**Assess the Situation**

**External Environment: Review of Opportunities & Threats**

**Steps**

###### Identify the key categories of information to be collected. Consider:

* + social/cultural (e.g. demographics, donor/volunteer expectations)
	+ economic (e.g. market changes, consumer confidence)
	+ political (e.g. new legislation and policies, changes in leaders or political philosophy, funding patterns)
	+ systems (e.g. structural changes in the health care system)
	+ technological (e.g. innovation in information technologies)
	+ sector (new program models, innovative strategies, staff recruitment)
1. **Identify key allies and competitors.** Start with other agencies working directly in the mental health or addictions field and then branch out to those who have or could have an impact on the people served by the agency. It is important to identify what makes them an ally or competitor and what can be learned from them. Consider:
	* their mission and how they position themselves
	* how they do things differently, worse or better than our agency
	* the organization’s direction and what impact it has on the agency
2. **Determine how the information will be collected.** Consider information that is available through:
	* existing sources e.g. CMHA Ontario or OFCMHAP
	* secondary sources e.g. government reports, Statistics Canada, websites
	* internal stakeholders e.g. Board members, staff, consumers
3. **Collect the information.** Look for significant changes, trends and potential allies and competitors in the external environment. If the information is being gathered from internal stakeholders, consider using a survey, interviews or brainstorming sessions. Also look for information that helps you to identify why those events are occurring. (See *What to Look For*)
4. **Organize the information into clear categories (e.g. social, political) and separate opportunities and threats.** Keep in mind that sometimes they can be the ‘flip side of the same coin’. For example, demographic changes in the population could increase the demand for service, which adds pressure to resources but may also increase funding opportunities.

###### Identify what the opportunity or threat means to the agency (e.g. to operations, resources, programs) and articulate the implications.

###### Prioritize those opportunities and threats that are the most likely to have the most impact on whether the organization succeeds in the future.

**What to Look For**

When looking at the possible opportunities and threats, use this list to help identify the most significant issues:

D Would it significantly influence our ability to achieve our mission?

D Would it have an impact on our whole agency or on a number of different areas of our operation?

D Is there a significant risk or implication if we don’t respond to it?

D Would it have a longer term impact on the agency?

D Would it directly impact our clients, funders, volunteers or staff?

D Would it cause us to do things differently, such as changing the way we deliver service or recruit staff?

D Is it likely to occur?

D Would it have a significant impact on resources?

D Would it make us significantly more or less competitive?

D Could we effectively take advantage of it or reduce/eliminate it?

D Would most of our stakeholders see it as critical to our success or failure?

**Assess the Situation**

**External Environment: Benchmarking/Best Practices**

**Steps**

###### Determine the purpose of the exercise. Is it to:

* + compare ourselves to other organizations in different sectors?
	+ compare ourselves to ‘like’ organizations?
	+ find innovative approaches?
	+ learn about how others deliver programs, govern, manage or build relationships?
1. **Determine how formal a process is required.** For example, if the process is intended to benchmark your agency’s performance against that of other organizations, it must be reliable. It is important to ensure the same things are being compared and that there is a complete and accurate picture. If it is to learn from others about how they do things, then the process can be less formal.

###### Identify the specific areas that need to be benchmarked or learned about.

For example, is the purpose to learn about:

* + financial or program performance?
	+ how efficiencies are achieved?
	+ program delivery or governance models?
	+ recruitment or communication strategies?
1. **Determine where to get the information.** Collecting it from existing sources, such as CMHA Ontario or OFCMHAP, community partners or literature reviews, is much less costly and time consuming than doing your own research.
2. **Develop a realistic plan for collecting the information.** Identify information sources and strategies for data collection. Determine who will collect the information and what resources are required. If it is important to collect original information, think about partnering with other organizations.

6. **Once the information is gathered, clearly articulate what was learned** from the research process so that it can inform the development of strategic directions.