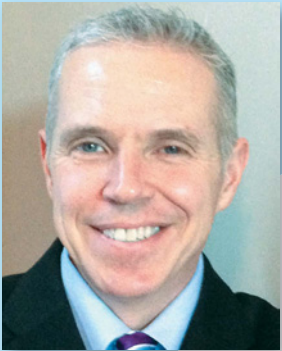


SOAR *Don'*



BY DR. STEVEN SWAFFORD

Nine Industry Executives Share “From the Field” Insights into SOAR Strategic Thinking Framework

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ne of the more popular and familiar environmental scanning tools is a SWOT (strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats) Analysis, which has its developmental roots in the 1950s. A more recent strategic thinking tool—the SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results) Framework—emerged in 2003. This new approach marries techniques found in the Appreciative Inquiry research approach with strategic planning tools many industry professionals have used in the past.

Though Leadership Outfitters has been exploring and guiding a variety of organizations’ strategic thinking process using the SOAR Framework after using the SWOT Analysis for several years, there was limited research data to highlight specific observations related to this process. We set out, therefore, to document real-life observations of senior association management and foundation executives over a two-year span after attending a CalSAE professional development program presented in October 2011 in Irvine, Calif. and Sacramento, Calif. called *Living the New Normal in Association Management*.

The appreciative inquiry-grounded SOAR Framework offers executives an important alternative to SWOT Analysis in the strategic planning process. Long-time management guru Warren Bennis said, “It is usually risky business to identify a ‘trend’ or a new direction before the major outlines of the alleged phenomenon can be clearly observed.” Our study tracks the major outlines of the SOAR process and the

varied applications and uses in the association and foundation community.

Leadership Outfitters initially contacted 21 association management and foundation executives from attendees who participated in one of the above-mentioned workshops. Nine phone interviews were conducted last spring. The research group was considered an experienced group of association and foundation professionals with all participants having 10+ years of industry experience. The budget range for the organizations was between \$1.6 and \$31 million. Six of the nine executives had obtained the Certified Association Executive (CAE) designation, and one executive in the interview group had earned a PhD.

The comments from the non-profit executives were organized by topic based on the Five-I Model in 2009 by J. Stavros and G. Hinrichs documented in *The Thin Book of SOAR: Building Strengths-Based Strategy*. The five I’s are:

1. Initiate: The choice to use;
2. Inquire: Into strengths;

3. Imagine: The opportunities;
4. Innovate: To reach aspirations; and
5. Implement: To achieve results.

SOAR Framework Interview Question One

We sought to identify the real-life experiences that resulted in changed *behaviors* of non-profit executives as a result of the awareness and application of the SOAR Framework.

Initiate: The Choice to Use

Of the executives interviewed, five of the nine applied the SOAR Framework in their own organizations since October 2011 with all five having a positive experience. **Gina Ayllon, CAE**, Executive Director for the Professional Association for Childhood Education, shared, “I think by doing SOAR it brought out a different opportunity awareness and where are we going to be the best.”

Jo Linder-Crow, PhD, Chief Executive Officer for the California Psychological Association, chose to use

t SWOT for Strategic Planning

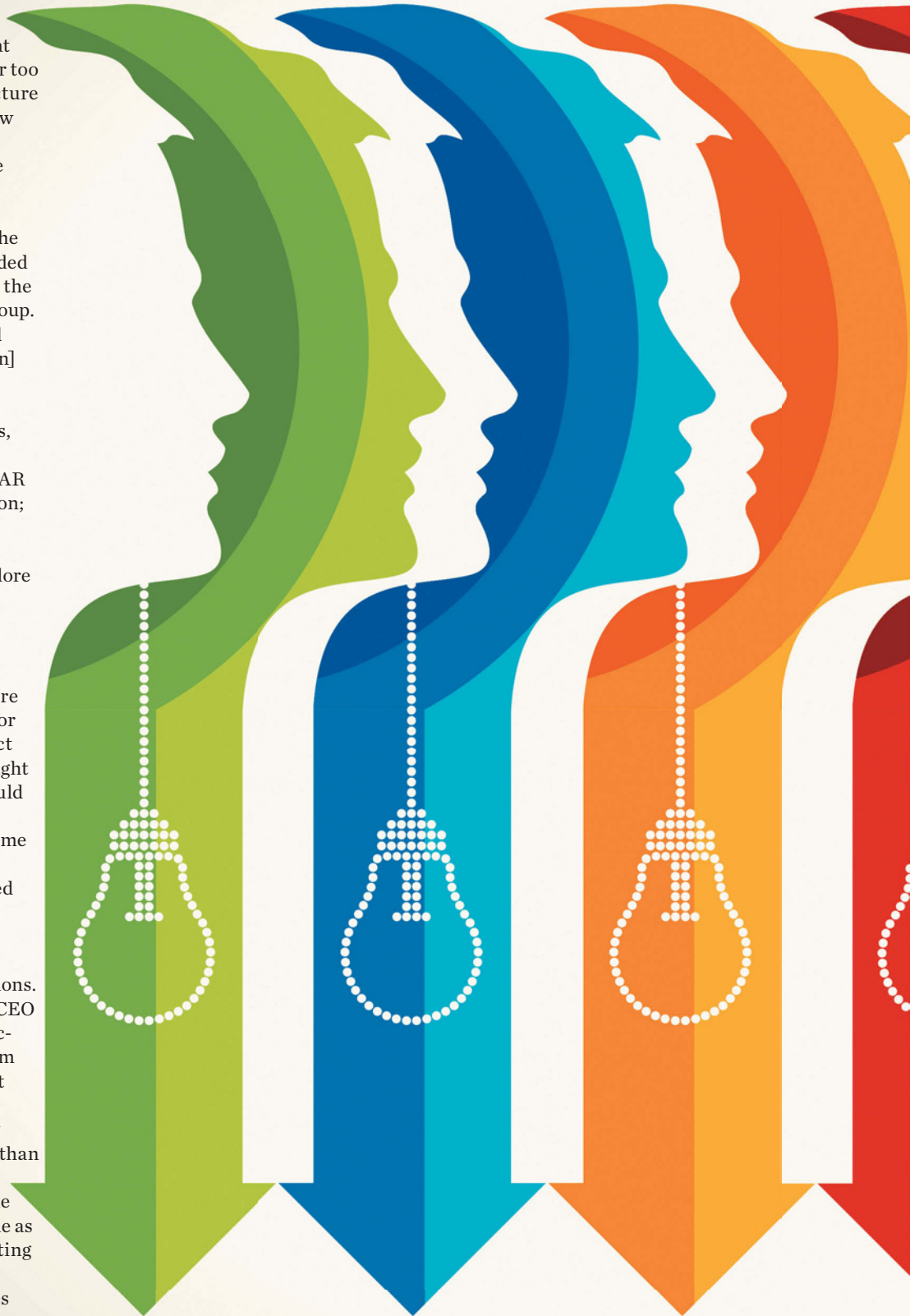
SOAR because of the perception that the structure was not too positive or too negative. “SOAR gives enough structure so that the group feels like they know what is expected of them without moving too far on either [end] of the spectrum.”

Gail Grimm, CAE, Director of Administration & Governance for the California Dental Association, decided to subsequently use SOAR based on the sophistication or maturity of the group. “I’ve actually used both [SWOT and SOAR] together if they [organization] are very mature and can accept the SOAR Framework.”

Of the remaining four interviews, three executives indicated a future desire or intent to introduce the SOAR Framework within their organization; two cited a plan to introduce the process within the next six months. One executive noted a desire to explore SOAR in light of the organization having experienced a significant membership decline and perceived the SOAR Framework as being able to provide different insights or future results. **Greg Wilson, CAE**, Director of Finance for the California District Attorneys Association, said, “I thought maybe shifting things positively could help us...we’ve spent a lot of time looking at the past and not a lot of time looking at the future.”

Eight of the nine executives noted the strengths-based or forward-thinking themes as key reasons for introducing the SOAR strategic thinking process to their organizations. **Jim Anderson, CAE**, President & CEO of CalSAE, highlighted the strategic-thinking language that resulted from the strengths-based theme. “It’s not only a positive document, but it’s the language that we’re using really conveying who we are more closely than prior documents.”

Ayllon had similar insights on the results of the strengths-based theme as the executive perceived that correcting weaknesses necessarily focuses on the past, since that’s where mistakes



were made, while exploiting strengths focuses on the future, since that's where excellent performance will result. "It's more forward thinking as opposed to what's wrong with our organization."

Inquire: Into Strengths

All nine executives identified the strengths-focused approach that is central to the SOAR Framework. Five executives noted the forward-focused or future-thinking theme as an additional strength. **Jeanne Marie Tokunaga**, Owner of JMT Communications Management, said, "SOAR has a much more positive spin to it than SWOT because of the weakness and threats being very negative words whereas SOAR has that aspirational part...let's really look at what we can do with our abilities that we have."

Linder-Crow started using the SOAR Framework and offered the following thoughts about the positive versus negative aspects, "I've used SOAR, and you talk about the opportunities and aspirations...in either one of those there's a chance for you to tease out what might be standing in the way. I prefer the more positive notion because I think groups can get really stuck on the threat part."

Similar words or phrases like *fluid, flowing in one direction*, and *dialog continuum* were additional strengths noted by three executives. The expanded comments around the connectivity of the process related to the symbiotic relationship between each of the four SOAR words contrasted against the silo-like structure of a SWOT analysis. Anderson said "There's an analogy between the SWOT process reinforcing a silo mentality with work plans where the SOAR process has morphed ... to encourage more cross-functional dialog." Grimm added a perspective on the continuum theme and said, "To me, SOAR allows you freedom...it's continual improvement."

In addition to the fluidity theme, three individuals believed that the SOAR Framework is more mission and purpose focused than other processes. **Gail Kelly, CAE**, Vice President of Marketing & Community Programs for the Safety Center, said, "We've changed to start focusing more on our mission, and I think SOAR ties in to that very well...I think it gives us a better framework to help us as an organization."

Imagine: The Opportunities

One theme was noted by nearly half of interview executives—the perceived flexibility and compatibility with other strategic-thinking processes. Four of the individuals cited either the ability to connect with another organizational measurement, such as a dashboard metric, or connected with a change catalyst discussion, which identified how the economy, technology, culture, and government instigated change that may affect their organization.

A strategic environmental scanning activity that focused on four primary change catalysts (economy, technology, government, culture) was shared with the survey executives during the October 2011 professional development program. Leadership Outfitters designed this activity to capture the threats and weaknesses dialog typical experienced in a SWOT Analysis but to reframe the external and internal catalysts in a more neutral mental model so the organization does not dwell on forces or catalysts many times outside of their control. This technique helped the dialog shift from functional silo objective areas to cross organization behaviors (e.g. community, innovation, standards).

While *opportunities* are included in both SWOT analysis and the SOAR Framework, there was a perception by three executives that the *O* in SOAR was more future-focused and pointed to how the organization could improve moving forward. Ayllon said, "With SOAR, you still identify the challenges but you identify them in a positive way of what we need to do—what's our opportunity, and how can we build on it."

Innovate: To Reach Aspirations

All nine executives identified that one or more "blue-sky" questions such as, "Where do we want to go?" or "What do we hope to achieve?" resonated with them on some level. Linder-Crow said, "I think that SOAR is a great catalyst for thinking and envisioning what can be."

Anderson directly noted that SOAR would allow the organization to stay focused on being strategic, building on strengths, implementing mission-focused innovations, and the belief that a new process would produce new results. "SOAR, with the aspirational focus and results focus, tends to create a higher and more constructive dialog."

Implement: To Achieve Results

All nine executives noted some type of measurement, changed behavior, or accountability element related to the SOAR Framework. Consistent themes such as data-focused, dashboard-friendly, idea implementation, and accountability emerged during the interviews. Linder-Crow said, "I think that the results component anchors things because I think one cautionary note is when you talk about strengths, opportunities, and aspirations it can get so blue sky that it is not anchored to reality."

Ayllon perceived the results element as allowing for a process that would result in a new dialog among board members who have known each other for several years. "I was excited about using SOAR with my organization because I didn't want to have the same old strategic plan...I think by doing SOAR it was able to bring out a different result."

Anderson noted a preliminary expectation after recently experiencing the SOAR process at CalSAE. "The dashboard has to support the strategic plan and then we'll see how well all the activities converge and relate to these SOAR objectives."

SOAR Framework Interview Question Two

This question sought to identify the real-life experiences that resulted in changed *mindsets* of executives as a result of the awareness and application of the SOAR Framework.

Initiate: The Choice to Use

As noted earlier, all executives indicated a positive perception of the SOAR Framework. Five of the nine already experimented with this process in their organizations. Three of the four remaining executives interviewed indicated a future desire or intent to introduce the SOAR Framework in their organization in the near future, with two citing a plan within the next six months.

Eight of the nine executives noted the positive-based theme or innovation focus as key reasons for a change in how they viewed the difference between SWOT and SOAR. In retrospect, Wilson said, "The big, big, big difference between SWOT and SOAR to me is SWOT is about the past and SOAR is about the future."

John Dane, CAE, Executive Director for the California Resource Recovery Association, took a more neutral view in comparing the two approaches, “SOAR is an alternative to SWOT in evaluating an organization to make sure it is relevant and to assure that it will be servicing and meeting future member needs as the nature of associations has changed.” From an innovation lens perspective, Grimm said “There’s so much going on right now [dialog] in the area of innovation and this process [SOAR] supports innovation so much.”

Inquire: Into Strengths

All nine executives identified the positive-focused approach that is central to the SOAR Framework, with five executives noting the forward-focused or future-thinking theme as a strength. Kelly said, “The fact that it was based on appreciative inquiry...you’re doing more of what you do well rather than focusing on the things you don’t do well.” In addition, Anderson pointed out the downward spiral that could happen as a result of constantly focusing on the organization’s negative attributes. Anderson said “SWOT can bring up a lot of negativity and you create a dynamic where people start focusing on the weak spots and wanting to fix them.”

One executive noted a mindset change and shift based on the lived experiences shared. Grimm said, “I think SOAR allows you the freedom to explore whereas SWOT keeps your focus within the four walls. SOAR allows you to get to the edge of the building and teeter on the edge of the rooftop.” Stressing her analytical nature, Grimm said, “I’m data driven. I’m analytical. I want to base my decisions on the facts and research. I think this [SOAR] gives people the opportunity to focus on the positive data points. If you put your energies there, you’re going to know what your threats and what your weaknesses are because you are doing better than anybody else and that’s your competitive advantage.”

Imagine: The Opportunities

One mindset theme that emerged was the opportunity to try new processes for an organization. Kelly said, “I’m always looking for models that I feel comfortable with the philosophy and can bring back for my own organization.” Wilson shared a mindset shift on how SOAR

The SOAR Framework provides that strategic thinking process in a way that prompts organizations to focus on what they do well and with a future focus mindset.

might exist in an organization where the chief executive officer might prefer the SWOT analysis. Wilson said “SOAR could be applied to pockets within an organization where the organization itself might use SWOT.”

Another interesting mindset emerged, which was the perception of SOAR in contrast with SWOT on capturing group feedback. Anderson noted the potential for individuals at various levels of the organization to safely contribute to the process. Anderson said “SOAR process can be applied, it seems to me, more across the board for folks in getting feedback.”

Innovate: To Reach Aspirations

All nine executives identified that the SOAR Framework-related, “blue-sky” questions such as “Where do we want to go?” or “What do we hope to achieve?” resonated with them on some level.

Kelly said, “I just think the SOAR process is a really good way for them all to find some way they can make a contribution in terms of where we’re going to be as an organization.” Tokunaga compared the aspiration nature of SOAR to the perceived analytical nature of SWOT, “I liked the aspiration nature of SOAR...I think that it is a more positive look at things rather than the purely analytical side of SWOT.”

Implement: To Achieve Results

As noted earlier, all nine executives noted some type of measurement, changed behavior, or accountability element attribute related to the SOAR Framework. Consistent themes such as *data-focused*, *dashboard friendly*, *idea implementation*, and *accountability* emerged during the interviews as well as some of the mindset shifts regarding the SOAR Framework. Kelly said, “SOAR is most effective when it’s connected either to a timeline or a SMART goal process or integrated into a dialog to provide direction.”

Tokunaga believed action and accountability were important attributes of the results phase, “SOAR is the starting point, and you need to be able

to translate that into action and that is a very important element...SOAR has a nice emphasis on results which is at least edging you toward something actionable and what is our next step.”

Summary

Stavros and Hinrichs’ *Five-I Model* aligned naturally with both the SOAR Framework interview questions and gathering verbal data from the executives participating. While using an existing model to frame the executive interview themes might be non-traditional, in this case, the interview comments aligned naturally with a few exceptions. The intent of appreciative inquiry is to ask *What might be? What should be? What will be?* from a strategic thinking mindset. The SOAR Framework provides that strategic thinking process in a way that prompts organizations to focus on what they do well and with a future focus mindset.

Dr. Steven Swafford, *Balance Warrior + CEO*, has worked for more than 25 years for and with organizations in areas of strategy, leadership development, communication, membership and executive management. He brings a practical knowledge of strategy and leadership with past associations such as the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), Club Managers Association of America (CMAA), and American Subcontractors Association (ASA) where he most recently served as the executive director. He is active in CalSAE leadership and was honored in 2006 as Associate Member of the Year. A native of Kansas, Steve has a B.S. in journalism from Kansas State University; a M.Div. from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC; and Doctorate from Pepperdine University’s School of Education and Psychology focusing on Organization Change. Steve is a co-founder of Leadership Outfitters, LLC which has offices in Los Angeles; Washington, DC; Boston; Hartford, Conn; and Eugene, Ore. Steve can be reached at steve@leadershipoutfitters.com or 310-428-6795.