

# The Goals Grid

## A New Tool for Strategic Planning

By Fred Nickols and Ray Ledgerwood

SWOT analysis is a tried and proven strategic planning tool. It focuses strategic planners on internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats). These then serve as a basis for thinking about and setting strategic goals and objectives. But getting to strategic objectives doesn't have to begin with a SWOT analysis. There is at least one alternative for getting the leadership of an organization to start thinking about strategic goals.

In this article, we'll present and discuss an exciting new strategic planning tool: the Goals Grid. It is a simple, easily understood framework but one that packs a wallop. Originally developed to help a group of senior managers establish a set of strategic goals, it has proven to have a multiplicity of uses and it offers benefits to the strategic planning process as an alternative to a conventional SWOT analysis.

The first thing we'll tell you about the Goals Grid is that it's so simple and easy you won't have to attend a training course or buy a book or other materials in order to use it. Better yet, it's free; no licensing fees, no royalties, no payments of any kind. Just pick it up and start using it.

Our purpose in this article is to answer four basic questions:

1. What is the Goals Grid?
2. How is it used in the strategic planning process?
3. What benefits does it offer?

4. How do I make use of it.

### What Is the Goals Grid?

The Goals Grid is a simple 2x2 matrix constructed by examining the Yes and No answers to two very basic questions: (1) Do you want something? (2) Do you have it? The interplay of the Yes and No answers to these questions defines four basic categories for goals and objectives (see the blank Goals Grid in Figure 1 on page 3).

If you want something you don't have, (Y/N) your goal is to obtain it (ACHIEVE).

*Action step:* Develop a list of outcomes, conditions or qualities the organization wants to achieve.

If you want something you already have (Y/Y), your goal or aim is to keep it (PRESERVE).

*Action step:* Develop a list of outcomes, conditions or qualities the organization wants to preserve.

If there's something you don't want and don't have (N/N), your goal is to avoid it (AVOID).

*Action step:* Develop a list of outcomes, conditions or qualities the organization wants to avoid.

If there's something you don't want but have (N/Y), your goal is to get rid of it (ELIMINATE).

*Action step:* Develop a list of outcomes, conditions or qualities the organization wants to eliminate.

ACHIEVE, PRESERVE, AVOID, and ELIMINATE – these are the four basic categories of goals making up the Goals Grid.

### **How Is the Goals Grid Used in the Strategic Planning Process?**

The Goals Grid is not only simple and easy to use, it's also flexible; it can be applied in several ways. Here are some with which we've had very good luck.

- Jump-starting the strategic planning process and dialogue
- Generating a set of “organizational reality check” criteria against which strategic goals and objectives can be gauged
- Providing a way of checking for and managing conflicting goals and objectives
- Generating the goals and objectives themselves.

To show what the Goals Grid can look like once it's been used in the course of a strategic planning session, we've included a “live” example that was produced by the board of a conservation organization working with one of the authors (see Figure 2 on page 4). It served as the basis for developing a more refined set of strategic objectives consistent with the values and priorities of the organization. Therein lies an important point and a caveat:

The Goals Grid does a first-rate job of helping strategic planners think about goals and objectives in terms of the categories making up the Grid, but it does not, by itself, guarantee that those goals and objectives are consistent with the organization's values or priorities. However, once the initial set of goals and objectives has been subjected to careful consideration, settled on and even polished, the Goals Grid can also serve as a convenient organizing framework for presenting and explaining them to staff.

### **What Benefits Does the Goals Grid Offer?**

As we've been stressing all along, it is simple, easy to use, and flexible. But those are benefits from our perspectives as practitioners. Here are some benefits of using the Goals Grid instead of a SWOT exercise that we've seen in action and that our clients have communicated to us.

- An extremely effective overall *organizational analysis tool* for participants of strategic and long-range planning workshops

- A *visible format* that workshop participants can continuously refer to when developing the strategic direction and goals for their organization
- An *effective method for developing group consensus* on future achievements for the organization (achieve)
- Follows a *logical progression of thought for goal development* and decision making (achieve, preserve, avoid, and eliminate)
- A great discussion generator for an *analysis of current services, products, programs, and direction of the organization* (preserve and eliminate)
- Provides a *quick check of the alignment of values*—individual and organizational—among the work-session participants (conflicts and consensus)
- Offers advantages over conventional flip-chart lists of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats because of the *simplicity and usefulness of the information generated*
- Individual responses and the associated group discussion can lead to a *consensual, agreed-to set of responses* to enter into the organization's “strategic” Goals Grid
- Allows *comparison of the “fit”* between a completed Goals Grid for an organization and one prepared for a single goal, project, program, or decision
- Most of all, the Goals Grid is a very *effective, practical, engaging, and efficient activity* for an organization's board, committee, task force or project team to use in the course of strategic planning.

### **How Do I Make Use of the Goals Grid?**

That's easy, just pick it up and start using it. It's not rocket science and, as a professional management consultant (or manager), you are already an experienced and savvy tool user, if not tool maker.

The typical Goals Grid session involves having participants write their responses on individual copies of the Goals Grid (a 15-minute activity). The full group next engages in an exercise in which individual responses are shared, recorded on a computer, projected on a large screen, and then discussed and analyzed. Flip charts or overhead transparencies can be used as well. Another option is to have small “family groups” from functional or operational units develop a starter set of goals and then share those.

You can be guided by the uses we've outlined above, or you can experiment with it and find some of your own.

FRED NICKOLS ([fred@nickols.us](mailto:fred@nickols.us); [www.nickols.us](http://www.nickols.us)) is a senior consultant with Distance Consulting LLC. He created the Goals Grid ten years ago and has used it for personal and professional purposes, with large and small groups, with senior execs for strategic planning purposes, and with managers at all levels for more tactical, operational planning purposes.

RAY LEDGERWOOD ([rayledgerwood@msn.com](mailto:rayledgerwood@msn.com)) is the owner of Board Works by Ledgerwood, a consulting firm that specializes in facilitating practical strategic planning sessions with the boards of government entities and associations.

Figure 1. A BLANK GOALS GRID

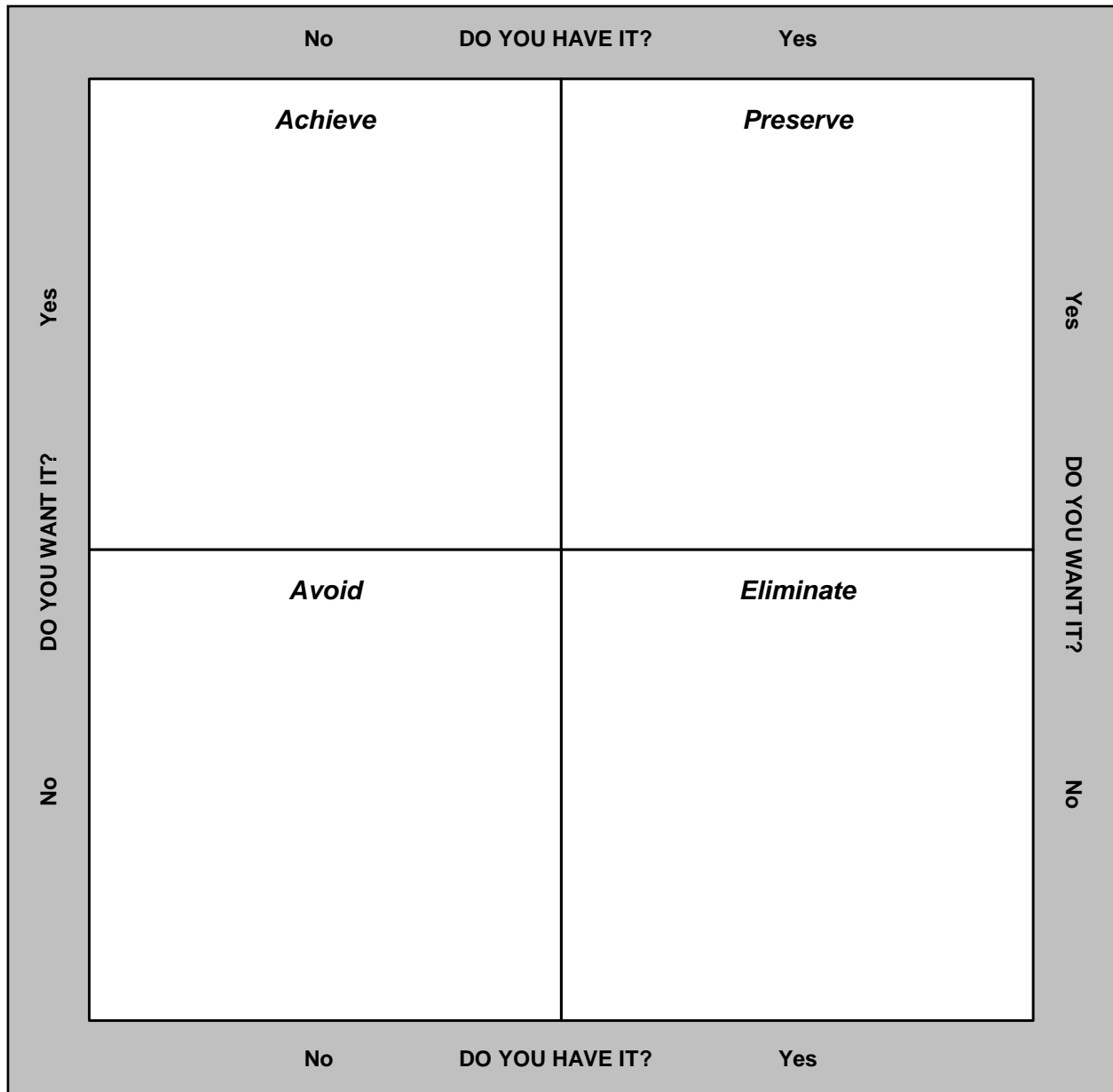


Figure 2. A “LIVE” GOALS GRID CREATED FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

## The Goals Grid

		No	DO YOU HAVE IT?	Yes		
DO YOU WANT IT?	<b>Achieve</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work toward sustainable growth in the county</li> <li>• Provide more incentives to property owners/managers for program involvement</li> <li>• Implementation of on-farm energy production and bio-fuels facility</li> <li>• Country living, and backdoor conservation program implementation</li> <li>• Healthy forests demonstration site</li> <li>• Clean and adequate water in all watersheds</li> <li>• Up to date natural resource inventory of current trends, baseline, resources</li> <li>• New and productive partnerships and better relationships with other organizations we deal with</li> <li>• Financial stability – independent of grants</li> <li>• More diversity with the communities we serve and within the organization</li> <li>• Better internal communications and understanding</li> <li>• Increase public participation and education in the natural resource issues</li> <li>• Become the “go to” organization for conservation information and conservation issues</li> </ul>		<b>Preserve</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creativity, expertise and enthusiasm of the current staff</li> <li>• Opportunities to inform and involve residents</li> <li>• Working relationships with agency partners</li> <li>• Working relationships and influence with legislature</li> <li>• Working relationship with land owners</li> <li>• Volunteer involvement</li> <li>• Positive image of the organization</li> <li>• Diversification of funding</li> <li>• Productive and efficient work environment – technology - maintaining the freedom and encouragement to achieve</li> <li>• Executive Director and his crystal ball</li> <li>• Flexibility to respond to different needs</li> <li>• Volunteer board members</li> </ul>	
	<b>Avoid</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being seen as a regulator</li> <li>• Stagnation</li> <li>• Growing into a bureaucracy</li> <li>• Conflict of duties and responsibilities</li> <li>• Poor public perception and misperceptions</li> <li>• Instability of funding</li> <li>• Addiction to uncertain grant funding</li> <li>• Special interest obligations</li> <li>• Excessive specialization and/or generalization</li> <li>• Appearance of favoritism</li> <li>• Graft, corruption and scandal</li> <li>• Group think – situation where we have a enclosed group of people without the benefit of outside input</li> <li>• Attitude that we have arrived – arrogance and/or overconfidence</li> </ul>		<b>Eliminate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers to progress</li> <li>• Narrow focus for our programs</li> <li>• Safety hazards</li> <li>• Excess expenditures</li> <li>• Gas guzzling vehicles</li> <li>• Stress caused by cell phones, spam emails and Xerox machines</li> </ul>	
No			DO YOU WANT IT?			No
		No	DO YOU HAVE IT?	Yes		

© Fred Nickols & Ray Ledgerwood 2005