

Components of a Strategic Plan for Non-Profit Organizations

At a minimum, a strategic plan should generally include the following sections:

- a mission statement
- an outline of goals, objectives, and activities
- an assessment of current resources, and
- a strategic analysis.

Each section is typically a few paragraphs to a few pages long.

Develop Your Mission Statement

Every nonprofit needs a mission statement: a clear description of the reason the nonprofit exists. Your mission statement should be the first section of your strategic plan and will set the stage for all that follows. Because all nonprofits are mission-driven, you must take care to define your mission clearly. While you shouldn't agonize over your statement, it's important to put some careful thought into articulating the mission that will guide your organization for years to come.

Outline Specific Goals, Objectives, and Activities

Identifying more specific goals helps break down your broad mission into individual elements, which you can then pursue with even more specific planning. For example, if your broad mission is to create economic opportunities for teenagers in a certain city or district, you might have specific goals of publicizing job opportunities for teens, mentoring teens in career development, and nurturing teens' leadership and entrepreneurial skills.

Getting even more specific, you can identify specific objectives with deadlines (objectives are closely related and similar to goals but more concrete and measurable). For example, if the above nonprofit's goal was to mentor teens in career development, an objective might be to implement a mentoring program in a certain city or district, by a certain time. It's often hard to judge whether a nonprofit has successfully accomplished a broad mission or even a narrow goal, but much easier to determine whether it has achieved a well defined, concrete objective.

Some nonprofits wisely go a step further and outline planned activities and programs separately from objectives. Having activities or programs clearly defined will help your nonprofit communicate with the public about exactly what you do, which can help greatly in getting the public involved or attracting contributions -- not to mention its value in managing your operations. When you are outlining specific activities or programs, remember that they should flow from your list of objectives and help advance your mission.

Assess Your Resources

In this section of your strategic plan, you should include an assessment of all of your resources -- including money, people, expertise, skills, and other intangibles -- that are currently available to your nonprofit. Your goal here isn't to detail your fundraising plan, but simply to develop a realistic understanding of the assets you have in hand.

When assessing resources, lots of folks mistakenly think only in terms of money. As is true in other areas of life, money can be a great help in getting things done, but it's also true that other assets -- such as skills and experience -- can translate into getting your mission accomplished. A troop of energetic, committed volunteers can be just as valuable -- sometimes even more so -- than cash in the bank or an expensive computer system.

Identify Strategies

With your goals, objectives, and activities identified and your current resources assessed, you're ready to do some true strategic thinking. In the realm of strategic planning, "strategies" are practical ideas about how to make the best use of your resources to achieve your goals.

A common approach to strategic thinking is called a "SWOT" analysis -- an acronym for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Strengths and weaknesses are positive and negative elements within the organization; opportunities and threats are positive and negative elements outside the organization. A SWOT analysis is sometimes called a "situational assessment" or an "environmental analysis," but they all use the same basic approach.

Examples of SWOT Elements

- Strengths are positive assets within your organization. Examples might include a highly respected board member, a talented group of volunteers, or ownership of valuable intellectual property, such as a book or software.
- Weaknesses are negative aspects within your organization. Examples might include a shortage of volunteers or outdated technology.
- Opportunities are positive elements outside your organization. Examples might include a high demand for your services or availability of a grant in your topic area.
- Threats are negative elements outside your organization. Examples might include a competing nonprofit or the demise of a major funder.

The key to doing a SWOT analysis is to think about ways to maximize the positive and minimize the negative elements. Brainstorm about ways to use your strengths to take advantage of existing opportunities and to overcome threats you've identified. Also focus on how you will minimize your weaknesses to make your group less vulnerable to threats.

Edit and Finalize Your Plan

Once you've completed all the essential elements of your initial strategic plan, let your plan sit for a day or two before beginning a final review. This allows the planners to clear their brains and look at it with fresh perspectives. It's a good idea to establish a firm deadline for incorporating any final edits, to keep everyone in "wrap-up" mode and prevent endless rounds of tinkering with the work you've already done.

Once your final edits have been incorporated, you may be finished. Or, if you plan to submit the strategic plan to potential funders, you may want to spiff it up and produce a professional document, perhaps using desktop publishing software. Package the information as necessary for your intended purposes -- an internal working document can be much less formal than a package you send to potential major donors