

# From SWOT to SOAR

Relying on strengths for a successful transformation



Bernard Tollec

Turningpoint Director – Executive Coach

## **Stop** to endless diagnostics...and **go** to transforming and liberating our organizations!

How many change strategies have remained unfinished, unimplemented or shelved by leaders? How many hours of work to diagnose a situation have gone to waste, as the desired transformation never materializes?

Experts say that only 30% of transformations are a success! So why so much effort, so many hours spent on such a low result?



Faced with the failure of a change, we often question the relevance of the strategy used without paying attention to how it was implemented on the ground. Yet our intervention habits, based on ancestral tools and beliefs, can also lead to dead ends. Take the example of a tool often used to support the construction of a strategy: the SWOT analysis. What if SWOT and the way we use it was in fact to blame?

### **SWOT: a historical precedent**

The "SWOT" matrix has been used for decades to build strategies by looking

for internal Strengths and Weaknesses, and Opportunities and Threats in the environment related to a project or a market. This technique was developed by Albert Humphrey when he was at the Stanford Research Institute in the 60s and 70s.

### **SWOT: yes, but...**

When I was HR Director, I had the opportunity, like many of you I'm sure, to use this matrix many times in order to develop our different business and transformation strategies. I had already noticed a recurring phenomenon, which I continue to observe today with the leaders I coach. During this type of exercise, we invariably spend a lot more time on our Weaknesses and the Threats faced.

Why such a phenomenon? Because "the negative is attractive", and it garners more attention. Indeed, the negative bias of our brain - the one that has preserved our species since creation - and the way we have been trained, naturally direct us towards what doesn't work or can be seen as a threat.



This is even more true when the company is in bad shape and its environment is disturbed. By focusing on weaknesses and threats, our attention is diverted from the opportunities and strengths that are present.

We generally end up exhausted or very discouraged from such an exercise, when instead, the construction of a strategy should be an exciting moment to set in motion a collective performance!



## SOAR: a new approach and a triple invitation

Beyond a change in letters, SOAR invites us to think and act in a different way and to develop a strategy that's much more effective (and motivating!). This tool is part of the "Appreciative Inquiry" approach. We are now using it to drive the development of new strategies and therefore change. The strength of this tool lies in its ability to redirect focus and engage a wider group of stakeholders. This approach was invented by Jacqueline M. Stavros (professor at Laurence Technological University in the US) and Gina Hinrichs, two American colleagues and experts of Appreciative Inquiry. Above all, it relies on the strengths and resources of organizations and the people who compose them (Fig.1).

A large red circle with a white border, containing the text 'Change the focus and involve a larger collective!' in white, bold, sans-serif font.

Change the  
focus and  
involve a larger  
collective!



Fig. 1

### SWOT vs. SOAR



## A.

An invitation to change focus:  
changing focus from gaps to be filled,  
towards resources to develop

As human nature inevitably tends to lend more importance and time to internal weaknesses and external threats, SOAR, by the way it is built, invites people to rebalance this time and offers a positive rewording of threats and weaknesses.



When I was an international HR Director in the industry, I was involved in employee engagement surveys among other things. Every year, we analyzed the results from these. That particular year was special because a new Vice President had arrived and decided to change things up in terms of the employee engagement and the customer orientation of the organization, hoping to achieve a real positive break in finances. I had done a very detailed analysis of the "engagement" part and the results were problematic and worrisome. These returns were based on objective measures (engagement survey, Net Promotable Score and balance sheet), in theory not up for discussion... And yet, nobody had the same reading of the figures and the discussion created more stubbornness than a will to change.

This story sheds light on the other two invitations offered to us by SOAR: an invitation to integrate stakeholders, and to ensure that diagnosis and action work simultaneously.

## B.

An invitation to integrate  
stakeholders: moving from work "in  
chambers" to participatory and  
contributory work

Most likely, the SWOT model already invited you to carry out this exercise with all the people who could be interested in the success of the company. It must be pointed out, however, that often this exercise is restricted to the management team. Leaders still live with some limiting ideas, such as: "we are the vision", "we are the strategy", "if a group is too big it can't work effectively", "if more people work together on this, we could end up losing control", etc. So often, this work is done by a small group of experts before being "suggested" to a larger group afterwards. Suggested is the best case scenario, imposed or cascaded down is the worst.

You may recall the famous syndrome that most major organizations suffer from? The 3333 syndrome. As part of a change or a transformation, a small team spends 3 months thinking and building, constructing and deconstructing reality, experiencing discord and finally agreeing on a common workplan, a common vision, a clear strategy.. For 3 days, this management team will train a larger group (often middle managers) to get the message across. Surprisingly, they will see their work challenged by



questions they may consider to be resistance to change or bad faith. Of course, they forget that it took them 3 months of work and reflection to come up with this plan, and that they are asking this group of executives to accept their analysis 30 times faster than that! Then they will ask their executives to implement the plan in their teams in 3 hours. What does the last 3 stand for? 3 seconds? No, 3 years. 3 years of resistance to change! Is this a caricature? Not really! Whenever I tell this to a leader, they end up admitting it with a smile, wondering how else it could be done.



On the contrary, SOAR considers this work as collective, with a maximum of internal stakeholders, but also external: employees, suppliers, customers, or those who benefit from the services of the organization. Utopian? No, it's quite possible with a little experience. We have done it in an agro-food company by mobilizing 1500 employees, in a pharmaceutical company by mobilizing 900 collaborators, and in a home care services company by mobilizing the 300 employees, their patients and their network.

To engage and mobilize people is to guarantee that you will benefit from a broad vision of the possibilities, since you invite the whole ecosystem of the organization to

position itself. In addition, inviting people to participate ensures their commitment throughout the transformation.

C.

An invitation to consider that analysis and action are inseparable: go from "analyze first and then act" to "engage people through a transformational analysis"

The habit of "analyze first, take time to think, and act afterwards", though it seems very logical, is ultimately counterproductive. On the contrary, we believe that transformation runs parallel to analysis. Therefore it's important to note that if questions can generate change, it's crucial to properly choose the questions that you will ask in such an exercise. More than an analysis, you invite stakeholders to a conversation around questions that will "obsessively" look for resources. (Fig. 2)

The SOAR process can generate increasingly more energy and trust between actors on the ability of the organization and teams to move towards the desired direction. If you choose SOAR, you choose a new, much more efficient way of setting your organization in motion.

SOAR or SWOT, it's up to you!

Fig. 2

SWOT		SOAR	
S	What are the strengths of your organization? (a list of strengths)	S	Recall moments when you witnessed your organization fulfilling its mission and being highly effective. What strengths and resources does the organization have in regards to these success stories? (a list of strengths and resources rooted in shared, real stories)
W	What are the weaknesses of your organization?		
O	What are the opportunities in your organization?	O	What are the opportunities offered to you by your internal and external weaknesses, threats and opportunities?
T	What are the threats to your organization?		
		A	Based on your resources and making the most of the opportunities presented to you, what are your greatest aspirations for the future of your organization?
		R	What results can stakeholders expect? What resources do you have to do this?

Given our culture, SWOT tends to focus on weaknesses and threats, thus turning this analysis into a gap-reducer. All these gaps can generate endless resistance and counter analyses...

SOAR builds on the successes, opportunities, aspirations and resources of the organization. As the process progresses, it makes it possible to accumulate the resources available to achieve goals.

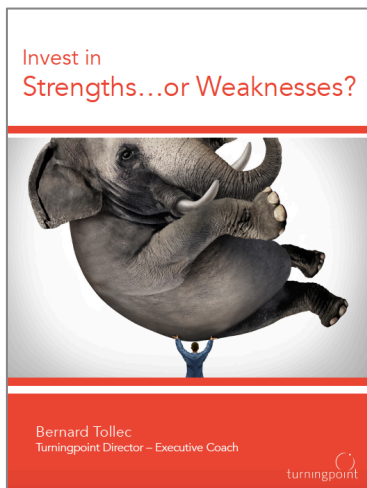
A company going through change: a number of gaps to be filled

A company going through change: a number of resources on which to capitalize



Bernard Tollec is the Director of Positive Transformation at Turningpoint, an international coaching firm specializing in the individual and collective support of managers and their teams during transformations. He is one of the European experts on strength and resource-oriented approaches such as *Appreciative Inquiry* and *Solution Focus*. He intervenes as an Executive Coach in organizations that wish to experience rapid and long lasting changes, both in France and abroad. He guides and trains leaders, coaches and internal change agents on these new pathways of collective intelligence.

## To go further...



Contact us for more information:  
[contact@turningpoint-leadership.com](mailto:contact@turningpoint-leadership.com)

<https://www.turningpoint-appreciativeinquiry.com/>  
[www.turningpoint-leadership.com](http://www.turningpoint-leadership.com)

*If you want to go higher, go deeper*