

Strategic Planning And Climate Change: A Case Study In The Ski Industry

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Introduction

Popular press has explored the economic implications of rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns (Branch, 2014), as well as how the weather complicates the management of international Hallmark sporting events (Dattaro, 2015). The effects of environmental change, however, are not consistent across varying organizations and markets. Both corporations and locally owned resorts are adjusting their operations due to market restrictions caused by climate change (Branch, 2014), but despite the call for strategic planning research within this context (Nicholls, 2006), organizational action and reaction to long-term effects of climate change on the sport industry have not been substantially investigated. The aim of this research was to evaluate the use of strategic planning by a locally owned ski community in the face of climate change.

For almost 60 years, academics and practitioners have examined successful organizations through the dynamic framework of strategic planning. Wolf and Floyd (2013) categorized this robust body of literature into three time periods: 1) Before the late 1970s and 1980s — investigations were prescriptive and focused on the characteristics of the long-range planning process, 2) 1980s and 1990s research — focused primarily on using empirical data to link strategic planning and organizational performance, and 3) The 2000s — a shift in agenda to using Mintzberg's (1994) fallacies to redefine underlying assumptions about strategic planning. This research project falls into the third time period.

While research exists on environmentally friendly practices that ski resorts have integrated into operations, and anecdotal evidence suggests that they are shifting business strategies to accommodate for climate change, no empirical research has outlined the strategic planning associated with these adjustments. This evaluative research bolsters the existing literature by clarifying the degree to which strategic planning theory is put into practice by sport organizations in the context of a global climate change.

Research design and data analysis

The particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic benefits of a case study structure provided the opportunity for gathering rich descriptions of the processes within the environment of a planned, recreation community in the United States. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior management team personnel employed within this community. The community was a homeowners' association with public and private sport recreation services, including downhill and cross-country skiing, sledding, and tubing. For triangulation purposes, secondary data, including annual reports and internal planning documents, were also collected. Open and axial coding were employed by the researchers to determine the emerging themes within primary and secondary data.

Results and conclusions

One primary theme emerged — Engagement in Outcome-based Strategic Programming — and two sub-themes, a) Importance of Transparency, and b) Community Membership Contribution. Primary and secondary data analyses indicated that senior management within the organization actively engaged in processes with internal and external constituents to address the repercussions of climate change. Initially the data suggested that senior leadership team members engaged in formalized, strategic planning with an outcome-based approach. A closer analysis of the data indicated that, while the senior leadership team members used language indicative of what is commonly considered to be strategic planning, their behaviors were actually reflective of strategic programming. Examples of such will be presented on the research poster.

Mintzberg (1994) differentiated between strategic planning and programming through the potter's craft analogy; i.e., similar to a potter, a strategic planner's core function is to set a vision for an organization. This is a hands-on, improvisatory process that is responsive to unclear, unresponsive materials. Strategic programming, though, is the process by which the vision is implemented. Personal testimony highlighted organizational commitment to involve internal and external constituents in the programming that was intentionally created in response to climate change. Secondary materials confirmed the practice of employing new strategies, yet no data provided support for strategic planning.

The core function of strategic planning was not embraced by the organization examined in this study. Some success has been found by adapting to the effects of the changing natural and economic environments, but strategic planning has not been used to set a long-term vision. The lack of direction and cohesive planning may lead to ultimate downfall for the organization. These results indicate a need to assess the degree to which senior leadership utilizes strategic planning across snow sport-based organizations. Future research objectives include broadening the sample of organizations to include both locally- and corporate owned ski communities, and an investigation into the characteristics of sport organizations that embrace strategic planning and vision setting.

References

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