SOAR Analysis Explained

Idea In Short

Executives evaluating strategic planning tools should adopt a Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results [SOAR] analysis when the goal is alignment around growth, not risk containment. The framework builds a shared plan from what an organization already does well, then converts that momentum into measurable targets using key performance indicators [KPIs] or objectives and key results [OKRs]. Leaders run it across five steps: assess the present against the desired future, narrow the list to a few priority themes, execute with named owners, track progress against targets and revise the plan as market conditions shift. It suits teams focused on expansion, culture or human resources goals and pairs naturally with a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats [SWOT] analysis when risk exposure also needs attention. The remainder of this article lays out the process and the tradeoffs.

Most strategic planning tools start by asking what is broken. A SOAR analysis asks the opposite question first: what is already working and how far can that momentum carry the organization. Built around Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results, the framework gives leadership teams a four-quadrant chart. It links today's capabilities to tomorrow's targets, using key performance indicators [KPIs] or objectives and key results [OKRs] to keep the process honest. It suits companies chasing growth, culture change or cross-functional alignment more than it suits companies managing acute risk. The sections below define the framework and walk through its five-step process. They also compare it against the more familiar Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats [SWOT] model.

What Is a SOAR Analysis Framework

A SOAR analysis is a planning method that examines what an organization does well today and what it wants to become. It is organized on a 2x2 chart. The top half of the chart addresses the present through strengths and opportunities, while the bottom half addresses the future through aspirations and results. The left side covers internal factors the organization controls and the right side covers external conditions it must respond to. That structure gives the tool a dual advantage. It documents current capability while forcing a conversation about direction. Because it builds forward from what already works, SOAR tends to generate faster buy-in in rooms where SWOT-style weakness audits create defensiveness.1 The result is a practical way to convert capability into an actionable plan. That plan ties directly to how organizations move from intent to execution.

Reading the SOAR Chart

The chart divides into four sections and each one answers a distinct question rather than repeating the others. Strengths and opportunities describe the present; aspirations and results describe the future. Internal factors sit on the left and external factors sit on the right. That combination keeps the exercise from drifting into pure introspection or pure market-watching. Teams that treat all four quadrants with equal rigor produce plans that hold up under scrutiny from both operators and financial sponsors. Skipping a quadrant, by contrast, tends to produce a plan that is either aspirational without grounding or grounded without ambition.

Strengths and Opportunities

Strengths capture what the organization does well right now and the exercise works best when it stays specific rather than general. The relevant question is not whether the company is good at its business but which capabilities, relationships or assets set it apart from competitors. Customer feedback often surfaces strengths that internal teams undervalue, including service qualities that quietly drive repeat purchases and referral revenue. Opportunities, by contrast, look outward toward trends, partnerships or market gaps the organization is positioned to exploit. The distinction matters because opportunities should reflect realistic openings, not speculative hopes. Testing each one against the strengths already identified keeps the list disciplined.

Aspirations and Results

Aspirations set the ambition, asking what excites the organization and where it wants to be in a defined period. This quadrant works best when it pushes past incremental improvement, since modest aspirations rarely generate the energy needed to align a large team. Results then convert that ambition into something measurable. KPIs or OKRs specify what winning looks like and how progress gets tracked. Forbes Advisor describes the OKR format as pairing a defined objective with key results, using a formula that forces vague ambition into testable language.2

We will [objective] as measured by [key results]

Without this quadrant, aspirations remain sentiment rather than strategy and teams have no way to know whether the plan succeeded.

Five Steps to Conduct a SOAR Analysis

Running a SOAR analysis well requires more than filling in four boxes during a single meeting. The process works as a sequence, where each step depends on the quality of the one before it. Skipping steps, particularly the tracking and revision stages, is the most common reason SOAR plans stall after an energetic launch. Organizations that treat it as a continuous cycle rather than a one-time workshop get considerably more value from the exercise. The five steps below cover assessment, prioritization, execution, monitoring and adjustment.

Assess the Present and Envision the Future

Start with a working session that brings together coworkers, managers and other stakeholders. Avoid running it as a small planning committee working in isolation. Use the top half of the chart to document what is currently working, including customer relationships, market growth or recent positive feedback. Then populate the bottom half with future goals, whether that means hitting a specific revenue figure or entering a new market segment. Including employees, executives and even customers in this stage produces a wider range of input than a leadership-only exercise would generate. That breadth builds the shared ownership that makes the resulting plan easier to execute later.

Focus on a Few Priority Themes

Brainstorming sessions generate more ideas than any organization can pursue at once, so the second step is disciplined narrowing. Choose the goals that are both achievable and consequential enough to justify the resources they will consume. A short list of priority themes, organized with straightforward planning tools, tends to outperform a sprawling plan that spreads attention too thin. McKinsey research on growth outperformers found that fewer than one in four companies consistently outpace their industry peers on revenue and profit growth. The firm attributes part of that gap to disciplined focus on the adjacencies where a company already holds an advantage.3 That same discipline applies inside a SOAR plan. Fewer, sharper priorities beat a longer list of good intentions.

Execute With Shared Ownership

Execution is where most strategic plans succeed or fail and a memo announcing the new priorities will not move anyone. Employees need to understand their specific role in the plan, or they will default to prior habits, producing confusion and declining morale. Clear execution means setting explicit goals, assigning tasks to named owners and scheduling regular check-ins rather than annual reviews. Tools that connect teams and surface progress transparently reinforce the sense that the plan is real rather than aspirational language from leadership. Gallup's research on engagement found that teams pairing strengths-based development with active engagement management see much lower attrition. Teams that address either factor alone fare worse.4 That combination of ownership and recognition is what turns a chart into daily behavior.

Track Progress and Adjust Course

A SOAR plan is not a document to file away after the workshop. It requires ongoing monitoring against the results defined earlier. Regular reviews, whether through simple dashboards or dedicated software, catch problems early enough to correct them before they derail the broader plan. Teams that skip this step tend to drift back into prior routines within a quarter or two. They lose the alignment the exercise was meant to create. Markets shift, competitors respond and internal capabilities change, so the chart itself should be revisited rather than treated as fixed. Corporate Finance Institute's guidance on goal-setting notes that specific, measurable targets are what separate goals that get achieved from vague intentions that quietly disappear.5 Building that discipline into the review cadence keeps the SOAR plan current rather than ceremonial.

Strengths and Limits of the Method

SOAR analysis carries clear advantages for teams focused on growth and alignment. It is simple enough to run without extensive facilitation training and it produces action-oriented goals tied directly to KPIs or OKRs. Cross-departmental participation tends to generate a shared strategic language that survives beyond the workshop itself. The framework's positive orientation also keeps morale higher than exercises built around identifying flaws. Those advantages come with real tradeoffs, though and leaders should weigh them before choosing the tool.

The method deliberately omits weaknesses and threats, which means it offers no structured way to flag risk exposure the way a SWOT analysis does. It can also produce a plan that is thinner on hard data than teams accustomed to quantitative strategic reviews expect. The aspirational quadrants invite qualitative language more readily than the strength and opportunity sections do. Aspirations and results can overlap with goals already defined in other planning documents, creating duplication rather than clarity. The tool also does not examine competitive threats directly. It serves organizations with room to plan several years out better than those facing intense near-term market pressure.

SOAR Versus SWOT

Both frameworks organize planning around a four-quadrant chart, but the resemblance mostly ends there. SOAR uses Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results and orients entirely toward growth. SWOT uses Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats and deliberately balances positive and negative factors. SOAR looks forward and stays optimistic by design; SWOT is built to surface problems before they become costly. Harvard Business Review's research on SWOT implementation argues that most organizations run the exercise backward, starting with internal factors before external ones. It recommends gathering the external environment first.6

> Gather an inventory of relevant environmental conditions, the threats and opportunities. Next, explore internal strengths and weaknesses

That sequencing critique matters for SOAR too. The same discipline, starting from evidence rather than assumption, applies to any quadrant-based tool. SOAR tends to suit human resources initiatives, culture work and internal alignment projects. The goal there is mobilizing people around a shared future, not defending against external threats. SWOT remains the stronger choice when a team needs to examine competitive positioning or catalogue operational risk. Many organizations use both in sequence, running SWOT to map the landscape and then SOAR to build the growth agenda that follows.

Choosing SOAR for the Right Moment

The decision to use SOAR rather than SWOT, or alongside it, should follow from what the organization needs to accomplish. Growth-focused teams, human resources departments building culture initiatives and leadership groups seeking cross-functional alignment tend to get the most value from the exercise. Organizations facing significant competitive threats or operational risk generally need a tool built to catalogue those factors directly. SOAR is not designed for competitor analysis and stretching it to cover that ground produces a diluted version of both exercises. When the goal is team agreement around an optimistic, forward-looking plan, though, SOAR does that job more directly than most alternatives.

SOAR Analysis in Practice

Applying the framework to real organizations shows how it converts strength into measurable ambition. Consider a handmade goods marketplace with an established leadership position in its category. Its opportunity is rising demand for artisan products, its aspiration is market leadership and its result is quarterly user growth. A ride-sharing platform built on a widely adopted app might treat reduced taxi availability as its opportunity. Global expansion becomes its aspiration, backed by a defined annual growth rate as its result. A mobile-first social platform might point to strong engagement metrics as its strength and rising phone usage as its opportunity. Category leadership becomes its aspiration, backed by a specific annual user growth target as its result. Each example follows the same pattern:

> an honest strength, a real external opening, an ambitious but connected goal and a number that proves whether the plan worked

The pattern holds regardless of industry. It forces the same discipline every time, grounding the aspiration in something the organization actually has, not something it wishes it had. That discipline is what separates a SOAR chart that drives real decisions from one that reads as motivational language with no follow-through. Leaders who want durable results should insist that every aspiration trace back to a specific strength or opportunity already on the chart. Doing so keeps the plan credible to the people who have to execute it, not just to the people who wrote it.

- 1Why is strategic planning important
- 2What is an OKR? Definitions and examples
- 3Courageous growth: Six strategies for continuous growth outperformance
- 4The powerful duo of strengths and engagement
- 5SMART goal: Definition, guide and importance of goal setting
- 6Are you doing the SWOT analysis backwards?

Summary

SOAR analysis gives leadership teams a structured way to build strategy from strength rather than deficiency, pairing internal capability with external opportunity and translating both into aspirations backed by measurable results. It differs from SWOT by skipping weaknesses and threats entirely, which makes it faster for alignment but less suited to risk assessment. The five-step cycle, assess, focus, execute, track, adjust, keeps the plan current as conditions change rather than letting it go stale after a single workshop. Organizations pursuing growth, culture change or cross-functional buy-in gain the most from it, particularly when paired with clear KPIs or OKRs that convert ambition into accountability. Used alongside SWOT, it rounds out a fuller picture of both risk and opportunity.