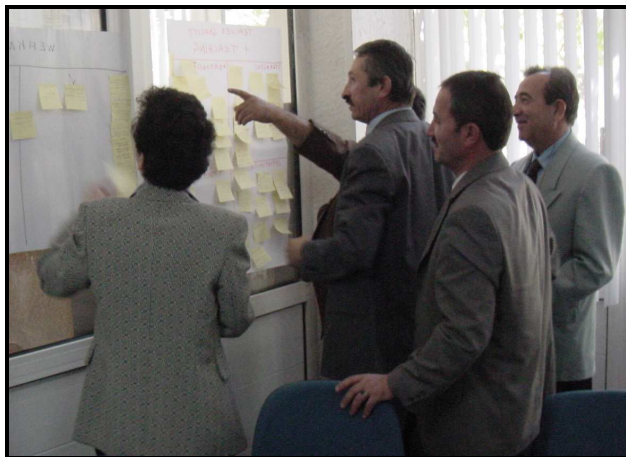# SWOT ANALYSIS: An Important Tool for Strategic Planning

A SWOT Analysis Explained

Examples of SWOT workshop activity

The word "SWOT" stands (in English) for four words:

S = Strengths *(strong points)*
W = Weaknesses *(weak points)*
O = Opportunities
T = Threats

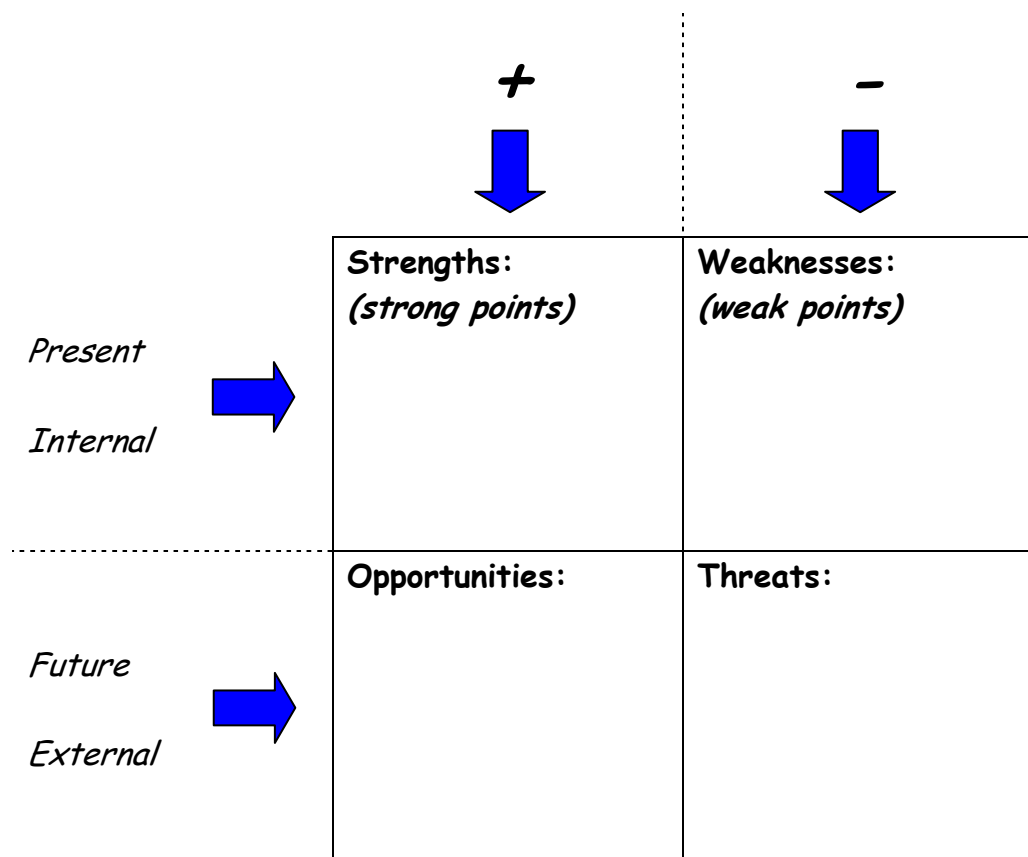A SWOT Analysis uses a grid of four squares set out like this:

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

For workshop purposes, the grid should be drawn large: e.g. filling the whole of a sheet of a flip chart.

To help clarify the differences between "Strengths" and "Opportunities" and "Weaknesses" and "Threats", the following observations might be helpful:

- Strengths and Weaknesses tend to describe the PRESENT situation.

- Strengths and Weaknesses are typically INTERNAL to whatever is being analysed.

- Opportunities and Threats tend to describe the immediate FUTURE.

- Opportunities and Threats are typically EXTERNAL to whatever is being analysed (but they can also include internal factors).

- Strengths and Opportunities are POSITIVE factors.

- Weaknesses and Threats are NEGATIVE factors.

These characteristics are summarised in the following diagram:

	+	**-**
Present *Internal*	**Strengths:** *(strong points)*	**Weaknesses:** *(weak points)*
Future *External*	**Opportunities:**	**Threats:**

The grid is used to analyse a chosen topic.

The following are examples of suitable topics. A SWOT Analysis of **one** of the following:

> School and Community Relationships
> School Management Practices
> The Use of School Grounds
> Teaching Quality in the Classroom
> Student Behaviour
> Student Motivation
> Etc.

Of course, choose another topic if this is of more interest and relevance!

Size of Groups:

The size of groups used for SWOT analysis can be varied to suit particular circumstances. Usually, however, groups of about 5 or 6 people work best. Everyone will be involved and it is easy to generate lively discussion. One of the strengths of a SWOT Analysis, especially if it is a workshop activity, is that it does encourage everyone to participate.

In other words, if you are conducting a SWOT Analysis in a workshop of 30 people, it will probably best to divide the participants into 5 or 6 groups. Each group can do its own SWOT Analysis. Later, if wished, their results can be compared and similarities and differences discussed.

SWOT Stage 1:

Workshop participants are provided with "post-its". They brainstorm and try to identify the "strengths", "weaknesses", "opportunities" and "threats" - for example, for "Meeting the Learning Needs of All Students".

Individual participants write down on "post-its" the "weaknesses", "strengths", "opportunities" and "threats" they can think of, one at a time. One "post-it" is used for each "strength", "weakness", "opportunity" and "threat" identified. "Post-its" can be placed in the relevant squares in any order.

One of the reasons this kind of brainstorming is effective is that something one person says or suggests will often stimulate or remind someone else of

something additional. The workshop facilitator, therefore, should encourage participants to take note of each other's "post-its" as they are placed on the grid.

When people begin to run out of ideas and suggestions, the first stage of the SWOT Analysis has been completed.

SWOT Stage 2: "Clustering"

Firstly, think about cause-and-effect relationships. For example, which weakness is caused by, or causes, another weakness? Later on, this will help us to prioritise solutions. One problem may need to be solved before another can be addressed.

If appropriate, readjust the position of the "post-its" to show cause-and-effect relationships. For example, place the "cause" immediately below the "effect". The process of thinking about cause and effect relationships will probably result in the need to add more "post-its". This is to be encouraged!

Secondly, try to group some of the "post-its" together in clusters, according to the type of "strength", "weakness", "opportunity", or "threat" that they describe. Perhaps, for example, there will be one cluster of "post-its" to do with resource issues. There might be another cluster of "post-its" to do with management issues. And so on. At this stage, some "post-its" could be removed if it is decided that they say the same thing, or the wording could be refined to consolidate two almost similar points or ideas together.
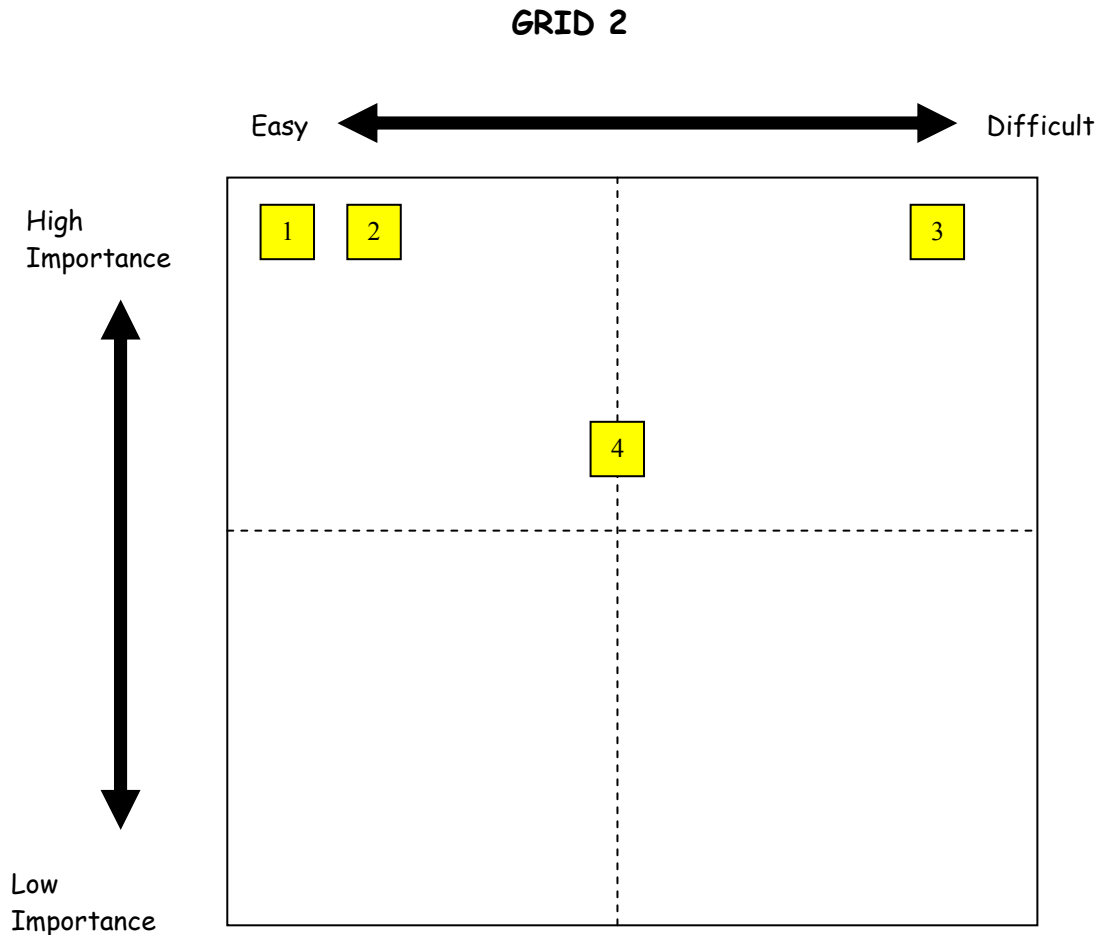
This stage of the analysis helps us to clarify and categorise different types of issues. You may wish to make a record of this stage of the analysis, before proceeding to Stage 3.

SWOT Stage 3:

For project design and activity planning purposes, the "weaknesses" square of the grid is especially important. It is here that we are likely to get ideas for appropriate activities and strategies to address weaknesses in the system.

Often the "weaknesses" square of the grid will fill up with more "post-its" than any of the other three squares. In a perfect world, it would be nice to be able to solve all weaknesses and problems. Unfortunately, in the real world, this is not possible. No single project or action plan can address all issues.

A very effective analysis that combines consideration of "how **important**" a weakness is, with "how **practical**" it is to do something about it, can be conducted with reference to an additional grid: Grid 2.

GRID 2

Easy ⟷ Difficult

High Importance ↕ Low Importance

Grid with post-its: 1 and 2 in top-left (High Importance, Easy), 3 in top-right (High Importance, Difficult), 4 in the center.

The "weakness" "post-its" on the original grid can be moved across onto this new grid. Exactly where they are placed has an important new meaning. A "post-it" placed in the extreme top-left corner of this grid (i.e. "post-it" number 1 in the example) can be interpreted as being a weakness that is very important, but is also easy to solve. "Post-it" number 2 in the example shows a weakness that is just as important, but is considered slightly more difficult to address. The weakness depicted by "post-it" number 3 in the example is "very important, but also very difficult (perhaps impossible) to address".

The vertical dotted line, for practical purposes, can divide the grid into "weaknesses within the power of the project/management to address" (on the left of the line) and "weaknesses outside of the power of the project/management to address" (on the right hand side of the line).

"Post-it" number 4, in the example, is of "fairly high importance", but participants are not sure whether it is inside or outside the power of the project/management to do something about it. Therefore, they have placed the "post-it" over the vertical dividing line.

The purpose of a SWOT Analysis is to help us to analyse (evaluate) a situation, and then identify an action plan to do something to improve it.

One of the reasons Stage 3 of the SWOT Analysis so useful is that it helps us to identify a "way forward".

It is often good to develop an action plan by focussing on the "top-left-hand corner" of the second grid: in other words with weaknesses that are very important, but are not too difficult to address. By doing this, we are starting with, and agreeing upon, things we believe can be done! We are identifying a "way forward". We are not getting bogged down with problems that are too difficult.

If wished, Stage 3 of the SWOT Analysis can also be used for further analysis of "strengths", "opportunities" and "threats". For example, this would allow us to identify the "most important and practical strengths" that we can draw upon in mapping a way forward.

Again, you may wish to keep a record of the results of Stage 3, before moving on to Stage 4.

SWOT Analysis Stage 4

To bring us closer to developing an action plan, SWOT Analysis Stage 4 is a very simple, but very important, stage.

It involves taking a "weakness statement" (a negative statement) and reformulating it as an "objective statement" (a positive statement).

Use this process to reformulate the weaknesses that you believe it is within the power of the project/management to address.

You now have the basis for an action plan! If there are too many objectives to address, select the ones with the greatest importance!

SWOT Analysis Stage 5

This Stage of the SWOT Analysis concentrates on the "Threats" identified. SWOT Analysis Stage 5 involves a "Risk Analysis".

Another Grid is required, as shown below: Grid 3.

GRID 3
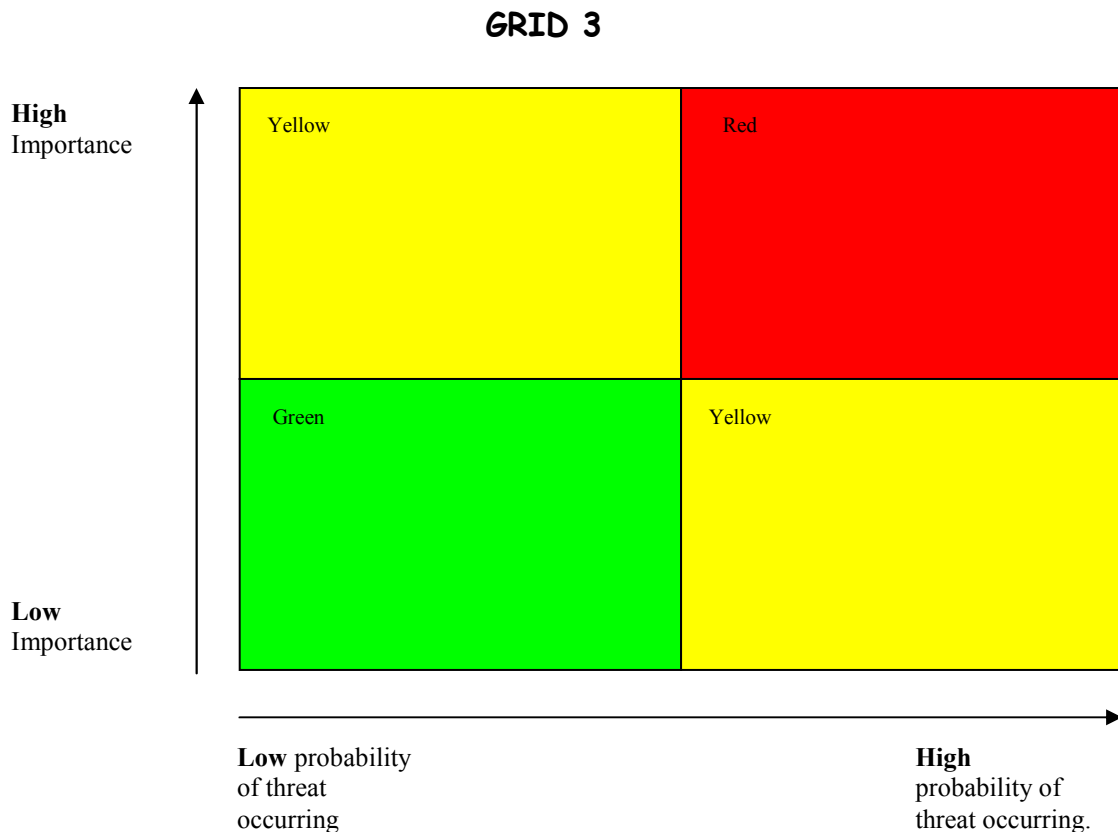
The grid has been colour coded (like traffic lights). For "threats" in the green area of the grid, "go ahead": the threats can be ignored. They are not important enough to worry about.

For threats in the two yellow areas of the grid: "proceed with caution". These threats are important enough to demand further attention. Monitor or manage these threats and, if possible, adjust activities and objectives to remove the threats or reduce the risks associated with them.

Threats that fall in the red area of the grid are known as "killer threats". You may need to "Stop!" and think again. Consider redesigning your action plan to remove the threat or substantially reduce its importance or probability of causing failure.

SWOT Analysis Stage 6:

There is an underlying "logic" to the four squares of the "SWOT" grid, which can be summarised as follows:

- The "weaknesses" identified help us to develop possible activities and strategies suitable for a project or action plan.

- We should than try to consider how we can **build** on the "strengths" and "opportunities" we have identified to increase our chances of success.

- We also need to take important note of the "threats" we have identified. We need to consider how we might be able to design activities to avoid these threats or minimise the risks associated with them. Another strategy might be to design activities that address these threats directly: to remove or limit them.

What remains, therefore, is for us to go back to the "strengths" and "opportunities" we have identified, and see if we can come up with practical suggestions for building on these. This represents Stage 6. As a result of Stage 6 of the Analysis, we may see the need to modify the activities that we have provisionally identified to take full advantage of strengths and opportunities.

Summary:

- The purpose of a SWOT Analysis is to help us to analyse (evaluate) a situation, and then identify an action plan to do something to improve it.

- A SWOT Analysis helps us to focus on what is possible, rather than on what is impossible.

- Because a SWOT analysis is a participative activity, it is good for building **consensus**: where everyone is agreed upon, and committed to, a practical way forward for making things better.

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