

STRATEGIC PLANNING OVERVIEW

Purpose

The purpose of strategic planning is to help an organization clarify its mission and objectives, then set forth a plan for how to reach them, and be able to evaluate how well they were accomplished.

Approaches

Strategic planning typically involves a multi-stage process that involves people from all levels of an organization, not just senior leaders. External stakeholders such as clients or community advocates sometimes are included as well. Often this process is just as important to the organization as the plan it produces - which almost always is committed to a written form so it can be shared and referred to by all whose activities are guided by it.

Coming originally from management sciences and the corporate world, a number of models or approaches to strategic planning have been developed. *Goals-based planning*, starting with the organization's mission, is one of the most common. Other approaches (such as "scenario-based" planning, which identifies several of the most likely future developments in the organization's environment, and then creates a plan for responding to each one) are discussed in the literature on strategic planning (see list of resources at the end).

Getting Started

As with any management task, the first step for a nonprofit organization in doing strategic planning is deciding who will be responsible for carrying out the task. Typically it is the nonprofit's board of directors, in partnership with the executive director. Sometimes a board committee and/or a senior staff person are appointed to coordinate the strategic planning effort. Sometimes an outside consultant is hired to facilitate the process and to help write the plan.

A few basics:

- * whoever will be affected by the results of strategic planning needs to be involved in the planning process, and in reviewing the plan when it has been drafted
- * a "plan for strategic planning" needs to be drawn up, identifying how the planning process will be carried out, who will be responsible for it, and what the timeline is
- * the nonprofit's board and executive director need to agree up front about how the plan will be used - for instance, to guide board meetings, and to submit with funding proposals
- * lengthy, complicated strategic plans typically don't get used - if possible, the plan should be no more than five pages in length, with supplementary materials in an appendix if needed
- * the duration of the plan needs to be set up front - three to five years is typical
- * the nonprofit's board and executive director need to discuss what *won't* be part of strategic planning - a strategic plan is not a business plan, and it isn't intended to specify all the details by which the organization will achieve its mission and goals

Each of these basics can be discussed by the nonprofit's board and staff in the first meeting organized around strategic planning, and with the nonprofit's strategic planning consultant if there is one. Out of that discussion can come a simple agreement about how the planning process will move ahead.

Components of the Strategic Plan

The five main components of a goals-focused strategic plan are:

1 - Organizational Description

A brief, usually one-paragraph overview of what the organization is, the target population and geography it serves, and its history.

2 - Organizational Mission

A one-sentence (at most two) statement about what the organization is designed to achieve.

3 - Goals

Briefly-stated goals that relate to this organizational mission - the main programs or activities of the nonprofit are summarized in this section.

4 - Strategies for Achieving Goals

Specific steps by which these goals will be achieved over the time period of the strategic plan, typically laid out by year.

5 - Measures of Success

Measurable standards tied to each goal and strategy, so that the organization can know whether it has succeeded. Sometimes these success measures will be made by a formal evaluation process - which may be conducted by the Board, an assigned staff person, or an outside evaluator.

Resources

There are many good and useful knowledge resources for strategic planning, including some that may be specific to a nonprofit's area of work. Following are some places to start:

Allison, M. and Kaye, J. (2003). *Strategic planning for nonprofit organizations*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Bryson, J. (2004). *Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organizations: A guide to strengthening and sustaining organizational achievement, 3rd edition*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bryson, J. and Alston, F. (2005). *Creating and implementing your strategic plan*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Free Management Library. *Strategic planning*. Available at www.managementhelp.org

LaPiana, D. (2008). *Nonprofit strategy revolution: Real time strategic planning in a rapid response world*. St. Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance.

McNamara, C. (2007). *Field guide to strategic planning*. Minneapolis: Authenticity Consulting.

Schwartz, P. (1991). *The art of the long view*. New York: Doubleday.