

Strategic Planning: From Mundane to Meaningful

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Introduction

There are many books, online tools and articles that outline models, frameworks and structures to guide organizations of all sizes and complexities through the strategic planning process. This resource suggests a general framework based on elements common to those found in the literature. It can be adapted to meet the needs of your group or organization and will help you to develop a strategic plan that will guide your program planning, budgeting and measurement of performance.

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

Note: Throughout this resource the term “organization” is used to refer to the entity doing the planning whether it is a community group, coalition or agency.

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<http://hclinkontario.ca/images/strategicplanning.pdf>
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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.”¹

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 builds 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.

“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.

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.

“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

When done effectively, the strategic planning process helps to achieve many important outcomes for an organization, by:

- ▶ Communicating organizational values;
- ▶ Articulating a collective vision, mission, goals and objectives to stakeholders;
- ▶ Creating alignment of the vision and mission with the goals and objectives;
- ▶ Identifying organizational priorities and subsequent allocation of resources;
- ▶ Creating a common language amongst stakeholders;
- ▶ Establishing a framework for other plans and partnership opportunities;
- ▶ Providing a base from which progress can be measured;
- ▶ Building stakeholder ownership and commitment toward achievement of the organization's vision and goals; and
- ▶ Instilling 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, such as when you are:

- ▶ Starting a new organization or group;
- ▶ Starting a new initiative or large project or beginning work in a new direction;
- ▶ Moving into a new phase of an ongoing effort;
- ▶ Trying to invigorate an older initiative that has lost its focus or momentum; or
- ▶ Applying for new funding or to a new funder.

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 (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. As you would for any project, it is important to develop a plan that outlines the steps to take, who will be involved in leading the process, the project team, budget, timelines and the approval processes. This plan acts as a mechanism to ensure support and commitment from senior management. A discussion with an [HC Link consultant](#) can provide support and guidance during this process.

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.²

THERE ARE MANY FRAMEWORKS THAT CAN GUIDE A STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS, INCLUDING:

- ▶ **SWOT** – A traditional planning model which makes planning decisions after examining an organization’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.
- ▶ **AI (Appreciative Inquiry)** – 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](#) that may be adapted to guide a SOAR discussion in other settings.
- ▶ **RBA (Results-Based Accountability)** – 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 threats in more detail than SWOT and are more often used in the business environment.

Organizations should not to get too concerned about finding the perfect process to conduct strategic planning. Choose a framework that best suits the goals of your planning approach and adapt it as necessary to meet the needs of your management and stakeholders. It is important to include the following four elements, regardless of the process used:

- 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; and**
- 4. Developing methods to measure achievement of the goals and 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. The following section explores the above four elements and offers methods that may be appropriate for community groups to use in their strategic planning with links to more detailed information.

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, if gathered earlier the data can be used to inform all aspects of the process.

Answers to the question, *What do we ultimately want to become?*, can best be gathered through engagement of stakeholders. 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.⁴ 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, Appreciative Inquiry 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.

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.

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. Strategic retreats and open forums are other options for engaging stakeholders in the strategic planning process.

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. Clear vision statements are:

- ▶ 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; and
- ▶ Easy to communicate (short enough to fit on a T-shirt).⁵

“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

EXAMPLES:

- ▶ Healthy children
- ▶ Self-sufficient families
- ▶ Safe streets
- ▶ Safe neighbourhoods

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? Mission statements should be:

- ▶ clear on what is to be done and why;
- ▶ concise;
- ▶ outcome-oriented without prescribing means; and
- ▶ inclusive, reflecting the voices of the stakeholders.

EXAMPLES:

- ▶ To help our clients become self-sufficient by providing timely, friendly, culturally competent job training.
- ▶ 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:

- ▶ Everyone in the community has a right to a reasonable quality of life.
- ▶ Everyone is worthy of respect and equal consideration.
- ▶ 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. These 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 programming and/or internal operations. While the terms goals and objectives are often used interchangeably, goals are usually more broad or far-reaching than objectives.⁶

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 measurable but broad enough to reflect multiple objectives.⁷

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:**

- ▶ Develop employees.
- ▶ Increase tobacco-free spaces.
- ▶ Decrease homelessness.

Objectives are specific strategies that indicate 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:**

- ▶ 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, timelines for completion and the budgets associated with each action plan. It is common to develop action plans for each specific strategy so that all of this information is captured in one location. This level of detailed planning can be delegated to specific staff or work groups that are most familiar with frontline activities.

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 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. It describes six steps which guide you through the program planning process. Program planning is a separate process from strategic planning, since it focuses solely on the development or revision of programs which may be added at any time during the strategic planning cycle. Regardless of when they are developed, all of the programs and strategies should align with the organization's priorities outlined in the strategic goals and objectives, which in turn, align with the mission, vision and values.

RBA offers innovative ways to identify strategies that 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 the effect. They generally answer questions such as: How much did we do? (Quantity), How well did we do it? (Quality) and Is anybody better off? (Impact)⁸ 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.

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.

CONCLUSION

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. Strategic planning is not a panacea however. It is not able to anticipate exceptional events such as changes in government policy, pandemics, economic instability or natural disasters. In such cases the strategic directions may remain intact but the action plans may need to change substantially. The key is to align every one of the strategic plan's elements with the vision so that all stakeholders see how their work contributes to its achievement. In that way, your plan will go from mundane to meaningful.

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.

HC Link offers [customized consulting services](#) to community groups, organizations, and partnerships to support their work in building healthy communities. Our consultants can provide valuable resources, tools, problem-solving, advice and mentorship in a variety of areas. Our consulting services are funded by the Government of Ontario and are provided free of charge, when possible. [Contact us to learn more!](#)

ENDNOTES

¹Allison, M. and Kaye, J. *Strategic Planning for Non-Profit Organizations: A Practical Guide for Dynamic Times*, Third Edition, John Wiley and Sons Inc. 2015.

²Suchman, A., Williamson, P. and Robbins, D. Inc. 2015. [Strategic planning as partnership building: engaging the voice of the community a new perspective on strategic planning](#). *AI Practitioner*, February, 2002.

³Stavros, J., Cooperrider, D and Kelley, D. [Strategic inquiry appreciative intent: Inspiration to SOAR: A new framework for strategic planning](#). *AI Practitioner*, November, 2003.
This article provides a good overview of how appreciative inquiry and SOAR can be used in strategic planning.

⁴Senge, P., Roberts, C., Ross, R., Smith, B. and A. Kleiner. *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. Doubleday NY, NY. 1994.

⁵KU Work Group for Community Health and Development. [Chapter 8, Section 1: An Overview of Strategic Planning](#). Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas. Retrieved from the [Community Tool Box](#). 2015.
The [Community Tool Box](#) 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.

⁶Mittenthal, R. [Ten keys to strategic planning for non-profit and foundation leaders](#). TCC Group, New York. 2002.

⁷Schilder, D. *Strategic planning process: steps in developing strategic plans*. Harvard Family Research Project. 1997.

⁸Friedman, M. *Trying Hard is Not Good Enough*. FPSI Publishing. 2005.
Information about Results-based Accountability and the processes is available at www.resultsleadership.org (general information) and www.raguide.org (detailed implementation guides).

HC Link *Your resource for healthy communities*

HC Link works with community groups, organizations, and partnerships to build healthy, vibrant communities across Ontario. We offer consulting services, learning and networking events, and resources in both English and French. Our services are funded by the Government of Ontario and are provided free of charge where possible.

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