Like other not-for-profit organizations, professional associations understand that strategic planning must be undertaken periodically as part of good stewardship of the organization. However, they do not always follow a very systematic approach to this critical endeavour, and may not create an approach that meets the needs of their particular circumstances. This white paper outlines how professional associations can go through a strategic and tactical planning process to generate tangible benefits for all stakeholders in the organization and enable them to move forward together. It is important to be strategic about your strategic planning.
CONSIDERING STRATEGIC PLANNING

A1 Why should you do strategic planning?

Although it’s often seen as a chore, the benefits an association can derive from strategic planning are enormous.

Strategy is about choice, and about action—in the current high-pressure environment, associations need to make these choices clearly and explicitly, execute on them effectively, and communicate them purposefully.

Done well, strategic planning can ensure alignment among all the elements of the organization, improving member satisfaction, employee morale, financial sustainability, and the overall profile and brand of the association. It is one of the key ways for Boards to exercise their duty of stewardship.

Unfortunately, done poorly, strategic planning can be a frustrating exercise that goes nowhere and saps goodwill from all involved.

This paper outlines ways that organizations can undertake strategic planning to maximize its benefits and avoid the pitfalls.

A2 When to begin?

Most organizations follow the rule of thumb that strategic planning should be undertaken at least every five years or so. However, there are a few circumstances that might trigger an earlier strategic planning process:

- Significant change in the organization’s external landscape, such as threats to revenue streams, increased competition for members, or shifts in relationships with other bodies (e.g. national/provincial associations, or overall governing bodies such as the Royal College for medical associations).
• Major regulatory, economic or competitive changes affecting the professional lives of members. The organization may need to respond to these issues, particularly as they relate to the member value proposition, or emerging member needs.

• Great talent in place, particularly at the Board level, may trigger a somewhat earlier process. If you have a highly strategic President in place and a particularly savvy Board, you may want to go ahead with strategic planning to take advantage of the people around the table at this moment.

• Internal shifts, e.g. a leadership transition, particularly if unanticipated. This is especially important if the organization has experienced significant conflict, such as removal of a CEO or Board members. Once the situation has stabilized and new leadership is firmly in place, strategic planning should be considered as a way to enter a new chapter.

• If the organization is experiencing a crisis that threatens its existence, such as a catastrophic loss of funding, or a crippling lawsuit. Organizational capacity is better used to address more immediate concerns. Take a look at strategic planning once the dust has settled.

• If there is about to be a significant change in personnel or structure:
  • If a current CEO will be retiring, you might wait until the new leader is in place. However, if the search is expected to take some time, and there are pressing concerns to be resolved in the meantime, a truncated process may be a possibility, while leaving the door open (and funding available) for the new CEO to do strategic exploration of his or her own.
  • Likewise, if a merger has been agreed, it makes sense to do strategic planning to build the newly merged organization rather than trying to blend separate plans.

There are a few situations where it is probably not wise to undertake a full strategic planning exercise, including:
DEFINING SUCCESS

Once you determine that it is time to engage in strategic planning, there are 3 key questions you should be asking to shape your approach.

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**B1 What is at stake?**

If there are few significant changes on the horizon, perhaps a fairly streamlined strategic planning process will suffice. It is important, though, to validate these perceptions of the organization and the environment with a range of people (typically senior staff and Board members; possibly also strategic partners).

On the other hand, if the organization or its environment is going through a great deal of flux, or there are severe resource constraints—or even exciting but game-changing opportunities on the horizon—then a more extensive strategic planning process makes sense. There may be more fundamental issues to address: what is at the core of what we do? What role should we play in a changing environment? How can we protect our medium-term or long-term viability? What circumstances might result in the demise of the association?

*The more significant the issues your organization faces, the deeper and broader your investment in the strategic planning process should be.*

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**B2 What do you want to achieve with this process?**

Setting objectives for the strategic planning process is critical.

What strategic questions do you want this process to answer? What issues do you want to address? Are there organizational issues, such as staff/Board alignment or organizational design, that you are hoping this process will address? Is the organization willing to consider discontinuing certain parts of its operations, or starting significant new programs?

Being explicit with your objectives for the process will be enormously helpful in ensuring it stays on track. These objectives must be aligned with what is at stake for the organization for the process to be truly successful.
Before you start strategic planning, you should clarify what is on the table.

Many organizations are complex, with various means of revenue generation (such as a Journal or other publication, a conference, or a fee-for-service business), or perhaps a diverse membership base. Before you start strategic planning, you should clarify what is on the table; every part of your organization, only some parts, and why? What happens if the process uncovers a need to examine other parts of the organization?

Do you need to update the mission, vision, or values? It's not necessary to revisit them as part of strategic planning. If there is consensus that they need updating, you can either do them in parallel, or focus on them after strategic planning. Often that is a better way to sustain organizational momentum, since the mission, vision, values conversation will be more grounded in the realities of the organization, and the Board will be fresh from strategic discussions.
Once you’ve determined the high-level parameters of the strategic planning process, you can develop and manage your approach.

The Board typically makes final decisions, with invaluable and significant input from many others.

**C1 Decide how to manage the process.**

A strategic planning committee may be struck, which might have a few Board members, some senior staff, other volunteers, and sometimes representation from member groups, or more junior staff. Committees of this kind can be incredibly valuable as a sounding Board for processes or ideas, and can offer unmatchable insight. It is important, however, to be clear on the role of these committees throughout the project, and to provide them with adequate support and guidance throughout. Clear terms of reference and consistent ongoing management and support are critical to their success.

The ED or CEO of the association as well as the Chair or President of the Board have critical roles to play, no matter how the process is managed, and all the more so if there is no committee. They both must be prepared to devote significant time and—possibly more importantly—mindshare from start to finish. As the most senior stewards of the organization, they will generally feel an enormous sense of responsibility around this process, and it will become more absorbing as it goes on. **Though it is demanding, this process can be incredibly rewarding, both personally and professionally.**

**C2 Ensure resources are available.**

Failure to anticipate the time required to engage in strategic planning, especially for staff, but also for volunteers, can lead to frustration and burnout.

A robust strategic planning process represents a significant investment of organizational resources and should be included in the organization’s operational plan for the year as well as the Board workplan.
While many organizations conduct strategic planning using internal resources, it is common to engage a third-party facilitator or consultant, either for certain components of the plan or to shepherd the process end-to-end. It is useful to understand where an external resource can add the most value:

- Sustaining focus on the process regardless of what else might be happening in the organization.
- Conducting objective research.
- Facilitating decision-making, in order for staff and Board members to participate rather than have to run the process, especially where there are contentious issues to be resolved, or when the organization is facing critical strategic decisions.
- Building common ground, particularly if groups involved (e.g. staff and Board) have a challenging working relationship, or limited familiarity with each other.
- Offering an outside perspective and analytical capabilities, which is more important where the internal or external issues are complex and require significant work to distill into strategies.
- Bolstering internal resources, which often do not have sufficient capacity to dedicate adequate time to the process, or may lack specialized skills such as survey research and analytics.

It is useful to understand where an external resource can add the most value.
GETTING THE PLAN DONE

Every organization has ways of understanding its stakeholders and environments on an ongoing basis, but the strategic planning process is a time to step back and take a systematic approach to this assessment. This provides a shared fact base for decision-making, and can shorten some discussions by bringing in evidence to evaluate.

The organization’s structure and the issues it faces should drive the research and assessment conducted, but there are some standard methodologies that most strategic planning processes should at least consider:

- Definition of key stakeholders: generally this may include members, volunteers, staff, Board, any industry partners or sponsors, government funders or partners, clients of services offered (e.g. of revenue-generating services), other organizations (particularly those where there are interdependencies such as shared services or partnerships), strategic partners, and others.

- Plans for consultation with each key stakeholder group:
  - For members, a robust member needs assessment yields enormous value, often obtained through both qualitative research (one-on-one interviews or focus groups), as well as quantitative survey tools.
  - If the staff group is large enough, consider conducting a survey to get their perspectives. A multilevel assessment of staff perspectives is generally needed to understand organizational issues.
  - For others, confidential qualitative interviewing is a recommended technique for gaining their perspective and advice.

- Scan of the external environment based on secondary research and other means, e.g. participation in conferences, seminars, or webinars.

- Evaluation of the organization’s performance, including financial results, membership levels, program delivery, any compliance or policy issues, or other relevant measures. If a previous strategic plan had already laid out measures, then this can provide a good starting point.

Once this research has been conducted, it should be distilled into an analytical
Create the strategies.

Strategies articulate how the organization is going to be successful given its aspirations and circumstances—they should be high-level enough to be a bit of a stretch, but specific enough to be concrete and executable.

This is often the most challenging element of the strategic planning process—defining what the organization will actually do, based on the analysis of its internal and external situation. This is a somewhat creative process, but must also be firmly grounded in reality.

Below are some points to consider for strategy development stage:

• While consultation should gather ideas from many stakeholders, when you are developing strategy the number of people involved should be limited to just a few.

• If the situation is highly complex or politicized, especially if Board members are not deeply conversant with the issues, it may work best to have a smaller group such as a strategic planning committee, or even just the CEO and President come up with the strategies for the Board to review.

• If the Board is relatively small and has strong strategic skills, it may be worth considering facilitating strategy development with the Board itself. Note this approach demands a significant time commitment, typically at least two full-day Board meetings spread over a period of weeks or months.

• Articulating strategy involves defining how the association is going to succeed and thrive. Strategies should collectively address the most significant threats and weaknesses identified in the SWOT analysis, to protect and strengthen the organization. They should also build on the organization’s strengths and capitalize on the opportunities that exist in the environment, to be efficient in using the resources available.

• It can be just as important to clarify what a strategy means you will not do. If your strategy is to offer highly tailored, premium, exclusive membership experiences, you are unlikely to be able to lead in cost-efficiency, for example. Strategic choice of one path means other paths are not taken, and this should be clear around the Board table.

• The achievement of the strategies should be measurable in some way—identification of metrics can be key in clarifying what the strategy is intended to accomplish.

• Sometimes it’s very clear from the outset what the strategies are going to be—perhaps because the option set is limited, or because there is one dominant choice. This is not a bad thing, but it’s important to validate and test before deciding on the “obvious” choice.

• Scenario analysis can be an important part of strategy development; if there is a set of choices in front of the organization, you will want to assess the implications of each option. And if there are a number of different futures that the organization may face as a result of external forces, it will be important to understand your range of possible responses.
All too often, strategic planning processes fizzle out once there is a high-level plan approved by the Board. This is understandable; there may be some fatigue as a result of the effort that has gone into the strategic plan, and people involved may have deferred other work and feel an urgency to get back to their “real jobs.”

However, the real work of the organization should be driven by the strategic plan. This happens most effectively when tactical planning knits the strategy together with implementation. Tactical planning marks the transition from decision-making to implementation, and therefore from Board to staff. If the results of the strategic plan are not integrated into the workings of the organization, then much of the investment in the process will be wasted. Tactical planning should break the strategies down to meaningful activities (e.g. projects), and then do an initial assessment of how they might be implemented. This part of the process needs to be managed carefully so that it does not take too much time or energy; estimates of time and resources should be made at a high level. Board members must be aware that the estimates may change with time and organizational learning.

Elements of tactical planning to cover for each strategy include:

- What specifically should be done? What projects are required to make the strategies successful?
- How will you determine success for...
Implement, embed, and measure.

A strategic plan should be a living document, taking root in the organization and growing and changing with it. Once the combined strategic and tactical plan has been developed, the biggest danger is that it will be shelved and ignored as the organization gets back to its day to day operations. The majority of the investment in the planning process would then be wasted.

So, how can the value of the strategic plan be maximized?

- The strategic plan should drive operational planning.
- Management team and Board agendas should be oriented around the strategies.
- Board reporting should be structured so that Board members can see progress towards execution of the tactics (e.g. changes implemented, people hired, training completed) as well as achievement of the strategies, using the metrics defined in the planning process and others as discovered during implementation.
- Strategic planning metrics should be incorporated into staff performance evaluation at all levels.

Frequently, the tactical planning process leads to pruning of desired activities. This forces prioritization before time and energy is devoted to tactics that they are not resourced to pursue. While an ambitious organization with mission-oriented staff and Board will want to do more than is possible with current resources, it is important to focus everyone’s energies on the truly critical tactics which will really generate results, and not squander resources on too many ideas. Make sure the tactical planning outputs circle back to the strategies developed, for amendment as required, and to align expectations with realism.

each strategy, and for each project? How will you measure that success? (These should correspond to metrics for the strategy but do not need to be identical.)

- What dependencies exist between projects?
- What resources—financial, personnel (paid staff or volunteers), or other—are required for success?
- How long will these projects take to reach fruition and transition to business as usual?
- Who needs to be involved with these projects, both internally and externally?
• The strategy should be reviewed at least annually at both the senior management level as well as the Board level, typically leading up to the Annual General Meeting. This review should be expected to result in amendments to the strategic and tactical plan.

• Many organizations find it useful to undergo a strategic review halfway through a strategic planning cycle, especially if the environment or the organization is going through a great deal of change. Again, this may result in amendment of the plan.

Using the results of the plan to engage with your various stakeholders is often overlooked.

E3 Communicate the plan to the people you want to engage.

The specifics of the communication plan should vary based on your tactics. If you want to activate your membership for advocacy purposes, or you want to offer different types of services to them, then communicating the strategic plan is the first piece of that campaign and should be executed accordingly. You might simply put a summary of the plan on your website, or you might undertake a roadshow to each chapter.

Don’t forget to communicate to all the stakeholders you consulted with, as well. If you asked them their opinion, they will want to know what you did with it.
Strategic and tactical planning will be most successful...

if it is done in a spirit that enables experimentation and a recognition that both the external environment and the organization itself are both subject to change. A well-designed strategic planning process can lead not simply to a report on the shelf, but instead to a stronger, more resilient organization, with a re-energized staff, Board, membership, and stakeholders.

Meredith Low Consulting offers strategic and tactical planning, member needs assessment, strategic conference assessment, and other services to professional associations. Founder Meredith Low is a highly experienced management consultant, focusing on helping organizations and companies understand how, when, and where to grow in the context of fast-changing environments. Her career spans engagements with professional associations and other not-for-profits, small to large companies (including the Fortune 500), and government. Experience includes health care, media (both digital and offline), software, business information services, logistics, and construction.

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