The year is 1861, and the Board of Directors of the Pony Express calls a strategic planning meeting for June 4th, a nice warm day. Although the mail service has been operating for 14 months—the envy of the modern world—there are rumors of problems, even competition!

"There is talk," the chairman of the board announces, "perhaps more than chatter, that cities will be linked by some contraption that a certain Sam Morse has been playing with, called the "telegraph." Our task, before any of us leaves, is to recognize threats to our operation and plan to overcome them. Strategy!"

He looks over to their consultant—a professor from a prestigious university—who slowly uncoils from his slouch and explains about "SWOTs": Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. "But before we identify these," the academic notes, "we have to create a vision, a broad statement of our purposes and direction. Then we must have a mission statement."

Creating a Vision

The board breaks into small groups to brainstorm ideas for the vision statement. Before lunch, they agree on one: "Excellence in Delivering the Mail." They break for lunch.

Returning to the boardroom, they examine their SWOTs. They find their strengths easy to list: letters between St. Joe and the coast in 10 days, reliability, positive image. Weaknesses? Well, being made up of two operating companies, there is some loss of efficiency in trying to serve two masters. Opportunities include the possibility of turning the Pony Express into a public utility and doing some research to develop faster horses. They might get into a new business, one person suggests, or convert the current horse stops into a franchised chain of boarding houses. Threats are tough for them. After much soul-searching, they admit that the new competitor with wires and poles could overcome them. Strategy!

Fighting the War at Hand

One hundred thirty years later, schoolchildren still read the romance of the Pony Express. Others wonder if there are lessons to learn from that historic experience. Well, there are a few:

1. Missions should be related to reality and results, not just to ringing rhetoric.
2. Working smarter is much better than working harder.
3. Restructuring, or change, should be based upon the new realities and opportunities, so they couldn't generate fresh goals, objectives, and missions.
4. No amount of good intentions can substitute for useful consequences.
5. Create the future you want, not the one that already is.
6. Don't keep riding a failing horse until it drops dead under you.

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The next step is to identify SWOTs: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The planners use internal and external scanning to unearth the system's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and then analyze them. It is important to ensure that scanning includes all the SWOTs. So that all partners in the system have the same marching orders, the planners derive decision rules, that is, results-referenced policies such as "all course objectives will link to school, system, and societal objectives." These deci-