

**Strategic Planning**  
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**NEDRA News**

We are all familiar with planning – determining annual department goals, preparing for campaigns, even planning for vacations and weddings – but how many of us really know that much about *strategic* planning? You may think it's something that your organization's Board of Trustees does at some weekend-long retreat every few years, or something that big private companies deal with before they go public. But strategic planning can be worthwhile for anyone and any group – especially your department or division.

### **WHAT IS STRATEGIC PLANNING?**

Strategic planning is just that – planning that uses strategies to define your course of action. Unlike annual planning, which gets you to your regular goals each year, strategic planning charts out a path to your future vision. It may lead you just a little farther down the road you're already on, or it may take you in a totally different direction in order for you or your group to become who you want to be in three to five years.

It's also more than just long-range planning; it is a continuing process that directs you to what is truly important for your group, and allows you to respond to changes in your organization's environment. In short, it's a directed effort to "shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it – with a focus on the future."<sup>1</sup>

### **REASONS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING**

- Helps your group build on strengths and overcome weaknesses;
- Positions you for the future;
- Determines what resources you need to accomplish your goals;
- Forces you to commit to effective activities;
- Ensures a more focused approach.

### **WHAT DOES STRATEGIC PLANNING INVOLVE?**

**Mission Statement:** This is the foundation of your existence and operations. It identifies who you are, who you serve, and what you provide, in one to three precisely-worded sentences. It should be something easy to remember and convey, and all of your goals and tasks should relate back to it.

**Vision Statement:** Your dreams are found in the vision statement; how does the future you look? The mission and vision statements should tie together so that you don't veer off too far from one trying to attain the other. Consider this as the destination you want to reach, and let it frame the course and actions you take in planning.

**Fact-finding:** As researchers, this should be the easiest part of the process for us, but it's often the most overlooked and undervalued. Use separate surveys to gather information from your insiders and constituents (or those served). This allows for a base-line understanding of how the group is perceived – in its purpose, in accomplishing its goals, and in its communication. Unless you gather data and analyze the basics before pulling together your plan, you may be working in a vacuum that dooms you to failure in the long run.

**Buy-in:** Make sure you have everyone's support before you even begin the process. This includes the inside stakeholders, as well as those your group serves (other departments and bosses). Everyone needs to be willing to take some risks and try new things, as well as ensure the plan is carried out. You don't want to invest in a great deal of planning that will ultimately be rejected.

**Retreat:** For strategic planning to be successful, it needs to include a meeting with the main stakeholders (your department or division) all sitting together to brainstorm and hammer things out. Set up a day-long session that is away from your offices. Be sure the facility has the tools you'll need for the day, such as comfortable seating, flip charts, outlets for laptop computers, and Internet access. Budget for lunch and snack breaks, too.

**Follow-up:** All the planning in the world won't get you where you want to go if you don't have a follow-up mechanism and accountability. Setting up charts with tasks, deadlines and responsibilities helps make your plans tangible and concrete, and allows you to track your progress and adjust along the way.

**Annual Reviews:** You should review your strategic plans every year to make sure you are on course and determine if anything major needs to be addressed or revised. Full strategic planning sessions can then be held every two to three years, which will allow you to accommodate any dramatic changes in your environment.

## HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE PROCESS

**Resources:** Before you start, you will want to have the time, people and budget resources in place to accomplish your goals. Some of the resources you'll need include: reports, survey instruments and data for the fact-finding portion, time to accomplish the fact-finding and planning, a place for your retreat, and a budget to support the goals you will set. Most important of all, though may be appointing a "plan champion" who will keep the group on track and oversee the reporting process as you put your plans into action.

**Timing:** It's best to have the "leisure" of pulling together the entire process over several months, but that's not always possible. At the very least, complete your strategic plans prior to – and separate from – your annual plans. While you can hold an annual planning session the day after a strategic planning retreat, you'll be better off if you have time to compile the follow-up reports and allow the participants some "breathing space" after all that brainstorming.

**Consultants:** Outside consultants who can facilitate the strategic planning process bring a lot to the table. They allow the group to focus on the more creative aspects of planning, while keeping the group on track. Consultants are usually not stakeholders in the process, so they can bring an objective viewpoint to the discussions. And experienced consultants can smooth the way for the organization – they have the tools already set up, they know how to drive the discussions, and they are usually good at facilitating groups with disparate opinions. You don't always need high-dollar consultants to help you; just someone who understands your group and your mission, and who has experience with leading strategic planning sessions.

**Who to Include:** The entire department or division should be included in the process at some point, as should those you serve. Through the informational surveys, you can get buy-in from everyone at the outset, and by reporting back on the results, you let them know their input was important and useful. The actual retreat should include as many department personnel as you feel would be productive. All managers and project leaders should attend, along with any individuals who might be "information warehouses" for how things work for your organization (especially if you are considering changing any processes that might affect or be affected by them). You can break the retreat into separate sections for stakeholder groups if you don't want to include everyone in the full retreat.

### What Steps to Take:

- Determine a timeline and deliverables chart that includes the retreat date and reporting deadlines.
- Compile and analyze materials, such as past annual and/or strategic plans, budgets, organization charts, and any other collateral that might give an idea of how the group currently operates.
- Set up and conduct insider and constituent surveys. This process usually takes two weeks to one month to complete, depending upon how it's designed and distributed.
- At the retreat, cover topics such as Mission, Vision, Strengths & Weaknesses (including survey results), Programs & Services, Budgeting, Group Structure, and Communication.
- As a follow-up to the retreat, a written summary report with recommendations based on results from the meeting and surveys should be compiled, including charts with tasks, deadlines and responsible staff members. Use this to draft a plan for the next three years.

## EFFECTIVE MEASUREMENTS OF YOUR SUCCESS

By establishing detailed reporting mechanisms that outline all major goals and deadlines, you will be able to track your success and achievements throughout the year. As you review your plans, you can determine areas that need revisions along the way – from changes in responsible personnel to eliminating projects altogether. A plan should evolve as circumstances change. And it's okay to be

unsuccessful in some areas; the beauty of strategic plans is that the underlying vision does not change – you just may need to adjust to how you achieve the results you are seeking.

## **BENEFITS AND PITFALLS**

There are some pitfalls involved with strategic planning. It may not turn out as you hoped, due to a lack of buy-in, the inability of some of the participants to fulfill their goals, or because of things completely out of your control. In addition, if the planning process is weak, the resulting plan may not meet the needs of the organization for more than a short time. One other consideration is the stability of the group going into the process. Strategic planning is worthless in getting an organization out of a major crisis; that's a current problem that can't be solved with a strategic plan.

However, the strategic planning process is often energizing for the participants, though. It provides an organized framework for giving the group focus and a plan to improve and accomplish more. A major benefit of strategic planning – especially over annual planning – is that it provides a broader set of goals and helps a group to concentrate its efforts in proactively moving along a more future-directed path.

Everyone wants to feel they know where they are going and how to get there. A strategic plan can be your group's guiding light.

<sup>1</sup> from *Bryson's Strategic Planning in Public and Nonprofit Organizations*

November 2008