

THE STRATEGIC PLANNING TRAP

How to Avoid It

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To avoid the two traps so common in strategic planning—assuming that after the plan is developed, it will be carried out and using the work of developing the plan as an escape from the difficult process of managing change—it is essential that planning be approached as a developmental challenge. The process should be designed to increase the effectiveness of current operations and the ability of the organization to manage and make change. Goal statements for each project and a work plan are key tools.

Nonprofit service organizations are being called upon to respond to spiraling demands for their services. This explosion across a broad range of societal needs, triggered in large measure by fundamental changes in government policies and financial support, has produced unprecedented challenges.

Understandably, increasing numbers of such organizations are undertaking strategic planning to develop answers to some very tough questions. Do any of these sound familiar?

- With all the different needs and opportunities before us, how can we be sure which ones we should respond to? How can we get our arms around this so we don't just spin our wheels?
- How can we find time for strategic planning? Our staff is struggling just to keep up with our daily operations and crises!
- Funding of existing operations is a constant battle. How can we consider doing anything more without more funding?
- How can we get our board more involved, so that they take an active, responsible part in helping us shape our future?
- As we gear up for the future, how can we

be sure we won't have unpleasant surprises when we get there?

Feeling rather overwhelmed even before undertaking a strategic planning process, organizations are turning more and more to planning consultants to lay out and lead the process. Impressive presentations lead to stimulating discussions. With high hopes, the effort begins.

The scenario frequently unfolds something like this: Meetings are held with managers, staff, and board members, often starting with re-examination or creation of a mission statement and identification of strengths and limitations, needs and opportunities. Demographic and environmental studies are undertaken, assignments are made, other studies conducted, and more time-consuming discussions held. Already overworked and under stress, staff members soon begin to question this diversion of their time and energies from urgent operational matters. They are urged to keep the faith.

Gradually, recommendations and alternatives are developed, committee reports written and rewritten, consensus meetings and retreats held, controversies addressed, costs estimated, timetables and implementation

plans developed, and decisions reached. Finally, six months or more after beginning this process, an impressively bound strategic planning document appears that summarizes all of this effort.

A logical process to be sure. Too often, however, after these months of hard work by many people—and severe strain on current operations—the realization emerges that much of this may well have been an exercise in frustration. Why? What is the trap into which they have fallen?

Simply stated, the strategic planning trap is sprung when the traditional approach—“First plan; then do”—is the logic upon which the process is based. That logic assumes that, given a carefully developed strategic plan, the sought-for results will follow—that the organization will be able to carry out the plan. Logical, perhaps. However, far too often this proves to be a fallacious assumption. Consider these real-life examples.

- A large Jewish Community Center was experiencing a decline in membership following years of increasing community acceptance in its rapidly growing city. Funding had dropped more than 10 percent to a level of \$9 million. A new executive director was hired, and a strategic planning committee of the board was asked to lay out a new 5-year plan.

The strategic planning committee included a diverse group of executives and managers from commercial and industrial companies, as well as attorneys and accountants. It was chaired by a former president of the board. After several months of meetings and demographic studies, they agreed to a list of some 20 objectives that would set the Center onto a new trajectory of community service and fiscal stability.

Before proceeding further, they realized that to achieve any of these objectives something more was needed to develop and successfully carry out a plan based on these objectives.

- In a large metropolitan area, an educational organization was formed to encourage economically disadvantaged children

to stay in school. Three years after an auspicious and creative start, operations began to deteriorate, and funding became increasingly difficult to obtain. Key personnel changes were made, and the board engaged the services of a planning consultant to lead the board and administrative staff through a strategic planning process.

Although the administrative staff was small and very short-handed, a series of 2- to 4-hour sessions was held each month, with assignments between sessions. These were well organized and thoughtful, but participation was erratic. Trying desperately to deal with daily crises, someone observed that this process was like rearranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic. Despite this, strengths and weaknesses, and opportunities and threats were identified and discussed. Twenty-six action goals were defined, assignments issued, and timetables set.

Meanwhile, with operations becoming increasingly chaotic, some board members interjected themselves into administrative and personnel matters. Finger-pointing was rampant, and morale plummeted.

Some eight months after beginning the strategic planning process, an impressive 46-page (plus appendices) report was issued. There was only one problem with the report: The organization did not have the capacity, know-how, or ability to carry out the plan.

- The auxiliary of a large hospital in a major metropolitan area had a long and distinguished history of initiatives that resulted in new services, new facilities, and new programs of importance to the hospital and to the community. In recent years, demographic changes and new economic pressures in the hospital had resulted in decreasing responsiveness by the power figures in the hospital to new initiatives by the auxiliary. The officers of the auxiliary began to seek consulting help to develop a new strategic plan.

When the consultant began working

with them, three things became clear. First, important new service and facility need did exist that the auxiliary could play an important role in initiating or supporting. Second, new and creative ways would be required to initiate and build support for such efforts by various parts of the hospital. Finally, the officers would have to develop and apply much more disciplined methods and attitudes to the management of their own initiatives in the new environment.

New strategies were discussed for pursuing a few of the most promising service and facility needs. Commitments and assignments were made to explore these with hospital officials, and to take a few modest steps to broaden the support base of the auxiliary. In follow-up meetings, the officers kept revisiting and agonizing over their decisions, their assignments, and their frustrations. The recycling continued, despite new ideas for making the required actions easier to carry out. Their discomfort over holding each other responsible for meeting their commitments was greater than their determination to move forward.

Under these circumstances, trying to develop a strategic plan would have been a diversionary and futile exercise.

The truth is, the vast majority of service organizations struggle mightily to carry out their existing commitments and programs, although in many cases, substantial opportunities exist to improve the effectiveness and impact of their existing resources. Key managers often do not have the know-how or the experience to improve current operations in a comprehensive or organized manner, much less simultaneously develop and carry out longer-range plans for expansion and change.

Under these circumstances, investing the time and energies of key people in a process of defining the future becomes a diversion from the less exciting but absolutely essential task of improving operational performance and service quality. Acting on the belief that developing a new strategic plan will galva-

nize a bogged-down organization is a fantasy—an escape into planning. The result: frustration, misdirected energies, loss of credibility, and a squandered opportunity to respond to the challenge.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH: THE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Our experiences suggest a different approach: Think of the strategic planning process as a developmental challenge. Begin with carefully designed steps to increase the ability of members of the organization to learn and gradually master how to plan, manage, and carry out important improvements in current operations. Foster collaboration, and introduce new tools and methods, as needed, to help achieve successful changes. Then, use these very tools and methods later on in the strategic planning phase. Know-how and confidence serve as building blocks for the challenging tasks of strategic planning and implementation.

Carefully tailored to the unique characteristics of the organization, three basic work elements are woven together in a step-by-step developmental process:

1. *Short-term performance improvement:* Focus first on a few immediate opportunities for streamlining and strengthening tangible operational and quality delivery processes that people agree are most important. The vehicle: small inter-functional teams charged with developing practical recommendations for improvement that can be put into effect quickly.

Too busy? When the people working on these task assignments believe that they are being empowered to make their work more rewarding and the agency more impactful, inevitably they find the time to work on them, no matter how busy they are. The opportunity to directly influence one's destiny is heady stuff.

Depending on the nature of the organization and how it may be trying to shape its relationship with the community, task teams may include lay leaders as well as

staff. Under the leadership of the management group, each team receives a sharply defined, measurable, near-term (usually 6 to 12 weeks) assignment.

With appropriate guidance, team members learn how to work together on clarifying their task and their team leader's role, brain storming, work planning, data gathering and analysis, individual and sub-team assignments, accountability for results, testing the practicality and cost of their recommendations, and reporting and reviewing with the management team.

These learnings are used not only to achieve tangible, rewarding results here and now but also to increase the confidence, readiness, and ability of people to work together and carry out subsequent projects of increasing scope, complexity, and impact.

2. *Development of leadership for change:* The improvement projects are designed also to increase the capabilities of members of the leadership group to work together to plan and manage performance and quality improvement on an ongoing, rather than crisis basis, and to learn what is required to provide cohesive leadership for strategic planning.

Built into this leadership development process are organizing, facilitating, and working with teams; helping create practical work plans; providing constructive feedback; making decisions on teams' recommendations; managing the implementation of approved changes; and following up on their effectiveness. Fundamentally important is developing attitudes and capabilities of key managers to work together on matters that transcend their usual functional or group concerns.

In short, the process is designed to coalesce individual managers into a real management team that focuses effectively on common goals and mobilizes the organization to accomplish them—while simultaneously carrying out their functional responsibilities. This dimension of leadership is essential for moving successfully into the strategic planning phase.

3. *Board, community, and staff collaboration:* The board is kept informed so as to increase their understanding about the developmental phase and to stimulate support for the strategic planning that is to follow. As the first wave of improvement projects nears completion, the intensity of dialogue and collaboration increases among administration leadership and board and community regarding plans for moving into the strategic planning phase.

By this time it is clear that the organization has begun to develop a heightened capability to undertake the complexities of strategic planning in a disciplined way. This goes a long way toward building the confidence, understanding, and active involvement of the board and community members. Working through this developmental process creates the momentum for moving forward with the more traditional work of strategic planning. These now familiar disciplines, methods, tools, and managerial cohesiveness continue to be used.

The developmental process avoids the two strategic planning traps into which so many organizations fall: (1) assuming that the organization has the capability and know-how for carrying out a strategic plan and (2) unconsciously using strategic planning as an escape from the hard work of organizational performance improvement.

The balance of this article outlines how this developmental strategic planning process has been applied in a rapidly growing legal services agency under the auspices of a Jewish federation in a major metropolitan area. Key learnings are summarized.

AVOIDING THE TRAPS—ANATOMY OF A SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

By May 1996, only six years after the agency's creation, a legal services staff had grown to 45 casehandlers and support staff, a caseload of 7,000 and a budget of \$3 million.

This exponential growth was expected to continue at the rate of 15 to 20 percent per year (doubling in 4–5 years). Further, the social, political, and legal environments were very much in flux. It was time to set a more deliberate course, rather than continuing to respond ad hoc to changing pressures and opportunities.

In preliminary discussion with a management consultant, it became clear that several fundamental operational and managerial issues were impeding the most effective use of existing resources. Further, the board had been rather passive in overseeing and steering the organization so long as funding was adequate.

Instead of plunging directly into strategic planning, the key managers agreed that a developmental phase, focused on improving important operational and quality needs, would be timely and essential. They agreed that this was needed also in order to develop (1) the basis for practical, realistic strategic planning; (2) awareness and interest on the part of the board; and (3) the capacity of the organization to carry out a strategic plan. What follows is a summary of how the effort was launched and how it proceeded.

Phase I—Performance Improvement (June 1996–February 1997)

1. *Needs and Opportunities: Involving the Staff:* Individual interviews with the consultant reveal six major areas of need: (1) staff support services, (2) case intake process, (3) performance appraisal system, (4) staff communications, (5) personnel policies, and (6) collaboration among units and managers.
Consultants summarize their findings and report to the management group and then to the entire staff. Commitment emerges that the first phase of the strategic planning process must be to strengthen the capacity of the organization to plan and implement change and improvement, starting with the six areas revealed in the interviews.
2. *Launching a First Wave of Improvement Projects:* New disciplines and tools are applied to ensure successful, on-time task group performance: criteria for project selection (short term, measurable, important to the people concerned, doable with existing resources); written project assignments; leadership of task groups; step-by-step work plans and individual accountability; and a management review and steering process.
Inter-functional task groups are formed to address the first five of the six areas identified. The sixth—collaboration among units—will be achieved as a byproduct of the interaction of members of the five task groups and their managers.
Specific assignments to be worked on first are selected for these five areas. Written goal statements are prepared, expressed in tangible, measurable terms, with a time target for each. Key managers discuss these, and reach agreement.
3. *From a Group of Managers to a Management Team:* The struggle begins to understand what leadership of a comprehensive process entails. Working sessions are held among the key managers, and with the consultant on these topics: how to review and support the work of the task groups without undermining the role of the task group leaders, and how to deal with emerging conflicts concerning their own individual attitudes, behaviors, and responsibilities.
4. *Presentation and Handling of Task Groups' Recommendation:* The management team learns the hard way that old patterns of management can generate substantial backlash. In structured meetings with the management team, they review recommendations by the task groups. Some, after heated discussion, are revised before being approved.
5. *The Process is Assessed:* Participants respond to a questionnaire; analysis by the consultants highlights suggestions for improving the process and for making it

more acceptable to staff members. Follow-up meetings with management team and with staff crystallize their understanding about strengthening the process for continuous improvement.

6. *Follow-up on Implementation of Initial Projects:* Three months after approval, there is fine-tuning for maximum effectiveness and recognition of results achieved.

By now, sufficient confidence and know-how have been developed to enable attention to be turned to the strategic planning task.

Phase II—Strategic Planning (February 1997–April 1998)

1. *Identifying the Areas for Defining the Future (5-year Time Frame):* Five areas are identified: geographic scope, service offerings, staffing size and mix, collaborative opportunities with other organizations, and fund development.

Task group methodologies developed in Phase I are applied. Written assignments are issued to inter-functional task groups to study and make recommendations backed by analysis, data, cost estimates, and implementation proposals.

It was agreed that the pace of this effort would be geared to the expanding caseloads of the participants, the need to gain cooperation of various other public service agencies, summer vacations, and the like.

2. *Sketching out the Report:* Top management creates a rough sketch of how the strategic planning report to the board will be organized. What will it look like? This is used to provide focus for the task groups and for management's thinking.
3. *Reference Data Compiled:* Top management pulls together historic and projected data for reference by the task groups. Graphs and charts are developed for use by the task groups, and as appendices to the report.
4. *The Management Review Process:* Periodic, in-depth discussions with the task

groups ensure mutually supportive thinking, minimal overlap of effort, maintenance of the pace, and consistency in the task group reports.

5. *Task Groups Submit Their Reports:* Through a series of meetings, discussions, and debates, agreement by the management team is reached on content, presentation, and format and on how the reports are to be used in the final report to the board.
6. *Shaping the Final Report:* The text of the report is written. Task group reports are integrated and summarized. Recommendations for each area of the plan are shown year by year for the next five years, and cumulatively, with numbers and costs. The report assumes final form.
7. *Gaining Board Approval:* As the effort proceeds, ongoing dialogue is conducted between the executive director and key board members so that there are no surprises. Understanding, input, and support are essentially assured by the time the report is submitted.
8. *Board Consideration:* All recommendations except one are approved; that one is sensibly deferred. Because the groundwork with the board had been well laid, implementation of several of the recommendations was informally approved in advance, and implementation begun.
9. *Implementation:* Implementation proceeds smoothly. In the light of continual changes in the environment as well as in the organization, plans are in place to roll the strategic plan forward after 18–24 months.

Phase III—Improvement Becomes Truly Continuous

As implementation of the strategic plan proceeds, the number and diversity of cases and staff continue to increase. The organization's continuous improvement process is expected to play a vital part both in further improving service levels and in increasing the personal rewards from providing these vital services. Continuous exami-

nation and improvement are now accepted characteristics of the organization's culture.

For example, three years after the developmental process began and two years after first-wave implementation and follow-up review, the management team, with other key staff members, identified three important matters that needed to be improved. Work on these was carried out successfully and expeditiously.

Figure 1 was included in the strategic planning report to the board of directors. It shows the inter-relationship and timing of the three phases of the developmental strategic planning process (Phase I–III, above).

KEY LEARNINGS

Approach Strategic Planning as a Developmental Challenge.

Design the process to increase the effectiveness of current operations and the ability of the organization to manage change. This avoids the two traps so common in strategic planning efforts: (1) assuming that after the plan is developed, it will be carried out, and (2) using the work of developing the strategic plan as an (unconscious) escape from the difficult but essential task of managing performance improvement and change. The key elements in avoiding those traps are as follows:

- *Begin with several important short-term improvement projects using inter-functional teams:* Introduce the methods, tools, and processes that foster broad involvement and collaboration, as well as new attitudes about what is possible and management disciplines for effective leadership. Enthusiasm for improvement and change is gradually developed through achievement of initial successes. Learning how to use these methods and tools—by both task teams and the management team—is an essential part of this process.

For example, one of the most useful but often underused tools is the basic work plan (see Figure 2). Understandingly,

people tend to resist committing themselves by putting their plans on paper. However, the very act of putting specific steps in writing helps task group members understand better their various functions, and begin collaborating—without lectures or formal instructions about the importance of collaboration! They learn how to brainstorm, to challenge each others' thinking, to discover in advance when they have skipped or oversimplified some steps, to examine alternatives, and to explore possibilities for taking steps concurrently. Including Beginning and Ending dates for each step strengthens both planning and accountability for results and develops the role and responsibilities of the team leaders, thereby substantially increasing the likelihood of successful, on-time achievement.

As the work proceeds, distributing updated copies of the work plan is an easy, convenient way of reporting progress to task group members and others concerned. In addition, it provides management with a key tool for conducting progress reviews and for ensuring that the work of the teams is mutually supportive and on schedule.

- *Overcoming pessimism over limitations and previous discouragements:* The focus begins to shift from "why we can't" to "how can we." Success (even if modest) becomes contagious; increasingly, more and more people want to climb on board. The view of what is possible in the future begins to expand.
- *Create an environment conducive to experimentation:* One agency needed to obtain much broader and more active involvement by its board members and other members of a rather complacent community. Following up on a mailed announcement, seven board members agreed that each would telephone eight designated families to encourage them to participate in a very important meeting to select and launch initial improvement projects. As a result, some 40 people came to the meeting, surpassing by far the number who

Figure 1. Time-line of the strategic planning process.

Process Elements	1996	1997	1998	
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I. Continuous Improvement Process (CIP) <u>Purpose:</u> To build a solid base for future growth by strengthening current operations, organization, and management capacity.				
<u>Phase 1:</u> Six project teams: Recommend operations improvement changes, approval, implementation.	=====	=====		
<u>Phase 2:</u> Study of work flow and procedures to further improve productivity (consultants and staff).			=====	
II. Vision 2000 <u>Purpose:</u> To develop and implement a practical plan for carrying mission into the new millennium and beyond.				
<u>a. Staff (5 study teams):</u> Research and recommendations to Board		=====		
<u>b. Board:</u> Discussion and direction-setting			=====	
<u>c. Staff:</u> Implementation			=====	
III. Management and Organization Development <u>Purpose:</u> To provide successful experience and skills in planning and managing improvement and change.				
<u>Vehicles:</u> Processes used in I and II above backed by consultant services and coaching.	=====	=====	=====	

otherwise would have participated. This experiment was so successful that these board members continue to serve as newly designated Community Liaison Representatives (CLRs) whenever it is important to make personal contact with families in the community.

Strengthen the Capacity to Manage Change

- *Mold functional managers into a coherent management team:* Highly trained specialists who have become department or functional managers may have great difficulty learning what it means to wear both functional and top management "hats." For the organization to manage further growth and change, it is crucially important that this development be designed

into the process. By collaborating with each other in the management of improvement, key managers learn what it means to deal with increasingly complex organization-wide issues as a management team, even as they continue their roles as functional managers. Thus, managerial and leadership development is built into the process as a crucially important byproduct.

- *Confront the "loose-tight dilemma":* Many service organizations are staffed by people who are strongly motivated by the organization's mission in society. The opportunity to contribute to this good cause compensates for relatively low pay scales. Board and other community members are similarly motivated, even though they have but limited time to devote to the affairs of the organization.

These facts set the stage for the loose-

tight dilemma. Urgency and need for rapid response to the operational and developmental challenges generate an impetus to move forward as rapidly as possible. On the other hand, it is important not to turn these people off by making excessive demands on their time and energy.

Part of the art of leadership is sensing the optimum point on the loose-tight spectrum that is most appropriate for the organization, its people, and its constituents. It is our experience that top management tends to underestimate the power of genuine involvement, and the excitement that can be generated by determined leadership, to stimulate the willingness of people to participate actively and responsibly in the process of moving the organization forward.

When expectations are too modest, the unintended message is that the effort is not

all that important. A critical mass of effort is necessary for the undertaking to be sustained effectively. Further, management must expect, but not allow itself to be diverted by, periodic testing by individuals of its seriousness of purpose.

Vigilance and determined leadership provide the ultimate answer to this dilemma—keeping in mind the variables outlined below.

Work the Variables That Affect People's Dedication:

The first variable is the meaningful involvement of staff in identifying and selecting the initial improvement projects and then experiencing the personal rewards of working together to bring about tangible results.

Second is the effectiveness of the task group leaders in working with team members

Figure 2. A sample work plan.

Date Prepared _____
Revised _____

Goal: _____
(include what will be achieved; how it will be measured; target date)

Primary Responsibility of: _____

#	Steps (Start each with action verb)	Who Resp.*	Target Dates		Status as of _____
			Reg.	End.	

*If more than one person is responsible for a step, circle the person with prime responsibility.

Table 1. Summary: Avoiding the Trap

A well-designed and executed development process is the key to avoiding the strategic planning trap.

1. Begin with a few performance improvement projects that:
 - Are important to the people concerned
 - Are tangible and measurable
 - Can involve small cross-functional/interdiscipline teams
 - Can be achieved in a short time (2–3 months or less) with the resources already available
2. Design the process so as to:
 - Build in new tools, methods, and ways of thinking, collaborating, and planning
 - Develop managerial attitudes and skills for leading the organization to achieve increasingly challenging projects, and far-reaching goals
 - Experiment with new ways of involving the board and of expanding community participation
 - Test the capacity of staff and other involved people to dedicate the time and energy needed for increasingly useful participation
3. Assess and increase the effectiveness of the total organization to plan and carry out targeted changes:
 - Follow up on effectiveness of approved changes several months after implementation
 - Review and strengthen processes used for performance improvement when moving into the strategic planning phase
 - Further strengthen the managerial process to lead the strategic planning effort
4. Build on the momentum and confidence generated by performance improvement successes to launch the strategic planning phase:
 - Identify the few key dimensions which will define the next 3–5 years
 - For each, define a measurable, time-bound assignment for study and recommendations
 - Get volunteers (or appoint as necessary) to serve on inter-functional/inter-discipline task groups to carry out these assignments
 - Apply the managerial processes used for performance improvement to launch, review and coordinate the work of the task groups
 - Keep the board and influential community members regularly informed, and get their feed-back as to both the planning process and the thoughts that are emerging; inform the task groups of this feed-back
 - Attach timing and costs to all recommendations

in brainstorming ideas and then collaborating in developing work plans that help the teams accomplish their goals on time. This includes following up to make sure that all individual commitments are understood and met and keeping team members and management regularly informed as to progress and road blocks.

Third is the frequency and nature of the follow-up and review process by the management team. This process must be planned and carried out in ways that (1) demonstrate management's continuing interest in the projects; (2) ensure accountability for on-time results; (3) provide prompt, thoughtful, and constructive response to all recommendations (and when modifying or rejecting a

recommendation, providing a complete and honest explanation); and (4) keep everyone informed throughout the process through periodic major meetings in which all participants are involved.

The final variable is timely recognition and appreciation (both private and public) of each team's accomplishments—an often-overlooked factor.

Use the Tools and Disciplines— Consistently

Three tools and disciplines are particularly useful for enabling the task groups to perform successfully and on time, and with a sense of real control and confidence. These apply in both the initial (improvement) phase

and the strategic planning phase that follows.

1. *The goal statement for each project or undertaking:* The goal should be (1) important to the people concerned, (2) tangible and measurable, (3) short term (generally 6–12 weeks), (4) doable with the available resources within the targeted time frame, and (5) expressed in writing.
2. *The work plan,* developed by each project team, after initial brainstorming, about how it intends to proceed. The written work plan lays out all the steps to be taken to accomplish each goal, the sequence and timing (start and completion dates), and the person responsible for each step. The status column is used to keep all interested people informed by periodically distributing photocopies.
3. *The management process* utilizes the updated work plan of each team as a key tool for disciplined, fast moving, but thoughtful reviews of progress and for coordinat-

ing and steering the overall effort. Periodic meetings with members of all project teams together can be exciting and productive occasions for renewing the impetus and for keeping everyone informed and on track.

Finally, striking the right balance between the urgency of the undertaking and the capacity of the people concerned to respond is a continuous underlying challenge. Management's determination and constancy of interest and involvement, coupled with demonstrated sensitivity, are key leadership attributes for adroitly testing and expanding the limits of pace and accountability for results.

It is our hope that these learnings will prove useful to others in public service organizations as they undertake strategic planning efforts that avoid the traps too often experienced by others.