

# A PRIMER ON EFFECTIVE STRATEGIC PLANNING

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Strategic Planning serves as a cornerstone for helping nonprofit organizations thrive. In fact, it's as essential to them as steering is to a ship, keeping the vessel on track until it reaches a desired destination.

What association and nonprofit executives don't know about strategic planning can severely hinder their organizations' missions and end results. Here's a primer on strategic planning specifically designed to help executive directors identify effective strategic planning processes and those to avoid.

Carefully crafted strategic planning produces a host of problem-solving benefits. In fact, in its most productive form, strategic planning will:

- **Offer a framework** for board governance effectiveness, performance and evaluation.
- **Execute a process** for developing an attainable, growth-oriented future vision.
- **Introduce valuable knowledge** about member bases, best member targets and their real needs.
- **Evaluate** organizations' current product and/or service offerings.

- **Prioritize and develop** action plans for introducing new programs, products or services.
- **Create plans** for new funding strategies and resource allocation.
- **Develop an Implementation Action Plan and Calendar** with clear directions on how to attain future visions.
- **Build group consensus and buy-in** into the planning process.
- **Involve staff** in supporting a future vision and attaining set goals and objectives to get there.
- **Monitor setbacks and successes** during implementation and respond accordingly.
- **Anticipate and meet the challenges** of ongoing organizational, regional and global change.

Note that the hallmark of effective strategic planning is its visionary aspect. Too often, association executives mistake strategic

planning for planning that involves developing specific programs or services that meet community needs, or for which funding exists (i.e., the state is implementing a business calling program and our organization needs to do it also). In other instances, organization write

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plans to outline how they will implement programs for which funding is currently available (they follow the money, in other words).

Taken as a whole, these examples of typical planning (often referred to as "strategic") lack strategy and visionary exercises that look to the future and identify what nonprofit organizations need to do differently to fulfill their missions and better serve members. These

types of plans also lack implementation systems that explain how goals and objective are to be accomplished with accountability and timeframes.

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## Five Phases of Organizational Strategic Planning

Well-designed strategic planning initiatives encompass a five-phase process, including:

1. **Board governance evaluation (a critical “preliminary” phase)**—assesses the management function of the board in order to gain an accurate picture of its governance strengths and gaps. The end goal is to make changes where necessary to maximize board effectiveness.
2. **Needs assessment**—action items include developing a vision and mission; analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and treats; determining if members have a genuine need for currents products and/or services; identifying current resources, community needs, debt capacity, government/policy changes and other top priorities for mission fulfillment.
3. **Outcomes**—action items include developing goals, objectives and new program possibilities.
4. **Implementation**—addresses organizational strategies for how to achieve established visionary goals. This phase also covers the development of funding strategies, delegated objectives and defined action plans.
5. **Review**—includes measures; reward and recognition strategies; and a process for systematic (and ongoing) outcome tracking. Identifying Effective Strategic Planning.

## Identifying Effective Strategic Planning

Keep in mind that many strategic plans are designed to be a point-in-time endeavor; and they often fail to take advantage of member research. In its best form, strategic planning is an ongoing process of listening to members and building an organization's capacity to meet not only current but also changing member needs. Continual monitoring of member needs and wants sets a firm foundation for successful strategic planning.

Also, as a good rule of thumb, strategic plans should never have more than five goals. Five (or even fewer) goals are much easier to remember, communicate and reinforce in the long term.

In today's economic environment, smart (and visionary) executive directors recognize that they have to think about how their organizations need to change to better respond to the changing, and more challenging, needs of their customer bases. They also need to understand how global and industry trends are and will affect their organizations and members. Efficient strategic planning meets these needs and more.

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