



Identifying Critical Planning Issues—An Essential Step in Formulating Strategies

My January/February 2005 column described the strategic assessment process. The cancer program assessment process is essential to evaluate the current cancer program position and to identify critical strategic planning issues and opportunities.

Once the assessment is completed, the detailed findings must be translated into opportunities and critical issues. In most cases, many of the “issues” initially identified are really symptoms of a broader and real issue. The issues analysis must be an introspective and intellectually honest process in the strategic business planning process. A variety of methods can be used to move from symptoms to issues. Some of the activities that might be considered include:

- Organize the issues into categories. Using the strategic assessment framework (services and operations, organization, and market) is one such framework.
- Have a colleague or a representative for the hospital planning staff review the categories and description of issues for comment.
- Validate the issues list with the cancer program planning committee (if one exists) or with the program board or executive committee.
- Compare the issues list with the key findings from the strategic assessment, a SWOT's analysis, program executive, or strategic planning committee minutes, tumor board discussions, or other program evaluation tools.

In most cases, the key issues will focus on:

- Adequacy of the mission statement and accuracy of the vision statement.
- Future cancer program strategic direction (eg, remain on course with minor modifications or *fundamentally* change the direction).
- Establishing or strengthening physician-hospital (and cancer program) integration (economic or clinical).

This discussion is complicated and broad and will include discussion of the hospital and program's relationship with oncologists (eg, the number of physicians required for the program, economic and equity position, role in strategic planning implementation, skill level and expertise).

- Establishing or strengthening multidisciplinary approaches.
- Adequacy of the program's technology position. This could include discussions regarding potential new service (revenue) development, expansion of existing services and capacities, and approaches to improve the service and care delivery.
- The future role, scope, and activity levels of clinical research in the program.
- The future role of care management and standards of practice.
- Cancer center organization and management structures.
- Cancer center marketing.

The essential purpose of the program assessment as the first phase of the strategic planning process is to identify the critical issues that must be resolved for the program to remain financially viable. Strategies serve as solutions to these challenges. With the planning issues identified, a strong foundation for strategy formulation is prepared. When accurately identified, the critical strategic planning issues serve as the precursor to the priority strategies. Strategy formulation constitutes the second of the 3 strategic planning phases and will be discussed in future columns.

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