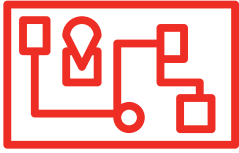




Strategic Planning Workbook



Mapping your Future



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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

There is no one way or “right” way to write a strategic plan. The information provided in this workbook is meant to serve as a guide to arts organizations to help you create a strategic plan, or audit your existing plan. This ensures your strategic plan incorporates the necessary information for you to move intentionally into the future and provide funders – including the VCA – with a compelling plan for your future work as they make investment decisions for your organization.

How to Use This Tool

Think of this resource as a workbook. It is intentionally separated into phases for ease of use. Walk through the sections reading about the purpose behind each phase, then use the worksheets to generate information, lift up questions, and identify any potential blind spots.

Why Strategic Planning Matters

A strategic plan helps any organization, and certainly arts organizations, to:

- Define the direction of an organization
- Focus both internal and external stakeholders in that direction
- Establish goals that are aligned with and help you achieve the mission and vision of your organization
- Create a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility

The first step in the process of crafting a strategic plan is identifying the big questions you want to answer as an organization. Use these to come up with ten to 15 key questions facing your organization.

- Who is the core audience of your arts organization?
- What are barriers to achieving your mission?
- What are your greatest strengths?
- What are your organizational challenges?
- What is changing internally or externally that will impact you?
- Where do you want to take the organization?
- What do you have to do to get from here to there?
- What current/future trends will impact the arts sector that you should consider?
- What big decisions will your organization have to make in the next three years? (location, programs, staffing, etc.)



THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Buzzwords, Jargon, and Acronyms: In addition to guiding your organization for the next few years, your strategic plan can be used to show external stakeholders, like your community, funders, and participants, what you are working on and how you plan to achieve it. It is important to keep them in mind when crafting the words of your plan and avoid using jargon and acronyms they may not be familiar with.

Presentation: Another area to be mindful of is how you present your plan. When presenting the plan publicly, think about your audience. What is the purpose of sharing the plan with them? What pieces of this plan are they interested in? How can you be respectful of their time while also showing them where you are headed?

It might make sense to your organization to compile all of the information you collected or utilized during your strategic planning process into one large strategic planning document. While this may prove a good idea for an internal point of reference, funders and other stakeholders are rarely going to be interested in sifting through scores of pages. Likewise, you do not want a plan that leaves stakeholders with too many questions. A plan that is too small, vague, and lacking details will not instill confidence about your plans for the future.

Beyond the words, size, and level of detail in the plan, the physical presentation of the plan can make a big difference. Ensuring it looks professional and is branded to your organization are relatively low impact ways to make it feel official and present well to both internal and external audiences. As an arts organization, it is particularly important that your plan is colorful and exciting and reflective of the beautiful work you do.



WORKSHEET

Strategy Brainstorm Map



#1 Who Who will and should benefit from your ideas and planning? (Think client, participant, patron. Only one person goes here - leave out donors and volunteers - they help with the mission, but they aren't who you exist for.)



#4 Barriers What barriers or road blocks do you see coming up?



#2 Challenge List five or more challenges or questions facing your organization. What are you doing that you want to grow? What do you want to do less of?



#5 Impact What change do you want to affect in the world?



#3 Resources What resources do you have that you can utilize? (Think human, capital, financial, service, reputation, network)



#6 Ideas What ideas are emerging that you should consider in strategic planning? How can you leverage your resources to achieve the desired impact?



Strategic Questions

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Use the answers above to help you think through questions you want to answer in strategic planning.



1. DEFINING YOUR MISSION & VISION

Your mission and vision work in tandem with your strategic questions. You can use your mission to guide your strategic direction, or through this process, you may realize your current mission is misaligned with the focus of your organization. If you have a well-established mission statement, it is good to write it down and keep it top of mind throughout the strategic planning process.

If you are asking, what is a mission statement anyway? Or what is the difference between a mission and vision?

Nonprofit Hub puts it this way:

- A vision statement is your destination, a mission statement is your map, and your values are your guideposts.
- A vision statement expresses the overarching change you want to see in your community. It is your dream for the future that you put words around.
- A mission statement explains what you do, for/with whom, and the more immediate impact you make while doing it.

When considering your mission and how to share it, here are three things to keep in mind:

1. First, for external audiences, the outside world should hear or see it and instantly understand what you do.
2. Second, for internal audiences, your mission should help motivate and inspire your team.
3. Lastly, it should be specific enough to help you prioritize resources and opportunities.

Maybe you don't currently have a mission statement or maybe everyone in your organization has a t-shirt with the mission statement on it. Either way, you can benefit from this exercise to ensure your organization has a clear mission and vision as you move forward.



WORKSHEET

Thinking About The Mission

Instructions: Take 30 minutes with your board and staff to reflect on your organization's mission using the framework below.



Our organization exists to:

Compare your statement with your teammates. What are common themes or words you hear? Where were differences in your statements?



Common themes:

Now, co-create a new statement with your teammates.



Our organization exists to:



2. GATHERING EXTERNAL DATA

Engaging the community around you is essential to an authentic and successful strategic planning process. If you only talk to your own staff and board about what you think people want and need and how well you are doing, you receive a limited amount of information. You also risk making decisions based on inaccurate assumptions or understandings of your context and your stakeholders.

There are multiple ways you can approach collecting feedback from your community – one-on-one interviews, surveys, focus groups, or a combination of any or all of those approaches. Deciding the best approach for you and your stakeholders will depend on several factors:

- your capacity to engage people authentically
- the number of people you are striving to engage,
- the quality/fidelity of your email database,
- your organizational culture,
- the depth of relationship with your stakeholder list (eg. will they pick up the phone and agree to sit down with you?),
- and the types of questions you are planning on asking.

The first step is considering: Who do we need to talk to that can help inform our strategic questions? Using your questions, work through who you think might have insights and answers that can help you answer those questions. It may be easier to start with types of stakeholders (donors, participants, community leaders, partners, etc.).

Once you have identified a good variety of stakeholder categories you can then identify the specific people in each category that you can reach out to. It is important when identifying individuals that you have a strong relationship with the person and they are familiar with your organization.

REMINDERS

1. It is important to not only select organizational cheerleaders for this step. You can only grow and learn if you are open to honest and potentially negative feedback.

2. Be sure you are mindful of a diversity of lived experiences in selecting who to talk to, including, but not limited to, race, gender, age, location, etc.

3. If you can't decide, over-invest in those you serve in lieu of funders and donors.



WORKSHEET

Figuring Out Who To Talk To

	Type of Stakeholder	Specific Individual	Method of Outreach	Who is Responsible
Example	Volunteer	Ms. Volunteer	Interview	ED
Example	Program Participant	Everyone we have an email address for	Survey	Office Admin.
Example	Donor	XYZ Foundation	Focus Group	Board Chair

What questions do we need to ask?

1. How did you get involved or connected with us?
2. What would you say we are best known for?
3. What are our opportunities for improvement?
4. If you could give us one piece of advice as we plan for the future, what would it be?
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

10 is a good number of questions



3. GATHERING INTERNAL DATA

A strategic plan always includes a goal around internal communication, operations, or organizational structure - just not front and center - this is your *how* not your *why*! It is important to gather internal feedback from your staff, board, and volunteers alongside external stakeholders. Depending on the size and culture of your organization, this could look like a meeting, an anonymous survey, or individual interviews. It is also important to use existing organizational documents as part of this process. Below is a list of potential documents that can help inform the strategic planning process. Many organizations will not have all of these. You don't need to create anything that doesn't already exist; just utilize what you do have.

INTERNAL DOCUMENT CHECKLIST

ORGANIZING & LEGAL DOCUMENTS

- Board of Directors and organizational information
- Current strategic or action plan
- Most recent month's board meeting minutes
- Relevant data or research already completed
- Organizational chart
- Program map (if available)

FINANCIAL DOCUMENTS

- Current year organizational budget
- Current month actual income/expense statements
- Previous year-end financials
- Balance Sheet

MARKETING

- Marketing Plan
- Recent collateral and brochures
- Previous consultant work products

DEVELOPMENT & FUNDRAISING DOCUMENTS

- Case Statement
- A recent grant proposal
- Last annual report
- Fundraising plans
- Previous consultant work products
- Donor report – last year and current year giving report showing break-outs of gifts from different categories



WORKSHEET

Staff and Board Strategic Thinking



THINGS I AM NERVOUS ABOUT



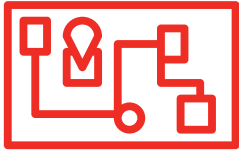
THINGS I AM EXCITED ABOUT



DREAMS & ASPIRATIONS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION FOR THE NEXT THREE TO FIVE YEARS



I REALLY NEED ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS TO DECIDE OUR FUTURE DIRECTION



4. BUILDING CONSENSUS

Once you have collected all of the internal and external feedback, it is time to sit down as a team and process the information so you can begin to build consensus around what you heard and what that means for your organization moving forward.

If you conducted interviews, focus groups, and/or surveys, it is a good idea to have your team read through the feedback together and identify any common themes that came up. That could look like areas of concern, things you are doing well, and opportunities for the future. You can use your strategic questions as a guide as you sift through the information by thinking about how the feedback provides insight and answers to the big questions you identified at the beginning of the process.

As you reflect on the stakeholder information you are looking for, identify Themes, Sparks, and Pathways.

Themes

A Theme is something you heard mentioned by multiple stakeholders. (Mentioned at least three times.)

Sparks

A Spark is a comment or idea that only came up once or twice but is something that is essential for you to consider as you move forward.

Pathways

A Pathway is an idea or suggestion that emerges from the feedback. While you are not yet ready to make any decisions, this is an idea that needs to be captured on a list and considered for your strategic plan.



WATCH OUT

Be careful not to ignore a theme if you don't like what it says or means, or even if you disagree. Feedback from your staff or your community is valid and deserves to be considered. Truth and perception are tricky - but if many people are saying the same thing, it is worthy to think about.



WORKSHEET

Processing the Feedback

Use this first section to take notes as your team shares the feedback with one another. The second section is for your team to state the key themes that emerged from your stakeholder conversations.

BEST

HARDEST

EXCITING



T H E M E S
1
2
3
4
5



5. CRAFTING YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN

It is now time to start crafting your plan! Your plan will have several components to it. First, you want to determine your goals. This sets the strategic direction for the next three years. Any more than that and you begin to dilute your focus.

SPECIAL NOTE: Great plans are centered outward – the majority of your goals should be about driving your mission forward, not what you need to do internally to make it happen.

These are big enough that you will want at least three and no more than six goals.

EXAMPLE

1. GOAL: EMBED A VISITOR-FOCUSED APPROACH IN EVERYTHING WE DO

Now that you have strategic direction set, you want to determine the strategies you will use to get there. Each goal should have between three to four strategies. These are still bigger than action steps but they should be pathways to achieve the goal.

1.1 STRATEGY: CREATE A CLEAR PATH THROUGH WAYFINDING FOR VISITOR ENGAGEMENT

Once you have your strategies identified, you have now completed the 50,000-foot view of your plan. Now you are ready to get input from your internal stakeholders and work toward approving your plan.



WORKSHEET

Strategy Blueprint

Instructions: Complete this exercise as a group, aiming for consensus as you move through the prompts.

ASPIRATIONS

What are the ideal desired outcomes? What do you want to achieve?

CHALLENGES

What problems are you trying to solve? What obstacles must you overcome?

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

How will you overcome the challenges? What specific mantras will guide teams?

FOCUS AREAS

What is the scope of the strategy? What will you focus on for the most impact?

ACTIVITIES

What types of activities solve the problems? What capabilities achieve your aspirations?

OUTCOMES

What metrics will be used to gauge success? What types of measurements will you employ?



6. BRINGING YOUR PLAN TO LIFE

Operationalizing your plan is how you keep it from becoming a document that sits on a shelf and ensure it is a plan your organization can actually use to make decisions and achieve outcomes. The vehicle you use to pull this together and monitor progress will depend on the size and culture of your organization. It can look like anything from a spreadsheet to incorporating into an existing project management tool, like Asana.

After your plan is approved by the board, you have essentially set the strategic direction for your organization. Now you are ready to start listing tactics, or action steps, under your strategies. These are the “checklist” type items that are in line with your strategies and that, as you execute them, will achieve your strategies and, ultimately, your goals. Here is a sample tactic:

EXAMPLE

1.1.1 TACTIC: EVALUATE ALL SIGNAGE

1.1.1.1 ADDITIONAL TACTIC: EVALUATE ALL INTERNAL SIGNAGE

Below are key components to include that expand on the goals and strategies you have already developed.

- Tactics/Initiatives – Multiple steps to be taken
- Timetable – For initiating and completing each strategy
- Resources Required – The human, financial, and other resources required to execute each strategy
- Accountability Measures – Specific measures for assessing progress in completing each strategy
- Responsibility – The position (or person) with lead responsibility for successfully implementing each strategy



WORKSHEET

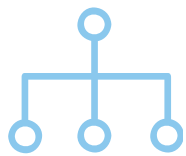
A Guide to Implementation

Your plan is only as good as your implementation strategy. This keeps your plan alive for board, staff, and committee members.



Monitoring tools come in all shapes and sizes. Evaluate your culture and expectations. Agree on a tool and a schedule for updating the tool.

Tool: _____



Designate champions and leaders for different sections and seek agreement on the roles and responsibilities for the team.

Leads: _____



What do you do with new ideas that were not considered in your plan? What is the mechanism for lifting up new ideas and programs?

Mechanism: _____



What if the world changes? The answer to losses in funding, new funding and dramatic changes is found in your plan. Your plan is your north star and should guide all decisions.



Commit to an annual review as an organization to update tactics and consider your environment and changes to your organization.

SPECIAL NOTE: Get your plan out of a Word document and use a tool like Excel or Google Sheets to turn it into action. A beautiful plan is great for showcasing and sharing to others but it isn't useful to monitor it over time.



7 KEEPING YOUR PLAN ALIVE

So, you have an operationalized strategic plan, now what? There are a few things you can do to ensure your organization stays on track and keeps the plan front and center when making decisions. Your staff and your board each have roles to play in keeping the plan alive.

STAFF AND BOARD QUESTIONS

- Are staff clear on their assignments?
- What is your rollout plan?
- How will they get updates on the plan?
- How will you keep them focused on the plan?

BEST PRACTICES

1. Create a roll-out plan to share with all involved
2. Reformat your meeting agendas to match your strategic goals
3. Assign goals or strategies to staff
4. Adopt a dashboard or progress tool and calendar of updates



TRANSFORMING THE BOARD ROOM

1. **AGENDAS:** Use the plan to build board agendas - if it isn't on the plan it isn't a discussion topic.
2. **ANNUAL GOALS:** Assemble annual board goals inspired by the plan and stay on topic.
3. **IDEAS:** Practice referral strategies when ideas arise - don't take up board meeting space with non-strategic items.
4. **CHAMPIONS:** Designate champions for each goal area so individual board members have responsibilities for the plan's success and assign goals to committees to oversee their implementation.
5. **ONBOARDING:** Make sure new board members understand the plan as part of their first activities.
6. **MONITORING:** Agree on a tool and timeline for updates being presented to the board that is not labor intensive for staff and keeps the board focused on strategy.
7. **ANNUAL REVIEW:** Commit to a formal annual review process as part of a retreat or check-in to look back and look forward.



CLOSING

Your Checklist

Section 1: Defining Your Mission & Vision

- Revisit Mission and Vision
- Seek Consensus on Directions

Section 2: Gathering External Data

- Draft your strategic questions
- Develop a gather plan that focuses on external audiences
- Conduct all data-collection

Section 3: Gathering Internal Data

- Engage board and staff and get their input in strategic questions

Section 4: Building Consensus

- Theme the information collected
- Review feedback and select the direction and bold goals for the future

Section 5: Crafting Your Strategic Plan

- Use action words focused on your mission to write your plan
- Seek feedback from community and stakeholders

Section 6: Bringing Your Plan to Life

- Operationalize your goals and strategies with tactics
- Develop a 12-month action plan based on your goals

Section 7: Keeping Your Plan Alive

- Develop a plan to check in on your progress
- Consider how the staff and board will use the plan and how often
- Keep the plan on your desk, not your bookshelf

WHAT IF THE WORLD CHANGES?

The answer to losses in funding, new funding, and dramatic changes can be found in your plan. While the specific item to be considered might not have been thought of, the plan should serve as your North Star. Stay true to the guts of the plan because you worked hard on the plan and, using consensus, arrived at these decisions together.



RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Section 1: Defining Your Mission & Vision Resource Links

<https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/mission-and-vision-statements>

<https://www.networkforgood.com/resource/whats-the-difference-between-mission-and-vision/>

Section 2: Gathering External Data Resource Links

<https://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/sites/default/files/Engagement.pdf>

<https://nonprofitaf.com/category/community-engagement/>

<https://buildingmovement.org/reports/nonprofits-integrating-community-engagement-guide/>

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how_listening_to_constituents_can_lead_to_systems_change

Section 3: Engaging Internal Stakeholders Resource Links

<https://fundingforgood.org/engaging-staff-in-strategic-planning/>

<https://prosper-strategies.com/nonprofit-impact-system/>

Section 4: Building Consensus Resource Links

<https://blueavocado.org/board-of-directors/consensus-based-decision-making/>

<https://www.urban.org/research/publication/guide-data-chats-convening-community-conversations-about-data>

Section 5: Crafting Your Strategic Plan Resource Links

<https://www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Strategic-Plan-Work-Sheet-Action-Verbs-563.pdf>

<https://assets.csom.umn.edu/assets/109756.pdf>

<https://boardsource.org/fundamental-topics-of-nonprofit-board-service/nonprofit-strategic-planning/#guides>

Section 6: Bringing Your Plan to Life Resource Links

<https://blog.bit.ai/implementation-plan/>

<https://asana.com/resources/strategy-implementation>

<https://7principles.thecne.org/1-create-strategic-budgets/>

Section 7: Keeping Your Plan Alive Resource Links

<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/running-nonprofit/strategic-planning-nonprofits>

<https://www.managementcenter.org/resources/smart-to-smartie-embed-inclusion-equity-goals/>

ABOUT THE VIRGINIA COMMISSION FOR THE ARTS

Established in 1968, the VCA is the state agency dedicated to investing in the arts of Virginia. Through allocations made possible by the National Endowment for the Arts and the General Assembly, the VCA utilizes investments to empower arts leaders, arts educators, and arts practitioners. In doing so, we create a virtuous cycle of those who not just participate in and appreciate the arts, as stated in our enabling legislation, but those who serve as change agents and advance the Commonwealth of Virginia.

MISSION STATEMENT

To invest in the arts in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

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The Spark Mill is a consulting firm headquartered in Virginia with a focus on customized solutions and attention to detail. We believe all organizations and companies, regardless of size, can have high functioning and high return programs focused on values-based plans. We love all things strategy, change, community, and culture. www.thesparkmill.com to learn more.