



Off the Shelf

How to Ensure that Your Strategic Plan Becomes a Valued Tool

by Michael Burns

The question is whether the strategic plan will be pursued or end up on a shelf collecting dust, beside other well-intentioned initiatives.

– “Strategic Plan Attacks School Inadequacies,”
Hartford Courant, July 13, 1994

The objective of strategic planning is to develop a practical tool that can guide an organization into some defined future and provide important measures of success.

The process includes a review and possible revision of the mission statement as well as research and analysis of the organization’s services or grant-making opportunities, environmental threats and internal capacity to achieve established goals. Following this analysis, planning participants develop outcome, output and input objectives. These statements describe what effects the organization wants to have on identified opportunities and threats and how it will go about accomplishing them.

For the participants, strategic planning can be an exciting process.

Those involved gain a new working knowledge of one another because they conduct most of their planning activity outside of regular business meetings. Frequently, they gain new insights into the organization as well.

Thinking about the organization without the pressures of more immediate issues often leads to renewal and increased dedication. However, the planning process may not be inspiring enough to ensure that the strate-

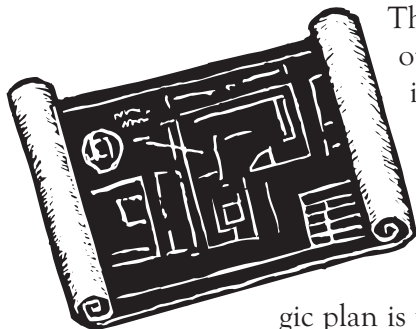
gic plan is used by the organization’s members. Daily demands can easily distract good intentions and keep the newly completed strategic plan on the shelf.

The following “do’s” and “don’ts” for keeping your strategic plan off the shelf can help your organization obtain the tangible benefits it deserves from its planning efforts.

Keeping Your Plan Off the Shelf: What to Do...

Here are four essential steps you can take to ensure that your strategic plan fulfills its function as the organization’s compass for the future.

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1. MAKE YOUR PLANNING PROCESS INCLUSIVE. Ownership is a critical ingredient when implementing a strategic plan. Without ownership, individuals who are most affected by the plan may actively or passively resist their part in implementing it. The most effective means of developing ownership is to make sure there is broad participation in the planning process.

Participation can take place on many levels, including information gathering, brainstorming, committee discussions, individual interviews and plan review. If you are wondering who should be included, a good test is to ask, "Who will be affected by this decision?" Foundation staff, trustees, distribution committee members, managers and even grantees may be affected by the plan, and they can provide valuable insights. Trustees in particular should be aggressively recruited into the planning process. As the foundation's "owners," the trustees have an institutional, legal and moral interest in the final planning document.

A commitment to inclusiveness will require special attention to the needs of planning participants. Manage the location, frequency and scheduling of meetings to enable the fullest participation and to reflect the diverse needs, desires and limitations of participants. Written materials used during the process should provide summaries and details to match the different information-processing styles of the various people involved. Work assignments should accommodate the available time and interest levels of participants. Meeting their needs will assure participants that they have had every reasonable opportunity to contribute to the planning process. This, in turn, will lead to the greatest possible sense of ownership when the plan is complete.

2. MAKE SURE YOUR PLAN IS REALISTIC, FLEXIBLE AND COMPLETE. Of course, "realistic, flexible and complete" are in the eyes of the planner. The desire to excel may cloud reasonable objectives. After developing objectives, one final review of the strengths, weakness and competitive analysis parts of the planning process will help define what is achievable, given specific time and resource parameters. A review of the foundation's past successes and a thoughtful competitive analysis often provide valuable context for strategic decisions.



Planning flexibility is also important. Unless crystal balls or futurists with 20/20 vision are a part of the planning process, the unforeseen may limit the foundation's ability to achieve established objectives. Therefore, objectives have a larger potential for success if they attempt to take into account external, unforeseen changes. It is important to define a range of possible occurrences and to plan contingency responses across the full range. These possibilities may be revised or rejected, but they provide a valuable starting point for responding to the unexpected.

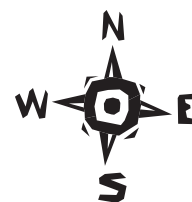
A process for considering changes or adjustments should be agreed upon before the plan's implementation. This process should identify those individuals within the foundation who can propose changes. The process also should describe the steps required for achieving change.

Many so-called strategic plans are little more than statements of goals and objectives. Knowing where you want to go is only half the challenge; you must also decide how to get there. A detailed implementation plan makes a strategic plan complete. It identifies the significant tasks that must be accomplished - and says who is responsible for them and when they must be completed - for each strategic objective. Without an implementation plan, a strategic plan is just a shell of good intentions.

3. MAKE A COMMITMENT TO EVALUATION. If your strategic plan is well conceived, it will be invaluable for measuring success. This is reason enough to keep it off the shelf. Four simple rules apply. First, decide what you really want to know from an evaluation. Your goals may include finding out not only whether you achieved an objective, but how it was achieved, how efficient the process was and what impact the achievement has made. Evaluation points are good times to make adjustments to the plan in light of findings.

Next, identify who will be responsible for evaluation. This involves oversight - often by a board committee, perhaps with data collection and structuring by staff and analysis by an outside consultant. If evaluation tasks are not specifically assigned, they may not be carried out. Most important is deciding who will be accountable for initiating and coordinating the effort.

Third, agree on an evaluation method or methods. For evaluation to be a productive tool, both those evaluating and those evaluated must be comfortable with the process. Evaluation methods will produce different results for different objectives.



Finally, develop an evaluation schedule that assigns specific responsibilities to specific individuals. Charts with benchmarks are effective graphic tools for keeping everyone apprised of the status of planned activities. Assigning specific dates and meetings for review is a mechanism for creating deadlines that everyone will remember.

4. THE VALUE OF YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN DEPENDS ON YOUR BOARD OF TRUSTEES. As the voluntary leadership and, possibly, founders or donors, the trustees are the "owners" of your foundation. The board's consideration of the completed strategic plan is the last step in the planning process. Unless the board fully endorses your strategic plan, it will never really leave the shelf.

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To gain the commitment of your board, consider the following approaches:

- Involve members in approving, if not designing, the planning process.
- Involve members as planning participants on the steering committee, as researchers or in unofficial and official discussions throughout the process.
- Engage members as a body in discussion about the pros and cons of the proposed plan.
- Ensure that members are involved, whether through committees or another method, in regularly scheduled reviews of the implemented plan.

...And What Not to Do

As you pursue these steps for keeping your foundation's strategic plan off the shelf, keep in mind some situations to avoid. The following brief list describes a few of them.

1. Do not develop your strategic plan during a crisis. Experience shows that planning participants will redirect their planning efforts from the strategic, long-range and external issues to more immediate, short-term and internal issues if the cause or environment for planning is a crisis.

2. Do not set unrealistic objectives. Unrealistic objectives and implementation plans, contrary to popular opinion, do not provide incentives to overachieve. More often, failure to be realistic can lead to frustration, dissatisfaction and the possible abandonment of a strategic plan.

3. Do not assume that everyone knows what is expected of him or her. If you have not told individuals what their parts are in the implementation of a plan, they do not know. More important, if you have told them but what you have said is not in writing, they may not remember. Detailed statements specifying who is responsible for what ensure that assignments will be done and objectives will be accomplished.

4. Do not ram a plan down anyone's throat. This applies especially to those who have not been a part of the planning process but are affected by the plan.

Your strategic plan does not have to end up as filler for the foundation archives. If you follow the guidelines in this article, it can be an invaluable map to your foundation's future. As noted above, four simple rules can help ensure that your strategic plan succeeds: make your planning process inclusive, make sure your plan is realistic, make a commitment to evaluation and gain the support of your board of trustees.



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