

Choosing Our Direction

Setting the Stage

A Primer on Strategic Planning and Visioning



Introduction

This workbook is the first in a series of five designed to assist your group, organization, or nonprofit agency in developing an effective strategic plan that can help you strengthen and sustain your organization's achievements. These workbooks can also help provide you with the insight you need to accurately and realistically guide your future. Intended as the introduction to the other four booklets in this series, *Setting the Stage* will help you understand the strategic planning process, who should be involved, and what you need to do to make it successful. It will also help you assess whether your organization is prepared to undertake such an effort at this time. Workbooks 1 through 4 in the *Choosing Our Direction* series will guide you through the steps required to move from discussion and exploration to the point where you can outline—and implement—an effective course of action that will make your strategic planning efforts pay dividends long into the future.

Whether your group has been in existence for many years or only a couple of months, an accurate and realistic strategic planning effort can help you better prepare for the challenges ahead. Common sense suggests (and research findings substantiate) that those organizations having the clearest sense of their own goals and capabilities are most successful. An old adage says, "If you don't know where you're going, any path will get you there." What your organization wants to ensure is that you are taking the path that makes the most of your talents, time, and resources.

What Is Strategic Planning?

Strategic planning can most succinctly be described as a systematic process through which an organization agrees on—and builds commitment among key stakeholders regarding—priorities that are essential to its mission and responsive to the operating environment.

Planning involves looking forward and deciding what the organization will do in the future. *Strategic planning* is a disciplined effort to produce decisions and actions that guide and shape what the organization is, what it does, and why it does it. It also requires that an organization examine what it is and the environment in which it is working—and thus focus on future issues and challenges.

As you will see, strategic planning requires, as a first step, a comprehensive organizational assessment. As such, in the early stages of strategic planning efforts your organization will need to undertake a process of gathering and analyzing information needed to make an appraisal of the organization in its environment.

Why Undertake a Strategic Planning Effort?

Strategic planning should be viewed as a tool to help your community-based organization use its human and financial resources effectively. A well-thought-out strategic plan, developed with input from internal and external stakeholders, will enable your organization to identify and prioritize important goals, increase members' involvement in the organization, and increase the financial resources that are needed to attain these goals.

Benefits of Strategic Planning

- Defining a shared vision
- Learning about community, industry, and society trends
- Prioritizing critical issues
- Developing synergies between strategies so that all of the organization's efforts work together
- Enhancing accountability
- Helping to overcome crisis management
- Increasing motivation, commitment, and teamwork
- Hearing from key stakeholders
- Identifying organizational strengths and weaknesses
- Encouraging strategic thinking
- Adapting more effectively to changing circumstances
- Providing focus for people's energies
- Use in developing a solid fundraising plan

- Developing shared criteria for evaluating achievement

While they are outweighed by the benefits, we should also recognize that there are some very real challenges to effective strategic planning.

Challenges of Strategic Planning

- Resources are needed: commitment, time, money
- Individuals are less likely to be able to forward their personal agendas
- May expose some organizational weak areas or conflicts
- Requires discipline on the part of many people over a long period of time
- Can be threatening—may call into question long-favored goals, strategies, and programs
- May require discussion of controversial issues that some may prefer to avoid

How to Prepare Your Organization for Effective Strategic Planning

Comprehensive strategic planning efforts are not to be taken lightly and, depending on the circumstances, are certainly not an effective use of time for every organization. The degree of your involvement is determined by a number of factors including organizational readiness, available time, and the effectiveness or recentness of prior strategic planning efforts. As we have noted, however, the reading and exercises in the *Choosing Our Direction* materials can help your organization regardless of whether your organization chooses a one-day compressed effort or a comprehensive strategic plan.

What is most important is that you make the commitment to follow through on the objectives your strategic planning efforts have outlined. This distinguishes the *Choosing Our Direction* materials from many other strategic planning guides, and it will distinguish your organization from those that are not prepared to make the most out of their strategic planning and visioning efforts.

Successful strategic planning, regardless of how comprehensive you make it, however, can only be achieved by preparing everyone in your organization for the tasks ahead. We all know of organizations and businesses whose strategic plans, while perhaps marginally useful, did not live up to their potential and perhaps were even counterproductive. Although your organization

may not be prepared at this time to take on a comprehensive strategic planning effort, many of the following steps will be required if you are to be successful. Workbooks 1 through 4 of the *Choosing Our Direction* program will help guide you through each.

Steps toward Creating a Successful Strategic Plan

1. Gather support for the planning process and assess readiness.
2. Formally commit to the planning process.
3. Create the planning team.
4. Conduct an organization assessment (environment scan, situation assessment).
5. Review (or create), discuss, and state the organizational mission and vision—and ensure that everyone is comfortable with them.
6. Develop goals, strategies, and objectives.
7. Draft and approve an action plan.
8. Implement your plan.
9. Monitor implementation.
10. Conduct regular reviews.

Who Should Be Involved?

Strategic planning should be viewed as a process that involves a number of individuals committed to spending the time necessary to develop a plan that will guide your organization over a period of years. If your organization is prepared to take on a reasonably comprehensive strategic planning effort, a number of key roles need to be filled throughout the process.

Participants in the Process

Strategic Planning Champion:

This individual is normally a key member of the board or organization who believes in strategic planning and will help keep the process on track. This person doesn't need to be a strategic planning expert but should be someone respected by the board members, volunteers, and/or staff.

Plan Writer:

The plan writer assembles the planning group's decisions into the final planning document. This person takes notes during planning meetings and provides drafts that are reviewed by the planning group. The plan writer does more than compile a record of the planning meetings; he/she must also insert opinions and recommend logical next steps.

Planning Process Facilitator:

The facilitator's main role is to plan each meeting's agenda and keep the group on track. The facilitator may be from outside the organization or could be a member of your organization.

Planning Team:

The broader the representation (among stakeholders) on this team, the greater the chances that everyone will be willing to contribute effectively and that the resulting efforts will be useful to all those involved.

Board of Directors (as appropriate):

Not all organizations fit this model. If yours does, the board of directors will ultimately be responsible for adopting the plan and utilizing its insights to guide future decisions and ensuring that the plan is implemented.

Staff Members (if appropriate):

Have a wealth of knowledge and experience that should be tapped throughout the planning process.

Clients:

Almost all organizations, regardless of their structure, serve a client base in one way or another. While it may not always be advisable to include this group in your internal strategic planning efforts, you most certainly want to gain their input along the way.

When Should You Initiate a Strategic Planning Process?

While the answer to this question will depend on the circumstances of your particular organization, there are some events or conditions that you may want to avoid so that your efforts are as successful as possible. If you cannot answer “yes” to each of these questions you may want to consider waiting until more favorable circumstances prevail.

- Do you have (or are you likely to have) the active involvement of the leadership (both board and staff) in your organization throughout the process?
- Is there an absence of crises or other urgent issues that can interfere with creative thinking and participation in the planning process?
- Are board and staff relationships generally healthy with a lack of any serious, negative conflict?
- Do your board and staff understand the purpose of planning and what it is and is not able to accomplish?
- Is there is commitment to devote adequate time and other resources to preparing—and implementing—the plan?
- Is there willingness to assess current programs, current and future needs, and new ways of doing and evaluating things?
- Is communication generally open and honest—where disagreements are expressed and discussed constructively?

How to Begin

You will also have to make a few logistical decisions regarding your strategic planning efforts.

- Set aside time for the planning process. Whether you are devoting 6 hours or days to your strategic planning efforts, this time should be set aside strictly for strategic planning. No other agenda items or issues should be allowed to encroach your strategic planning efforts.
- Decide to what extent you need a facilitator. While the *Choosing Our Direction* materials are designed to be facilitated by a trained cooperative extension professional, you are obviously free to use these materials in the way that fits your organization’s needs. Recognize, however, that strategic planning efforts are almost always more effective when the one leading the discussion has neither a perceived or real stake in the outcome and can ask explorative questions that help groups fully assess issues they may not address otherwise.
- Find a place to hold the planning meetings. Regardless of the comprehensiveness of your effort, it is often helpful to meet in a neutral location away from the normal “trappings” of your day-to-day operations. The location should be comfortable, have ample refreshments, and be fully supplied with all the materials you will need to make the most of your creative time together.
- Set the ground rules for discussion.

3. To get a “bird’s-eye” view of the strategic planning components you are prepared to undertake, check each of the topics you will need to address in the box below.

Strategic Planning Components Required (check all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> Workbook 1: What Do We Do Now?	<input type="checkbox"/> Workbook 2: What Shapes Our Future?
<input type="checkbox"/> Organizational Goals and Objectives	<input type="checkbox"/> Assessing Your Stakeholders
<input type="checkbox"/> Organizational Program and Activities	<input type="checkbox"/> Forces Shaping Your Future
<input type="checkbox"/> Communications and Committees	<input type="checkbox"/> Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
<input type="checkbox"/> Workbook 3: What Are We Going to Do?	<input type="checkbox"/> Workbook 4: Making It Happen
<input type="checkbox"/> Developing a Vision and Mission	<input type="checkbox"/> Creating an Implementation Plan
<input type="checkbox"/> Developing Goals and Objectives	<input type="checkbox"/> Developing Your Action Plan
<input type="checkbox"/> Matching Goals to Structure	<input type="checkbox"/> Establishing an Evaluation Plan
	<input type="checkbox"/> Ensuring Continuation

4. Overall time frame

Start

Finish

5. List members of the planning committee

6. Contact person

7. Stakeholder groups that will be involved

8. Approximate number, dates, and times of meetings required

9. Location(s) of meetings

10. Individuals or committee responsible for compiling discussion results and developing report

11. Will an internal or external facilitator be required?

Facilitator's name: _____

12. Whose responsibility will it be to ensure the plan is implemented?



Summary

Now that you have a clearer understanding about what strategic planning is all about—and what you need to do to undertake a successful and action-oriented plan—now is the time to begin to lay the groundwork necessary to ensure your efforts pay off. *Choosing Our Direction* Workbooks 1–4 will provide you with the materials and worksheets you need to move forward.

About the *Choosing Our Direction* Materials

Effective groups and organizations have clear goals and objectives and are focused on working toward accomplishing these. *Choosing Our Direction* is a strategic planning tool for groups or organizations to become more effective by developing or redeveloping such goals and objectives for their future. It helps groups identify who they are, what they currently do, what they want to do in the future, and develop a usable plan for getting there. The workbooks in the *Choosing Our Direction* program are designed to be used sequentially and are intended to provide a framework for strategic planning. However, depending upon the needs of the group or organization, the workbooks can be used independently to focus on specific concerns or issues.

The workbooks in the *Choosing Our Direction* program include:

- Setting the Stage: A Primer on Strategic Planning and Visioning (Initial assessment: Is strategic planning for your organization? What does it involve? What is the group's commitment?)
- #1 What Do We Do Now? (Introduction to strategic planning, assessing organizational structure)
- #2 What Shapes Our Future? (Forces affecting the organization; stakeholder perceptions; strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats)
- #3 What Are We Going to Do? (Goals, objectives, mission and vision exercise)
- #4 Making It Happen (Implementation plan; action steps; timeline; evaluation)

No two strategic planning efforts are ever the same. Differing organizational needs and circumstances often require different strategic planning approaches. It is also important to remember that good strategic planning is never really finished—and provides for a continual process of reevaluation and refocus. The *Choosing Our Direction* workbooks are a complete strategic planning program with exercises to guide your group through this process. Depending upon the needs of your group, these workbooks can also be supplemented by additional tools and exercises. Many of these can be found at www.visioning.aers.psu.edu.

Prepared by Walt Whitmer, extension educator, community and economic development in Juniata County; William Shuffstall, extension educator, community and economic development in Clearfield County; and Timothy W. Kelsey, professor of agricultural economics.

Visit Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences on the Web: www.cas.psu.edu

Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research, extension, and resident education programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

This publication is available from the Publications Distribution Center, The Pennsylvania State University, 112 Agricultural Administration Building, University Park, PA 16802. For information telephone 814-865-6713.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

The Pennsylvania State University is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. It is the policy of the University to maintain an academic and work environment free of discrimination, including harassment. The Pennsylvania State University prohibits discrimination and harassment against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Discrimination or harassment against faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated at The Pennsylvania State University. Direct all inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policy to the Affirmative Action Director, The Pennsylvania State University, 328 Boucke Building, University Park, PA 16802-5901, Tel 814-865-4700/V, 814-863-1150/TTY.

© The Pennsylvania State University 2004

Produced by Information and Communication Technologies in the College of Agricultural Sciences

CAT UA394 2M2/04ps4656a