



Module 4: Board Handbook for Strategic Planning

Version 1 – May 21, 2002

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I Introduction	1
II Strategic Planning.....	2
What is Strategic Planning?	2
Why Strategic Planning?	3
What Strategic Planning is Not	3
Key Concepts	4
Prerequisites for Planning	5
III The Strategic Planning Process.....	6
Strategic Planning Model	6
Strategic Planning Flow Chart	6
Step One – Getting Ready	6
Step Two – Adopting the Mission and Vision	7
Step Three – Assessing the Situation	8
Step Four – Developing Strategies, Goals, and Objectives	9
Step Five – Completing the Written Plan	10
IV Conclusion.....	11
 <i>Appendices</i>	
<i>A – The Strategic Planning Committee</i>	
<i>B - VON _____ Branch Strategic Planning Committee Work Plan 200X, Template</i>	
<i>C – Team Building Exercise: Using Creativity in Decision-Making</i>	
<i>D – Brainstorming</i>	
<i>E – Assessing the Situation</i>	
<i>F – Standard Format for a Strategic Plan</i>	
<i>G – Endnotes</i>	

STRATEGIC PLANNING

I Introduction

The following information has been adapted from the Support Centers of America¹ – a not for profit organization with a mission to *increase the effectiveness of the nonprofit sector by providing management consulting, training and research. Their guiding principles are to promote client independence, expand cultural proficiency, collaborate with others, ensure their own competence, and act as one organization.*

Strategic planning is a step-by-step process that identifies who you are, where you are, where you want to go, how you wish to get there, when you want to arrive, who will do the work, and what are the costs². Within the VON, the process of strategic planning sets the direction for the organization at the local level, which is in keeping with the direction set nationally. The branch board is required to make internal and external assessments, know the needs of key stakeholders and identify key issues. By developing strategies to address the issues and making plans for implementing and evaluating progress, the branch board is able to “plot the course” for the organization at the local level.

Purpose of Handbook

The purpose of this handbook is:

- To provide board members with information about the strategic planning process;
- To identify the issues that boards must address prior to undertaking the strategic planning process; and
- To present a model for board members to consider as they embark upon the actual process of strategic planning.

II Strategic Planning

What is Strategic Planning?

Strategic Planning is a tool to be used, in the case of boards, to do a better job – to focus energy, to ensure that all members of the organization are working toward the same goals, to assess and adjust the organization's direction in response to a changing environment. In short, strategic planning is a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it, with a focus on the future³.

VON Context

In the VON Context, strategic planning occurs both nationally and locally. The vision, mission, core values and philosophy of the organization are developed nationally and supported locally.

A word by word dissection of the definition of strategic planning provides the key elements that underlie the meaning and success of a strategic planning process:

The process is **strategic** because it involves preparing the best way to respond to the circumstances of the organization's environment, whether or not its circumstances are known in advance; nonprofits often must respond to dynamic and even hostile environments. Being strategic, then, means being clear about the organization's objectives, being aware of the organization's resources, and incorporating both into being consciously responsive to a dynamic environment.

The process is about **planning** because it involves intentionally setting goals (i.e., choosing a desired future) and developing an approach to achieving those goals.

The process is **disciplined** in that it calls for a certain order and pattern to keep it focused and productive. The process raises a sequence of questions that helps planners examine experience, test assumptions, gather and incorporate information about the present, and anticipate the environment in which the organization will be working in the future.

Finally, the process is about **fundamental decisions and actions** because choices must be made in order to answer the sequence of questions mentioned above. The plan is ultimately no more, and no less, than a set of decisions about what to do, why to do it, and how to do it. Because it is impossible to do everything that needs to be done in this world, strategic planning implies that some organizational decisions and actions are more important than others – and that much of the strategy lies in making the tough decisions about what is most important to achieving organizational success.

The strategic planning process can be complex, challenging, and even messy, but it is

always defined by the basic ideas outlined above - and you can always return to these basics for insight into your own strategic planning process.

Understanding Terminology

Strategic – In the dictionary, the word strategy has to do with war and deception of an enemy. In nonprofit organizations, strategy has to do with responding to a dynamic and often hostile environment in pursuit of a public service mission. Thinking strategically thus means being informed and consciously responsive to this dynamic environment.

Planning – Strategic planning is planning because it involves intentionally setting goals (choosing a desired future) and developing an approach to achieving those goals.

Why Strategic Planning?

Some of the fundamental benefits to the strategic planning process and the development of the final plan include:

- A framework and a clearly defined direction that guides and supports the organization;
- A uniform vision and purpose that is shared among constituents;
- An increased level of commitment to the organization and its goals;
- Improved quality of services for clients and a means of measuring the service;
- A basis for fundraising and board development;
- The ability to set priorities and to match resources to opportunities; and
- The ability to deal with risks from the external environment and having a process to respond to crisis.

What Strategic Planning Is Not

Everything said above to describe what strategic planning is can also provide an understanding of what it is not. For example, it is about fundamental decisions and actions, but it does not attempt to make future decisions. Strategic planning involves anticipating the future environment, but the decisions are made in the present. This means that over time, the organization must stay abreast of changes in order to make the best decisions it can at any given point – it must manage, as well as plan, strategically.

Strategic planning has also been described as a tool – but it is not a substitute for the exercise of judgment by leadership. Ultimately, the leaders of any organization need to sit back and ask, and answer, "What are the most important issues to respond to?" and "How shall we respond?" Just as the hammer does not create the bookshelf, so the

data analysis and decision-making tools of strategic planning do not make the organization work – they can only support the intuition, reasoning skills, and judgment that people bring to their organization.

Finally, strategic planning, though described as disciplined, does not typically flow smoothly from one step to the next. It is a creative process, and the fresh insight arrived at today might very well alter the decision made yesterday. Inevitably the process moves forward and back several times before arriving at the final set of decisions. Therefore, no one should be surprised if the process feels less like a comfortable trip on a commuter train, but rather like a ride on a roller coaster. But even roller coaster cars arrive at their destination, as long as they stay on track!

Successful strategic planning:

- Leads to action;
- Builds a shared vision that is values-based;
- Is an inclusive, participatory process in which board and staff take on a shared ownership;
- Accepts accountability to the community;
- Is externally focused and sensitive to the organization's environment;
- Is based on quality data;
- Requires an openness to questioning the status quo; and
- Is a key part of effective management, nationally and locally.

Key Concepts

What is the difference between a **purpose**, **mission**, and **vision**? There is a lot of confusion about these three words in the nonprofit planning literature. For the sake of clarity, the following definitions are used consistently throughout this document.

A **purpose** is an end result, a goal which an organization is seeking to accomplish. The purpose is the answer to the question, "Why does this organization exist?" The answer is to achieve the purpose.

Mission is typically understood as a broader concept. Mission is synonymous with mission statement and includes three major concepts: the purpose (as above), the "business" an organization engages in to achieve this purpose, and a statement of values guiding the accomplishment of the mission.

VON's Mission

VON Canada, a charity, guided by the principles of primary healthcare, works in partnership with Canadians for a healthier society through:

1. Leadership in community-based care.
2. Delivery of innovative, comprehensive health and social services.
3. Influence in the development of health and social policy.

Finally, **vision** is the most global concept. A vision is quite literally a mental image of the successful accomplishment of the mission, and thus the purpose of the organization.

VON's Vision

VON will be Canada's leading charitable organization addressing community health and social needs.

Prerequisites for Planning: Key Factors that Must be in Place Before Beginning the Planning Process

As with any major effort, a planning process has its proper time and place in the organization. There are certain organizational elements that must be in place in order to ensure that the planning process will provide the maximum benefit to the organization. It is important to be candid when assessing the organization's readiness to engage in the planning process. Even if you get half way through the planning process before you realize that the organization is not ready, stop and remedy the situation before continuing with the process. Unfortunately, many organizations plan when the organization is not ready. They always have an unsatisfactory planning process and subsequent results. Make sure the following elements are addressed before making the commitment to plan:

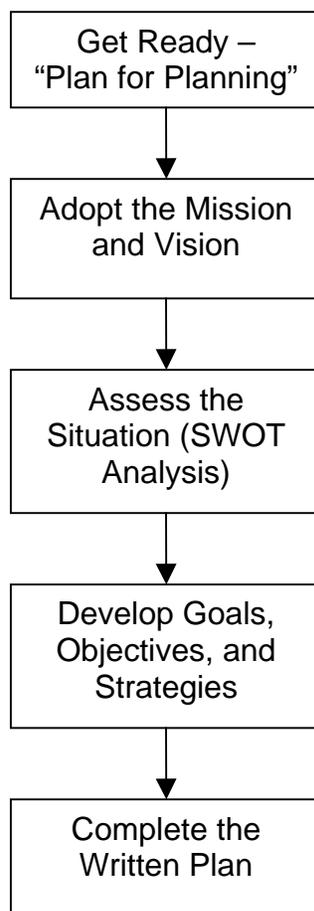
- A commitment of active and involved leadership, with continuous leadership engaged throughout the planning process;
- A resolution of major crises that may interfere with the long range thinking during, commitment to, and participation in the planning process;
- A board and staff who understand the purpose of planning and what it can and cannot accomplish, as well as consensus about expectations;
- A commitment of resources to adequately assess current programs and the ability to meet current and future needs; and
- A willingness to question the status quo and to look at new approaches to performing and evaluating the community needs identified by the organization.

III The Strategic Planning Process

Strategic Planning Model

Many books and articles describe how best to do strategic planning, and many go to much greater lengths than this document, but the purpose here is to present the fundamental steps that must be taken in the strategic planning process. Below is a brief description of the five steps in the process. These steps are a recommendation, but not the only recipe for creating a strategic plan; other sources may recommend entirely different steps or variations of these steps. However, the steps outlined below describe the basic work that needs to be done and the typical products of the process.

Strategic Planning Flow Chart



Step One – Getting Ready

To get ready for strategic planning, a branch board must first assess if it is ready. While a number of issues must be addressed in assessing readiness, the determination essentially comes down to whether members of the branch board as well as the

organization's leaders are truly committed to the effort, and whether they are able to devote the necessary attention to the "big picture".

A branch board that determines it is indeed ready to begin strategic planning must perform five tasks to pave the way for an organized process:

- Identify specific issues or choices that the planning process should address;
- Clarify roles (who does what in the process);
- Establish a Strategic Planning Committee (see Appendix A);
- Develop/review organizational profile (i.e., organizational chart);
- Determine if there are prior documents available related to the Strategic Planning Committee (i.e., prior strategic plans can serve as a template and guide the board as they undertake the strategic planning process);
- Identify the information that must be collected, such as prior Community Needs Assessments, to help make sound decisions; and
- Identify the internal and external stakeholders that may be approached for the situation assessment (refer to Step Three – Assessing the Situation). Some of the stakeholders that the branch board may wish to approach are as follows:
 - Internal – Branch board members and staff.
 - External – Donors, clients, community leaders (e.g., Mayor, Town/City Councilors, MLAs), community partners, senior citizen groups, volunteer organizations, service organizations, representatives from local health care organizations (e.g., hospitals, nursing homes, etc.) etc.

The product developed at the end of the step one is a **work plan** (see Appendix B). This is essentially a plan about **how** the branch board will conduct its strategic planning.

Strategic planning demands a different way of thinking. Individuals must be creative and be able to brainstorm, problem-solve, and reach consensus on a decision as a group. For some board members, this way of thinking and functioning (as individuals and as a team) may be completely new. To help the members of the Strategic Planning Committee come together as a whole and practice these skills, it is suggested that they engage in a team building exercise (see Appendix C for a suggested team building exercise. It would be beneficial for the board to designate a facilitator to lead this exercise. This individual may be a board member or a VON Canada staff member).

Step Two – Adopting the Mission and Vision

As noted earlier, a mission statement is like an introductory paragraph: it lets the reader know where the writer is going, and it also shows that the writer knows where he or she is going. Likewise, a mission statement must communicate the essence of an organization to the reader. An organization's ability to articulate its mission indicates its

focus and purposefulness. A mission statement typically describes an organization in terms of its:

- Purpose – Why the organization exists, and what it seeks to accomplish;
- Business – The main method or activity through which the organization tries to fulfill this purpose; and
- Values – The principles or beliefs that guide an organization's members as they pursue the organization's purpose.

Whereas the mission statement summarizes the what, how, and why of an organization's work, a vision statement presents an image of what success will look like.

Both the vision and mission statements of VON Canada have been articulated earlier in the document.

With mission and vision statements in hand, an organization has taken an important step towards establishing a shared, coherent idea of what it is strategically planning for.

At the end of step two, a **confirmation of the mission statement and vision statement** is established and adopted.

VON Context

VON Canada establishes the Vision and Mission for the organization. It is the role and responsibility of the branch boards to adopt these core directives in fulfilling the organization's mandate.

Step Three – Assessing the Situation (see Appendix E)

Once the branch board has committed to why it exists and what it does, it must take a clear-eyed look at its current situation. Remember, that part of strategic planning is an awareness of resources and an eye to the future environment, so that a board can successfully respond to changes in the environment. Situation assessment, therefore, means obtaining current information about the organization's strengths, weaknesses, and performance (i.e., SWOT Analysis – see Appendix E. It may be beneficial for the board to designate a facilitator to lead the activities used during the SWOT analysis [e.g., focus group]. This individual may be a board member or a VON Canada staff member.). This information will highlight the critical issues that the organization faces and that the board's strategic plan must address. These could include a variety of primary concerns, such as funding issues, new program opportunities, changing regulations or changing needs in the client population, and so on. The point here is to choose the most important issues to address. The Strategic Planning Committee should agree on no more than **five to ten critical issues** around which to organize the strategic plan.

VON Context

The relationship of the Branch (Executive) Director plays an important role in understanding the integration of the work of the board with that of branch operations. The ability of the branch to contribute to community building is heightened with the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

The products of step three include: a **database** of quality information that can be used to make decisions; and a list of **critical issues** which demand a response from the board - the most important issues the organization needs to deal with.

Step Four – Developing Strategies, Goals, and Objectives

Once the organization's mission has been affirmed and its critical issues identified, it is time for the branch board to figure out what to do about them within the coming year: the broad approaches to be taken (**strategies**), and the general and specific results to be sought (the **goals** and **objectives**). Strategies, goals, and objectives may come from individual inspiration, group discussion, formal decision-making techniques, and so on but the bottom line is that, in the end, the leadership agrees on how to address the critical issues. This can take considerable time and flexibility. Discussions at this stage frequently will require additional information or a reevaluation of conclusions reached during the situation assessment. It is even possible that new insights will emerge which change the thrust of the mission statement. It is important that planners are not afraid to go back to an earlier step in the process and take advantage of available information to create the best possible plan.

Understanding Terminology⁴

Goals – Goals are broad and general. They are usually long-term statements of what the board hopes to achieve in the next 3-5 years.

Objectives – An objective is a short-term, practical target related to a goal (i.e., what the board hopes to achieve in the next year). It is through the objectives that goals are reached. Objectives are SMART – **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic, and **T**imely. A few objectives may be needed to reach each goal.

Strategies – Strategies are the how to's of the objectives. These are the actions you need to take to make this happen (e.g., organize a workshop, launch a media campaign, advocate for policy change).

Example⁵:

Goal #1 – To reduce the degree of malnutrition among young children.

Objective #1.1 – To increase the knowledge of 60% of families in our community (specify) about relevant information regarding health and nutrition in the next three years.

Strategy – Develop a guide book with and for families. (Note: There would be additional strategies listed)

Objective #1.2 – To build the skills of 60% of families in our community (specific) in learning how to effectively apply health and nutrition information in helping their young children to be more healthy.

Strategy – Design many small workshop sessions with families in areas that they can access.

Branch boards may find it beneficial to limit the number of goals, objectives and strategies that they wish to focus on for the coming year. For example, the branch board may identify five to ten goals and develop three to five objectives and strategies for each goal.

The product of step four is an **outline of the organization's strategic directions** – the general strategies, long-range goals, and specific objectives of its response to critical issues.

Step Five – Completing the Written Plan

The mission has been articulated and adopted, the critical issues identified, and the goals and strategies agreed upon. This step essentially involves putting all that down on paper. Usually one member of the Strategic Planning Committee will draft a final planning document and submit it for review to all key decision makers (usually the board and the Branch [Executive] Director). Also it may be helpful to confer with the Branch (Executive) Director to determine whether the document can be translated into operational plans (the subsequent detailed action plans for accomplishing the goals proposed by the strategic plan) and to ensure that the plan answers key questions about priorities and directions in sufficient detail to serve as a guide. Revisions should not be dragged out for months, but action should be taken to answer any important questions that are raised at this step. It would certainly be a mistake to bury conflict at this step just to wrap up the process more quickly, because the conflict, if serious, will inevitably undermine the potency of the strategic directions chosen by the planning committee.

It is important to note that the strategic plan needs to be evaluated or revisited on an ongoing basis to ensure that it is still positioning the organization positively in relation to the changes in the environment. The strategic plan needs to be dynamic, not static and the board must monitor it to ensure that it is still relevant.

The product of step five is a **strategic plan!** (see Appendix F for a sample format).

IV Conclusion

Strategic planning is an ongoing and dynamic process. The process used to develop the strategic plan can guarantee success or failure. Credibility and ease of use are often direct results of how the plan was created. The format of the strategic plan will influence how and when people use the document in the workplace. Complex, outdated documents are doomed to remain on the shelf so it is recommended to keep the process as simple as possible and created with clarity of action. The aim is to assure the use and respect for the strategic plan by the organization.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

The Strategic Planning Committee

It is important to have a formal planning team or committee that spearheads the planning process. The strategic planning committee is not responsible for doing all of the work, rather it is responsible for ensuring that the work gets done. In essence, it becomes the cornerstone of the team: creating initial drafts of planning documents, deciding which stakeholders to involve (how and at what stage) and prioritizing or narrowing information for the organization to discuss and evaluate. The committee serves to maintain the efficiency of the process.

Within the VON, is it recommended that branch boards establish a Strategic Planning Committee with the following responsibilities:

1. Develop a strategic plan for the branch in conjunction with the vision and mission of VON Canada and for recommendation to the board;
2. Identify the unmet needs of the community, through a community development process;
3. Develop an implementation plan for new program development related to charitable activities; and
4. Develop an evaluation plan for charitable programs within the branch.

Appendix B

**VON _____ Branch Strategic Planning Committee
WORK PLAN
200X**

Purpose: To outline a plan for how the branch board will conduct its strategic planning process.

ACTIVITY (i.e., what are you going to do, what information do you need to collect/review, who do you need to involve, etc.)	TIME LINE (i.e., when will you accomplish these activities by)	COMMENTS (i.e., who will be responsible for each activity)

Appendix C

Team Building Exercise: Using Creativity in Decision-Making

Problem solving and decision-making are the essence of teamwork. As a team, you will have to remove any obstacles that interfere with the decision-making process in order to produce a working solution. The basic problem-solving process involves the following seven steps:

- 1) Define the problem in specific terms.
- 2) Determine the goals to be met in solving the problem.
- 3) Generate alternative solutions.
- 4) Select the most viable solution.
- 5) Develop an action plan (i.e. determine who will do what and by when).
- 6) Implement the solution.
- 7) Follow through by:
 - i. Ensuring that the proposed action steps were carried out, and
 - ii. Evaluating the effectiveness of the solution and its repercussions at intervals.

The ability to make effective decisions is the focus of this exercise. Team members will have to decide and agree upon the definition of the problem, the solution to the problem, and the specifics of implementing the solution.

Ineffective procedures during this process can alter a team's final decision. Even teams who are known for their ability to work well together can made decision errors if members keep information, such as opinions and ideas to themselves. The key is for every team member to speak up. If differences of opinion are not voiced, your team may find that issues cannot be clarified and that the final solution may be the easiest but not the best.

Some of the problem-solving and decision-making issues included in this exercise are:

- Using creativity in problem solving;
- Learning processes such as **brainstorming** (see Appendix D); and
- Enhancing communication during problem solving.

Creatively solving a problem means removing obstacles that interfere with the decision-making process in an unconventional but effective manner. To achieve success in creative problem solving, the following guidelines may be of some assistance:

- 1) Adopt a questioning attitude.
- 2) Establish an environment of acceptance in which ideas are considered before they are judged.
- 3) Examine the problem from new angles and try stating it in atypical ways.
- 4) Break the problem down into components and list alternatives for solution for each component. Combine these new component solutions to make a new solution for the problem.

Process

The team has fifteen minutes to read the following scenario entitled *Shipwrecked*, and to generate ideas for solutions. During this time, a leader will record the ideas on a flip chart.

Shipwrecked

After several months of hard work, you and your teammates are taking a much-deserved vacation. You pooled your resources and embarked upon a two-week cruise with the Titanic II. Late one night there is a terrible storm and you and your team members find yourselves stranded on a desert island. All of you search the wreckage for supplies and find a little food, two thousand bricks, and a notebook computer with a working battery and cellular modem that you quickly use to e-mail for help. The Coast Guard responds to your request but informs you that it will take at least two weeks for rescue because of the backlog of survivors with notebook computers who e-mailed them first. The laptop battery then fizzles out.

Your team holds a meeting and determines that there is not enough food to support everyone for that period of time. Therefore, the immediate task at hand is to generate creative ways of using the bricks to increase the chances of survival.

After fifteen minutes, the leader will then facilitate a discussion of the activity by prompting the team to answer questions such as:

- 1) What method did the team use to generate ideas? What was helpful about this method? What was not helpful?
- 2) How was the team's approach "creative"?
- 3) Did everyone participate equally? What effect did the members' level of participation have on the team's ability to solve the problem creatively?
- 4) How might this activity relate to real problems faced by the team?
- 5) What might be the first step toward incorporating creativity into the team's problem-solving process?

Source: Information Technology Institute. (2000). ITI student handbook.

Appendix D

Brainstorming

One of the easiest and most enjoyable ways to quickly generate a lot of ideas is to brainstorm. A successful brainstorming session help to:

- Encourage creativity
- Involve everyone
- Generate excitement and energy
- Separate people from the ideas they suggest

Guidelines for brainstorming:

- Start by reviewing the topic; make sure everyone understands the issues.
- Give people a minute or two of *silent* thinking time.
- When ideas start to flow, let them come. Freewheel – don't hold back.
- No discussion during the brainstorm. That will come later.
- No criticism of ideas – not even a groan or a grimace.
- Hitchhike – build on ideas generated by others in the group.
- Write *all* ideas on a flipchart so everyone can see them.

Methods for brainstorming

Two common methods for brainstorming are:

- **Rounds.** Go around the group and have each person say one of their ideas per turn, until everyone is out of ideas.
- **Popcorn.** Anyone calls out an idea, no order, until all ideas are out.

Source: Scholtes, P., Joiner, B., & Streibel, B. (2000). The Team Handbook (2nd ed.). Madison, WI: Oriel Incorporated.

Appendix E

Assessing the Situation

Gathering Perceptions about the Organization

Part of getting a clear view of the environment and dynamics of an organization is for the board to look at it through others' eyes; both internal and external stakeholders' perceptions of the organization will add valuable information to the situation assessment. The SWOT technique, a simple and effective vehicle for collecting this information, helps focus the process by breaking it down into four broad categories:

S – What are the organization's **internal Strengths**? What is the organization doing well in?

W – What are the organization's **internal Weaknesses**? What could be improved?

O – What **external Opportunities** might move the organization forward?

T – What **external Threats** might hold the organization back?

Evaluating an organization's general strengths and weaknesses, as well as the strengths and weaknesses specific to each of its programs, typically includes assessments of:

- Board and staff capabilities;
- Quality and value of programs to the community; and
- Reputation of both the organization and individual programs.

Successful organizations exploit strengths rather than just focus on weaknesses. In other words, this process isn't just about fixing the things that are wrong, but also nurturing what is right.

The same kind of thinking should apply to how an organization approaches its opportunities and threats – the external trends that influence the organization. These are usually categorized into political, economic, social, technological, demographic and legal (PESTDL) forces. Examples for each of these categories are as follows: Political – Change in municipal/provincial government positions, i.e., Mayor, MLA; Economic – New business opens in local community; Social – Trend that families (e.g., children) of seniors live a great distance away from them; Technological – New method to transport meals keeps them longer for twice as long; Demographic – By 2020, 20% of the population will be over the age of 65; and Legal – New regulations change requirements for receiving provincially-funded home care services. These external forces include such circumstances as changing client needs, increased competition, changing regulations, and so on. They can either help an organization move forward (opportunities) or hold an organization back (threats) – but opportunities that are ignored can become threats, and threats that are dealt with appropriately can be turned into opportunities.

Gathering Board and Staff Perceptions of the Organization

Since SWOT analysis is a primary means of receiving input from a broad and representative constituency, it is important to include as many board and staff (your internal stakeholders) as possible in this process. Their ideas and opinions might be collected through questionnaires, telephone or in-person interviews, facilitated organization-wide or small-group meetings, or a combination of these methods. Some organizations have board and staff meet together to discuss their ideas and opinions, while others have them meet separately. A common and useful approach used during meetings is to brainstorm ideas onto flipcharts.

After the lists of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats have been recorded, the listed ideas can be grouped into logical topic or issue groups (e.g., all the ideas related to staffing or program development should be grouped together) to make the data easier to present and analyze.

Gathering External Stakeholders' Perceptions

Just as the above SWOT assessment allows an organization to collect a wide variety of perceptions from internal stakeholders, a SWOT assessment of those outside the organization can also add a great deal to the situation analysis. External stakeholders (such as clients, funders, community leaders, and potential collaborators) can give the planning committee insight into community opinions of what the organization does well, where it can improve, unmet community needs it might address, and other potential opportunities or threats. Again, this information might be gathered through telephone or in-person interviews (preferably), questionnaires, or focus groups. In addition to their general perceptions of the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, external stakeholders might also be asked some questions specific to their outsider perspective. For example:

- What are the organization's strengths and weaknesses? What opportunities and threats does the organization face?
- What does the stakeholder need or expect (criteria for performance) from the organization?
- How well does the organization perform against those criteria (excellent, good, fair, or poor) and why?

Appendix F

Standard Format for a Strategic Plan

A strategic plan is simply a document that summarizes, in about **ten** pages or less of written text, why the branch exists: In the case of VON, what it is trying to accomplish, and how it will go about doing so. Its "audience" is anyone who wants to know the organization's most important ideas, issues, and priorities: Board members, staff, volunteers, clients, funders, peers at other organizations, the press, and the public (Note: Annual General Meetings of the branch boards provide them with an excellent opportunity to report back to the community on the branch's strategic plan). It is a document that should offer edification and guidance – so, the more concise and ordered the document, the greater the likelihood that it will be useful, that it will be used, and that it will be helpful in guiding the operations of the organization. Below is an example of a common format for strategic plans, as well as brief descriptions of each component listed, which might help writers as they begin trying to organize their thoughts and their material. This is just an example, however, not the one and only way to go about this task. The point of the document is to allow the best possible explanation of the board's plan for the future, and the format should serve the message.

Table of Contents

The final document should include a table of contents. These are the sections commonly included in a strategic plan:

I. Introduction by the Chair of the Board

A cover letter from the Chair of the branch board introduces the plan to readers. The letter gives a "stamp of approval" to the plan and demonstrates that the organization has achieved a critical level of internal agreement (This introduction is often combined with the Executive Summary below).

II. Executive Summary

In one to two pages, this section should summarize the strategic plan: It should reference the mission and vision; highlight the long-range goals (what the organization is seeking to accomplish); and perhaps note the process for developing the plan, as well as thank participants involved in the process. From this summary, readers should understand what is most important about the organization.

III. Mission and Vision Statements

These statements can stand alone without any introductory text, because essentially they introduce and define themselves.

IV. Organization Profile and History

In one or two pages, the reader should learn the story of the organization (key events, triumphs, and changes over time) so that he or she can understand its historical context (just as the planning committee needed to at the beginning of the planning process).

V. Critical Issues and Strategies

Sometimes organizations omit this section, choosing instead to "cut to the chase" and simply present goals and objectives. However, the advantage of including this section is that it makes explicit the strategic thinking behind the plan. Board and staff leaders may refer to this document to check their assumptions, and external readers will better understand the organization's point of view. The section may be presented as a brief outline of ideas or as a narrative that covers several pages.

VI. Goals and Objectives

In many ways the goals and objectives are the heart of the strategic plan. Mission and vision answer the big questions about why the organization exists and how it seeks to benefit society, but the goals and objectives are the plan of action - what the board intends to "do" over the next few years. As such, this section should serve as a useful guide for operational planning and a reference for evaluation. For clarity of presentation, it makes sense to group the goals and objectives by program/service if the organization has only a few programs or services; if some programs or services are organized into larger groups, the goals and objectives will be delineated at both the group level and the individual program or service level.

VON Context

The major focus for the branch boards is to assure the charitable programs for the organization are relevant to the needs of the local community and appropriately resourced.

VIII. Appendices

The reason to include any appendices is to provide needed documentation for interested readers. Perhaps no appendices are truly necessary (many organizations opt for brevity). They should be included only if they will truly enhance readers' understanding of the plan, not just burden them with more data or complicating factors.

Appendix G

Endnotes

¹ Alliance for Nonprofit Management. www.allianceonline.org

² Environment Canada and Health Canada, Community Animation Program and Community Mobilization Program in Atlantic Canada. (Winter, 99/00). Planning for change: Strategic planning and program planning for nonprofit groups.

³ Bryson, J. (1995). Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organizations. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁴ Environment Canada and Health Canada, Community Animation Program and Community Mobilization Program in Atlantic Canada. (Winter, 99/00). Planning for change: Strategic planning and program planning for nonprofit groups.

⁵ Ibid.