



Strategic Planning Resources

The strategic plan is the board's roadmap or GPS¹. Nearly every discussion and decision should be framed by the mission and goals.



It is not a document to create at a retreat only to be shelved to collect dust. The plan communicates value to members. It directs committees. It guides successive boards of directors to stay the course and advance the mission.

This package supports the strategic planning process. Resources can be saved, adapted and shared.

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¹ Goals, Priorities and Strategies = GPS

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Organizations with a good strategic plan are more successful. The plan provides a roadmap for leadership and staff. They work as a team to achieve consistent goals over several years. The *Strategic Planning* guide describes the preparations for planning, developing the plan, and implementation.

Why Have a Strategic Plan

1. **Roadmap** – The plan identifies the “destination” and guides the board of directors, committees and staff.
2. **Continuity/Sustainability** – Without a plan the organization is susceptible to mission drift and simply being reactionary.
3. **Prioritization** – Planning allows leaders to identify the important issues and programs; and to drop programs that are ineffective or irrelevant.
4. **Allocation of Resources** – Planning is the disciplined allocation of resources (time and money).
5. **Assignment and Timelines** – Good plans include performance measures and assignments indicating how and when projects will be done.
6. **Awareness** – The plan should be compelling to members and stakeholders.

Terminology of Planning

Understanding of and consistent use of terminology is important to guide discussions.

Mission – The purpose for existence; crisp sentence or two – easy to articulate.

Vision – Statement of aspiration; how the organization will be perceived.

Values – Guiding principles of the leadership and staff.

Goals – The core competencies to which resources will be allocated. In setting goals, consider the acronym SMART - Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely.

Strategies – Approaches and programs for achieving the mission and goals.

Tactics – Assignments, accountability and deadlines.

Performance Measures – Methods to measure progress.

Business Plan – An annual detailed program of work linked to the strategic plan.



Trends in Planning

- Set just 3 to 7 goals; allowing the organization to focus efforts on its core competencies.
- A mission statement that is visionary can replace the need for separate mission and

vision statements.

- Promote the plan to members and prospects by converting it to a brochure or posting on the website.
- Report on the plan's progress by reviewing at board meetings and at least annually.

Span of the Plan

3- 5 Years

Most plans span three years. Planning annually tends to cause short-term thinking. Plans exceeding 5 years may be unrealistic in rapidly evolving environments.

Planning Retreat

With preparation, focus and the right set up a strategic plan can be developed in a day or two. Because discussions will be intense, it is best to do the plan over two consecutive days --- giving everyone a relaxing break after the first day.

The room should be set up in an open-U, with a flip chart at the front. Ensure that seating is comfortable, and food and amenities are nearby. Natural light is preferred to a room without windows.

Brand Statements

The mission, as well as vision and values, serve as a “promise” to the community. The statements

help to distinguish the organization. While the vision and values are optional, the mission or purpose statement is required.

50,000 Foot Perspective

Encourage discussions to remain at the 50,000 foot level. There is tendency for discussions to drop to 25,000' (committee work) or lower, say 10,000' (staff work and tactics.) Leave the tactics to committees and staff. Stay out of the "weeds" at the planning retreat.

Facilitation

An experienced facilitator involves everybody in discussions, while focusing on completing the planning in the time allotted. There are *disadvantages* to having the staff or a board member facilitate. A plan's success may be linked to the right facilitator. Provide the facilitator with all the information they need to understand the organization.

Environmental Scan

Planning is not done in a vacuum; there are environmental influences. Directors should be qualified to recognize trends and community needs. Often the discussion is built around the acronym SWOT – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

Surveys and focus groups may be conducted to gain valuable stakeholder input.

Strategy or Tactic

What's the Difference?

Strategies are innovative approaches to achieving the goals. They are often identified as programs, issues, priorities, benefits, events and services.

Tactics are a lower level discussion – how will it occur, who will do it? Tactics are the responsibility of committees, staff and consultants. Tactics are usually set *after* strategic planning.

Precautions

Plans fail for many reasons:

- Too many people at the planning retreat; 15 to 20 are ideal for meaningful discussions.
- Too many goals – simply a list of what the board wants to see finished. Successful organizations focus on just 3 to 7 goals.
- Short term thinking; it's not a strategic discussion if leaders cannot think beyond their terms of office.
- An inexperienced facilitator or one with a personal agenda.
- No final report formatted as a strategic plan.
- Meetings over several months rather than completing the plan in one sitting.
- Distractions during the planning meeting.
- The wrong people at the planning table; it is a responsibility of the board of directors who should be visionary leaders.
- Failure to include performance measures and timelines.
- Leaders and staff ignore the plan and go back to doing things as before.

Implementation after the Retreat

There will be a temptation to put aside the new plan and return to daily tasks. Focus on implementation and integration into the culture of the organization.

- Appoint a "Plan Champion" to monitor and report on progress.
- Align every committee under the goal areas.
- Add performance measures and deadlines.
- Promote the plan to members and stakeholders.
- Create a yearly program of work for committees aligned with the strategic plan.
- Promote the plan at meetings and on the website.
- Include the plan on the board agenda.
- Conduct an annual review of progress.
- Share with the staff to get their buy-in of the board's strategic direction.

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Do We *Really* Need A Strategic Plan?

Bob Harris, CAE

The newly elected president walked into the executive director's office to discuss the year ahead. He brought a notepad filled with 13 projects to achieve before his term ends.

How might the executive respond?

Start by thanking him for sharing his priorities. Follow that with, "Let's look at our strategic plan to see how your projects fit." The aim is to show that his interests might already be part of the strategic plan or to discuss how they can fit.

If they don't align the discussion might ensue, "What should we adjust in our existing plan to integrate your goals so as not to exhaust our resources?" The conversation would benefit by including the executive officers.

The approach shows the importance of a strategic plan to guide the association through successive leadership, avoiding year to year distractions.

Strategic Planning is NOT Dead

You might have heard, "Strategic planning is dead." The statement is not meant to for associations to abandon planning. Simply the processes and outcomes have evolved.

Planning retreats are opportunities for directors to consider the future. It is different from board meetings where attention is generally focused on the current year.

Planning that used to take months or weeks can be done in less than a day with proper preparations. Reports that were 20 to 100 pages have been pared down to a page or two. Rather than starting anew at every retreat, boards have realized it's smart to build upon the prior plan.

Terminology has changed. Strategic drivers might be set to frame decision making. Mission and vision statements have been combined. A plan champion or Sherpa may be appointed to monitor and report on progress. Staff track progress on a program of work.

Association GPS

The plan sets a destination and describes a roadmap. Consider it the organization's guiding GPS – goals, priorities and strategies.

The road map should be the primary guide for board, committees and staff. When proposals are made, directors should question, “Why are we talking about this if it is not in our plan?”

Staff Rely on a Plan

Several association executives offered perspectives on planning:

There is an old adage, “If you don’t know where you are going any road will get you there.” The strategic plan is our road map which, when properly used, will focus and prioritize the financial and human resources to meet significant goals and objectives, explains Glenn East, CAE and executive director at the **Northeast Florida Association of REALTORS®**.

At the **Retail Association of Maine**, CEO and CAE Curtis Picard says, “Having a strategic plan with 3 to 5 clear goals enabled us to focus our limited resources on the things that matter. While it is sometimes easy to say yes to an idea, the strategic plan gave us the criteria to determine if it was mission critical or not. Finally, the plan made our board meetings run much more smoothly once we centered the agenda on the specific goals.”

Erica Huffman, CEO at the **Escambia County Medical Society** avows, “Having a strategic plan gives the association a sense of direction. It is a road map and without it, it is easy to get lost among the variety of task and projects the association manages.”

Charlene Wandzilak, of the **Pennsylvania Veterinary Medical Association** offers, “Having a strategic plan which is referred to regularly and monitored for progress helps provide a vital road map for times when the organization wants to overcommit itself and not focus on its true purpose or tries to be all things to all people. It also provides direction on where to focus resources, energy, time and effort to make the most impact for our members and our organization’s overall success.”

The **San Diego County Dental Society’s** executive Michael Koonce, CAE says, “The plan is our primary guide. It’s our association’s mandate on what it is we want to accomplish and our staff’s marching orders on where and how to focus our time. If done right, it’s also the measure of whether or not we are successful. I can’t imagine working without one.”

Overcoming Objections

Some boards refute the value of planning. The most common reason, “We just don’t have time for a retreat.”

Planning retreats got a bad rap because they began with games, trust-falls, and group hugs. Directors roll their eyes when they are told to stand up and pick a partner.

Some directors dislike having a plan because they prefer to offer suggestions at will. Without goals to frame board work, the discussions fall to the latest crisis, personal priorities or the “good ideas” tossed on the board table.

Another objection is cost. Hosting a retreat and compensating a facilitator requires a budget. If the price seems high, remember most plans are for three years or longer – amortize the amount over three years and it’s a small cost for a roadmap.

When the board says we don’t need a plan, use this rationale:

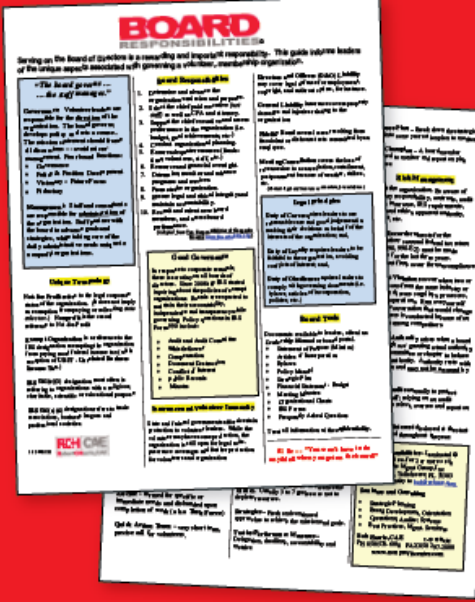
- Planning retreats require an investment of time, though an effective plan can be developed with advance work in under a day.
- A plan lends support to advocacy. The description of the organization and its priorities demonstrates how the organization benefits the community and society.
- A plan should always be on the board table. Transform the plan into a placemat format, laminate it, and keep it front and center at meetings. As ideas are offered, check how they fit in the plan or what must be adjusted to accommodate a new program.
- The plan is integral to membership recruitment and renewal. It should answer, “Why belong?” Members should know of the organization’s goals and strategies.
- Incoming directors should ask, “Where is the strategic plan, our job is to advance it.” Directors offering “good ideas” or hoping to leave a legacy is counter-productive.
- Staff rely on the plan to align work with board priorities. A staff developed business plan supports the board’s strategic plan.
- Committees need to be familiar with the plan so their work can advance its elements.
- The plan tracks progress and performance. Without a plan efforts may go in any direction.
- The plan is as important as the governing documents and budget; directors should read them all to fulfill fiduciary duties.

- The planning retreat is not just about adding new ideas; it is a time to evaluate programs and *drop* what has low relevance.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.

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Strategic or Tactical Board?

Bob Harris, CAE

The board meets for the purpose of governance. *Governance* is described by most state corporate statutes as adherence to policies or governing documents and the continuous monitoring of their implementation. The principal duties of a board include advancing the mission, protecting assets and serving the membership.

To govern the board should be *strategic*. Strategy is defined as a method or plan chosen to bring about a desired future, such as achieving a goal or solutions to a problem. Strategy can be characterized as thinking at a higher level and for the longer-term.

A problem occurs when a board is characterized as *tactical*. Tactical can be defined as lower level work that should be carried out by committees and staff.

Strategy and desired outcomes is set by the board so that staff and committees can align resources and achieve the results.

The problem is when a board falls below strategy and becomes tactical. It is sometimes masked by the enthusiasm of the discussion. For example, in a discussion about a problem, the conversation drops to tactics: “Who will staff the registration desk?” “Will we provide coffee?” “Should we select a new theme?”

Avoiding the Weeds

Board members should want to focus their efforts on visionary discussions. This requires more strategy than tactics.

Meetings focused on tactical thinking require more time. They produce less significant results. Directors become frustrated if time is wasted discussing the details of implementation and application.

Techniques to increase opportunity for strategy and less tactics include:

- ❑ **Consent Agenda** - The consent agenda is single entry on the primary agenda that packages items the board should read but require no action or discussion, for instance staff and officer updates. Use of a consent agenda can save 30 to 60 minutes, redirecting the time for substantive issues. It requires discipline to submit timely reports and hold the directors accountable for coming prepared by reading the reports. The chief elected officer should enforce accountability among directors.

- ❑ **Agenda Design** – Asked why the agenda is in its current form and the usual answer is, “It’s always looked like this.” There are ways to design an agenda that advances the work and supports strategic discussions. Consider adding the goals from the strategic plan right on the agenda, and include the mission at the bottom. Add time indicators so directors know what’s expected with each item and when to move on. Or break the agenda into sections, for instance: 1. Association Business, 2. Strategic Decisions, 3. Visionary Thinking. Remove “New Business” from the agenda by asking directors to submit ideas in advance according to policy or precedent.
- ❑ **Room Set Up** – There are room set-ups that facilitate meaningful discussions. The most common is an open U so each person feels equal; able to hear and see each other. The room environment should be comfortable. A cold, tight, dark room will not enhance outcomes.
- ❑ **All Eyes on the Screen** – Some boards distribute reams of paper in the form of reports and information. Consider less paper by giving directors access to the information on a screen. Project the report being discussed on a central screen so all board members are focused on the correct document. Directors will bring their own computers to have documents at their fingertips.
- ❑ **Dashboards** – Dashboards are graphic representation of reports and data. Improve understanding and save time by transforming a 10 minute update on membership, for instance, into a single graphic in the form of a thermometer or gauge. Use the same dashboards so directors recognize trends and gaps. Ask the board to select up to a dozen dashboards it would like to review at each meeting.
- ❑ **Knowledge Based Discussions** – Encourage the board to base discussions and decisions on facts. Too often discussions are moved by passion or group think. Group think is the practice of approaching problems or issues as matters that are best dealt with by consensus of a group rather than by individuals acting independently. Directors should ask tough questions before making decisions, exercising duty of care and fiduciary duties. Use external benchmarks to compare data from similar organizations.
- ❑ **We’re in the Weeds** – One of the most powerful comments at the board table is, “We’re in the weeds.” If conversations appear to fall below governance, directors and staff should recognize the problem and pose the statement.

Nobody wants to conclude a meeting wondering if anything was achieved. Involve the officers in the design of meetings that advance the mission and goals without dropping

into tactics. Orient the directors to their roles in governance and the distinction between strategy and tactics.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.



Between the Rails – The Governing Documents

Bob Harris, CAE

The elected chair suggested, “*A strategic plan keeps the board members between the rails.*” Her comment made sense to support good governance and a high performing board.

The rails are like train tracks or highway guard rails. The intent is to stay within the rails while conducting business.

The board should avoid derailments and detours. Distractions are frequent. They may come in the form of committees propose ideas that are beyond available resources. Or from directors unsure about governance so they delve into management.



Detours might come from an elected officer who wants to leave a personal legacy. Or diversions from members asking for new services, so the board tries to be “all things to all people.”

Here are the RAILS within which the board should be guided.

Mission Driven – The board advances the mission statement. It is the purpose for existence and justification for tax exempt status. Going too far outside the mission can cause jeopardy. The mission statement should frame nearly every discussion and decision of the board.

Governance vs. Management – The board’s role is governance. Directors are authorized to make governing decisions by state corporate law and the governing documents. Seldom should they focus on management decisions. Outside the rails is when a board begins to micromanage or gets into administrative work.

Strategic Plan – The board creates and advances a strategic plan. Most plans act as a 3-year roadmap for the organization. It’s easy to set the plan aside as the crisis of the month arises or new ideas are proposed. Keep the plan on the board table to check that committee work and board motions fit within the goals of the plan.

Board vs. Committees – Committees are appointed and assigned initiatives from the strategic plan. They supplement the work of the board. They receive authority from the bylaws and/or their appointment by the board. Directors should avoid doing committee work at the board table.

“When a board undermines the work of a committee to which it has entrusted an assignment, the processes lose integrity and support is weakened,” explains Patricia A. Montgomery, IOM, and CAE at the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Budget – A budget has been adopted by the board. Directors should be familiar with it and recognize that every new project exhausts resources. Stay within the rails by being knowledgeable about the budget and resources.

Strategy or Tactics – Directors have a responsibility to be strategic. It is easy to drop to the level of tactics, usually described as minutiae or administrative details. When the board dives into tactics someone should remind them to “stay out of the weeds.”

There are several tools to keep the board “between the rails.”

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False Starts at Strategic Planning

By Bob Harris, CAE

Boards can be resistant to think strategically. Some finding it easier to focus on the short term thinking and safe topics.

A few boards consider planning an expensive process. Others fear the group hugs and games that characterize some retreats. Even the boards that have budgeted for planning often delay it a year or more.

Reports say that up to 50 percent of strategic plans fail. Here are 13 (unlucky) false starts and failures in the process.

1. **Annual Planning** – A strategic plan should span 3 to 5 years. If planning occurs every year it becomes a short term plan associated with the current chief elected officer. When directors know the organization plans annually, they seldom think beyond the year, “We don’t need to think long-term because we will be doing this again in 12 months.” The plan should be considered “rolling” for a period of at least three years to guide the board, and reviewed for progress annually.
2. **Too Many Planners** – The IRS suggests that the size of an exempt board of directors should facilitate meaningful conversations. Too few people may limit ideas. Too large may draw out meetings with so many people providing input. The dynamics are far different for a group of 15 persons versus 30 or 40. The right size planning team is usually 15 to 20 strategic thinkers. If the desire is more input, conduct advance focus groups or surveys. Every 4 extra people at a planning meeting tends to add an hour to the schedule so that everyone can be involved and heard.
3. **Meeting Environment** – From temperature to natural light, the room environment is critical. Squeezing too many people into a dimly lit room will have a negative impact on outcomes. Avoid basements, dark narrow rooms; be sure the room temperature can be controlled and there is space to spread out (people and breaks.)
4. **Table Arrangement** – An open-U arrangement allows everyone to sit at the same table, easily hearing and watching what is said. (Observing body language is key in strategy development as directors might have good ideas but their micro-cues indicate otherwise.) Place a flip chart or screen at the open end of the table. Consider a room with enough space to accommodate several rounds in the back of the room for breaks, meals or small group work.
5. **Terminology** – Many of the participants may never have been involved in strategic planning, while others come from an environment that conducts planning but uses

terms unique to their settings. Understanding and agreeing to the words associated with nonprofit planning is critical. Otherwise, directors provide input but don't know whether they are offering a goal, strategy or tactic. Keep a terminology card on the table that defines: Mission, Vision, Values, Goals, Strategies, Performance Measures and Tactics.

6. **Wrong Season** – It would be unwise to conduct strategic planning in the middle of the current term of office when the chief elected officer's year is underway. An ideal time for planning is as the current term comes to a close. This allows incoming officers to create a plan and then have a month or more to consider implementation (assigning committees, adjusting budget, etc.) Or conduct planning immediately at the start of the new term. There should be linkage between planning and budgeting.
7. **The Right People** – The wrong people can doom the process. It is a responsibility of the board of directors. If the board is large or all directors are not strategists, pare down the number. Avoid an imbalance of past presidents or chairs – the meeting is about the future. Find ways to include visionaries, emerging leaders, representatives of diversity those who embrace technology.
8. **Plan Report** – The final plan should not be measured by the number of words or pages. Some of the best plans can be summarized on a business card. Be sure the report is drafted within a few days of the retreat and shared with participants so they can see results of their volunteer time. Avoid adding "fluff" to the report that includes pages of reports, the environmental scan (SWOT), agendas or survey results. Let the plan stand on its own as a report about how the organization plans to advance its mission and goals. (Remember that busy people seldom have time to read more than 3 pages before they are interrupted; shorter is better.)
9. **The Facilitator** – The facilitator is charged with keeping discussions on track and completing the task at hand – development of a multi-year, visionary, compelling strategic plan. Be leery of the board that asks their executive director to facilitate. The executive should be a participant at the table, not the note taker. Be cautious about the elected leader who wants to facilitate or has someone from his or her company lead the meeting; it is likely to be a conflict of interest and may diminish honest dialog. Identify a facilitator who fits your culture and understands your desired outcomes.
10. **Level of Discussion** – One might characterize board discussions at the 50,000 foot level --- visionary, strategic conversations that reach into the future. That would position committees at about 25,000 to 35,000 foot and staff at about 10,000 foot (defined by the IRS as "implementing the decisions of the board.") At strategic planning, conversations should be 50,000 foot and higher. It is not the place to question the price of coffee breaks or whether the office needs painting.

11. **Number of Goals** – Most organizations can hone down their priorities and projects to just 3 to 7 goals. A wise director at the planning table once reminded, “None of us will remember more than four goals so we should stop now.” Nearly every organization can advance their purpose with 3 to 5 well considered goals. Each goal will be supported by several fresh and on-going strategies to which resources must be aligned.
12. **Realty Check** – Planning should be based on reality and capacity. Brain storming with limited resources (funds, volunteers, committees, technology and staff) is unproductive. Strategic planning can be described as the “disciplined allocation of resources.” Be sure the facilitator and planning group are familiar with resources before setting goals
13. **Deployment** – Most planning retreats occur over weekends; Monday morning may be the death of the plan. There are a series of steps that must occur soon after planning for implementation; including: alignment of committees, stakeholder awareness, program of work, and periodic progress reports.

Understanding the false starts and traps will improve likelihood of success.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provide free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.



Champion of the Strategic Plan

Bob Harris, CAE

The board wrapped up its retreat, drafted a strategic plan and intended to officially adopt it at the next meeting.

That's often where plans die. Upon adjournment of the retreat busy schedules take over. The plan is shelved or filed. The saying, "out of sight, out of mind" applies.

There are many reasons a plan might fail, including transition of officers, an unwieldy plan, a board unaware of its importance, or an officer more interested in building a legacy.

To deploy the plan and integrate it into the organization, a plan champion or task force may be appointed. The role is to ensure the strategic plan "takes hold."

Champion the Plan

Just as a board relies on a treasurer to monitor and report on the finances, a plan champion or committee reports on the strategic plan's progress. The intent is to keep the plan foremost in the minds of directors, committees and staff.

Strategic Plan Champion – A member of the board who is close to the chief elected officer (often the person most likely to next ascend to the position) accepts the role of plan champion for the year. He or she monitors and reports on progress, making sure that the plan is not lost or waylaid in favor of personal agendas or distractions. When progress is slowed the champion will question why.

Task Force on Strategic Plan Implementation – This is an appointed small group of board volunteers to maintain focus on implementation. They may develop innovative methods to keep the plan front and center. Staff may be added or consult with the committee. The task force serves until they are confident the plan has been integrated into the association.

These are suggested action steps after the plan is adopted:

- ☐ **Adoption** – Ensure the board understands and adopts the new multi-year plan by a motion at an upcoming board meeting.
- ☐ **Agendas** – Revise the board agenda to ensure the plan receives attention periodically at meetings and time is allotted for discussion of the goals.
- ☐ **Engagement** – Develop tools to maintain board interest in the plan. Suggest keeping the actual plan on the board table, displaying it on the conference room

wall and/or creating wallet cards with a summary of the plan for volunteers to reference and distribute.

- ❑ **Awareness** - Transform the plan into promotional materials to inform members and the community. Create graphics and design a brochure or PDF for members and prospects, post on the website, and/or create a banner of the new mission, vision and goals.
- ❑ **KPIs** – Study and set key performance indicators (KPIs) for measurable elements of the plan. KPIs may include growth goals, deadlines for completing work, and assignments to committees, staff and consultants. Transform the KPIs into a dashboard of 8 to 12 major elements the board can monitor. For example, if the plan calls for membership growth of 200 new members within 3 years the staff will break that down to be 66 new members per year or 12 per quarter.
- ❑ **Staff Alignment** – Be sure staff understands they are part of the team to advance the plan with board and committees.
- ❑ **Tracking** – Staff may create a tracking tool to become their office work plan. It takes the format of a horizontal template or spreadsheet that includes columns for the goals, strategies, tactics, KPIs, assignments and deadlines. The most popular method to report the tracking is with a “stoplight” concept. Green indicates progress or ongoing; amber indicates there may be needs such as resources, funding, time, delays or questions. Red indicates the effort has come to a halt or delay.
- ❑ **Reporting** – Ask the chairman of the board to allocate time to report on progress or problems. The board should anticipate updates and celebrate achievements.
- ❑ **Annual Review** – At least annually review the plan among board and staff. Also the membership will appreciate knowing how the board has advanced the plan that was announced a year earlier. The plan will be the foundation for an Annual Report.

The plan acts as a safeguard against mission creep. “Good ideas” will arise at meetings that are accelerated by passion and group think (“I voted for it because I thought you were going to vote for it.”)

The plan keeps the board on track. If a priority or crises arises the plan may be delayed but the champion or task force will ensure attention returns to the plan.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.

Strategic Plan Overhaul or Calibration

Bob Harris, CAE and Mark Adams

When you take a vehicle into a repair shop you hope the estimate will be a quick tune-up or calibration. You dread the need for the more costly and time consuming overhaul or engine rebuild. This is a story about calibration and drivers in a strategic plan.

Repair shop terminology can be applied to associations.

- **Calibrate** - to adjust precisely for a particular function.
- **Tune-up** - a process in which small changes are made in order to make something work better.
- **Rebuild** - build again after it has been damaged or destroyed.
- **Overhaul** - take apart in order to examine it and repair it if necessary.

Generally a plan benefits from a calibration or tune-up; seldom does it need a complete rewrite, overhaul or rebuild.

Cadence of Planning

Plans are created to span three to five years. A well-written plan will endure beyond its designated span. If the planners drafted a solid mission and goals with supporting strategies it should guide successive volunteers.

Some organizations schedule an *annual retreat*. The yearly frequency causes the directors to wrongly believe they should focus only on the year ahead. Directors wait to hear of the priorities or desired legacy of the incoming chief elected officer. It is short sighted to set goals and strategies based on one year.

Most organizations hold a retreat every three years. At that meeting they review the prior plan, consider environmental factors, and adjust strategies.

Assuming the prior plan was good, its framework will remain unchanged. For instance if advocacy and education are the cornerstone of the mission, they will not likely be removed.

Drivers and Guideposts

The Employers Association of the NorthEast (EANE) adopts “strategic drivers” in the strategic plan to serve as guideposts allowing flexibility and adaptability. These might include customer service excellence, brand strength, a high performing culture, healthy growth and expansion and robust technology applications.

“The drivers are akin to goals in traditional planning terms and are defined after extensive scanning and active discussion is undertaken by both the board and senior management team,” explained Mark Adams, Director of HR Solutions.

“This process ensures that the drivers are not only valid by being rooted in and reflective of the association’s mission and core values but also that the drivers are fully supported by the leadership. Drivers are the foundation of the strategic plan and serve as a litmus test for establishing and prioritizing future initiatives.”

In contrast to the board’s strategic plan, EANE’s business plan is established annually by the management team. Initiatives in the business plan may be either external or internal in their scope with champions being identified, and specific targets and measures being crafted that define clear expectations and accountability for the staff.

By utilizing drivers, EANE is able to adapt to a rapidly changing business climate, effectively allocate staff and resources while not sacrificing or losing the organization’s fundamental purpose or identity along the way.

Environmental Factors

The reason for calibrating a plan are usually the influence of environmental factors. Externally these might include government regulation or new technologies. Internal factors could include changes in staffing, the work of task forces or members’ challenges.

Consider these environmental influences on a plan calibration:

- **Opportunity** – What opportunities have arisen since the plan was developed?
- **Regulation** – What is the impact of government regulators and political influence?
- **Technology** – Is there new technology to apply in the organization?
- **Resources** – Have funds become available or depleted? Is there a need to diversify income?
- **Surveys** – Have members communicated new concerns or challenges that should be addressed?
- **Evolution** – Industries, communities and lifestyles change, potentially impacting elements of the plan.

- **Progress** – What has been accomplished that can be marked off as completed? Should new programs be added?
- **Leadership** – Every year brings new leaders and their ideas.
- **Committees** – Do task forces need to be appointed; have committees completed their charges from the prior plan?
- **Competition** – Since the plan was developed has competition arisen that should be considered?

Before updating a strategic plan, decides if the drivers and goals should remain the same. Will it need an overhaul or tune-up?

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Bob Harris, CAE, provides free association governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com. Mark Adams can be contacted at madams@eane.org.



After the Planning Retreat

Bob Harris, CAE

The board retreat was fun. A crescendo of good ideas were offered. The team got better acquainted. A 3-year strategic plan was drafted.

Come Monday morning when daily routines set in the retreat participants soon forget what was decided or the priorities to which they agreed.

What's Next?

Before the retreat ends the most important question is: "What's next?" What can be expected? Should we await a written report, approval of the plan at the next meeting, timelines, and committee assignments?

The gist of the question is, "Will the new strategic plan be implemented and fully integrated into the organization?" The query should give pause to how to make best use of the newly developed plan.

Implementation

Plans fail for lack of implementation and integration. Here's a short list of what's next in general sequential order.

- Circulate a Draft of the New Plan
- Board Approval at the Next Meeting
- Align Committees, Appoint Task Forces
- Inform Members and Stakeholders about the Plan
- Assign a Plan Champion to Monitor Progress
- Discuss the Plan at Board Meetings, and Annually
- Three Year Update

Questionnaire

At the retreat, or immediately after, circulate this questionnaire about implementation of the new plan. The left column aligns with the six components of the Association Operating System (AOS).

For each statement, rank the strategic plan on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is the weakest and 5 is the strongest. (Answer key at the end.)

		Question	1 Weak	2	3	4	5 Strong
Mission, Vision, Values	1	Mission Statement - Mission statement is clear and impactful, easy to communicate, and will be the primary driver of activities and programs.					
	2	Vision - The leadership team has a vision of long term success for the organization.					
	3	Values – Guiding principles frame board discussions, i.e. transparency, respect, accountability, innovation.					
People	4	Positions - The right people are in the right positions in the association.					
	5	Support – Job descriptions and expectations are clear; each person has the support and budget to fulfill their roles.					
	6	Knowledge - Knowledge is transferred through orientation processes and access to information.					
Processes	7	Documentation - All activities are documented as steps to guide future volunteers.					
	8	Best Practices – Best practices are identified to sustain the quality of activities and operations.					
	9	Technology – Sufficient investment in technology to support communications, collaboration, internet presence and association functions.					
Performance	10	Continuous Improvement – Continuous improvement is a part of good governance and management; tools are used to make improvements.					
	11	Knowledge – Dashboards and scorecards are used to reduce time listening to reports so the board can make knowledge based decisions and avoid group-think.					
	12	Benchmarks – Data is compared against external sources in areas such as operating ratios, membership market share, and compensation.					
Strategy	13	Strategy – Board remains at a strategic level; avoiding tactical concerns of committees and staff.					
	14	Awareness – Internal audiences (membership, chapters) and external stakeholders will be aware of the new plan and kept abreast of progress.					
	15	Guide - This strategic plan will be front and center at all board and committee meetings.					

		Question	1 Weak	2	3	4	5 Strong
Outcomes	16	Value/ROI – The benefits and services exceed the cost of membership dues; member needs and satisfaction are gauged.					
	18	Social Responsibility – Association has positive impact on society, i.e. jobs, safety, economics, quality of life; and demonstrates corporate social responsibility.					
Score		Add total within each column.					
		Multiply each number as indicated:	x1	x2	x3	x4	x5
		Calculation within each column:					
		Total for final score:					

Scoring

18 – 50 - Need to develop a plan for implementation immediately.

50 - 60 - It's a start; place more emphasis on integrating the plan into association.

60 – 70 - Find more ways to use the new plan.

70 – 80 – The strategic plan is positioned to drive success.

80 – 90 - The plan should yield excellent outcomes.

A guide to implementation is scheduled for publication by the American Society of Association Executives with the title: *Strategic Integration – Tips, Tools and Techniques to Move Beyond Strategic Planning*.

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Audit the Strategic Plan

After the strategic planning retreat there is an excitement about implementation. Deployment tactics will involve the board, committees, staff and stakeholders.

Initial steps include aligning committees with the goals, identifying performance metrics, and informing members about the new plan.

The excitement wanes as routines take over. There becomes less interest in execution and monitoring the plan. A crisis may redirect resources and attention.

Distractions, delays and disinterest will hinder execution. Successive boards may not give the plan credence. Performance metrics may not have been established. Or the planning retreat was simply a to-do list for the staff.

It takes resolve to sustain interest in the strategic plan.

“Some believe most the work is done upon board approval of the strategic plan. Goals don’t miraculously accomplish themselves. Implementation requires the convergence of volunteer leadership and staff to craft a program of work including tactics and metrics,” offers Keith Darby, CAE and CEO at the San Mateo County Medical Association.

Association Audits

Associations are familiar financial audits. An audit is an objective examination and evaluation of a process in the organization.

Audits can apply to any aspect. A communications audit evaluates messaging and brand strength. A financial audit engages an outside accounting professional to review aspects of the finances and to report to the board.

A strategic plan audit will revive the excitement of the planning retreat, get the plan back in high-gear, and may extend life and value of the plan.

Plan Basics

A plan should guide the association for three to five years. The board has a responsibility to draft it. It serves as the organization’s roadmap.

Beware the organization that holds an “annual retreat.” The board becomes socialized to thinking the retreat is a one-year focus on the incoming chair’s priorities only.

The board must think beyond their terms of office. For instance, planning in 2019 or 2020 should consider the association's relevance in 2022 to 2025.

Leverage the new plan for multiple uses. Create a program of work or use it to answer members' questions: "What does the association do for me?"

"Auditing the plan helps the staff and board objectively look at whether the strategies and goals are still important and relevant to the organization. It's better to regroup in the middle than to look back at poor results due to lack of monitoring," said Bob Thomas, COO at the Michigan Chamber.

Audit Process

An audit considers applications, format and progress. It may start with a report on progress or problems by the plan-champion reporting on progress.

It can be accomplished in a few hours of conversation (in addition to prep and follow-up time.) The discussion should focus entirely on the plan; it isn't part of a convened board meeting but a time to analyze and adapt.

Strategic Plan Progress Report (staff summary)

Four Organizational Goals and Strategies – Priorities to Advance	Progress		
	Not Started	In Progress	Complete
Powerful Advocacy			
Member grassroots involvement and input.			✓
Powerful lobbying team.		✓	✓
Respected political action committee.		✓	✓
Legal challenges and amicus briefs.			✓
Collaboration with allied organizations.		✓	✓
Messaging advocacy achievements and issues.		✓	✓
Leverage resources of parent organization.	✗	✓	✓
Second Goal	Not Started	In Progress	Complete
Third Goal	Not Started	In Progress	Complete
Forth Goal	Not Started	In Progress	Complete

Reviewing the first year of the plan you may hear leaders ask:

- Do members know about our plan, can we improve awareness?
- Are the committees aligned and aware of how their efforts advance elements of the plan?
- Should we re-prioritize our work?
- What external influences hinder our progress?
- Are the performance metrics accurate; should they be adjusted?

The discussion should reinvigorate the plan. New board members, committees and ascending officers will give more emphasis.

Extend the Life of the Plan

The conversations reveal the board's understanding and staff's implementation of the plan. Here's what an audit should check:

- ☐ Strategic plan was formatted to be of value to board and staff.
- ☐ Members and stakeholders were informed of the plan.
- ☐ The plan is considered at board and committee meetings.
- ☐ Performance measures and dashboards are tied to the plan.
- ☐ A plan champion or goal champions are monitoring progress.
- ☐ A six-month or annual update is scheduled to make corrections and celebrate progress.
- ☐ The plan is displayed, or printed as a brochure, to promote awareness.
- ☐ Board agendas reflect a focus on the plan.

There are two beneficial outcomes from an audit. The first is that the plan takes on new meaning and renewed interest by leadership.

The second is the potential to make course corrections that will extend the plan's life and value for another year. If a retreat is planned every three years, it is possible that the audit and tweaking can extend the life without holding another retreat.

Finally, with or without a strategic plan audit, a well drafted plan that identifies the core competencies and a powerful mission should not need much modification three years later. The priorities and strategies may be adjusted but the framework will remain much the same.

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Fast Track Strategic Plan Implementation

Bob Harris, CAE

Within minutes of adjourning the strategic planning retreat the directors scattered, returning to work after volunteering a day or weekend to create the multi-year strategic plan.

Back at the association office there is temptation to put the new document in a file with other older strategic plans. Or create a notebook, placing it on the bookshelf to collect dust.

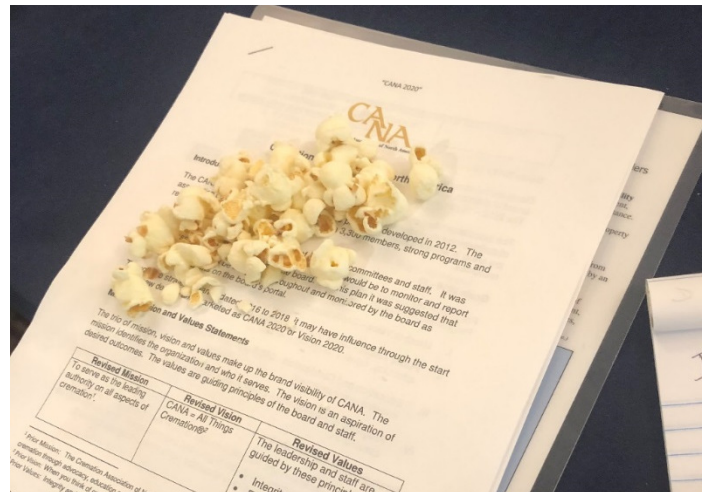
The planning retreat is like planting a garden. The new ideas, strategies, programs must take root. Without nurturing or attention the plan may die.

“There is nothing more inspiring and rewarding than seeing a strategic plan come to life! It is a living, breathing document that deserves our diligent care. It enables us to remain focused on our purpose, goals and values, and nimble enough to adjust our efforts as issues and trends change,” said Linda Jay, RCE, and CEO at the Bakersfield Association of REALTORS®.

A plan that lingers without taking action will lose momentum. The leadership team has to be resourceful to implement their new plan.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

The phrase “out of sight, out of mind” is true for strategic plans. If it does not hold the attention of the board, committees and staff, it is dead at the starting block.



Strategic plan used as a "plate" for popcorn.

Here are three methods to fast track implementation, improving the likelihood of its success. Do all of these within 60 days of the board's planning retreat.

Staff Retreat

Staff are integral to implementation.

If they are excluded from the planning retreat they will be eager to learn the results and how the plan impacts positions and departments. The retreat often causes unfounded anxiety back at the office, “Will I still have a job?”

The staff need to understand aspects of the plan and the rationale that drove decisions. Discuss the board's priorities for the years ahead.

Shortly after the board's retreat, convene staff for a retreat of their own. Use the time to increase understanding and to set timelines and accountability. Spread the plan over three years; don't try to achieve everything in the first year.

Performance measures should be added to the plan to give it better traction. While a board might not know such details, the staff can project timelines, growth margins, profitability and retention rates, for instance.

To track progress, create a spreadsheet identifying who is responsible for what and when. Maintain it as a shared document that all staff can update and monitor progress.

Committee Engagement

Committees supplement the work of the board.

The new plan sets innovative programs and projects that will be delegated to committees. Use task forces, quick action teams and micro-tasks to engage volunteers.

If committees don't agree or understand problems will arise. After the planning retreat, assemble committee chairs to discuss how their efforts fit. If they have initiatives underway or recommendations, discuss how they will align with the plan's new goals and strategies.

Committees should be aligned with the plan. If there are goals that have no associated work groups it may doom elements of the plan.

Convening all the committees allows for an exchange of ideas. They should collaborate rather than working in silos; not knowing who is doing what. For greater impact, regroup and assess progress six months later.

Member Awareness

To members, the plan should communicate return on investment (ROI). They'll judge whether or not the board is serving their needs and making best use of resources.

Transform it into marketing pieces. Reduce the high-level details to an information card that can be shared with members and prospects. Create a slick brochure to use for membership recruitment and renewal – describing what the association has planned. Create a PDF for the website or to distribute to members. Build a PowerPoint to introduce chapters to the plan.

To add emphasis, make it a signature quality document. Have directors sign the plan for members to know who set the direction and takes responsibility for advancing the mission and goals.

There are many techniques to increase the success of a strategic plan. These three can fast track implementation.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides governance tip and template at www.nonprofitcenter.com.



Everything can be Measured

Bob Harris, CAE

The motion on the board table had enough momentum to pass. Then an astute director asked, “How will we measure performance? How will we evaluate our success for failure?”

Boards often adopt programs and pass motions without considering performance expectations. For example: “I propose that we direct staff to increase student memberships.”

Directors and staff should be uncertain about the intent of the motion. Does it suggest 100 new students? Is it a plan to create student chapters? The motion does not define performance measures.

Process for Selecting Metrics

A board has a duty to evaluate organizational effectiveness. When a motion is so general it may be impossible to gauge success.

By discussing the metrics *before* passing the motion, awareness of the intended outcomes clarifies expectations.

Everything can be measured. It will take some thought and board discussion.

“The board should select a dozen or so core areas to monitor that have significant impact.”

Begin by identifying metrics that have the most value to the organization. For example, the number of website visitors, budget aspects, membership growth or legislative wins. The board should select a dozen or so core areas to monitor that have significant impact.

Next develop a methodology for reporting the information. Rather than oral reports and spreadsheet presentations, consider using dashboards, they are a way to depict performance visually on a chart.

By presenting the same dashboards consistently at board meetings, directors begin to recognize gaps, trends, strengths and weaknesses. Corrective actions can be taken as appropriate. Some organizations post the information on a board portal where directors have access at will.

The measures should be associated with the strategic plan; nearly every metric can be tied to the goals. During the annual retreat, a focus on the plan and performance will improve outcomes.

Areas of Performance

Here are some common association performance measures and their descriptions:

Membership – Retention and growth rates are monitored; percentage of market share is satisfactory (number of members compared to the total number of potential members); member satisfaction is gauged; member participation is increasing.

Financial Fitness – Sufficient saving established; the ratio of dues to non-dues income is satisfactory; investments yield desired results; income streams are reliable and diverse; independent accountant advises board.

Exposition – Booths and space outpace prior trade show; attendance is up; exhibitor satisfaction is high.

Sponsorship and Advertising – Number and income of sponsorships and advertising is growing.

Government Relations – Consider the number of issues being tracked; how many members are involved in grassroots; the number of contacts with lawmakers; and the number of political wins.

Political Strength – Majority of the members engaged in PAC funding; size of the PAC is sufficient to influence lawmakers.

Professional Competency – Association supports enhancements in member competency through education and certification programs; opportunities for research and publishing; noted reduction in consumer complaints and grievances.

Governance – Right size board; all directors proficient in governing duties; pipeline of future leaders in development; periodic board self-evaluation conducted; board meetings produce substantive results.

Technology – Investment in technology platforms supporting association functions; providing member access 24/7 and reducing reliance on staff; ratio of investment in technology may reach 10 percent of budget.

Education – New topics and speakers added; total number of CE hours required are growing to be a respected resource in education marketplace; programs are well-marketed, attended and produce profit.

Chapters – Performance of components are effective with growth in membership, programs, leadership, etc.; chapters are compliant with laws, policies and bylaws; underperforming chapters are addressed.

Staffing – Staffing is sufficient for a growing organization and to advance the strategic plan; adequate investment in professional development; compensation is comparative with similar roles and responsibilities; methods of performance evaluation are effective.

Committees – Committees are aligned with goals in the strategic plan; sufficient number of volunteers to support committees; ineffective committees are addressed by eliminating, merging or revamping.

Strategic Plan – Plan guides board and staff for 3 to 5 years; reasonable number of goals (3 to 7) supported by sufficient resources (funds, staff, time, technology); program of work or business plan tracks assignments, deadlines and metrics.

Internet Presence – Search engine optimization (SEO) draws visitors; social media strong with postings, likes, retweets, etc.; internet presence is considered a benefit by members.

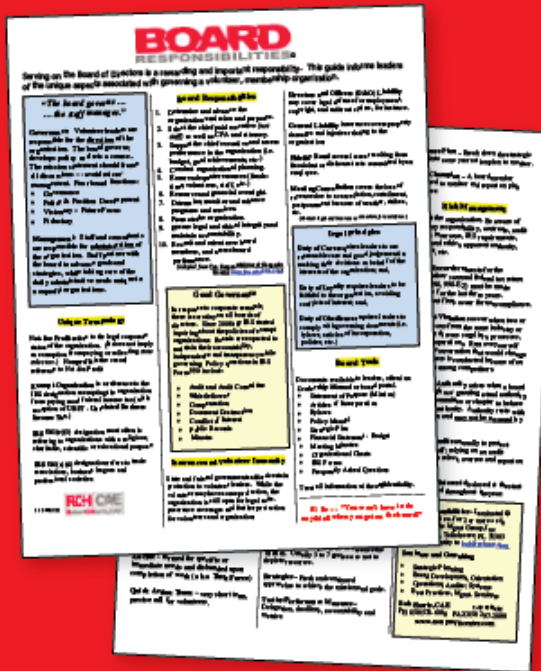
Diversity – Composition of board and staff reflects diversity of the membership and community; programs designed to serve varied audiences; diversity is a guiding principle; collaboration with groups representing diversity.

Board members frequently rely on performance measures in their work settings, thus it should be instinctive to apply the concept in associations.

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