



Strategic Planning THAT WORKS

Don't just create a plan: Put it into action.

By Debra Thompson

Strategic planning is as essential to your organization as steering is to a ship, keeping you on track until you reach your destination. Yet, so many nonprofits omit this vital activity or don't do it well. Instead, they go along from day to day, doing their "thing" of delivering services, trying to raise money, and just surviving.

Nonprofit organizations are too important to settle for mere survival. They need to thrive. And to do that, they must articulate what they do, how they do it, who they help, and what they need to continue and grow. They must determine what it will take to achieve their goals. And that calls for a strategic plan.

"Oh, we've tried that," you might say. But if you didn't obtain any lasting benefit from your planning process, there's a good chance you ended up with one of the following:

- **The historical.** Your plan is based on the previous year's budget, plus 5%.
- **The dust collector.** The plan is 150 pages long, took two years to create, and sits on the shelf.
- **The warm-fuzzy.** Your "plan" was actually a half-day retreat where everyone sat around, sang the planning equivalent of "Kumbaya," and left feeling good—but nothing happened.

Here's a primer to make sure your plan makes a real difference.

Does the board have the right composition, skill sets, community awareness, and size?

How Strategic Planning Solves Problems

Carefully crafted strategic planning helps solve a host of problems. When done well, strategic planning will accomplish the following:

- **Offer a framework** for board effectiveness, performance, and evaluation.
- **Develop** an attainable, growth-oriented vision.
- **Evaluate** your current product and service offerings.
- **Prioritize action plans** for introducing new programs, products, services, and funding strategies.
- **Create a calendar** with clear directions on how to attain future visions.
- **Build group consensus** and buy-in to the planning process.
- **Involve staff** in supporting a vision and attaining goals and objectives to get there.
- **Monitor setbacks and successes**, and respond accordingly.
- **Anticipate and meet the challenges** of ongoing organizational, regional, and global change.

It's All about Vision

If a "strategic" plan fails to define the organization's vision, not just the impact of programs, it isn't re-

ally a strategic plan. The hallmark of effective strategic planning is its visionary aspect.

Too often, nonprofit leaders confuse strategic planning with the type of planning that simply develops programs or services in response to community needs or availability of funds (for instance, funds are available for food programs, so they plan a food program). Such planning lacks visionary exercises that look to the future and identify what the organization needs to do differently to fulfill its mission.

Think of the process as one in which your organization's leadership tries to envision the future: How might the community change? How might trends affect the needs of the community? How must your organization evolve in step with changes when they occur?

Five Phases of Strategic Planning

Well-designed strategic planning encompasses five phases:

1. Evaluate the board (a critical "preliminary" phase). Assess the board's governance function to gain a picture of its strengths and gaps. Does the board have the right composition, skill sets, community awareness, and size to function effectively?

2. Assess needs. Develop a vision and mission; analyze strengths,

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Effective strategic plans don't have more than five goals.

weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT); determine if constituents and the community have a genuine need for current services; identify current resources, community needs, debt capacity, government and policy changes, and other top priorities for mission fulfillment.

3. Achieve outcomes. Finalize goals, objectives, and new program possibilities.

4. Implement. Craft strategies to achieve goals, including funding strategies, delegated objectives, and action plans with assigned responsibility and target dates.

5. Review. Measure, reward, and recognize success. Track outcomes systematically.

Characteristics of Effective Plans

The best strategic plans have several things in common:

Ongoing process. In its best form,

strategic planning is a continuous process of listening to constituents, donors, and others while building the organization's capacity to meet not only current but also changing needs. Continual monitoring of community needs and wants sets a firm foundation for successful strategic planning.

Five-goal limit. Effective strategic plans don't have more than five goals. Five (or fewer) goals are much easier to remember, communicate, and reinforce in the long term.

What nonprofit executives don't know about strategic planning can undermine their organizations' missions and end results. And what they do know—and implement—can make the difference between just surviving and gloriously thriving. ■

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Keep Moving Forward

Here are more resources (available at www.snpo.org/members) to help you plan your strategic journey:

- **Putting Vision to Powerful Use in Your Organization** (Vol. 13, No. 4)
- **Adapt to Change to Survive** (Vol. 24, No. 2)
- **Needed: A Better Grasp of Strategic Planning** (Vol. 24, No. 5)
- **Should You Change Your Mission?** (Vol. 20, No. 3)
- **Creating a Values-Based Road Map** (Vol. 23, No. 2)
- **How to Assess and Improve Your Board's Performance** (Vol. 24, No. 1)
- **Four Steps to Evaluation Success** (Vol. 23, No. 2)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Strategic Planning and Outcome Measurement (www.snpo.org/lino).

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