

Seven simple steps to strategic planning

Introduction

'Strategic planning', 'business planning' and (perhaps most of all) 'corporate planning' are words that make many people's hearts sink. They can conjure up thoughts of endless meetings, obscure jargon and generally a waste of valuable time. But every organisation needs to ensure that their effort goes into achieving their goals. This short guide is intended to encourage any not for profit organisation to get to grips with effective strategic planning by asking seven simple questions.

Step 1: What are you trying to achieve?

The place to start with is to ensure that you are clear about what you are trying to achieve. This is essential before you start thinking what it is you need to *do*. These might also be described as the goals, or the outcomes that you want to achieve: the changes in 'the real world' that you want to see. It is important to describe what you are trying to achieve at the right level. Goals like "To make the world a better place" is clearly too high level and vague. "To reduce injuries from traffic collisions" or "to provide play facilities for children" might be more suitable. Don't at this stage include methods: "To achieve xx *by doing xyz*" or targets - this will come later. It may be helpful to then break down your overall goal into (no more than) three or four more specific outcomes that you'd like to achieve. You may think of these as your strategic objectives.

Step 2: What must you do, to achieve this?

Once you have agreed the outcomes that you are trying to achieve, you can then (and only then) start to consider what actions you need to do to achieve this. Try to detach this discussion from what you *currently* do - hopefully there will be a strong correlation, but not necessarily. This forms the basis of your plans. Your plans should include 'SMART' objectives (Specific Measurable Agreed Realistic Timed) so that you everyone understands what they are and so you will be able to tell if they have been achieved or not. Some of them are likely to include targets - for completing projects by a certain date, or providing services to a specific number of people each year.

This is probably the stage which involves the most work. Depending on the complexity of your organisation, there may be several layers of this plan - at the organisation ('corporate') level, at a departmental, or team level. It is good to delegate this more detailed planning to the people who will be responsible (and accountable) for delivering them, as this will increase their ownership of the plans, and it also uses their experience and perspectives to establish what is achievable and what isn't. It is also useful to make sure that you don't waste people's time by involving them in discussions on work which doesn't affect them.

Step 3: How do you know if you are succeeding?

This is about monitoring your performance: do you know if you are achieving what you want to achieve; and delivering what you want to deliver? It is important to think about both your goals (Stage 1 - what are you trying to achieve?) and also your plans (Stage 2 - what must you do?). This is because you may find that although you are delivering most or all of your plan (you are doing what you said you would do), the outcomes that you are trying to achieve don't seem to be being delivered. You need to find out why: is there something affecting your desired outcomes that isn't included in your plan? A common difficulty in identifying performance information is the availability of data; it can be tempting to monitor only those things that you already have statistics on. You may find that you lack information on important things and if so should consider how best to get the best information you can, even if it is imperfect. If you have a non-executive committee, they should generally focus on the outcomes, and leave monitoring plans largely to management.

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Step 4: What resources do you need?

You need to know what resources - money, capital, equipment, people - you need to get the things done that you need to do. This is not a detailed budgeting exercise, but you need to assess your capacity to deliver your plan, and to make sure that they are aligned. You may find that you lack certain resources - premises, equipment or staff - in which case you need to include in your plan a method of acquiring these (for example a fund-raising initiative). You might also want to consider if your resources (especially staff) are organised in the best possible way to deliver your plan.

Step 5: What external partners do you need to work with?

Whatever your business, there will be some external bodies that you need to work with in order to achieve your goals. These may include your members or service users, funders, regulators and government bodies; but they are also likely to include other private, public or third sector bodies active in your field. You may want to secure their co-operation to help you deliver some of your plans - or you may want to influence other bodies whose interests conflict with yours. Either way, you need to identify who they are and plan your relationship with them.

Step 6: What behaviours do we need?

Many organisations define the 'values' that they want to exhibit and you may find this useful. However, even if not, it is still worth considering the kind of behaviours that you need for organisation to exhibit if it is to be successful. In every case, leadership will be important: no plan or strategy can be achieved without this. Other attributes that may be important are co-operation and mutual respect - different parts of an organisation need to collaborate for the common goals, rather than act as independent or even competing units. Everyone in your organisation has something to contribute to this discussion.

Step 7: Compare what you are currently doing against your plan

This final stage can be the most difficult bit. There is a saying (attributed to Peter Drucker) that "Culture eats strategy for breakfast". This means that, irrespective of any new strategy you adopt, people will generally continue to do what they are used to doing and behave like they are used to behaving. Adopting a new strategy doesn't in itself change this. Review what your staff, volunteers, trustees etc actually spend their time on, and compare that with what you have agreed you need to do (step two above). Are they the same? Or does your organisation spend a lot of time or effort on activities which don't seem to be the key tasks needed to deliver your goals? You may find that staff are resistant to the idea that they should change long-held practices and adopt new ones. If so, it is worth spending time and effort trying to understand why. It may be that they have only a superficial buy-in to the strategy; or they may be committed to some other values which are actually important, and should be included in your strategy.

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David Hunter, Not for Profit Planning, Edinburgh