

TOWS ANALYSIS

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Summary

This fact sheet discusses an easy-to-use monitoring tool called a TOWS Analysis, designed to help your community create plans that address the unique strengths and challenges identified in your SWOT Analysis.

Keywords: community engagement, strategic planning, collecting data, analyzing data

What is a TOWS Analysis?

TOWS is an acronym that stands for threats, opportunities, weaknesses, and strengths. It's related to the SWOT¹ analysis – it's SWOT spelled backwards – but it focuses on developing strategies to address the features identified in a SWOT analysis.² It's an extension of the SWOT analysis, meant to enable a user to move from identifying their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the strategizing and planning for their next steps. SWOT analyses focus on what is,³ while TOWS analyses focus on what can be.⁴

TOWS Matrix	S - Strengths	W - Weaknesses
O - Opportunities	SO - Strategies	WO - Strategies
T - Threats	ST - Strategies	WT - Strategies

Figure 1 | TOWS Matrix

Adapted from (Wehrich, Heinz. "The TOWS Matrix – A Tool for Situational Analysis. Long Range Planning 15, no. 2 (1982): 61.

See [Conducting a SWOT Analysis and Monitoring your Progress](#) fact sheets to learn more

TOWS analyses use a four-part matrix to map out the relationships between an initiative's strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats, and then create strategies to address these features. It "is a two-by-two chart that has four types of strategies" considered.⁵ The four strategies are: strengths-opportunities (SO), weaknesses-opportunities (WO), strengths-threats (ST), and weaknesses-threats (WT). Together, the four strategies enable plan-making that matches internal strengths and weaknesses to external opportunities and threats.

Strengths-opportunities connects internal strengths with external opportunities, asking how a strength of the First Nation can be leveraged to take advantage of an external opportunity.

Weaknesses-opportunities

examines how internal weaknesses can be addressed by taking advantage of opportunities that appear. Asking how an external opportunity can bolster underperforming areas of an organization.

Strengths-threats links an organization's internal strengths to external threats, asking how strengths can be used to solve or minimize external concerns.

Weaknesses-threats "are defensive tactics aimed at reducing internal weaknesses and avoiding" external threats, asking "what strategy can I develop that will help me to reduce an internal weakness and avoid the threat?"⁶

The four strategies are: strengths-opportunities (SO), weaknesses-opportunities (WO), strengths-threats (ST), and weaknesses-threats (WT).

Why are TOWS Analyses Useful?

The TOWS analysis allows you to create concrete strategies and tactics grounded in the findings of your SWOT analysis. This enables the initiative to plan next steps after the SWOT analysis has been completed. While a SWOT analysis is valuable by itself, it usually requires some additional work to implement any findings. Typically, a TOWS analysis is conducted during the pre-planning phase immediately after the SWOT analysis has been completed but before plans have been formulated. TOWS is an easy-to-use template for plan development that can be used by any First Nation, project members, or organization. If a project is longer term, it's often recommended that SWOT analyses are conducted on a regular basis. This provides an opportunity to also revise the TOWS analysis and adjust any strategies depending on changes in your SWOT.

Plans that are developed using a TOWS analysis are informed by the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing an organization. Therefore, it enables plan development that responds to internal and external issues identified by team members. Furthermore, a TOWS analysis ensures that planning for both negative and positive situations is being undertaken, ensuring a broad view of possible scenarios.

TOWS Analysis Limitations

When conducting a TOWS analysis, you should be aware of its potential limitations. First, it can be a time-consuming process. To be undertaken successfully, it requires the separate process of a SWOT analysis to have been completed. SWOT analyses work best when they engage multiple stakeholders to ensure many perspectives on issues facing a First Nation are heard. This thinking also applies to a TOWS analysis. Therefore, completing a TOWS analysis requires a time and resource commitment from your First Nation to identify its current state, and then a repeat of this process to identify strategies for moving forward. This process should become more efficient as it's repeated.

The second limitation is that for a TOWS analysis to work successfully, it requires a good understanding of the external and internal factors affecting your community or project. If this understanding is lacking, then plans developed during the TOWS analysis may not be effective.

The third limitation of a TOWS analysis is that it does not include a system to weight the importance of any features or strategies recognized by your First Nation.⁷ This means that when deciding what strategies to adopt, the framework does not provide any guidance for how to prioritize your decisions.⁸ Relatedly, a TOWS analysis can create an overly large scope of strategies that you may struggle to choose from.



Figure 2 | Brainstorming Workshop

A TOWS Analysis works best with the widest number of participants. This enables a diversity of opinions and expertise to inform your strategies.

Table 1 | Strategy Examples

	Strategy Examples
Strengths-Opportunities	A staff with a history of grant-writing matched with an available grant for your initiative
Weaknesses-Opportunities	Applying for grants to fill a funding gap in your services
Strengths-Threats	Ensuring that households have access to the internet during a lockdown
Weaknesses-Threats	Addressing internet connectivity during a lockdown

Who Participates in a TOWS Analysis?

Like SWOT, a TOWS analysis works best when the largest range of stakeholders is involved in the brainstorming. Therefore, community members with knowledge of the project are valuable participants. In addition to community members, the Chief and Council, as well as employees working on the project should all be engaged in the TOWS analysis. By reaching out to many knowledgeable stakeholders, the TOWS analysis can develop a significant number of strategies and alternate strategies for the project. Moreover, maximizing involvement in the process reduces the number of potential blind spots in future strategy. A variety of perspectives can enable your organization to think through the connections between the features identified in the SWOT analysis and potential strategies to address them. This may result in a more robust selection of responses to issues that have been identified. This is particularly valuable because having alternative strategies ensures a range of responses to an issue if the initial strategy needs to be altered or replaced.

In addition to generating multiple strategies, involving all stakeholders in the TOWS process can benefit the implementation of selected strategies by creating ownership over them. Those who have participated in the creation of strategies may feel a greater responsibility for seeing those strategies implemented successfully.

How do you Lead a TOWS Analysis?

A TOWS analysis requires few materials. It can be helpful to have a facilitator to help with discussion as well as a designated note-taker to make sure no important points are missed. As a brainstorming session for participants it needs a whiteboard, large paper, shared electronic document, or any other way to collect ideas from your team and display the ideas back to them. A sample matrix is provided on page one with the correct ordering of the table. A sample matrix example is also provided in Table 3.

Start by creating a 3 x 3 table. The top left box can be left blank or be the title box. To the right of the title box label the strengths box, and to the right of it label the weaknesses box. In the box below the title box label the opportunities box, and below it label the threats box. In each of these, list the findings from your SWOT analysis under the appropriate heading. Make sure to list the SWOT headings in the same way as the example provided because they need to align with the TOWS strategies. You can then create the TOWS matrix.

The box directly right of opportunities will be labelled strengths-opportunities strategies. To its right is the box labelled weaknesses-opportunities strategies. Below the strengths-opportunities strategies will be labelled the strengths-threats strategies box. To its right will be the weaknesses-threats strategies. These four boxes are the TOWS matrix. Referring back to the bulleted points in the "What is a TOWS analysis" section, try to answer the questions posed for each of the four strategies.

While the TOWS Analysis needs to take place after the SWOT analysis has been completed, it can take place in a single session or over multiple meetings. Moreover, if using a digital table and a free software such as Google Docs, the brainstorming can take place remotely – although this requires access to a computer and internet for all participants. To undertake a TOWS Analysis remotely, organizers could send out a link to an online meeting platform like Zoom, and then ask participants to give their ideas about how best to address any issues noted in the SWOT Analysis.

Figure 3 | Sample TOWS Matrix.

Adapted from (Wehrich, Heinz. "The TOWS Matrix – A Tool for Situational Analysis. Long Range Planning 15, no. 2 (1982): 61.

TOWS Matrix	S - Strengths	W - Weaknesses
	Energetic staff	Limited funds
O - Opportunities	SO - Strategies	WO - Strategies
Engaged community	Creating a community outreach plan	Using social media to connect
T - Threats	ST- Strategies	WT- Strategies
Staff retiring	Creating a succession plan	Applying for project funds in advance

Questions to Ask in a TOWS Analysis

- How can a strength be leveraged to take advantage of an external opportunity?
- How can external opportunities bolster underperforming areas?
- How can strengths be used to solve or minimize external concerns?
- “What strategy can I develop that will help me to reduce an internal weakness and avoid the threat?”

Final Thoughts

A TOWS analysis is an effective planning tool that allows a First Nation, organization, or project to take the features identified in its SWOT analysis and turn them into actionable strategies. It enables formulation of plans to address internal and external threats and opportunities. Finally, as it is developed out of a SWOT analysis, a TOWS analysis is a simple template for building plans that are rooted in the particular circumstances of the community undertaking it.

Further Reading

The TOWS Matrix: A Tool for Situational Analysis by Heinz Wehrich

This article is the original description of the TOWS Analysis. It is useful for examining the TOWS analysis in depth and understanding how to structure one.

https://www.academia.edu/34211017/The_TOWS_Matrix_A_Tool_for_Situational_Analysis

Community Tool Box by the University of Kansas

The Community Tool Box is a free resource that lists tools, tips, and examples for community planning that include the TOWS and SWOT analysis, needs assessments, and more.

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en>

Endnotes

- 1 Wehrich, Heinz. “The TOWS Matrix – A Tool for Situational Analysis.” Long Range Planning 15, no. 2 (1982).
- 2 Wehrich, Heinz. “The TOWS Matrix – A Tool for Situational Analysis.”
- 3 Pretty, Kahla. “Conducting a SWOT Analysis.” Indigenous Planning Factsheets, 2020.
- 4 Johnson, William H A, Project Strategy and Strategic Portfolio Management: A Primer. New York: Business Expert Press, 2013. https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/cmos_formatting_and_style_guide/web_sources.html.
- 5 Johnson, William H A, Project Strategy and Strategic Portfolio Management: A Primer.
- 6 “An Introduction to the TOWS Analysis.” Lucidity. accessed November 1, 2020. https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/cmos_formatting_and_style_guide/web_sources.html.
- 7 Johnson, William H A, Project Strategy and Strategic Portfolio Management: A Primer.
- 8 Johnson, William H A, Project Strategy and Strategic Portfolio Management: A Primer.