



No Dust!

Using Your Strategic Plan as an Active Governing Tool

By Natasha Dresner



"You asked to see our original strategic plan."

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More often than not, life and day-to-day operations take over a well-intentioned strategic plan implementation. If it is one more thing everyone has to do, the strategic plan begins to feel like a burden instead of being exciting. By embedding your strategic planning into daily operations, you begin to make strategy a habit instead of an event. Then acting strategic or completing items on your strategic plan becomes natural instead of something extra. Here are ten quick ways to keep your strategic plan from hitting the shelf and collecting dust.

1. Get Everyone Involved

Make your organization's plan everyone's plan. Taking a top down approach is a recipe for failure. Assign every staff member a goal or objective. If necessary, assign a Board Buddy to help and oversee the goal or objective. Review progress at every Board meeting. This way everyone is responsible in a specific way.

2. Keep it Simple

For your strategic plan to be implemented, everyone in your organization has to understand it. Using big business lingo and confusing jargon diminishes the effectiveness of your plan. **SIMPLIFY!**

3. Delete the Fluff

The sure death of a strategic plan is entombing it in hundreds of pages of text. Less is more. Delete or turn into an Appendices the non-essential verbiage, comments, and notes that just clutters up the page.

4. Appoint a Strategy Engineer

Appoint someone besides yourself to be the point person for the strategic plan – someone highly organized and who commands the respect of everyone in your organization. He or she is responsible for keeping track of your progress; getting updates from managers and staff on goals, objectives, and action plans; sending the reminders out, and organizing meetings and communications about the strategic plan.

5. Create a Strategic Plan Poster

Put the key parts of your strategic plan on one page, blow it up at Kinkos, and hang it in your break room or common area, and the Board room. You can also put it in the employees' offices/cubicles. By creating a strategic plan poster, you keep everyone focused on your organization's strategic direction and priorities.

6. Loop Achievement into Incentives and Recognition

We all like to be rewarded and recognized for a job well done. Use creative ways to do it.

7. Hold a Monthly Strategy Meeting

Replace one of your regularly scheduled staff meetings with a strategy meeting. Meetings about strategy are exciting and people want to be involved. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the status of your plan. Cross of what has been completed. Troubleshoot if something is not happening. Make changes where needed.

8. Communicate Ongoingly and Build Continuity

Keeping your plan alive requires constant communication. Review progress at each Board meeting. That puts everyone on the same page, keeps people accountable and Board members engaged and in a governing mode, and, finally, helps develop a habit for strategic thinking and practice moving forward.

9. Lead by Example

There's no better way to keep your plan alive than showing complete commitment to its success to others. So talk about your organization's strategy regularly: when making budget, prospective members, program, or other core decisions; in conversations with clients, donors, and stakeholder. Be a strategic leader and people will follow.

10. Celebrating Your Success

Too often we are so focused on tomorrow's tasks, we forget to recognize successes today. Don't wait until the end of the year to recognize achievement. Celebrate small successes along the way! Did you achieve a big goal? Bring in pizza. Take the staff to lunch. Give everyone the day off. Go on a fun outing. No matter how big or small, by celebrating success along the way you'll keep everyone excited and engaged.

The 10 most common barriers to keeping your board members involved:

(during the well-organized and -conducted strategic planning process, these are easy to spot and address)

1. The Board is too large – not enough work for members to do.
2. The Board is too small – members feel overwhelmed; lack of perspectives.
3. The Executive Committee is too active – members feel disengaged or rubberstamping.
4. Members were lied to during recruitment.
5. Members received poor orientation.
6. Agendas are weak – lack of important, strategic discussions.
7. Members do not feel well used or important.
8. There is little opportunity for discussion.
9. The Board lacks social glue.
10. The Board chair has a dominant personality and management style.

Use Your Strategic Plan as a Measuring Tool

Adapted from *The Nonprofit Dashboard: A Tool for Tracking progress* by Lawrence M. Butler

Think of the mission as the spine of the organization – the essential, underlying framework of values and purpose that gives it shape and resiliency. By recasting the mission as a set of phrases that speak to the organization’s purpose(s), audience(s), or populations served, this set of phrases becomes the spine upon which relevant performance indicators can be hung. The below table illustrates the mission spine and selected performance indicators for a natural history museum. When broken into its component phases, it becomes possible to define performance indicators or metrics that speak to the organization’s success at fulfilling its mission imperatives of purpose, audience, methods, and outcomes.

Mission Statement			
Purpose	Audience	Methods	Outcome
The Sample Museum tells the story of our planet and its inhabitants	The families and students of all ages..	Through artifacts, specimens, and programs, that reveal the process of scientific research and discovery...	Leading to an appreciation of how scientists answer current questions while raising new ones
Performance Indicators			
Number of exhibitions and programs that use stories and engaging narratives. Diversity of human cultures and other living species featured in these stories.	Percentage of admissions, memberships, and other participants who are families and students, by age.	Involvement of scientists in presenting their research/agenda results. Use of collection of specimens and artifacts for educational purposes.	Visitor responses re: lessons learned about scientific method of inquiry and before/after appreciation of scientific research.

Without a strategic plan, identifying appropriate dashboard measures will be a challenging effort. The major strategic themes, direction, or initiatives identified in the plan can and should define the dashboard metrics. Below table is an example of what the museum did.

Strategic Initiative	Goal	Performance Indicator
Build support for the museum.	<p>Increase attendance by 10% per year.</p> <p>Build membership by 10% per year and move 20% of renewals to higher levels</p>	<p>Year-to-year changes in attendance.</p> <p>Year-to-year changes in total membership and individual categories.</p>
Cultivate more diverse audiences.	<p>Build a more diverse staff and board.</p> <p>Attract new audiences and encourage repeat visitation.</p>	<p>Demographic characteristics and trends on board and staff composition.</p> <p>Survey visitors in target audiences to determine visitation.</p>
Make the museum a forum for different perspectives.	<p>Schedule exhibits and programs that present different views on timely topics.</p> <p>Encourage visitors to share their perspectives with other visitors and with the museum staff.</p>	<p>Analyze visitor comments to determine whether their interests and viewpoints are reflected in the exhibit/program.</p> <p>Track visitor use of "Talk Back" opportunities and publish responses in newsletter.</p>

Sample Strategic Action Plan/Follow-up Format

SMART Goals/ Recommendations/Action Steps	Time line(s)	Who	Budget impact	Available Resources	Outcomes/ Outputs	Comments
1. List your strategic goal here						
2. List your strategic goal here						
3. List your strategic goal here						
4. List your strategic goal here						

OF - Offerings; CL - Client Relationship; PS - Partnerships; EL - Evaluation and Learning; NPO – nonprofit organization; TF – task force

Board Profile/**Prospective Members** Worksheet

This worksheet can be adapted by organizations to assess their current board composition and plan for the future. The governance committee can develop an appropriate grid for the organization and present it to the full board.

In considering board building, an organization is legally obligated to follow its bylaws, which may include specific criteria on board size, structure, and composition. Or the bylaws may need to be updated to incorporate and acknowledge changes in the environment and community that have made changes in the board structure necessary or desirable.

Remember, an organization will look for different skills and strengths from its board members depending on its stage of development and its strategic goals.

Fill out the form below starting with the Board Members data and then go to Prospective Members. Insert numbers in the empty cells to indicate the number of members who belong to a certain category – use black for Board Members and **blue** for **Prospective Members**.

State of Board Members/Need for Prospective Members

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Comments
Age							
Under 18							
19 – 34							
35 – 50							
51 – 65							
Over 65							
Gender							
Male							
Female							
Geography							
Enter the appropriate locations							
Race/Ethnicity/Disability							
Enter based on the organization							
Other							
Disability							
Committee/Task Force/Advisory							
Enter the appropriate list							
Qualities							
Leadership skills							
Willingness to work							
Connection with your mission							
Personal Style							
Consensus builder							
Good communicator							
Strategist							
Visionary							
Resources							
Time to give							
Money to give							
Access to money							
Access to other resources (foundations, corporate support)							
Availability for active participation							

(solicitation visits, grant writing)							
Community Connections							
Religious organizations							
Corporate							
Education							
Media							
Political							
Philanthropy							
Small business							
Social services							
Other							
Professional Background							
For-profit business							
Nonprofit organization							
Government							
Other							
Education							
Enter your list here							
Areas of Expertise							
Administration/Management							
Entrepreneurship							
Financial Management							
Accounting							
Banking and trusts							
Investments							
Fundraising							
Government							
International affairs							
Law							
Marketing, Public relations							
Human resources							
Strategic planning							
Physical plant (architect, engineer)							
Real Estate							
Representative of clients							
Special program focus (education, health, public policy, social services)							
Technology							
Other							
Interests (organizational aspects)							
Enter your list here							
Other							

Sample Board Meeting Agenda

Name of the organization
Meeting of the Board of Directors
Date & Time



Use this space to put something you want to share with the Board – a thought-provoking quote; meaningful story; a joke or a cartoon – they're fun, informative, and can help you get your point across if you're in the position of the Board member on the right.

A. Call to order

B. Consent agenda

- a. Approval of minutes from previous meeting
- b. Approval of agenda
- c. Chief executive's report
- d. Treasurer's report
- e. Committee reports

C. Review of the Strategic Plan implementation

D. Strategic issues #1

E. Strategic Issue #2

F. Strategic Issue #3

G. Next Steps

H. Adjournment



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Imagine two nonprofit boards, A and B. Board A has it all figured out. Agendas are distributed well before meetings, and meetings are efficient and predictable. Financial oversight is handled carefully. Things run smoothly. Occasionally, though, a bad strategic surprise occurs. When it does, the board pulls together with good spirit and does what it can to recover.

Board B operates differently. Meetings are more contentious, a bit livelier. Although it occasionally delves into management issues (when they involve a major financial expense or top personnel matter), mostly the board members are interested in big questions about performance, future funding, how the organization is perceived, how it can improve its service to the community — topics that rarely lead to immediate decisions but definitely establish a strategic agenda for ongoing attention.

Board B engages in strategic thinking most of the time; Board A does not. Board B's discussions go beyond the ordinary process questions to more "thoughtful" inquiries that drive deeper into competitive conditions, constituencies' interests, and value-laden concerns. Board B devotes time to what matters most for the organization and its development. Board A may be "buttoned up" but is much more dependent on its staff for strategic early warnings and proposed actions to be taken.

Can, and should, all boards become more like Board B? I think so. Making strategic thinking a habit takes time, effort, and discipline, but it enables the board to be much more helpful.

What is strategic thinking?

Strategic thinking, in a nutshell, is critical reasoning applied to matters that most influence the future performance and viability of the organization — reasoning at a level of quality and value far above a perfunctory discussion of current conditions. Strategic thinking focuses on what matters most.

Board members individually and collectively can do this if they are both:

- Intentional about improving strategies and performance. Board members explicitly search for issues, topics, and opportunities that will improve and defend the organization strategically. They choose carefully what they spend time on.
- Disciplined about what and how to be thinking. They adopt more effective ways of examining complex and provocative issues. They look at subjects in new ways and from different angles — not just looking backward to see where the organization has come from, or forward when they engage in strategic planning, but over, under, and around the issues. They ask why, what if, and what do others do? They react to and interpret information in ways that lead to clear choices, decisions, and actions.

All of this makes regular "meetings" feel much more like retreats, where members are encouraged to take the time to focus on the big issues. Thoughtful conversations — about the external environment, community needs and perceptions, peers, and competitors — will identify crucial issues and lead to more relevant, timely, and constructive decisions. All this while getting their fundamental fiduciary work done, too.

Strategic thinking vs. strategic planning

Strategic planning is, of course, a vital process and sequence by which strategies are developed. But while planners can describe the plan's table of contents and the required elements of a plan, doing so does not automatically lead to good content, to a competitively superior plan.

Good strategic thinking, on the other hand, does supply the valuable content. It's vital because it contributes to the success of the

organization — period! Quality content comes not from participating in environmental scans or SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis but rather from the active brain power of board members and staff applied to pertinent subject matter and analyses. In an article titled “Living Strategy,” the authors provide a helpful definition: “Strategic thinking is about inquiry, dialogue, and stories; says you can’t predict the future, but you can be ready for whatever it brings by being adaptive; is an ongoing, iterative process; involves collective knowledge and intelligence-gathering capabilities; is organic, systems-oriented thinking; emphasizes conversation as a core process; and becomes a natural part of everyone’s present and future work.”

Getting started

Done well, strategic thinking makes the board a significantly richer strategic asset. Board work is far more productive and satisfying to board members. And the staff will find it has more time to deal with significant issues, no longer being drawn by the board into operational or inconsequential matters.

The board is uniquely positioned to bring such perspective because of its experience, diversity of background, sectorwide connections, loyalty to the organization and its mission, and detachment from day-to-day operations.

Making strategic thinking an integral part of board behavior takes attention and time. The following suggestions will help you get started:

- Retool your meeting agendas by allocating sufficient time for thinking. Strategic matters take time; rich debate won’t flourish if the entire meeting is absorbed in discussing operational issues or those of little strategic consequence. Try using a consent agenda (it groups routine items, such as previous meeting minutes and committee reports, under one umbrella that the board can vote on without additional discussion) so there is time for discussions of important issues. Ask if the right — i.e., most important — items are on the agenda.
- Pose “catalytic questions” or use some other meeting “devices” to stimulate thinking and promote lively, robust debates (see sidebars).

CATALYTIC QUESTIONS

In the book *Governance as Leadership*, the authors suggest posing catalytic questions that invite creativity, exploration, and do not depend largely on data and logic to answer.

- * What three adjectives or short phrases best characterize this organization?
- * What will be most strikingly different about this organization in five years?
- * What do you hope will be most strikingly different about this organization in five years?
- * On what list, which you could create, would you like this organization to rank at the top?
- * Five years from today, what will this organization’s key constituents consider the most important legacy of the current board?
- * What will be most different about the board or how we govern in five years?
- * How would we respond if a donor offered a \$50 million endowment to the one organization in our field that had the best idea for becoming a more valuable public asset?
- * How would we look as a take-over target by a potential or actual competitor?
- * If we could successfully take over another organization, which one would we choose and why?
- * What has a competitor done successfully that we would not choose to do as a matter of principle?
- * What have we done that a competitor might not do as a matter of principle?
- * What headline would we most/least like to see about this organization?
- * What is the biggest gap between what the organization claims it is and what it actually is?

Excerpted from Governance as Leadership by Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan, and Barbara Taylor. BoardSource and John Wiley & Sons, 2005.

- Challenge others' thoughts and behavior. A useful strategic thought must lead somewhere; it should consciously aim to improve strategic results. Some boards rotate responsibility for a member to play devil's advocate at each meeting to prevent complacency in discussions by challenging assumptions and probing traditional thinking. With practice, this process will become more natural and ingrained as board members see the value such thinking produces.
- Strengthen the board's composition. Does it include people who can look at things differently? If board members are mostly technical, consider recruiting an artist or writer to bring a fresh perspective. Board members who

have become jaded or bored may find it difficult to be energetic and creative. Consider new blood.

These suggestions may not magically transform the board into one that thinks strategically. But these ideas can initiate the transition to a high-performing team of board members. Nourished and practiced over time, with the right leadership, they will encourage strategic thinking to naturally occur — almost without thinking.

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ROBUST DISCUSSIONS

Try these techniques to stimulate board deliberations that are highly participative and relatively spontaneous.

- * **Silent Starts.** Take two minutes at the beginning of the board meeting for members to write (anonymously) the most important questions the board and management should address. Read and tally to identify the most crucial issues.
- * **One-Minute Memos.** At the conclusion of each discussion item, board members take a minute to write down what they would have said if there had been more time. Collect for review by the chair and chief executive so there's no doubt about what's on the board's mind.
- * **Future-Perfect History.** In breakout groups, develop a future-perfect narrative of how the organization can move from its present state to its envisioned state. Compare story lines and pathways and detours.
- * **Counterpoints.** Randomly designate two board members to make the most powerful counterarguments to initial staff recommendations.
- * **Role Plays.** Ask subsets of the board to assume the perspective of different constituent groups likely to be affected by the issue at hand. How would they frame the issue and define a successful outcome? What would each group regard as a worst-case scenario?
- * **Surveys.** Prior to discussing a major issue, board members take an anonymous survey that includes questions like: What should top our agenda next year? What are we overlooking? What is the most valuable step we could take to be a better board? What are the most/least attractive and worrisome aspects of the proposed strategic plan? An analysis of the responses (not the loudest voice) drives subsequent discussion.

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