Strategic Planning: Introduction

Whether starting a new organization or assessing an established one, strategic planning plays an important part in evaluating current operations and shaping the future. Done well, a strategic plan can serve as a touchstone for years to come. The process itself can also energize, inspire and strengthen an organization.

Strategic planning is a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it, with a focus on the future.

The future is not the result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that is created—created first in the mind and will, created next in activity. The future is not someplace we are going to but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination. —John Schaar

What strategic planning can do for your organization:
  • Clarify future directions and create a framework for making today’s decisions in light of future consequences
  • Build a cohesive image/perception of the organization among board, staff, volunteers, and other organizational participants—put everyone on the same page
  • Increase the level of commitment to the organization and its goals
  • Strengthen the foundation for fundraising and board development
  • Increase the ability to communicate within the organization, as well as with the organization’s public and stakeholders
  • Improve the quality of programming and a means for assessment
  • Enhance ability to deal with risks from the external environment
  • Foster greater community commitment to the organization

A successful strategic plan:
  • Is based on quality data
  • Is externally focused and sensitive to the organization’s environment
  • Accepts accountability to the community
  • Proceeds from mission and values; expresses how an organization over time can breathe life into its mission and continue to fulfill its mission as it builds a bridge from current realities to desired futures

The planning process: The value of planning is the process, and the process is at least as important as the written document. Successful processes and plans reflect and are tailored specifically to the organization; reflected are the organization’s current realities, working styles, dynamics, environments, vision, beliefs and needs.

A successful strategic planning process:
  • Is supported by organizational leadership; key leadership has gained ownership of the process and there is widespread buy-in and contribution to the plan
  • Builds a shared vision that is values based
  • Is an inclusive, participatory process in which board and staff take on shared ownership
• Provides opportunities for collaboration and broad involvement of those who impact and are impacted by the plan
• Requires an openness to questioning the status quo, is flexible, and provides a fluid process for learning and discovery through which creative strategies can emerge
• Acknowledges that disagreement is inevitable, welcomes divergent ideas, really works to get the best ideas out, does not shy away from argument, and allows for talking through delicate subjects
• Leads to action and is a key part of effective management—the plan does not sit on a shelf, the plan is truly valued and truly drives meaningful decisions, implementation is not left to chance

Sample planning process model:
1. Get organized
2. Take stock (assess current realities, internal and external environments)
3. Dream and debate (mission, values, vision, identifying issues)
4. Draft plan (developing goals, objectives, strategies, and actions)
5. Approve and implement

Obstacles to planning:
• Lack of or limited understanding, familiarity, and comfort with planning
• Limited financial, personnel, and time resources to carry out the process
• Resistance to planning on the part of board members, staff, and other individuals due to fear of change in the organization’s structure, operations, or interpersonal dynamics
• Inability to see beyond current problems and the immediate future
• Lack of commitment to implementation
• Unpredictability of external environment impedes planning efforts

from Cheryl Yuen, Cultural Development + Arts Management Consultant © 2004
Strategic Planning: Recommended Plan Review Criteria

I. SENSE OF IDENTITY
   • Is it clear that the organization knows who it is?
   • Has it expressed a set of core values?
   • Does it have a significant vision for the future?
   • Is the vision shared within the organization?
   • Is its mission one that is vital to an identified community?
   • Can the organization describe its artistic philosophy and product?

II. CURRENT REALITIES
   • Does the organization recognize and understand its current realities?
   • Does the plan present and analyze relevant facts about the organization?
   • Does the plan present and analyze relevant facts and information about the organization's target markets (audience, donors, communities)?
   • Does the plan present and analyze relevant facts about the wider external environment?

III. FUTURE PLANS
   • Has the organization articulated a clear sense of direction for its future?
   • Will the goals expressed advance the organization toward its vision?
   • Has the organization assessed its ability to compete for and secure resources?
   • Does the organization have the capacity to implement the actions it enumerates?
   • Does the plan differentiate between primary and secondary priorities?
   • Does the plan provide contingency plans or multiple scenarios?
   • Does the plan identify expected outcomes/results and evaluation measures?

IV. BUDGETS AND TIMELINES
   • Are budgets built upon elements of data review—such as expenses by program/cost center and cash flow projections?
   • Are budgets realistic and healthy?
   • Are they accurate and complete with sufficient detail including fund balances?
   • Are timelines realistic? Are key tasks clearly allocated? Is there sufficient detail?

V. PLANNING PROCESS
   • Does the plan evidence that all parts of the organization have been involved in planning?
   • Has learning taken place in the organization?
   • Have internal processes (such as decision-making, conflict resolution, critical response to artistic product) been made explicit?
   • What specific organizational capacities have increased during the planning process?
   • Will planning continue to take place in the organization?

from Laurel Jones, “National Endowment for the Arts Advancement 95/96 Handbook”