

BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY

Consulting software 'SOARS' to success

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South African native Larry Goddard makes his living helping businesses improve their performance and profitability. In 2005, he had an "a-ha" moment that revolutionized the way he could help his clients.

"I visualized a scorecard for business," says Goddard, who founded his Cleveland-based company, The Parkland Group, in 1989. The simplicity and vision of the idea took off at Parkland, and he and his team got to work developing it into "SOAR to Strategic Excellence."



The Parkland team developed 300 questions that evaluate 16 key business areas. This "Corporate Body Scan" provides a snapshot of a company's potential for success. What the Chardon Rubber Company learned from the process enabled it to troubleshoot how it was doing business; it resulted in its retaining \$2 million of business that it would have otherwise lost.

"When we looked at our standard costing system, where the overhead is spread over all the customers, we saw that some customers actually cost us more than we were selling the product for," says Marion DeVoe, Chardon Rubber Company's president and COO. In adjusting its pricing, the company's profit margins rose, and virtually all the customers were satisfied with their new pricing structure.

Goddard estimates that SOAR enables Parkland to help companies tenfold. Fortune 500 companies are doing similar things, he says, "but it takes millions of dollars and many years to accomplish." Instead, SOAR steers organizations to the core of what they do well – "the sweet spot" – allowing them to change drastically and often very quickly.



"Change isn't difficult when people take ownership of change, and SOAR creates instant ownership."

**Larry Goddard, president
The Parkland Group**

The SOAR evaluation allows employees to buy into the process and result. "SOAR is self-evaluative," explains Goddard. "Change isn't difficult when people take ownership of change."

The process starts with an all-day meeting of 12 employees who represent a cross-section of the company, from top management to trusted non-management employees. They each answer the 300 key questions, discussing and reaching agreement about the answers.

Parkland's proprietary software then analyzes the data and creates a business "scorecard" that is a direct reflection of employees' perspectives. Instead of evaluating businesses by individual credit scores and business statement that reflect past performance, SOAR evaluates how effective a business is now and can even determine how it will perform in the future.

In traditional business consulting, analysts interview employees, analyze data, and do individual research, but they aren't able to get the inside, unbiased perspective that SOAR

provides, explains Goddard.

Both healthy and under performing companies benefit from this kind of evaluations, adds the Shaker Heights resident. Jerry Stethem, president and CEO of Landmark Plastic Corporation, used SOAR to improve his company's business performance. "It was an objective, unbiased and thorough evaluation of the drivers of our business," says Stethem. "It served as a validation tool that we had thoroughly assessed the business."

In rethinking how to look at business consulting Goddard embraced one of SOAR's key concepts, "creating downhill ride." He compares the consulting world to the highly competitive and volatile airline industry, what he calls an uphill ride. Southwest Airlines was created with



an entirely different approach, offering such low fares that it created an entirely new class of customers – former road-trippers who now had access to air travel – allowing Southwest a competitive edge.

Goddard believes that like the airline business, business consulting is an over-serviced market in which clients are accustomed to a five-week evaluation, analysis and recommendation process to improve their performance. Finding a better way to provide these services to his clients, Goddard turned an uphill battle into a "downhill ride" where his business could flourish as other consulting firms struggled.

Customized SOAR programs are applicable to many industries including manufacturing, banking, distribution, retail, service, construction and not-for-profit.

SOAR was launched in January 2006 and was tweaked and improved until the software was finalized after multiple tests. Clients pay \$9,500 for SOAR. Goddard is now working on an online version, which, although it's less powerful because it doesn't focus on team interaction, will be accessible and affordable for many companies.

SOAR is poised to help companies well beyond the Cleveland area. Canadian companies will soon be using SOAR, followed in six months by Australian firms, says Goddard. "My vision is for every company to have an annually-updated SOAR score. There are so many things businesses can be doing to make themselves compete that they're just not doing."

Five sample "yes or no" SOAR questions

Our company has an up-to-date vision and strategic plan that clearly and comprehensively communicates "where" our company is heading in the next 3-5 years. **Y or N?**

We use teams extensively and effectively – for projects, ideas or to solve problems. **Y or N?**

Our pricing and estimating system takes into account all variable costs involved in producing the product and serving the customer. **Y or N?**

We have identified the "Key Drivers of the Company's Success" (known as Key Performance Indicators or "KPIs") – and we share these with managers and employees regularly. **Y or N?**

We have a comprehensive sales plan that clearly identifies how we will find, connect and do business with our "ideal" customers. **Y or N?**