INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF DIGITAL RESEARCH
Review Article

International Journal of Digital Research
www.ijdr.net
E-ISSN: 3033-179X
Volume 2; Issue 1; 2026, P.p. 77-89

How to Create the Best SOAR Analysis

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https://doi.org/10.63711/ijdr.net20260105

ABSTRACT

Strategic analytical frameworks are widely used in academic research and institutional planning; however, strength-based models such as SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) often lack standardized validation and measurable operationalization procedures. While SOAR is conceptually grounded in Appreciative Inquiry and positive organizational scholarship, many applications remain facilitative rather than analytically structured. This methodological gap limits transparency, comparability, and replicability across studies. This article develops a structured SOAR Validation and Measurability Model designed to enhance analytical rigor and strategic coherence. The proposed framework integrates three interrelated components – a Validation Layer establishing empirical grounding criteria, a Measurability Layer operationalizing aspirations through performance indicators, and a Strategic Alignment Flow ensuring logical progression from strengths to measurable results. The model introduces a Result Operationalization Matrix linking aspirations to defined KPIs, baseline values, target levels, time horizons, and responsible units. By embedding validation mechanisms and performance measurement principles into the SOAR framework, the study advances strength-based strategy from dialogical reflection toward evidence-based strategic management. The proposed model contributes methodological clarity, improves accountability, and increases applicability across governance, organizational development, and sustainability planning contexts.

Keywords: *SOAR analysis, Strategic management, Strategic planning, Organizational analysis, Performance measurement, SWOT analysis, PESTEL analysis, Validation framework, Strategic alignment, Strength-based strategy*

INTRODUCTION

Strategic analytical frameworks play a central role in academic research, organizational governance, and policy design. In environments characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and rapid transformation, scholars increasingly rely on structured methodologies capable of systematically

evaluating institutional capacities, environmental dynamics, and long-term development trajectories (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998; Porter, 1985). Among the most widely applied tools in strategic research are SWOT and PESTEL, frequently used in management studies, sustainability analysis, tourism planning, public administration, and regional development research (Gürel & Tat, 2017; Sammut-Bonnici & Galea, 2015).

While SWOT analysis provides a structured assessment of internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and threats, its diagnostic structure often emphasizes deficit-oriented evaluation (Gürel & Tat, 2017). Similarly, macro-environmental scanning instruments such as PESTEL concentrate primarily on systemic external pressures shaping strategic contexts (Sammut-Bonnici & Galea, 2015). Empirical applications demonstrate the analytical robustness of these frameworks across socio-economic and sustainability research domains (Karadzhov, 2016; Karadzhov & Yuleva-Chuchulayna, 2024).

Building upon these analytical traditions, recent methodological work has emphasized the importance of enhancing validation mechanisms and structured reporting standards within strategic frameworks. In particular, methodological refinements integrating SWOT and PESTEL approaches have demonstrated how analytical tools can evolve toward greater transparency and reproducibility in academic research (Karadzhov, 2025). These developments indicate a broader trend toward systematizing strategic models through measurable criteria and structured evaluation logic.

However, the increasing complexity of contemporary institutional environments – including digital transformation, sustainability transitions, governance reform, and organizational resilience – has stimulated growing interest in strength-based and solution-oriented analytical models (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). In contexts marked by crisis, volatility, and institutional uncertainty, traditional deficit-focused approaches may unintentionally reinforce problem-centered narratives. By contrast, strength-based frameworks aim to mobilize existing capabilities, align stakeholders around shared aspirations, and design measurable pathways for future development.

Within this intellectual evolution, the SOAR framework – Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results – emerged as a strength-based alternative rooted in Appreciative Inquiry theory (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Stavros & Hinrichs, 2009). Unlike SWOT, which balances positive and negative dimensions, SOAR intentionally centers strategic reflection on strengths and future-oriented aspirations. It encourages collaborative dialogue, participatory engagement, and the translation of shared visions into measurable outcomes.

Despite its growing adoption in organizational development, education management, and community planning, the academic operationalization of SOAR remains comparatively underdeveloped. Although empirical validation efforts confirm its construct structure and measurement potential (Cole, Stavros, & Hinrichs, 2022), standardized methodological guidance – including validation criteria, alignment logic, and measurable results frameworks – is still limited in peer-reviewed literature. This methodological gap constrains comparability, transparency, and analytical rigor across studies employing SOAR.

Recent scholarship in strategic evaluation further underscores the necessity of integrating structured decision-support logic into qualitative strategic models. Bryson, Edwards, and Van Slyke (2018) argue that public value governance increasingly requires transparent alignment between strategic intent and measurable performance outcomes. Similarly, Kaplan and Norton's (2001) later work on strategy-focused organizations emphasizes the importance of translating vision into operational metrics across institutional contexts. These perspectives reinforce the argument that

strength-based strategic models must incorporate structured validation and measurable accountability mechanisms in order to remain analytically robust.

The aim of the present article is to develop a validation-focused and measurability-driven framework for conducting rigorous SOAR analysis in academic and applied strategic contexts. The study introduces a SOAR Validation Model and a Measurable Results Framework designed to enhance analytical coherence, reduce subjectivity, and improve reporting standards. By clarifying conceptual foundations and establishing methodological guidance, this article seeks to strengthen the scholarly credibility and practical utility of strength-based strategic analysis.

This study completes a methodological trilogy aimed at strengthening major strategic analytical frameworks – SWOT, PESTEL, and SOAR – by progressively enhancing structure, validation logic, and measurable operationalization.

The specific objectives of this study are:

• To clarify the conceptual foundations and theoretical evolution of the SOAR framework;
• To establish methodological validation criteria that enhance rigor and reduce subjectivity in SOAR applications;
• To develop a structured Measurable Results Framework that operationalizes aspirations into clearly defined performance indicators;
• To provide practical guidelines and reporting standards suitable for academic research, strategic planning, and policy design contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To position the SOAR framework within contemporary academic discourse, it is necessary to examine its theoretical origins, structural evolution, empirical operationalization, and methodological critiques. The following sections synthesize foundational and recent research in order to identify both strengths and unresolved challenges within SOAR-based strategic analysis.

Theoretical Foundations – Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Organizational Scholarship

The conceptual roots of SOAR analysis can be traced to Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a strength-based theory of organizational change introduced by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987). In contrast to deficit-oriented diagnostic models, Appreciative Inquiry proposes that organizations evolve in the direction of the questions they most persistently ask. By focusing on strengths, achievements, and positive core processes, AI seeks to generate constructive transformation rather than corrective intervention (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

The philosophical foundations of AI were later reinforced within the broader field of Positive Organizational Scholarship. Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn (2003) argue that sustainable institutional performance is enhanced when strategic processes emphasize resilience, virtuous practices, and capability development. This strength-based paradigm challenged traditional risk-centered frameworks and created a theoretical environment conducive to the emergence of SOAR.

Further theoretical reflection on Appreciative Inquiry emphasizes its generative capacity in large-scale system change. Bushe and Marshak (2009) identify AI as part of a dialogic turn in organizational development, where meaning-making and collaborative sense-making become central strategic processes. This dialogical orientation strongly influenced the participatory design of SOAR.

While Appreciative Inquiry provides philosophical grounding, it does not offer a fixed analytical structure. The development of SOAR can therefore be understood as an attempt to translate AI principles into a practical, structured strategic framework.

Conceptual Structure and Operational Evolution of SOAR

Building upon these theoretical foundations, the SOAR framework was introduced by Stavros and Hinrichs (2009) as a structured model for strength-based strategic planning. The framework organizes strategic inquiry around four interconnected dimensions – Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results – designed to move organizations from reflection to measurable implementation.

Unlike SWOT analysis, which includes weaknesses and threats as analytical categories, SOAR intentionally concentrates on generative potential. Stavros, Cooperrider, and Kelley (2003) argue that strategic conversations centered on strengths and aspirations foster greater alignment and stakeholder engagement than problem-focused analytical processes.

Empirical operationalization advanced significantly with the development of the SOAR Scale. Cole, Stavros, and Hinrichs (2022) validated a 12-item instrument capturing the four SOAR constructs and demonstrated their internal consistency and construct validity. This study provided one of the first systematic quantitative assessments of the framework, shifting SOAR from primarily facilitative practice toward measurable academic application.

The framework has since been referenced in leadership development, organizational transformation, and participatory planning research. However, applications remain heterogeneous, often relying on workshop-based qualitative methodologies without standardized validation or performance measurement criteria.

This structural flexibility represents both a strength and a limitation – it enhances adaptability while complicating cross-study comparability.

Comparison with Deficit-Oriented Strategic Frameworks

To fully understand SOAR's positioning, it is necessary to compare it with deficit-oriented strategic models, particularly SWOT.

SWOT analysis remains one of the most widely applied strategic planning tools across management and policy contexts (Gürel & Tat, 2017). Its four-dimensional structure allows for systematic assessment of internal and external environments. However, several scholars argue that SWOT's inclusion of weaknesses and threats may encourage reactive rather than generative strategy formation (Helms & Nixon, 2010). Helms and Nixon (2010), in their comprehensive review of SWOT applications, note that while SWOT is adaptable and intuitive, it often lacks methodological rigor in factor prioritization and validation procedures. These critiques parallel challenges later observed in SOAR implementation.

PESTEL analysis, as another macro-environmental framework, focuses on external systemic forces shaping organizational environments (Sammut-Bonnici & Galea, 2015). While analytically robust for environmental scanning, it does not directly address aspirational alignment or performance translation.

In contrast, SOAR explicitly integrates strategic aspiration and measurable results into its structure. This forward-looking orientation differentiates it conceptually, yet the absence of standardized validation and performance metrics remains a shared limitation across strategic frameworks.

Methodological Gaps in Strength-Based Strategic Research

Despite increasing adoption, the academic literature reveals several unresolved methodological challenges in strength-based strategic analysis.

First, narrative-driven appreciative processes often lack explicit validation mechanisms linking identified strengths to empirical indicators (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). Without structured evaluation criteria, strength-based frameworks risk subjective over-interpretation.

Second, although the SOAR Scale provides psychometric support (Cole et al., 2022), standardized reporting protocols for academic SOAR studies remain absent. Variations in workshop design, stakeholder participation, and result measurement complicate reproducibility.

Third, critiques of appreciative models caution against uncritical optimism. Grant and Humphries (2006) argue that strength-based inquiry must be balanced by reflective scrutiny to avoid normative bias.

These gaps highlight the need for a structured validation layer, measurable results framework, and alignment logic capable of strengthening methodological transparency. Addressing this need forms the foundation of the present study's contribution.

METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the structured methodological framework developed to enhance validation, measurability, and strategic coherence within SOAR analysis.

A Validation-Focused and Measurable SOAR Model

To address the methodological gaps identified in the previous section, this study proposes a structured model designed to enhance rigor, transparency, and replicability in SOAR applications. The proposed framework integrates three interrelated components – Validation Layer, Measurability Layer, and Alignment Layer – collectively forming the SOAR Validation and Measurable Model.

The objective of this methodological design is to transform SOAR from a primarily facilitative and dialogical tool into a structured analytical instrument suitable for academic research and strategic evaluation contexts.

The Validation Layer – Ensuring Analytical Credibility

Before translating strengths and aspirations into strategic action, it is necessary to establish criteria that ensure analytical robustness.

The Validation Layer introduces structured verification principles for each SOAR component:

A. Strengths Validation

Identified strengths must be supported by verifiable evidence rather than solely by stakeholder perception or normative assumptions. In many practical applications, strengths are articulated through workshop dialogue without systematic examination of empirical indicators. While participatory reflection is consistent with Appreciative Inquiry principles, academic application requires a higher level of analytical substantiation.

Validated strengths should therefore be grounded in measurable performance indicators, benchmarking comparisons, audited results, documented achievements, longitudinal performance data, or triangulated stakeholder consensus supported by qualitative documentation. Where quantitative evidence is unavailable, structured qualitative validation – such as documented case

outcomes or formal institutional assessments – should be provided. Failure to validate strengths empirically risks inflationary bias, over-optimistic self-assessment, and reduced analytical credibility.

The Validation Layer thus requires that strengths demonstrate demonstrable institutional capacity rather than aspirational identity claims.

B. Opportunities Grounding

Opportunities must be anchored in systematically identified external developments rather than speculative projections. In several applied SOAR exercises, opportunities are formulated without explicit reference to macro-environmental analysis, resulting in disconnection between internal capabilities and contextual realities. Grounded opportunities should be justified through external data sources such as market analyses, policy frameworks, technological innovation trends, demographic shifts, regulatory changes, or sustainability transitions research. This external anchoring ensures compatibility with environmental scanning models such as PESTEL and reduces strategic misalignment.

The purpose of grounding opportunities is not to constrain visionary thinking but to situate generative aspiration within empirically observable environmental dynamics. Without such grounding, strategic planning may drift toward unrealistic expansion or unfeasible innovation pathways.

C. Aspirations Specification

Aspirations represent the normative and future-oriented dimension of SOAR; however, they frequently suffer from conceptual vagueness. Statements such as “become a leader,” “enhance excellence,” or “increase visibility” lack analytical precision unless operationally specified.

The Validation Layer therefore requires that aspirations meet minimum criteria of strategic clarity. Aspirations should be:

• Specific in scope

• Coherent with validated strengths and grounded opportunities

• Realistically attainable within institutional capacity

• Time-sensitive or strategically phased

Articulated aspirations must demonstrate internal logical consistency within the alignment chain. Vague or overly broad aspirational language weakens comparability across studies and reduces the methodological reliability of the SOAR framework.

D. Results Operationalization

Results constitute the most critical validation checkpoint within the SOAR structure. While the framework includes “Results” as a formal dimension, many applications fail to translate them into measurable and accountable performance architecture.

The Validation Layer requires that results be operationalized through defined Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), documented baseline values, explicit target levels, defined implementation timelines, and identifiable responsible units or governance actors.

This structured operationalization ensures that results are not merely symbolic affirmations of aspiration but measurable outcomes subject to evaluation and revision. By embedding measurable indicators, the SOAR framework becomes compatible with performance management theory, accountability systems, and governance transparency standards.

The absence of operationalized results represents the most significant methodological vulnerability in conventional SOAR applications. The proposed Validation Layer addresses this vulnerability directly by embedding measurable accountability into the framework's final stage.

Table 1. SOAR Validation Checklist

Dimension	Validation Question	Required Evidence	Risk if Missing
Strengths	Are strengths data-supported?	Quantitative or documented proof	Over-optimism
Opportunities	Are opportunities externally justified?	Market/policy data	Strategic misalignment
Aspirations	Are aspirations specific and time-bound?	Strategic objectives	Vision ambiguity
Results	Are results measurable?	KPIs & target values	No accountability

The Measurability Layer – Translating Aspirations into Indicators

Building upon the validation principles, the second methodological component focuses on operationalization.

The conceptual logic underlying this operationalization process is illustrated in Figure 1, which visualizes the transformation of strategic aspirations into measurable and accountable performance architecture.

Although SOAR conceptually includes "Results," many applications do not clearly define performance indicators (Cole et al., 2022). To address this limitation, the present framework introduces a structured Result Operationalization Matrix.

This matrix ensures that each aspiration is connected to:

- A measurable indicator
- A baseline value
- A desired target
- A timeframe
- A responsible stakeholder

Beyond ensuring operational clarity, this structured linkage transforms SOAR from a visionary reflection tool into a performance-integrated strategic framework. By explicitly connecting aspirations to measurable indicators, temporal benchmarks, and governance responsibility, the model introduces traceability into the strategic process.

This traceability enhances accountability, facilitates longitudinal evaluation, and supports evidence-based revision of strategic plans. In doing so, the Result Operationalization Matrix strengthens methodological transparency and enables comparative analysis across institutional and sectoral contexts.

To clarify the structural transformation from aspirational intent to measurable implementation, a visual representation of the operational logic is necessary. The schematic presented below synthesizes

the internal progression through which aspirations are decomposed into indicators, performance benchmarks, and accountability structures. This visual articulation enhances conceptual transparency and supports methodological reproducibility in empirical applications.

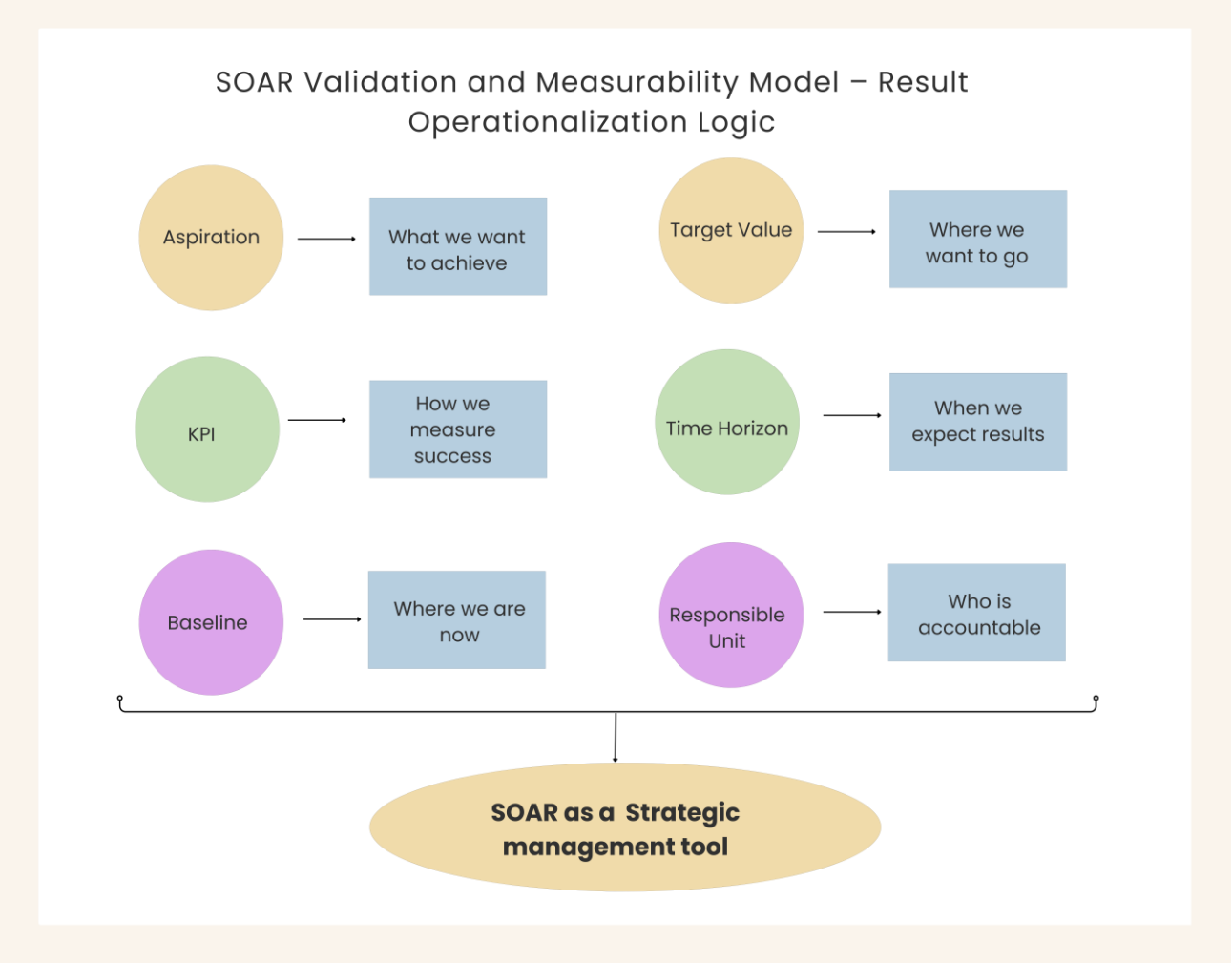

Fig. 1. Result operationalization logic within the SOAR Validation and Measurability Model.

By integrating performance measurement theory principles (Kaplan & Norton, 1996), SOAR can be aligned with balanced scorecard approaches and strategic performance management systems.

The Alignment Layer – Ensuring Strategic Coherence

The third component of the proposed model addresses the internal logical consistency of the SOAR process.

Strategic coherence requires that:

Strengths → enable Opportunities

Opportunities → justify Aspirations

Aspirations → translate into measurable Results

If this logical sequence is absent, the analysis risks fragmentation.

Given the importance of internal logical coherence within strategic models, a schematic alignment structure is required to illustrate directional interdependence across the SOAR dimensions. The diagram below visualizes how validated strengths enable opportunities, how opportunities

substantiate aspirations, and how aspirations ultimately translate into measurable results. By making this progression explicit, the model reduces fragmentation and enhances analytical integrity.

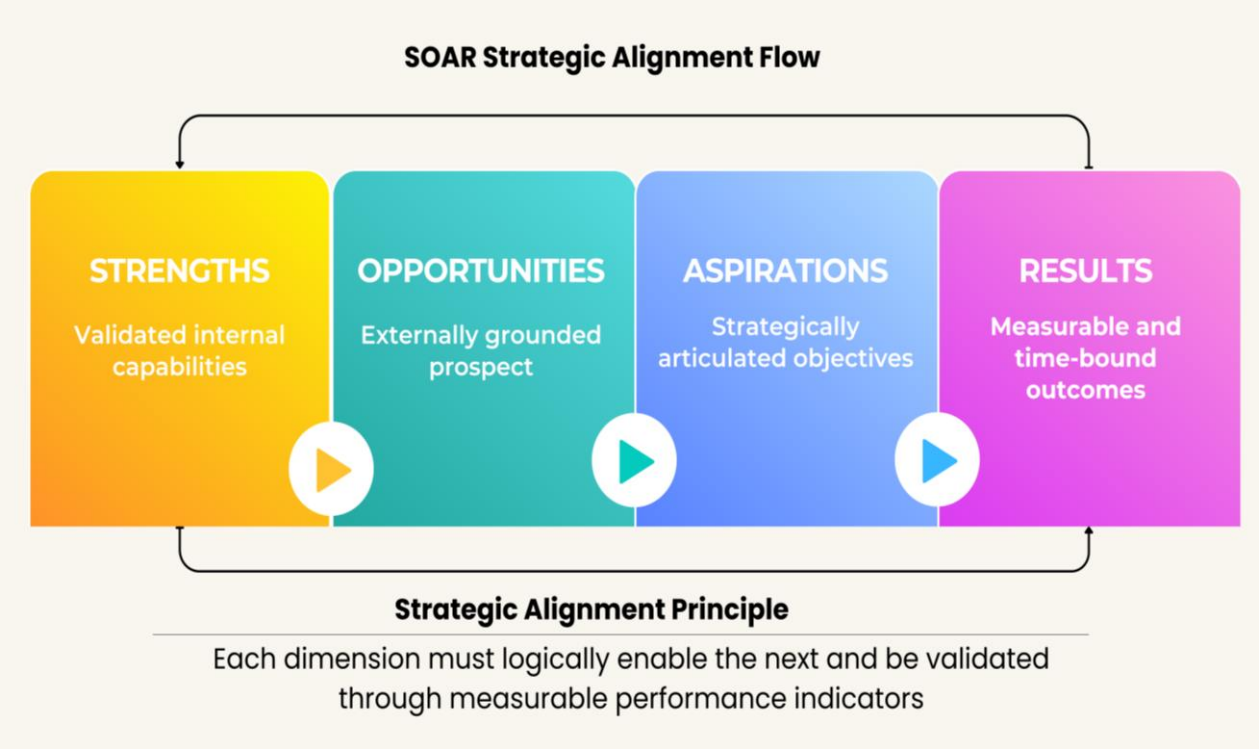

Fig. 2. Strategic alignment flow within the SOAR Validation and Measurability Model.

The Alignment Layer therefore introduces a directional verification principle – each dimension must demonstrably support the subsequent one. The integrated alignment logic of the enhanced SOAR framework is presented in Figure 2, illustrating the sequential progression and reinforcement loop that ensure strategic coherence.

This alignment logic strengthens methodological transparency and enhances reproducibility across studies. It also integrates strength-based strategy with performance management literature (Helms & Nixon, 2010).

DISCUSSION

The present study introduced a structured SOAR Validation and Measurability Model designed to address key methodological limitations in strength-based strategic analysis. The discussion section evaluates how the proposed framework contributes to theoretical clarity, analytical rigor, and practical applicability.

Conceptual Advancement

Existing literature positions SOAR as a strength-based and generative strategic framework rooted in Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Stavros & Hinrichs, 2009). However, prior applications have frequently relied on workshop-based facilitation without standardized validation and operationalization procedures (Grant & Humphries, 2006; Cole et al., 2022).

By integrating three structured layers – Validation, Measurability, and Alignment – the present model advances SOAR from a primarily dialogical methodology to a performance-aware analytical framework. This conceptual shift enhances its suitability for academic research and institutional strategic planning.

The introduction of explicit validation criteria reduces normative subjectivity, while measurable indicators improve comparability across applications. Consequently, the framework strengthens the methodological robustness of strength-based strategy.

Methodological Contribution

The principal methodological contribution of this article lies in translating aspirational language into operational strategic architecture.

The Result Operationalization Matrix ensures that each aspiration is anchored in measurable performance indicators, baseline values, target levels, defined time horizons, and responsible units. This integration aligns SOAR with established performance management principles (Kaplan & Norton, 1996), thereby reinforcing accountability mechanisms.

From a methodological standpoint, the integration of measurable indicators within qualitative strategic frameworks also resonates with contemporary debates on mixed-methods rigor and performance transparency (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). By structuring aspirational narratives through operational metrics, the enhanced SOAR model contributes to bridging interpretive strategic dialogue with quantitative evaluation logic.

Furthermore, the Alignment Flow model formalizes the logical sequence linking strengths to measurable results. This directional coherence minimizes fragmentation in strategy formation and supports replicability in academic research contexts.

Positioning within Strategic Frameworks

Compared with SWOT and PESTEL, the enhanced SOAR model retains its forward-looking and generative orientation while addressing recurring critiques of insufficient methodological precision (Helms & Nixon, 2010; Gürel & Tat, 2017).

Where SWOT combines positive and negative diagnostic elements and PESTEL focuses on macro-environmental scanning, the present framework positions SOAR as a strength-based model integrated with validation and measurement logic. This positioning strengthens its applicability within governance, sustainability transitions, higher education management, and organizational development research.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications of the proposed model extend across academic, managerial, and educational domains.

Implications for Academic Research

Researchers applying SOAR in empirical studies can utilize the Validation and Measurability framework to improve transparency and methodological consistency. The structured alignment logic enhances comparability between case studies and supports systematic reporting.

The model also provides a replicable template that may facilitate meta-analytical research on strength-based strategic planning.

Implications for Strategic Governance

Public institutions and organizations can employ the proposed model to strengthen accountability in strategic processes. By linking aspirations to measurable results and clearly assigning responsibility, decision-makers can better align strategic vision with performance evaluation mechanisms.

This is particularly relevant in sustainability-oriented governance contexts, where aspirational commitments frequently require operational translation.

In sustainability transitions research, the alignment between strategic ambition and measurable indicators is increasingly recognized as essential for policy credibility and stakeholder trust (Meadowcroft, 2011). Embedding measurable accountability within strength-based strategic processes therefore enhances the governance relevance of SOAR applications beyond organizational contexts.

Implications for Methodological Education

As SOAR is frequently introduced in business education, public administration, and strategic management courses, the proposed framework enhances pedagogical clarity. Students and practitioners gain a structured understanding of how strength-based strategy can transition from conceptual reflection to measurable implementation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite its contributions, the present study has certain limitations.

First, the proposed model remains conceptual and methodological rather than empirically tested across multiple institutional contexts. Future research should apply the Validation and Measurability Model to case studies in higher education, regional governance, sustainability planning, and organizational development to evaluate its practical robustness.

Second, further quantitative research could explore the integration of weighted scoring systems within SOAR dimensions to enhance prioritization mechanisms.

Third, comparative studies examining performance outcomes of traditional SOAR applications versus the enhanced validation model would provide valuable empirical insights.

CONCLUSION

This article developed a structured SOAR Validation and Measurability Model aimed at strengthening analytical rigor, accountability, and strategic coherence within strength-based strategic analysis. By identifying methodological gaps in existing SOAR applications and proposing a layered validation architecture, the study advances the framework beyond its predominantly facilitative and dialogical origins.

The integration of explicit validation criteria enhances the evidential grounding of strengths and opportunities, reducing normative bias and subjective over-interpretation. Simultaneously, the Result Operationalization Matrix transforms aspirational statements into measurable, time-bound, and accountable strategic objectives. This operational shift aligns SOAR with contemporary performance management theory and strengthens its compatibility with institutional governance and evaluation systems.

The introduction of a structured alignment flow further reinforces the internal logical coherence of the framework. By formalizing the progression from validated strengths to measurable results, the model reduces fragmentation in strategic analysis and supports methodological replicability across empirical contexts.

Taken together, these contributions reposition SOAR as a performance-aware and validation-integrated analytical instrument. The framework retains its generative, strength-based philosophy while embedding structured mechanisms that enhance transparency, comparability, and academic robustness.

As strategic planning environments continue to evolve under conditions of uncertainty, sustainability transitions, and institutional complexity, methodologies that balance aspirational orientation with measurable accountability become increasingly necessary. The proposed model contributes to this evolution by bridging the gap between visionary strategic discourse and evidence-based performance architecture.

Declaration by Authors
Ethical Approval: Approved
Acknowledgement: None
Source of Funding: None
Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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How to cite this article:

Karadzhov, V. (2026). How to create the best SOAR analysis. *International Journal of Digital Research*. E-ISSN: 3033-179X, 2 (1): 77-89. *https://doi.org/10.63711/ijdr.net20260105*

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