



The Leadership Letter

Strategic Planning: Not again!

Nothing strikes fear in the heart of a non-profit Board member quite like the term **strategic planning**! For most of us, memories of interminable dialogue, a lack of consensus, ineffective processes and a simple failure to do anything come to the forefront.

Strategic planning must be a process that engages creativity and vision about where an organization is and where it wants to be. It should be productive and energizing for those who participate in the dialogue.

Good strategic planning provides an opportunity for:

- ◆ Input from a variety of sources, including members, Board, stakeholders and colleagues.
- ◆ A frank discussion of challenges and opportunities.
- ◆ An analysis of what works and what doesn't, what's been tried in the past, new possibilities, and what should be included in the roadmap for the future.
- ◆ An identification of the resources necessary to accomplish the organization's goals and objectives and an analysis of whether those resources are available now or in the future.

"Strategic planning is the process of 1) determining what your organization intends to accomplish and 2) how you will direct the organization and its resources toward accomplishing these goals over the coming months and years." *Source: Strategic Planning Workbook for Non-profit Organizations, Bryan W. Barry, p. 5. www.FieldstoneAlliance.org*

Strategic planning usually involves choices about:

- ◆ **The organization's mission and whether that mission still reflects the actual operations and initiatives of the organization....** Changing environments can change the mission that an organization undertakes.
- ◆ **The organization's client....** Who do you serve? What does your client look like today? Is he/she different from 10 years ago? How have your clients changed?
- ◆ **The type of services, programming, member value that you provide....** If your member has changed, have the member benefits you provide changed to reflect that new reality?
- ◆ **Resources (both financial and personnel) that are sufficient to provide the organization of the future....** If the answer is no, what strategic objectives can you design to create an environment with sufficient resources? What will be necessary to move into that next phase of the organization?
- ◆ **Your role in the broader professional community....** Is there something unique about your organization that provides a different type of "belonging"? How do you capitalize on that uniqueness?

Strategic planning is just a process, something to be embraced rather than feared. It's an opportunity to develop a shared vision and chart the course for the future.

Let's explore some of the basics!

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Why Have a Plan for the Future?

Without a "roadmap" by which to guide governing board decisions, it's easy for an organization to veer off into uncharted territory. A plan gives the board a structure by which to make decisions about allocation of resources (both financial and personnel) and future programming, as well as a way to evaluate how governance and implementation are meeting organizational goals.

Plans provide:

- **Improved results**....[Research](#) shows that planning, setting goals and organizational vision positively impact organizational performance.
- **Focus and momentum** With a focus, the organization moves forward, utilizing resources appropriately to achieve stated goals and objectives. Good ideas don't always add up to successful initiatives. Good planning usually

does.

- **Problem solving**....Good planning outlines the challenges, opportunities and resources available to address those challenges and provides a platform that allows an organization to problem solve within defined boundaries.
- **Teamwork, learning and commitment**....Teams work effectively when they work as a group with identified goals, not as individual members who are simply grouped together. A plan that contains identified goals assists a team in pulling together and working effectively as a group.
- **Communication and marketing**....It's easy to communicate who you are and what you do if your organization is clearly working with a defined focus. If you can iden-

tify your focus, you can communicate your goals to others and make your organization an attractive option for members to address an issue that's of importance to them.

- **Greater influence**....Planning allows you to take control of both your organizational environment and the community or state environment in which you work. Focus allows you to become the "go to" organization when issues surrounding your mission arise.

Strategic planning won't solve all your organization's problems. It takes all stakeholders in the organization working to make that organization strong, but planning can give you that roadmap to get there.

Source: [Strategic Planning Workbook for Non-profit Organizations](#), Bryan W. Barry, p. 10-11. www.FieldstoneAlliance.org

A Realistic Planning Process

A planning design that is not realistic is probably one of the most common and deadliest mistakes that can be made as organizations undertake strategic planning. For non-profits, the board of directors is usually a committed group of volunteers who support the mission of the organization.

The key word here is volunteersomeone who is engaged but usually without the time or resources to commit to a lengthy planning process.

Leaders who are initiating and designing a strategic planning process need to be cognizant of the following.

- ♦ Participants will commit a certain amount of time to the pro-

cess initially but will begin to drop off if the process is cumbersome or un-productive.

- ♦ Participants will engage in activities in which they feel they have competence and background.
- ♦ Participants will not spend a significant amount of time preparing for a session. It's up to staff and leadership to format and prepare materials and resources that are easily accessible and available.
- ♦ Participants function more effectively in small groups that focus on certain issues. Consensus can be achieved at the conclusion of the process as the work of small groups is integrated into a larger whole.

Planners often make the mistake of holding a retreat that is focused solely on strategic planning and expect a finished product from a day or two of discussion. Good strategic planning is a process that evolves over an extended time period with defined steps in the process.

It's also not a "one time" process. Strategic planning by an organization is an on-going process that reflects, reviews, modifies and implements goals and objectives based on the environment at that point of time.

An effective strategic plan is a living document that changes as the needs of the organization change.

The Steps to Strategic Planning

There are a multitude of resources available to assist in the “mechanics” of a strategic planning process. As your board undertakes this process, you may wish to:

- ◆ Identify a leader within your board, organization or community that can lead a discussion that results in defined outcomes. (This isn’t an easy task and not everyone is equipped to do it.)
- ◆ Contract with an outside consultant to lead the process, working with the board to design a process that will result in desired outcomes. (In this case, it pays to check references and get referrals. Not everyone in the business is skilled at this task.)

Once you have made your decision about who will lead the process, it’s time to determine what type of framework you will utilize. There are a variety of frameworks, but there are some basic steps that are common to all of them.

Step 1: Get Organized

The initial step involves asking some hard questions.

- ◆ Are you confident that the organization’s staff is on board to undertake the challenge?
- ◆ Is your board fully committed to the process and willing to allocate the time needed to produce an effective and visionary plan?

If the answer to these questions is yes, then you’re ready to go! If the answer to any of the questions is no, you may wish to consider starting later or not at all.

Once you’ve made the decision about whether to proceed, it’s time to identify the challenges and opportunities facing your organization.

Step 2: Do a Situational Analysis

This step incorporates gathering the background information necessary to inform discussions about your organization.

- ◆ What is your organization’s history? How are your current operations tied into that history?
- ◆ What changes have occurred that have either modified an original mission or are dictating a review of that mission?
- ◆ What are the financial resources of your organization? Are your reserves adequate? Is cash flow a problem and financial resources limited? Are administrative costs out of balance with program costs? Is your budget realistic?
- ◆ What are the personnel resources of your organization and do the skills of current staff mesh with the mission and future direction of the organization?
- ◆ What identified challenges are on the table currently? What identified opportunities are present?
- ◆ Have you tried to do strategic planning before and it derailed? What’s different this time?

This information can be gathered from a variety of sources: organizational reports, stakeholder surveys, discussion groups, board self-assessments, questionnaires. Identify what information is needed and provide it in a variety of ways to the planning group. Technology has made this a much simpler and cost effective process.

Step 3: Set Direction

The most commonly used method in this process is the goals approach. In this process, the group :

- ◆ Sets strategic goals or guidelines.
- ◆ Develops strategies and plans to achieve those goals.
- ◆ Incorporates these goals into an operational plan that is the first draft of your strategic plan.

This process outlines **overarching goals** such as “**Increase Member Retention**”.

The next step then defines **how** that will be accomplished by developing **strategies** to achieve that goal. Once those strategies are defined, **several implementation guidelines** such as timelines, persons responsible, and completion dates are usually added.

The challenge in this step is to define those overarching goals, not projects or strategies.

For example, *Increase Member Retention* is an overarching goal. Contacting expiring members to remind them to renew their membership is not. It’s a strategy to accomplish the overarching goal.

Strategic plan documents usually reflect the mix of goals, objectives, strategies and evaluation criteria. The National Council of Non-profits has a [variety of resources on their website](#) that are devoted to strategic planning, including a sample plan from the Minnesota Council of Non-profits.

Step 4: Refine and Adopt the Plan

Once the initial work is completed, it’s time to sit back and review what you’ve done. What needs to be tweaked? Does the proposed plan meet both your mission and organizational objectives? Are there specific suggestions about revisions that could strengthen the plan? **What comes next? Look on page 4 for the answer!**

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*Promoting Quality Care and Education for
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SECA is a "Voice for Southern Children"

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www.southernearlychildhood.org

My association is composed of many people like me. We make it what it is. It will be friendly, if I am friendly. It will make a difference for children and their families if I make a difference. We will bring other people to our association if I bring them. It will be an association of respect, loyalty and service; of hope, fearlessness and integrity, and a people with a noble spirit, if I, who make it what it is, am filled with these qualities. Therefore, I pledge that I shall dedicate myself to be all the things that I want my association to be.
(Anonymous)

[Click here](#) to access archived issues of *The Leadership Letter*. The May 2012 issue has additional information on strategic planning.

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Now the Hard Part....Step 5: Making it Work!

You've finished the plan and everyone is satisfied that it reflects the goals and objectives of the organization. You've carefully thought out where you want to go and where you need to be. Now all you have to do is make it happen!

Assuming responsibility and meeting timelines can be one of the greatest challenges that face an organization, and it often requires that modifications be made along the way. If you've done a good job of planning, you:

- ◆ Have clear goals and objectives.
- ◆ Have mapped out reasonable strategies to achieve those goals.
- ◆ Have made the appropriate personnel and board assignments to begin implementation.
- ◆ Have designed an effective evaluation system to determine you've met the

goals and objectives.

The strategic plan is just the global view of your organization and there's still work to be done. This will require your executive staff and board leadership to develop an operational plan that translates the strategic plan into a yearly work plan and budget.

Your annual budget should be tied to the strategic objectives that you wish to achieve and your strategic plan should realistically reflect the resources that you anticipate will be available to meet those goals.

For example, if you wish to retain and recruit membership:

- ⇒ Does your budget allow for resources to be allocated toward a marketing campaign?
- ⇒ Do you have the personnel within the office to manage and direct that campaign?
- ⇒ Are financial resources sufficient to allow organizational representatives

to participate in the marketing campaign by traveling throughout the territory?

- ⇒ Can budgetary changes be made to shift resources into a campaign to meet this goal?

A good strategic plan is a **guide** and allows for solid planning by the organization. You'll need to stay focused and "keep on trucking" to make your strategic plan a reality that works for both the organization, stakeholders, and community.

As you work through this process, you might wish to access this [Strategic Planning Toolkit](#) that is available through BoardSource. It includes a step by step guide to a successful plan, is inexpensive and available in a downloadable PDF.

