A Strategic Planning Primer

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Do you need a strategic plan?

Strategic planning takes work, time, and the willingness to confront difficult issues and work through hard choices. It is only worth doing if there is a perception of a need for major change. If there is not a perception of a need for major change your planning is probably operational or tactical and addresses day to day activity.

Therefore, the first decision to make is what kind of a plan do you need. If you need a strategic plan this Primer may be helpful to you.

What is a strategic plan?

A strategic plan is a map to the future you want. Strategic planning consists of answering important questions, one after another, to make the key decisions that will drive action and produce results. The answers to questions about your purpose, your current situation, your desired future, what needs to change, and how you will make change are the major components of a plan. The process includes not only the plan, but also taking action, checking to see if things are working out the way you intended in the plan, learning from experience and modifying your plan and actions until you have the results you want.

Strategic planning does not have to be lengthy and complex, it does have to help people face tough choices, gather facts, think logically, make important decisions, and gather support for action and follow-through.

When to plan?

Planning occurs all the time. Strategic plans are most useful when they set the direction for a significant time period and lead to major change in either the way you work, what your work is, the results you produce, or the size and scale of what you do.

Why do a strategic plan?

It is very easy to get caught up in day to day activities and not know if we are making progress or not. We are often dissatisfied about the way things are, but feel we can’t do anything to make change for the better.
We are sometimes fearful about the future and yet we don’t know what to do about it.

A strategic plan helps you focus on the purpose of the day to day activities in order to make sure they lead to the results you want and helps you know what to do to make a difference. It helps you be active in shaping the future, rather than be passive in experiencing it.

**Whose plan is it?**

*Anyone can plan and everyone should.* For strategic planning to be worth the time and effort, you need to think through the ownership of the plan at the very beginning.

Plans are more successful if they are made by the people who will carry them out or who are effected by them. However, this is usually a much larger number of people than are interested in planning at the beginning.

There are many ways to plan that involve the broader group of people who need to support it. However, it is essential that the leaders of organizations critical to the success of the effort be involved. These organizations are those that will be held accountable for the results, control needed resources, or deliver those services called for in the plan.

This Planning Primer refers to “you” as the plan owners. After reading through the Primer, decide who the plan owners are and figure out the roles people will need to play so that the appropriate people are involved in answering the questions and making the decisions.

### Creating the Strategic Plan

**How to plan?**

There is a simplified way to plan. The simplified way to plan involves answering the following five fundamental questions in sequence:

- What is our purpose?
- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be in the future?
- What do we need to do and how will we do it to get to the future we want?
- How do we turn planning into action and results?

The following sections lead you through a process designed to help you answer these questions and make the decisions critical to shaping your future. The answers to these questions and your decisions based on these answers become the “chapters” of your strategic plan.

- What is our purpose?
1. Who do we serve and what are their needs and requirements? (Customers)
2. What measurable difference do we make in the world or what is the tangible value we produce? (Outcomes)
3. What major problems do we want to solve and what important needs do we want to meet? (Issues)
4. Who controls the resources or holds you accountable? (Stakeholders)

Summarize the answers to these six questions in one to two short sentences. This becomes your Mission Statement. Powerful Mission Statements emphasize the measurable differences you will make in the world and the tangible value you will produce. You will refer to this statement often to keep a clear focus on your purpose.

Where are we now?

In accomplishing our purpose:
1. What are our strengths?
2. What are our weaknesses?
3. What opportunities exist for improvement?
4. What are the threats?

Make a list of the answers to these questions. You will refer to them when you are making decisions about how and what needs to change. (Current Situation)

Where do we want to be in the future?

Choose a point in time that is at least a year in the future. Imagine that you are being very successful in accomplishing your purpose, that you have built on your strengths, addressed your weaknesses, and can celebrate success.
1. What does that successful future look like?
2. What are we celebrating?
3. What good things are happening?
4. Who is benefiting?

Write a sentence that vividly captures your picture of the future. This is your Vision. You will ask the question: “Will this get us to the future we want?” as a way to make choices about what you will do and how.
What do we need to do and how will we do it to get to the future we want?

Compare where you are now (Current Situation), and where you want to be in the future (Vision).

1. What are the gaps between where your are now and where you want to be?
2. What are the critical few big changes that need to occur to bridge the gap?
3. What are the concrete, measurable accomplishments that are needed to reach each goal?

The answers to these questions help you formulate Goals and Objectives. Goals are what you see when the big changes occur. Objectives are how you know the change has occurred, or the way you measure progress. The Goals and Objectives are the framework for action. Summarize each major goal and its objectives. You will use the objectives as the starting point for deciding what you will do and how. The most powerful goals and objectives are one that make a measurable difference in the lives of people and have tangible value. Challenge yourself to have goals and objectives that make a positive difference in the world.

Review your Mission and your Current Situation. Keep these in mind as you answer the following questions for each objective.

1. What do you want to do to accomplish the objective?
2. How would you know when you’ve accomplished it?
3. How will you measure success?
4. How will you do it?
5. What do you need to get it done?
6. Who will do what and when to get it done?

For each objective summarize who does what, when, and how. Identify the needed resources and the measures. These are your Strategies. Think through the sequence of your strategies and the connections between strategies. Based on your Vision decide which are the most important strategies. It is important to have very sound strategies. A good way to strengthen your strategies is to answer the following questions:

- Does every element of the vision connect to a goal?
- Does every goal have the necessary objectives?
- Can your objectives be achieved through your strategies?
- Can you explain the logic of how your strategies will actually make a measurable difference?

Revise your strategies so that you are confident they are complete and sound.
How do we turn planning into action and results?

Once you are confident of the soundness of your strategies, it is time to move your plan to action. To produce the results you want you will use the decisions about the most important strategies to answer the following questions:

1. What activities do we keep doing, what do we stop doing, what do we change? What new activities are needed? How do we organize the way we work?
2. What are people’s responsibilities? Who do we hire? What training do we need?
3. What equipment, facilities, information, and technology do we need?
4. How do we spend our money? Does the way we intend to spend the money we already have or expect to get support the elements of our priority strategies?

Summarize the important things that need to be done to ensure the success of your strategies. This is your Strategic Direction. You will use the strategic direction to guide decisions about what needs to change.

Make the connections between the decisions in your Strategic Direction and the way you do your work. Typical connections would be to the decision-making processes in the following areas:

- budget and financial management;
- policy and legislative development;
- human resources management;
- information technology;
- management of physical facilities; and,
- management of the daily assignments and work.

A summary of these connections can be included in your Strategic Plan. However, the details are usually in other documents such as the budget or the human resource plan.

The most common reason why strategic plans do not lead to the desired results is lack of follow-through; either because these connections are not made and nothing changes in the way people work or because there is not persistent tracking of progress and course corrections are not made. Your plan is not meaningful until it is influencing the actions and decisions of your employees, stakeholders and customers are getting what they need from you.
To ensure plan success answer the following questions:

1. How will we use our plan?
2. Who needs to understand and support it?
3. Who is responsible for the success of the strategies and the accomplishment of the results?
4. What are our immediate next steps?
5. Who needs to make what commitments to ensure the next steps are successful?
6. What are the consequences for when we do or don’t keep our commitments?
7. When and how will we keep coming together to do course correction and celebrate success?

The summary of the answers to these questions is your Action Plan. The action plan is used on a daily or weekly basis to keep moving forward with the plan.

This Planning Primer is only the tip of the iceberg of strategic planning. If you become more interested in exploring strategic planning in more depth there are many resources available.