



Strategic Planning for Nonprofits

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A strategic planning process identifies strategies that will best enable a nonprofit to advance its mission. Ideally, as staff and board engage in the process, they become committed to measurable goals, approve priorities for implementation, and also commit to revisiting the organization's strategies on an ongoing basis as the organization's internal and external environments change. Many nonprofits start the process by identifying the nonprofit's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, in what is commonly called a "SWOT" analysis. Looking at external as well as internal factors (such as your own nonprofit's staff capacity to accomplish its goals) is important.

Looking ahead and planning for the future actually should be continuous: As various factors change, the nonprofit may need to adjust its plans. While the process of bringing everyone together to plan for the future is energizing, once that is in the rearview mirror, don't let the plan gather dust on the shelf. If no one refers to the plan after it is completed, then it's hardly serving as a "strategic" guide! Revisit the plan periodically, making adjustments, and adapting the plan – and the nonprofit's strategic priorities – as circumstances change. Some argue for throwing out the "plan" completely, or reducing it to a very short, concise document, easily digestible by staff and board. Articulating and perhaps visualizing an organization's "theory of change" is another way to think about "what success will look like" – how to get there, and what resources it will take to get there. There are hundreds of consultants and volumes of written materials just on strategic planning and many others that help nonprofits develop a theory of change. We've selected just a few for you below. Your state association of nonprofits may also offer

educational programs and workshops throughout the year to assist your nonprofit with proactive planning. Plus, [staying current](#) with trends and policy issues that affect nonprofit operations is key to being prepared to adapt to a changing environment.

Practice Pointers

A good way to keep your nonprofit's board engaged is to tie the nonprofit's strategic initiatives to the agenda for board meetings, and to include a short discussion about some part of the nonprofit's strategic directions in every board meeting agenda. Questions to ask include, "Is that strategic initiative still relevant?" "Are the priorities (or tactics) we identified earlier the correct ones for the near future?"

Tools

- Sample [strategic agenda](#) for a board meeting
- Strategic planning [tools and resources](#) (Washington Nonprofits)
- Sample [Timeline for Strategic Planning](#) (Washington Nonprofits)
- [Create a strategic plan for your nonprofit](#) (NOLO)
- [Scenario planning worksheets](#) (Northland Foundation)

Resources

- [Adaptive Planning Toolkit](#) (Spark)
- [The Strategic Plan is Dead: Long live Strategy](#) (Stanford Social Innovation Review)
- [The Nonprofit Strategy Revolution: Real-Time Strategic Planning in a Rapid-Response World](#) (David La Piana)
- [What's the difference between a business plan and a strategic plan for a nonprofit?](#)

For information and assistance with strategic planning, contact your [state association of nonprofits](#).

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