, let's start with you for weaknesses.")

b. Or, you can open the floor to all groups ("What strengths have you noted?") for each category until all have contributed what they think is needed.

Whichever way you proceed, the facilitator or recorder should keep writing until the input from all groups is recorded. Note repeated items across groups for "weighting" of important possibilities.

You might want to discuss some of the items as they come up. In fact, cross connections between categories—"This strength plays into that opportunity"—is what you're pursuing, so a good facilitator will tease out those insights as they arise.

At the same time, you want to keep the process moving until all the chart is complete, so facilitator and recorder should work together to begin a fifth column or new page-one for working ideas.

Encourage the participants to also make notes of ideas and insights as you build so the drawing together process will continue to be creative and collaborative.

7. Discuss and record the results. Depending on your time frame and purpose:

- come to some consensus about most important items in each category
- relate the analysis to your vision, mission, and goals
- translate the analysis to action plans and strategies.

8. If appropriate, prepare a written summary of the SWOT analysis to give or mail to participants for continued use in planning and implementing your effort.

**How do you use your SWOT analysis?** In some ways a SWOT analysis pushes you to think "inside the box" by asking you to categorize with such simple terms of opposition. But the purpose of this information gathering is definitely to help you move outside the box of any constraints or limitations that may have hindered you before.
Knowledge is indeed power, and knowing what the positives and negatives of your program are puts you in a more powerful position for action. While a SWOT analysis is not in itself action, it can be a "support team" to help you:

- Identify the issues or problems you intend to change
- Set or reaffirm goals
- Create an action plan

The "Example" included with this section illustrates how SWOT can help discover areas for action.

And as you consider your analysis, remember the half-full glass. Be open to the possibilities that exist within a weakness or threat. Likewise, recognize that an opportunity can become a threat if everyone else sees the opportunity and plans to take advantage of it—thereby increasing your competition.

Finally, during your assessment and planning, you might keep an image in mind to help you make the most of a SWOT analysis: Look for a "stretch," not just a "fit." As Radha Balamuralikrishna and John C. Dugger of Iowa State University point out, SWOT usually reflects your current position or situation, therefore one drawback is that it might not encourage openness to new possibilities. You can use SWOT to justify a course that has already been decided upon, but if your goal is to grow or improve, you will want to use it differently. (See "Internet Resources" below for this article.)

**To Sum Up** A realistic recognition of the weaknesses and threats that exist for your effort is the first step to countering them with a robust and creative set of strengths and opportunities. A SWOT analysis identifies your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to assist you in making strategic plans and decisions.

SWOT is a simple yet comprehensive way of assessing the positive and negative forces within and without your organization, so you can be better prepared to act effectively. The more stakeholders you involve in preparing the SWOT, the more valuable your analysis will be.

Whatever courses of action you decide on, the four-cornered SWOT analysis prompts you to move in a balanced way throughout your program. It reminds you to:

- build on your strengths
- minimize your weaknesses
- seize opportunities
- counteract threats

A SWOT analysis will be most helpful if you use it to support the vision, mission, and objectives you have already defined. The SWOT will at least provide perspective, and at best will reveal connections and areas for action.