

STRATEGIC PLANNING: A NEW APPROACH TO A FAMILIAR CONCEPT



Strategic planning is a concept that is familiar to most businesses. However, effective compilation and execution of a strategic plan requires constant vigilance and discipline – which can be difficult to maintain for businesses that tend to be reactionary rather than strategic and forward-thinking. This type of intentional planning can be beneficial for nonprofit organizations that are compelled to execute their mission but may lack the resources to do so using a strategic mindset.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on how we live, work and engage in the community. As the world begins to move forward in the post-COVID era, there is no better time for nonprofits to take a new approach to strategic planning. The following provides a roadmap that all nonprofit organizations can use to develop their strategic plans.

The development of a formal strategic plan does not have to take months or years to create. “Real-time strategic planning” (RTSP) is a concept first introduced in David La Piana’s book, *[The Nonprofit Strategy Revolution: Real-Time Strategic Planning in a Rapid-Response World](#)*. This concept promotes the development of an organizational, programmatic and operational strategic plan following what La Piana calls the 4 building blocks of strategy formation, as described below.

Identity

Developing a firm and honest understanding of the organization's identity is critical to the RTSP process. Questions to be addressed include:

- What is the mission?
- What programs and services are provided that fulfill the mission?
- What population is being served?
- How do our programs and services impact the community?
- And, perhaps most importantly, how are we paid to provide these programs and services so we can continue to fulfill the mission and impact the community?

Competitive Advantage

- What differentiates your nonprofit from others?
- What resources (internal and external) can be leveraged to help fulfill the mission?
- Are there other nonprofits in our geographic area that offer the same or similar programs, to the same or similar constituents, with similar funding sources?

Answering questions like these will help to identify competitive advantages of your organization, bring to light programs or services that are not meeting a need in the community or don't align with the mission, or uncover opportunities for strategic partnerships that help further the mission.

La Piana calls out an organization's competitive advantage as one of the most important components of its strategy. Competitive advantage must be something that your constituents value. For purposes of RTSP, competitive advantage is the ability to advance your nonprofit's mission by:

1. Using unique assets or strengths – Examples include optimized program design resulting in better outcomes, great name recognition amongst funders and constituents, a diversified funding base that provides flexibility and stability, and well-connected board members.

2. Execution of programs as services – Examples include efficiency of dollars spent toward program activities, timely delivery of services, strong marketing and communication to promote name recognition, and sound accountability and public reporting.

A nonprofit should also identify and understand its competitors and their strengths when making competitive advantage decisions. As La Piana notes, “competitor” in this context isn’t a negative term. In the nonprofit arena, competitors often are organizations you collaborate with. Nonetheless, you’re likely competing for donors, media coverage, board members, employees, volunteers or clients.

Decision Making

When choosing or evaluating a new program, project or partnership, decisions on whether to move forward should be made through the lens of the overall strategic plan and mission. A “Strategy Screen” is a useful tool for outlining criteria consistent with the mission and strategic planning initiative and helps the organization’s leaders make the best decisions for the organization. Having such a tool in place in advance is extremely useful in helping your nonprofit be nimble and adaptable to emerging opportunities and needs while still staying true to your purpose. It also considers if the organization has the capacity to carry out a program or initiative and if the organization has the resources to fund it.

Strategic Questions

Many questions naturally arise when an organization is presented with an opportunity, but they are not all strategic. Strategic questions must be segregated from operational questions and answered quickly. Organizations should first ask questions such as, “How does this impact or promote the mission?”, and if the answers to such questions are positive, operational questions like, “Will we be able to hire more employees to do this?” can be addressed.

Strategic planning should be more than an agenda item in an annual meeting. Rather, it is meant to be a living document that aligns mission with action and

keeps everyone, from management to employees and volunteers to board members, rowing in the same direction. By implementing RTSP, your nonprofit's long-term strategy will help guide daily, weekly and monthly actions, resulting in the attainment of the organization's goals.

If your nonprofit is ready to take a new approach with "real-time strategic planning," our team can help you to quickly and efficiently identify, understand and act on challenges and opportunities to advance your mission.