

Strategic Planning: Planning for Success

Using strategic planning helps your organization's leadership define its vision and direction for the next year and subsequent years, and it then helps identify the action steps necessary to get you there.

Strategic planning allows volunteers and staff to feel as if they are involved in the growth of the organization. People that take ownership become more effective volunteers, staff members, and most importantly, leaders. Strategic planning also keeps the organization proactive rather than reactive. Wouldn't it be nice to be the non-profit leader in your community, rather than being dictated to by outside politics, economics, or market forces? Strategic planning helps you anticipate these forces and prepare for them.

Why do you need a strategic plan?

1. It will help improve output and performance from volunteers and staff. Remember that every successful for-profit company has a strategic plan. It is just as important, if not more so, for a non-profit organization to have the same.
2. It will help point you in the right direction – hopefully, forward! It keeps everyone involved and focused on achieving the organization's mission, and it builds camaraderie and promotes teamwork among your staff and volunteers. With everyone playing on the same team, striving for the same goals, you can achieve more. On a team working like a well-oiled machine, the sum of the parts is greater than the whole.
3. It helps you solve major organizational problems, and at the very least, helps identify weaknesses and develop action plans to improve them.

Every organization needs to plan for success, but most do not. Why? The organization's leaders may be ignorant about strategic planning and how it can be of benefit. They may also get confused with terminology: mission vs. vision vs. goal vs. strategy. Human nature tends to make us shy away from the unknown.

Some popular answers/excuses for not undertaking the strategic planning process include:

- We do not have the money to carry out extensive planning. Strategic planning is not something done for free. Good consultants are expensive - they can take the role of leader or facilitator (if you choose to use one). Professionals help keep the process on track and keep it focused, and most importantly, provide an outside, objective view. Also, many consultants will prepare the notes and present a professional report. Aside from consultants, additional expenses will include travel and meal costs for board members, staffing, printing, copying, etc.

- Suffering from the "revolving door syndrome" with key personnel. Many times, the average tenure of a development officer is 18 months or less, so you may begin and end the planning process with several different staff members. Some organizations would prefer not to undergo the strategic planning process, while at the same time, having to hire and train new employees.
- Thinking that good planning takes too long. Give yourself at least a full year if you want to do it right. Early in the process, some of the time should be used to gather statistics and applicable information so that the plan participants make educated and proper decisions. In particular, financial assumptions, based on fact rather than opinion, are of prime importance.

Changes in management, volunteer leadership, financial hardships, or other circumstances can really damage a strategic plan. Ultimately, a strategic plan succeeds because there is one individual who is a leader, has vision, and has imagination. This leader views every situation as an opportunity, a way for his/her organization to provide a service, make a friend, or make a difference. With luck, during the planning process this leader's vision and imagination will rub off on others!

How do you create a plan?

First, get board approval to proceed. Will your board members be willing to participate in this effort? If not, you need to keep planting seeds, or worse case scenario, get rid of those board members that are impediments – obviously, not easily done!

Secondly, is a consultant/facilitator needed to help? Do your homework in selecting a professional that understands the process and is good at organizing the thoughts of all participants into one coherent, strong report. Check references before hiring just anyone as a facilitator. Also, remember that a skilled fundraising consultant is not necessarily an expert in group facilitation.

Thirdly, you will want to undertake an analysis of current operating procedures, identifying those areas/issues which are most important to the future of your organization. An analysis should include history and current standing in the community. From this analysis you should be able to identify several burning issues to be addressed in the strategic planning process. Make these burning issues the focus of your planning. In general, be able to answer these questions:

What is your current mission, and is it coherent?

Should your mission be changed or broadened?

What are the growth opportunities for the organization?

Who are our competitors?

Why are we competing?

What are our strengths as compared to our competitors?

What are our weaknesses as compared to our competitors?

What are the opportunities and threats to our survival?

What are our financial constraints?

Are current facilities adequate for the future?

What do our customers and constituents need and want from us?

After completing your analysis, decide on the time frame necessary to implement your plan. Do you need a 2-year plan? Or possibly a 3 to 5 year plan? Some organizations, particularly those in healthcare may wish to develop a 2-year plan since the industry is changing so rapidly. More than likely, a 2 to 3 year plan will suit the needs of your organization and its constituents very well.

Definition of Terms

In the strategic planning process, the following terms are usually employed:

MISSION: Describes what your organization does. Essentially, why does your organization exist?

VISION: What you want the organization to be and how you want to be seen. Essentially, what is your destination?

GOALS: These are long term objectives that help you realize your vision. Essentially, how will you reach your destination?

STRATEGIES: Action steps used to help you achieve your goals. Essentially, what tasks will allow you to reach your goals and achieve your organization's vision?

Understand these terms, and the planning process has just gotten easier!

What ideas should your plan encompass?

There are many things a strategic plan could include. For the purposes of this article, we will be generic, but the following ideas should get your creative juices flowing. Here is an example of a plan containing a sample vision with potential goals and strategies:

VISION

TO BE THE MOST PROMINENT, MOST HELPFUL, AND COST-EFFECTIVE NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION IN THE METRO AREA, PROVIDING XYZ SERVICES TO OUR CONSTITUENCY.

- Goal:** Enhance your volunteer structure to get everyone involved. **Strategies:** Create a committee structure for development, finances, community outreach, etc.; make use of quarterly ad-hoc committee meetings to garner important opinions from donors and friends.
- Goal:** Establish endowment and create financial independence. **Strategies:** Undertake a market study to determine the feasibility of raising funds; increase fundraising staff to implement a capital campaign; implement a successful capital campaign; recruit business leaders to serve on finance committee to help manage funds.
- Goal:** Expand services to help more people. **Strategies:** Undertake feasibility study to determine market need; identify costs and action plans to secure necessary funding.
- Goal:** Promote a positive image of the organization with customers and donors. **Strategies:** Train and educate employees in order to reduce staff turnover; provide continuous customer service training for all employees; return phone calls promptly; acknowledge all gifts within 48 hours.
- Goal:** Reduce costs by 10% in all areas to become the low-cost development office among community peers. **Strategies:** Continue to expand and integrate today's available technology into your development office in order to streamline procedures; examine work processes to increase employee efficiency and job satisfaction; out-source activities and work processes; offer employees cash awards for the best money saving ideas.
- Goal:** Increase membership on the Board. **Strategies:** Establish nominating committee for member recruitment; recruit 5 new board members with specific backgrounds and expertise; develop and define job descriptions for board members; develop a training session for new board members.
- Goal:** Become the authority in your area with regard to knowledge of how to help the non-profit community. **Strategies:** Send staff members to continuing education programs; use guest

speakers during board meetings to help educate board members; network with other fundraisers and key volunteers.

Goal: Acquire 250 new donors this year and retain 75% of them the following year. **Strategies:** Use different appeals throughout the year; acquire a demographic profile of your constituency; retain a copywriter for annual fund letters.

Goal: Upgrade annual contribution amounts from regular donors. **Strategies:** Ask for more than one gift in the same year; ask for an unrestricted gift early in the year, and then a restricted gift later in the year; build loyalty with donors by thanking them repeatedly, recognizing them in publications.

Goal: Provide donors with VIP services. **Strategies:** Issue parking passes; offer discounts in the gift shop; offer advance previews of artwork to be displayed; sponsor private VIP cocktail parties before special events.

Goal: Establish a planned giving program. **Strategies:** Prepare a marketing plan for program; retain planned giving consultant (if necessary); network with estate lawyers in community; prepare promotional materials for mailings and personal solicitations.

Goal: Create a development committee to involve board members in the fundraising process. **Strategies:** Appoint 5 members to review and advise on annual fund; appoint 5 members to review and advise on planned giving; hold retreat with board members teaching them how to ask for money; solicit names of 10 prospects from each committee member.

In your final plan, you will include sections on: the organization's mission, specific services to be offered, staffing, finances, facility management, and most importantly, implementation procedures. Always identify who or whom is responsible for implementing each step of the plan.

Once you have your plan finalized and approved by all involved, you should begin implementation immediately. All participants need to see some type of progress with the plan. Do not leave it sitting on the shelf until the next time you begin planning. Employees, board members and other key volunteers, seeing no action, will become cynical and feel as if their input does not matter or make a difference toward the organization's mission.

Even after your plan is completed and you are in the implementation phase, you are really not finished. You must monitor the progress of all the participants, amend some of the goals based on changing market conditions, and plan for continued implementation. Review progress every three to six months and file a report with the board and key staff members. Strategic planning is a mind-set that is forever changing, never complete. Those organizations that develop a plan and then frequently amend it will stay on the leading edge in serving their communities and constituents.

Strategic planning can be successful with committed staff and volunteers. Strategic planning helps

define your mission, vision, goals and strategies. Strategic planning helps define the programs and services that you will offer to your constituency. Strategic planning can help make your fundraising efforts more successful.

A prospect or donor can sense that your organization has a well developed strategic plan. Get them involved in the process and they will probably become even more generous. A substantial gift will make the entire exercise worthwhile!

Strategic planning is summed up in two words: vision and direction. You must have the ability to visualize your organization 2 to 3 years from now, and develop the plan to direct your organization toward that vision.

START PLANNING, AND GOOD LUCK!