Strategic Planning: From Mundane to Meaningful

By Pam Kinzie, Consultant
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Healthy people, thriving communities
Des gens en santé, des communautés florissantes

Contents

Introduction

Strategic planning is not a new process. In fact, the first mention of it in the literature related to military strategy in the fourth century B.C.! The Harvard Business School presented it as a new discipline in the 1960's and by the 1970's the elements of strategic planning commonly used today appeared. Those who have participated in strategic planning before may be either enthusiastic about the prospect of developing one or jaded by a previous experience that did not accomplish the anticipated results.

This resource is intended to provide an overview of strategic planning including why, when and how to do it, who to involve, key elements, and what to consider when developing a strategic plan. It will provide a simple, clear guide to strategic planning for community groups, coalitions and small non-profit organizations drawing on literature aimed at similar organizations.

There are already many terrific books, online tools and articles that outline models, frameworks and structures to guide organizations of all sizes and complexities through the strategic planning process. Some were written by huge consulting firms and business "gurus" for large organizations, while others were developed and honed through experience specifically for non-profit organizations and community groups. This resource will suggest a general framework based on elements common to those in the literature. It can be adapted to meet the needs of your group or organization. Links to more detailed information will be provided. The resource will also provide information that will help you to develop a strategic plan that will not sit on a shelf, but act as a living document to guide your program planning, budgeting and measurement of performance. "The best plan is useless unless it is acted upon."[1]

Throughout this resource the term "organization" will be used to refer to the entity doing the planning whether it is a community group, coalition or agency.

Overview

What is Strategic Planning?

Strategic planning is "a process through which an organization agrees on and builds key stakeholder commitment to priorities that are essential to its mission and responsive to the organizational environment. Strategic planning guides the acquisition and allocation of resources to achieve these priorities."[2]

This type of planning is *strategic* because it involves making choices about how to respond to changing factors in the internal and external environments such as client and community needs, funding availability and competition. It is *systematic* because it follows a series of steps designed to help the planning team answer a sequence of questions. It is about *building alignment and commitment* through the active involvement of stakeholders and the community in the process of gathering input and identifying priorities. Lastly, it helps leaders make proactive decisions about how they will allocate scarce funds in an environment of competing demands.

"We always overestimate the change that will occur in the next two years and underestimate the change that will occur in the next ten. Don't let yourself be lulled into inaction."

– Bill Gates

Strategic planning is as much about the process of creating the plan as it is about the ultimate content[2]. It is not a linear process, but rather an iterative one ending with the development of comprehensive action plans. The literature suggests that meaningful and useful strategic plans also need to include the development of ways to measure progress toward the achievement of the action plans.

"The Future is not something you wait for but something you create by the action you take every day"

– Unknown

Why Create a Strategic Plan?

Think of a strategic plan as a flight plan for a pilot. Without one, the pilot and crew have no direction and no specific destination to inform the ticket-sellers or the passengers. The fueling station has no idea how much fuel to provide and the meteorologist can't anticipate the weather en route. Indeed the mission is unclear. As the Cheshire cat said to Alice in Wonderland at the crossroad- "If you don't know where you want to go, it doesn't matter which road you take."

Having a successful strategic plan is, by definition, a useable one that stakeholders fully support. If done effectively, the strategic planning process helps to achieve many important outcomes for an organization:

- Communicates organizational values

- Articulates a collective vision, mission, goals and objectives to stakeholders

- Creates alignment of the vision and mission with the goals and objectives

- Identifies organizational priorities and subsequent allocation of resources

- Creates a common language amongst stakeholders

- Establishes a framework for other plans and partnership opportunities

- Provides a base from which progress can be measured

- Builds stakeholder ownership and commitment toward achievement of the of the organization's vision and goals

- Instills the ability to anticipate and respond to change[3].

When to Develop a Strategic Plan

A strategic plan typically remains relevant and a useful guide for an organization for about three to five years but this can change in today's dynamic environment. There are a number of reasons why an organization would choose to develop a new one, regardless of how long it has been since the last one was developed. These include:

- when you are starting a new organization or group;

- when your organization is starting a new initiative or large project, or is going to begin work in a new direction;

- when your group is moving into a new phase of an ongoing effort;

- when you are trying to invigorate an older initiative that has lost its focus or momentum;

- when you're applying for new funding or to a new funder.

It's important under these circumstances to clarify your vision and mission so that any funding you seek supports what your organization actually stands for.

Before you begin...

Before an organization takes on the development of a strategic plan, it is necessary to secure true commitment from senior management and the board of directors (if applicable) since considerable time and resources are often required. Success requires a broad commitment involving all parts of an organization and a clear understanding of what the planning process is to achieve. It is important to develop a plan to plan, as you would for any project, to set out the steps you will take, who will be involved in leading the process, the project team, budget, timelines and the approval processes. This project plan acts as a mechanism to ensure support and commitment from senior management.

Elements of a Strategic Plan

Strategic planning involves two different ways of thinking – strategy and planning. Strategy is aspirational, focusing on making broad choices in direction, while *planning* involves translating these directions into goals and determining how to achieve them[1].

There are many frameworks that help guide the strategic planning process. Examples include:

- SWOT – A traditional planning model which makes planning decisions after examining an organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats;

- AI – Appreciative Inquiry which disproportionally and deliberately builds on an organization's strengths and "profitable" opportunities rather than dwelling on its weaknesses and threats and opens dialogue with partners and external stakeholders[3]. It transforms the SWOT model into SOAR (Strength, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) designed to help organizations and their partners to create a shared vision. The University of Guelph developed a series of questions to guide them in using SOAR for their planning of academic activities which have some applicability to planning in a community setting[4].

- RBA - Results-based Accountability which focuses on very quickly getting from "talk" to "action" in order to improve the quality of lives of populations within communities;

- PEST/STEEP – Examine the political, economic, environmental, social and technological factors in the external environment that could have an impact on an organization. They look at the opportunities and treats in more detail than SWOT and are more often used in the business sector.

It is important not to get too concerned about finding the perfect method to conduct strategic planning. Choose one of the above models that best suits the goals of your planning approach and adapt it as necessary to meet the needs of your management and stakeholders.

In the end, all of the models centre around four common elements;

1. Developing a vision, mission and identifying values;

2. Articulating strategic goals and objectives;

3. Identifying strategies and action plans to reach the goals and objectives;

4. Developing methods to measure achievement of the goals/objectives.

Each of these steps can be approached in different ways. The strategic planning process can take as little as a few weeks to several months to complete. Much depends on the degree of stakeholder involvement, the amount of data to review and digest and the complexity of the organization. A small agency or organization may be able to accomplish it relatively quickly, especially using the RBA model. It is important to include the four elements in the process regardless of the process used. The section that follows will briefly examine a sample of methods that may be appropriate for use by community groups in their strategic planning and provide links to more detailed information on step-by-step procedures that you can follow.

1. Developing a Vision, Mission and Identifying Values

"Where are we?" "What do we have to work with?"
"What do we ultimately want to become?"

The first step in the strategic planning process is usually to answer the questions *"Where are we?"* and *"What do we have to work with?"* The answers to these questions can be found in the internal and external environments from sources such as relevant reports, budgets, demographic and epidemiological statistics, client surveys and applicable sources of research evidence. These data can help identify the organization's strengths and weaknesses and point out potential opportunities to explore during the planning process. This process, together with stakeholder engagement, is often referred to as environmental scanning. Some frameworks insert it later in the strategic planning process, however, the data can be used to inform all aspects of the process if gathered earlier.

Answers to the question *"What do we ultimately want to become?"* can best be gathered through engagement of stakeholders.

> By definition a stakeholder is *anyone who cares about the organization, anyone who has an investment, a "stake," in the success of its mission. This encompasses those who must implement the strategic plan, those who benefit from its implementation, and those who could significantly help or hinder its implementation*[2].

There are a variety of ways to gather input from stakeholders. A survey can be used to obtain input from a broad base of stakeholders at a low cost.

Mind mapping is a useful process for engaging stakeholders directly, particularly in developing vision statements. In it, participants draw pictures of how they see the community or organization in the future. The resulting images can provide powerful and rich depictions of difficult concepts and far-reaching ideas. Artistic ability is not required, however the process should ideally be facilitated by someone with experience in the process. A range of additional options in the form of strategic retreats and open forums provides an opportunity for all stakeholders to participate in the strategic planning process.

According to Peter Senge, the heart of building a shared vision is designing a process that allows people at every level in the organization, in every role to speak from the heart about what really matters to them. The quality of this process determines the quality of the results[5]. Indeed, all of the literature reviewed for this resource emphasized the need to engage a broad base of stakeholders in the strategic planning process. Successful strategic plans are no longer created by senior management and boards of directors and then "imposed" on staff. Strategic planning frameworks such as Results-based Accountability (RBA), Appreciative Inquiry (AI) or even the more traditional frameworks such as SWOT all include some opportunity to seek input from stakeholders. Ideally the processes should provide ample opportunity for open dialogue, creativity and sharing to occur.

One of the primary reasons to undertake a strategic planning process is to establish or reaffirm a shared understanding of why an organization exists and its aspirations for the future. This is expressed in an organization's vision and mission

statements. Vision statements communicate an organization's desired future – one that is hard, but possible to attain. Examples include: Healthy Children, Self-sufficient families, Safe streets, Safe neighbourhoods. Characteristics of clear vision statements include:

- They can be understood and shared by members of the community

- Broad enough to encompass a variety of perspectives

- Inspiring and uplifting to everyone involved in your effort

- Easy to communicate - they should be short enough to fit on a T-shirt[6]

"A shared vision is not an idea. It is, rather, a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power. It may be inspired by an idea but once it goes further - if it is compelling enough to acquire the support of more than one person - then it is no longer an abstraction. It is palpable. People begin to see it as if it exists. Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as a shared vision."

– Peter Senge

"What do we do?" "Who do we do it for?" "How and why do we do it?"

Mission statements are concise statements of the core purpose of the organization. They set the boundary for the organization's current activities and answer the questions *"What do we do, who do we do it for and how and why do we do it?"* They should be:

- clear on what is to be done and why,

- concise,

- outcome-oriented without prescribing means,

- inclusive-reflecting the voices of the stakeholders[6].

Examples include: "Our mission is to help our clients become self-sufficient by providing timely, friendly, culturally competent job training." and "Our mission is to create innovative solutions to meet community challenges and build strong, equitable and sustainable communities through education, engagement and collaboration."

"What do we believe in?"

Many of the planning models leave out a discussion of an organization's values. **Values** guide an organization in planning and decision-making by describing how an organization intends to operate on a day to day basis as it pursues its vision. They answer the question *"What do we believe in?"* Often they include how staff and volunteers behave with each other, with their clients and with their suppliers. Sometimes they are expressed in phrases and other times in single words. Examples from a community group might include: "Everyone in the community has a right to a reasonable quality of life." "Everyone is worthy of respect and equal consideration." And an example from a health care organization might include: "Caring, Accountability, Respect, Excellence, and Equity."

2. Articulating Strategic Goals and Objectives

"What do we want to accomplish?"

While the vision and mission are important to inspire commitment, they may not result in long-term achievement unless they are accompanied by strategic goals and objectives. They indicate the intended future direction of an organization by describing how it plans to make the vision and mission a reality. They answer the question: "What do we want to accomplish?" They may be focused on discreet parts of the organization's programing and/or internal operations. While the terms goals and objectives are often used interchangeably, goals are usually more broad or far-reaching than objectives[7]. According to Mark Friedman, who developed Results Based Accountability, the strategic planning process should not result in a laundry list of goals, but rather reflect a list of the priorities of those who participated in the planning process. The best time to identify the organizational priorities is after the vision for the future and the mission are clear. To be useful, the goals need to be succinct and easily measureable but broad enough to reflect multiple objectives[8].

Strategic goals can also redirect focus from simply providing a set of established programs to providing programs that help achieve the desired outcomes for the community. Sometimes they are referred to as the pillars of a plan. Examples of strategic goals include:

- Develop employees,

- Increase tobacco-free spaces,

- Decrease homelessness.

Objectives are specific strategies indicating how the goals will be achieved. In RBA, they are expressed as results that community groups are seeking to achieve. There may be more than one objective for each goal. Objectives that are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable given the organization's resources, Relevant to the mission and Timed – include timelines for achievement) are the most useful, as expectations are clear. The Community Toolbox also adds "C" for Challenging so that the objectives require an organization to "stretch" its capacity. Examples include:

- Goal – "Best possible client experience"

- Objective - "To integrate the client/family input into planning and decision-making by the first quarter of the year."

- Goal - "Increase Tobacco-free spaces"

- Objective – "To increase the number of tobacco-free public spaces by 20% by year end."

3. Identifying Strategies or Action Plans to Reach the Goals and Objectives

"How will we actually accomplish the work?"

Strategies consist of approaches or sets of activities that need to be achieved in order to meet the goals and objectives. They answer the question *"How will we actually accomplish our work?"* Action or work plans are developed for each major function or department within an organization. They specify what will be done, who will be responsible and the timelines for completion. Budgets associated with each plan are also included. It is common to develop workplans for each specific strategy so that all of this information is captured in one document. Strategies often cover a range of activities such as adding new programs, seeking alternate sources of funding, reorganizing the organizational structure, or developing new strategic partnerships. In all cases they should align with the organization's priorities outlined in the strategic goals and objectives, which in turn, align with the mission, vision and values. In situations where many of the strategies are addressed through specific health promotion programming, the Online Health Promotion Planner from Public Health Ontario may be a useful tool. RBA offers innovative ways to identify strategies to achieve improvements in the quality of life for specific populations using a "Turn the Curve" exercise. Although some background knowledge of RBA is required, the process offers a clear-language, expedient approach to developing action plans in small groups. In addition, RBA uses seven performance accountability questions that may also be helpful in identifying strategies to meet the programming needs of specific "customers" or target groups.

4. Developing Methods to Measure Achievement of the Goals and Objectives

"How much did we do?" "How well did we do it?" "Is anybody better off?"

Ongoing measurement of progress toward goal achievement is perhaps the most important activity to ensure that your plan will be useful and meaningful. It also identifies opportunities for improvement on an ongoing basis. Performance measures are aimed at measuring the quality and quantity of the effort and effect. They generally answer questions such as *"How much did we do?", "How well did we do it?" "Is anybody better off?"*[9] They may take the form of a series of metrics or indicators for each objective. RBA offers a clear and easy way to identify performance measures for organizations working in community-related services. Regular financial statements also indicate how well the organization is doing relative to the budget that was developed to pinpoint the costs associated with the accomplishing the strategic goals. These are usually updated annually for the whole organization and as required for specific projects.

Participatory evaluation is an innovative approach to evaluation that involves stakeholders in throughout the evaluation process including:

- identifying relevant questions

- planning the evaluation design

- selecting appropriate measures and data collection methods

- gathering and analyzing data

- reaching consensus about findings, conclusions and recommendations

- disseminating results and preparing an action plan to improve program performance[10]

Although participatory evaluation may require more time, it can build the commitment and evaluation skills of stakeholders who are take part in the process. Zukoski and Luluquisen provide a very good outline of the process, including the benefits and challenges.

Tracking progress toward the achievement of each strategic goal in your plan and displaying it in a place that is readily visible for staff, volunteers and clients can be helpful throughout the implementation of the plan. Additional projects and programs may be added during the term of the plan but all of them should align with the strategic goals as previously described. In this way, the plan becomes a "living" document that drives the activities of the organization until it is time to renew it.

How Consultants Can Help

Consultants may be helpful in providing objective assistance in the overall design of your planning process to involve all key stakeholders. They can obtain sensitive information through interviews and share it in a constructive way. Their key role is to focus on the process and provide relevant background information. Some organizations find it useful to have consultants facilitate planning meetings or retreats so that the stakeholders are free to participate actively. An external consultant cannot, however, take sole responsibility for the development of the vision, mission or subsequent implementation plan as that requires the full involvement and commitment of all levels of the organization so that the plan truly reflects the interests of those who will implement it.

In Summary...

A meaningful strategic plan is not a marketing tool, wish list or a report card. It sheds light on an organization's strengths, vulnerabilities and possibilities and, with the commitment from senior management and the board, acts as a blueprint for success in the future. It can inspire stakeholders, examine and make informed projections to respond to a changing environment and reshape programs and organizational priorities. The key is to align each element within the plan so that all stakeholders see how their work contributes to the achievement of the vision. In that way, your plan will go from mundane to meaningful.

Resources

[1] Suchman, A. and Williamson, P. and Robbins, D.B. (2002) Strategic planning as partnership building: engaging the voice of the community a new perspective on strategic planning. AI Practitioner Newsletter, Feb. Retrieved from https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/uploads/Strategic%20Planning%20-%20Engaging%20the%20Voice%20of%20the%20Community.pdf

[2] Allison, M. and Kaye, J. (2015) Strategic Planning for Non-Profit Organizations: A Practical Guide for Dynamic Times, Third Edition, John Wiley and Sons Inc. Appreciative Inquiry Commons https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/intro/whatisai.cfm

[3] Stavos, J. Cooperrider, D and Kelley, D. (2003) Strategic inquiry appreciative intent: Inspiration to SOAR: A new framework for strategic planning. AI Practitioner, Nov. Retrieved from https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/.../Stavros%20-StrategicInquiryArt.doc

[4] Office of the Provost. University of Guelph. SOAR retrieved from http://www.uoguelph.ca/vpacademic/avpa/outcomes/SOAR.php

[5] Senge, P. M. (1990). The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization. New York: Doubleday/Currency.

[6] The University of Kansas Community Toolbox retrieved from http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/structure/strategic-planning/vmosa/main

[7] Mittenthal, R. (2002) Ten keys to strategic planning for non-profit and foundation leaders. Retrieved from http://managementhelp.org/strategicplanning/basics.htm

[8] Schilder, D. (1997) Strategic planning process: steps in developing strategic plans. Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved from http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/strategic-planning-process-steps-in-developing-strategic-plans

[9] Friedman, M. (2005) Trying Hard is Not Good Enough. FPSI Publishing.

[10] Institute of Developmental Studies as cited in Zukoski, A. & Luluquisen, M. (2002) Participatory Evaluation What is it? Why do it? What are the challenges?" Community-based Public Health Policy & Practice. (5) April. 1.

Additional Resources

For a detailed description of Results-based Accountability and the processes it includes go to www.resultsleadership.org for general information and www.raguide.org for detailed implementation guides.

Horsch, K. (1997) Indicators: definition and use in a results-based accountability system. Harvard Family Project. Retrieved from http://www. hfrp.org/evaluation/publications-resources/indicators-definition-and-use-in-a-results-based-accountability-system

Public Health Ontario (2015). Planning Health Promotion Programs: Introductory Workbook. 4th ed. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/eRepository/Six_steps_planning_health_promotion_programs_2015.pdf This evidence-based tool is useful for program design in cases where your strategic planning process has identified the opportunity to provide new or additional health promotion programs.

The Free Management Library at http://managementhelp.org/strategicplanning/actionplanning.htm offers a thorough guide to strategic and action planning, plus links to online discussion groups.

The University of Kansas Community Toolbox http://ctb.ku.edu/en/developing-strategic-and-action-plans This is a valuable resource for community groups throughout the strategic planning process. It provides a very comprehensive step-by-step guide using a Vision, Mission, Objectives, Strategies, Action Plan (VMOSA) framework. Many links to detailed information about each step are available.

Zukoski, A. and Luluquisen, M. (2002). Participatory Evaluation What is it? Why do it? What are the challenges?" Community-based Public Health Policy & Practice. (5) April. Retrieved from https://depts.washington.edu/ccph/pdf_files/Evaluation.pdf

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For more than 30 years Health Nexus has been working with diverse partners to help create healthy, equitable and vibrant communities where people of all ages can thrive. Health Nexus is a bilingual oranization that offers services and programs in English and in French.

To learn more, contact us at:

www.healthnexus.ca
416-408-2249 or 1-800-397-9567
info@healthnexus.ca
@healthnexus