



Civic Reinventions, Inc.

Reinventing Futures Through Strategic Conversation

STRATEGIC PLANNING ROADMAP

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Strategic plans are a proven management tool. They set priorities, focus energy, and help stakeholders work toward common goals. They strengthen how businesses and nonprofit organizations respond to changing environments. They do not predict the future. They help you prepare for it.

The best strategic plans focus organizational priorities and enroll all stakeholders in the results. Both the plan and enrollment are crucial. A strategic plan with system-wide buy-in will produce practical, measurable, time-specific results. With regular evaluation, you will know when you are successful. Poorly designed strategic plans are ignored and make fantastic fire starters. Good ones can be awesome.

Organizations conduct strategic plans for several reasons. Maybe leadership changes. An external threat emerges. An economic downturn results in declining profits. A major competitor threatens. Entrenched silos must be broken. The market shifts. Clients change. A new opportunity arises. Strategic plans provide structured conversation to respond intelligently to these threats and opportunities.

Strategic plans are hard work. They demand time and resources. Undertaking them can stress an already burdened organization. Nonetheless, they produce results. When designed and facilitated well, they create multiple settings in which creative conversation about the future occurs. People generate best ideas for embracing the future with imagination and creativity. Teamwork builds. A strong sense of community breaks forth. As stakeholders redefine mission, vision, and the values that will guide their behavior, ownership grows.

Through strategic conversation, people decide what is central to the organization. They make decisions on how resources of time and talent should be deployed. Detailed work plans create a roadmap for success to increase profits for businesses and further mission for nonprofits. When the essential step of evaluation is built in, strategic plans guide organizational behavior and drive adaptive change.

Hiring a professional facilitator to guide strategic planning is a wise step. An outside consultant frees leadership to

participate fully and brings objectivity. If your organization has never undertaken a strategic plan, several excellent books are available to guide you. Buy one tailored to the organization you serve. Books written for businesses are slightly different from those for the nonprofit and public sectors. These books will make you more knowledgeable when hiring a facilitator.

Strategic plans should be undertaken every three years. Five- and ten-year plans become irrelevant. The pace of change is too rapid.

All strategic plans share common steps.

- 1) Organize a planning committee that represents diverse interests within your organization. Include the top executive, board chair, a few board members, and senior managers. Consider including a few line employees and lower managers. By recruiting employees lower on the food chain, you signal everyone is important in the planning process.
- 2) Hire a skilled facilitator, usually someone outside of your organization who can lend objectivity and free all stakeholders to participate without distraction. Having the CEO, executive director, or board chair serve as facilitator is a mistake. No matter how talented, she or he cannot be objective. A neutral facilitator is especially helpful when dealing with contentious issues. The consultant listens carefully to your organization's unique needs and strategic challenges. She or he facilitates planning meetings, focus groups, and the planning retreat; crafts questionnaires; sets schedules; and drafts the plan. The consultant should be disciplined, deliver results on time, and have great personal integrity.
- 3) Conduct an environmental scan that assesses your organization and the environment in which it operates. The scan is both an internal audit and a market study. *SWAT Analysis* is the most commonly used environmental scan. Others include *Porters' Five Forces* and the *Pestle Analysis*. Regardless of the type, they accomplish the same goal. They provide data on organizational health, strengths, weaknesses, and

external market conditions--both threats and opportunities. In addition, collect data through in-person interviews, written and online questionnaires, and focus groups.

- 4) Agree on three or four strategic goals. Strategic plans that emphasize more than this number become diffuse and hard to remember. Set aside the other goals for your next plan.
- 5) Hold a strategic planning retreat that engages all stakeholders. Gather the collective intelligence and ideas of everyone who has a stake in your organization. During the retreat you will create or revise your mission, vision, and values statements. You will discuss priority areas and decide on key objectives. You will use a tool such as SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) to make a detailed plan.

In order to maximize buy-in, the retreat must be inclusive. Include all employees from line workers to middle managers and senior executives. Invite funders or investors. If a nonprofit, include neighbors, political officials, and advocates. The plan will be a waste of time with less than full participation. Rulers can no longer say "Jump" and expect the peasants to ask, "How high?" Involve everyone. The payoff will be a strategic plan that lives and breathes across your organization. Shareholders will be impressed. Funders will fall in love. Employees will parade the plan at every meeting. Water will turn into wine—almost.

- 6) Draft the written plan. The consultant typically drafts the report in dialogue with the planning committee. Edit it without mercy. Chop out jargon. Reduce the plan to simple, direct sentences that convey action, vibrancy, and hope.

- 7) Vet the plan with the board of directors and senior management. Hold focus groups with direct service employees. Encourage corrections. Strengthen the plan until it is perfect.
- 8) Adopt the plan. Usually, the Board of Directors approves the final version.
- 9) Promote the plan. Gussy it up with cool graphics. Make it a thing of beauty. Print it on glossy paper. Saturate your organization with copies. Post it on your website. Blog about it. Most importantly, read it. Read it in new employee orientations. Refer to it in meetings. Place it in gathering places. If you make it central to your organization's life every employee, funder, supporter, and volunteer will know its content. You will be impressed how much everyone affiliated with your organization is on board, knows your strategic priorities, and the work plan that makes it happen.
- 10) Conduct regular evaluations. Schedule system-wide meetings exclusively for reviewing the plan one year after its adoption. Begin with the board of directors, then expand to other stakeholder groups. Review the plan carefully. Celebrate progress. Make course corrections. Invite improvements. Two years out, review again. In three years, initiate a new strategic planning process. With change rushing by like whitewater, five-year strategic plans are like a canoe without a paddle.

The value of strategic planning lies in both the process of arriving at the plan and the written plan itself. The planning process engages people in system-wide conversations about priorities and objectives. It creates multiple opportunities for imagining the future. The plan sets direction. It guides performance for the years that follow. With the right design, the right facilitator, and multiple occasions for input, buy-in can be nearly universal. Buy-in triggers better performance. Your organization will thrive.

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