

Strategic Planning in Times of Uncertainty

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Introduction

Perhaps in a “simpler or a slower time” it worked well to use our past to predict our future. There was something relatively static about our assumptions regarding how our world worked. It felt relatively safe to chart a path . . . likely one of growth . . . in a line forward based on what had gone on before.

However, a predictable path in which our assumptions hold true is not descriptive of the present age. Today’s intricate web of issues – equity, environmental change, economic vacillation, and social unrest, to name a few – are rocking the foundations of old assumptions. And for that reason, traditional approaches to strategic planning are no longer responsive to the uncertainties we face.

Yet we still need a “compass north.” We need to set direction, find paths forward, and establish coherent goals. Today with the elasticity to adapt to the constant change we face. We need a plan that will help us minimize our risks while we navigate our way into our future.

Value of a Strategic Framework

There has been a great deal of new thought calling for approaches to planning that focus on vision, values, and overarching strategic approaches to the future. These planning processes set boundaries around where we are going while allowing the flexibility to change as needs arise. What follows is a brief outline of a process for developing a strategic framework as an alternative to traditional strategic planning work to guide your organization through these turbulent waters. Briefly:

What is a Strategic Framework?

- A concise document that sets a broad vision and outlines a strategic direction along which the future might unfold.
- A tool designed to connect big picture strategic elements (mission, vision, values) to goals, initiatives, measures in a rapidly changing environment.

What is included in a strategic framework?

- Context: Consideration of the challenges to be met, the assets we can mobilize, and ideas or successes we can build on.
- Shared grounding: A focus on vision, mission and shared values as an anchor for addressing the future.
- A brief framework where vision meets strategy: Naming of strategic priorities and key performance indicators to monitor and guide our progress.

How is it different from a traditional plan?

- A framework is more flexible in adapting to marketplace changes. Plans are often too rigid and precise to adapt quickly enough to meet emerging needs and shifts in policy.
- A framework provides clear guidance without being too prescriptive. Plans can easily become too detailed to allow staff the autonomy to make their own decisions.
- A framework provides an umbrella for all organizational activities. Plans become so specific in some areas that staff do not see a connection to the greater outcomes.
- A framework is easily understood and communicated. Plans can become lengthy and cumbersome.

One expertⁱ urges that through a strategic framework we are invited to

- **Get back to basics. Deliver value.** Focus razor attention on being clear about our assets, the strengths on which we can deliver the most value.
- **Place intelligent bets. What’s likely?** Through our assessment phase and dialogues to shape our framework, consider potential scenarios deeply. Be clear about what we can do today to prepare for the uncertainties we face.
- **Embrace short-term strategies.** Be agile; create our own informed experiments. Better to try and fail than not risk. Use short term strategies to develop strategic clarity. Don’t stand still awaiting clarity!

Two examples

The first example is from the North Dakota Parks and Recreation Department. Note that in this example the framework is an artfully displayed single page tool that offers internal and external audiences a clear statement of mission, vision, values and six areas of strategic imperative that must be developed to achieve their vision. Within each of those imperatives is a set of strategic initiatives to be developed to reach their goals. This is a classic “compass north” document.



MISSION
We offer a diversity of recreation opportunities and sustainably manage resources.

STRATEGIC PLAN
2018 - 2022

VISION
Enriching generations through experiences that connect people and places.

CULTIVATE PARTNERSHIPS ACROSS THE LANDSCAPE	OPTIMIZE PLANNING	CREATE A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT	STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATIONS	CONNECT GENERATIONS THROUGH EXPERIENCES	EMBRACE OPPORTUNITIES & SUSTAIN RESOURCES
IDENTIFY STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS CREATE STATE-WIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION ACROSS ALL PROVIDERS OF PUBLIC RECREATION AND RELEVANT PARTNERS ELEVATE THE ROLE OF PARK STAFF AND REGIONAL MANAGERS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES AND REGIONS FORMALIZE PARTNERSHIPS WHERE THEY EXIST	CREATE CONSISTENT PLANNING FRAMEWORK DEVELOP A CYCLICAL PLANNING STRATEGY DEVELOP TRACKING SYSTEM FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF PLANS	DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A DEPARTMENT WIDE TRAINING PROGRAM IMPLEMENT A PROGRAM TO IMPROVE AGENCY PROCESSES RECOGNIZE EMPLOYEE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE IMPROVEMENT OF AGENCY EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY	DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A DEPARTMENT MARKETING STRATEGY EXECUTE A PLAN FOR NON-MARKETING EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS IMPROVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION METHODS	UNDERSTAND CUSTOMERS AND IDENTIFY THEIR NEEDS INVENTORY EXPERIENCE OPPORTUNITIES PRIORITIZE AND IMPROVE EXPERIENCE OPPORTUNITIES	MAINTAIN AND IMPROVE RESOURCES INVESTIGATE ALTERNATIVES FOR ASSET MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS EXPLORE DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

VALUES
Stewardship · Service · Experiences · Leadership · Partnerships

CURRENT AS OF: MAY 22, 2018

The second example is from the City of Little Falls, Minnesota. Note that once again the Framework has been condensed into a “compass north” document to guide decision making by

--articulating commonly held values and vision elements identified through an extensive community listening process, and

-- naming a set of strategic imperatives (in the outer circle).

To be discussed below, the phase of this planning process that was the most in depth, the most labor and cost intensive, was Phase 2 – Gathering Community Input, and Understanding the Context.

A final plan will provide somewhat more detail, but will continue to be a tool that can easily be used to maintain focus, invite questions about both efficacy – Does this continue to be the appropriate path? – as well as evaluation – Are we getting there? What are we learning?



Developing your Strategic Framework

Phase I – Planning to Plan

In many ways this is one of the most critical phases of your planning work. It is your opportunity to become clear about key readiness questions:

1. Who needs to be at the table throughout our planning? Be sure that you gather the right people. For the process to achieve the ends you desired, it is imperative that you identify and include a diversity of perspectives on the planning team and in the planning process. This always must include
 - a) Board of Directors, who are charged with leading the planning effort;
 - b) Staff leadership, charged with working closely with the board in strategy formation and execution;
 - c) those who will implement the plan—staff and key volunteers;
 - d) those current and past stakeholders in the organization
those who might best be described as “stake seekers”
 - e) others?
2. Are we ready to plan? What are our resources (time, human, financial) to complete this process? What must shape the scope of our planning work at this time? Is there an external deadline by which it must be done? Are there external stakeholders that identify expectations around the scope and depth of our product?

3. How will we communicate our work? How will we explain what our process will be? Why a strategic framework is a valuable approach? What outcomes we hope to achieve and by when? Why is this important work? With whom must we communicate to ensure buy-in to our process?
4. In an initial Strategic Planning Ad Hoc team meeting, consider questions that will inform how you proceed with subsequent steps in our planning process:
 - a) What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of our station? What's at the "center of our table"? How can we make this question a focal point in our planning process, especially in the assessment phase?
 - b) What assumptions do we hold that we need to test or challenge in our community assessment and strategy development? What's missing that we need to probe?
 - c) What conversations might we launch in this planning process that could create new opportunities or possibilities for our future?
 - d) What challenges are we concerned might come our way and how might we meet them?

Phase 2: Understanding the Context. Where are we now?

A robust external and internal assessment is essential to inform the strengths as well as the gaps that must be addressed in the strategic plan. Very briefly, as you consider what you need to include in this critical information gathering phase of your planning, here are some commonly named areas of exploration:

External Environment (Opportunities and Challenges)

- Political, Economic, Social Forces and trends
- Client, Customer, Member, etc., resource controllers
- Competitive forces / Collaborative opportunities

Internal Environment (Strengths and Weaknesses)

- Resources such as people, competencies, culture, economic
- Present strategy effectiveness
- Performance—scorecard, indicators, results, history

To flesh this out in more detail, questions to be raised in your Strategic Planning Ad Hoc Team might include:

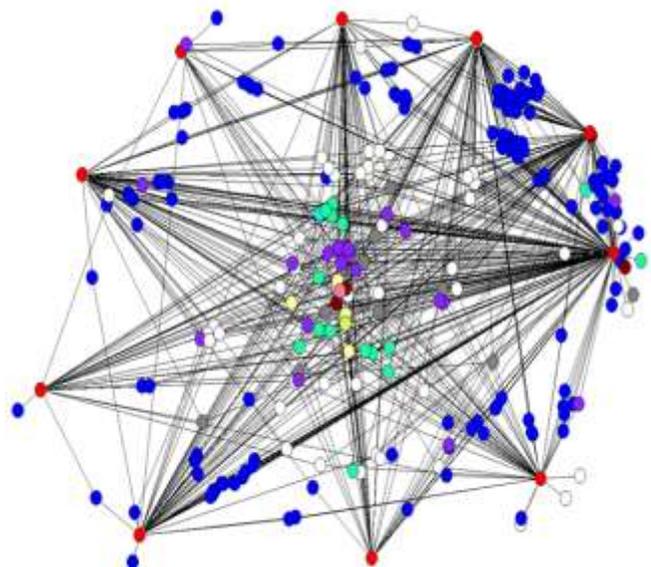
Who do we need to hear from?

- Existing supporters, volunteers, patrons, listeners
- The broad community
- Business community
- Government or other influencing organizations
- Other?

Exercise: Map your community. Identify and explore both current and potential future relationships.

What do we need to discover?

- Broadly held understandings of what are important priorities for our community
- Broadly held vision for our community future
- Role that public radio can play
- How we can best engage participation
- Perceptions of what's working, what's missing, challenges and gaps
- Other?



By what processes should our assessment and listening processes unfold?

- Surveys?
- Focus groups?
- Individual interviews?
- Town hall meetings?
- Capturing data at festivals, etc.?
- Other?

Questions to help you make sense of your future as well as identify questions/people/areas to probe in your assessment process might include some like the following. These of course also become excellent questions in Phase 3 as you distill your learnings from your assessment phase.

- Which of our previous expectations need to be rethought?
- What prospects that seemed unlikely or years away could be accelerated?
- What might constituents (new or established) value in particular in different possible futures?
- How might that vary across key variables (for example, culture or demographics)?
- What are the biggest threats to our current business?
- What new providers, business models, and ecosystems, technology, etc. might emerge?
- Which existing competitor companies are best positioned to succeed?
- What capabilities, relationships, and assets are important in different possible futures?

Exercise 2: Consider a SWOT analysis. It can be used as an early starting point as you test whether board and staff are aligned. Early on it can also serve as a mechanism to identify issues you will want to explore in your deeper assessment process. In this regard it is a starting point, NOT an endpoint. It can point the way for your robust assessment process that provides information from a wide variety of stakeholders, key performance indicators, and field analysis.

A SWOT may also be useful after completion of your deep assessment, as a tool to condense the learnings that emerge.



Phase 3: Agreeing on Purpose and Direction. Where are we headed?

By now you will be “swimming” in data. You will have gained a breadth of perspectives, and come to understand your work through the eyes of a wide variety of stakeholders. Phase 3 is an opportunity for rich team dialogue as you sort through the what you’ve learned. The process paramount! Be sure to spend the necessary time in a dialogue where the messy, the consequential, and the long-avoided topics are processed as a team. Synthesize what you’ve learned in Phase 2 and “try on” alternative futures for size.

There are many excellent tools for focusing your conversations as you identify and analyze strategic issues. They all have the goal of helping you identify critical strategic issues and refresh your vision. All of these exercises are included in the provided toolkit of resources.

Pick one or two that might work for you!

Tools for distilling ideas and reaching consensus

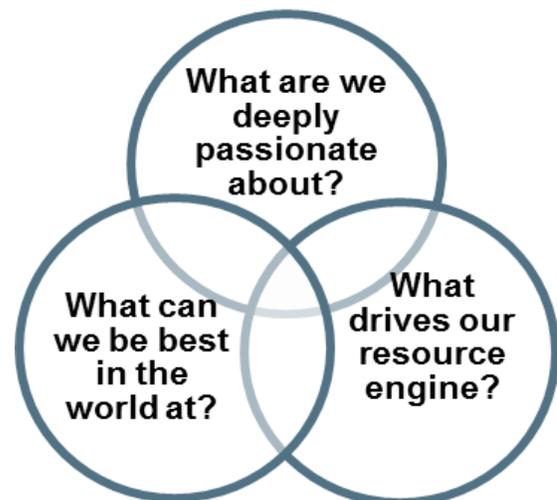
Discussion Tool 1: What is our Hedgehog?

As we shift our thinking away from the traditional “bigger is better” toward “deeper,” consider a conversation to help you understand and focus on our core to build strength and lead to a sustainable future. This may invite us to shift focus, or in fact may lead to a “disciplined pursuit of less.”

- What are we most deeply passionate about as a business? This is likely not a “thing you do” but an underlying value.
- What is our core competency? What are we best at? Again, this may not be obvious.
- What brings the resources we need in the door? Is it our skills at relationship building? Our gift of communication? Our valued niche in the fabric of our community?

As you have conversation to consider how the three circles of your hedgehog intersect, this exercise should inform where your need to strategically focus. [Jim Collins. *Good to Great*.

<http://www.jimcollins.com/>.]



Discussion Tool 2: What is our Theory of Change?

A theory of Change is an invitation to assimilate the information, ideas and cultural considerations identified in Phase 2 of your planning process into an inspirational, aspirational description of the strategic future the organization hopes to achieve. A theory of change . . .

- ✓ invites deep discussion of the process of change to achieve the vision
- ✓ outlines causal linkages or key actions and shifts required to move from the present reality to the desired future.
- ✓ it becomes instrumental in clarifying needed work and building a sense of team with a common task.



Discussion Tool 3: Defining Outcomes with Key Stakeholders in Mind

This exercise is the simple, yet profound reminder to be sure that as you take the perspective of “WIIFT” – What’s in it for them? It is the cautionary note to ensure that, at the core of your thinking as you formulate strategy you are considering community first.

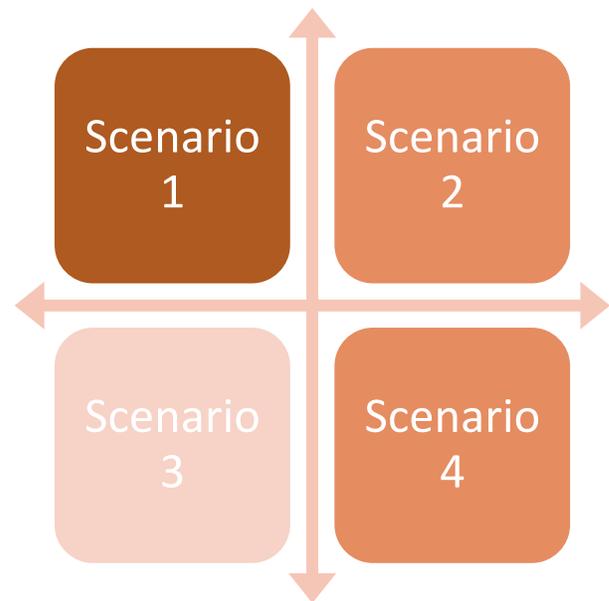
- ✓ Who are our key stakeholders or constituencies, the key “authorizers” of our work?
- ✓ What are the concerns or priorities that they articulate?
- ✓ What strategy adjustments would address the interests of key constituencies?
- ✓ What outcomes will be most valued by key constituencies?
- ✓ What kinds of evidence, key performance indicators, will likely be compelling to demonstrate impact on behalf of key constituencies?

Discussion Tool 4: What may be Alternative Scenarios?

While Scenario Planning in itself can be a deep process, there is significant value in the simple process of visualizing alternative futures and considering their relative merits and challenges.

Essentially, it’s an exercise in identifying two uncertainties – genuinely challenging unknowns that would impact your future. Based on these uncertainties, describe alternative futures. It’s not about “picking a future” but rather about a deep conversation to consider work that can be done in the shorter term to buffer your organization from the worst effects, or propel the organization forward toward success in an uncertain environment.

As a thought starter [you likely will name other axes]: Perhaps the X-Axis is the continuum from terrestrial radio to satellite radio; the Y-Axis is the continuum from reliance on traditional funding methods to new financing mechanisms. Describe 4 scenarios.



- ✓ **CONTENT:** What are the strengths/weaknesses of this scenario in enhancing our community impact? What is the impact on our station’s brand identity? How do we know?
- ✓ **ENGAGEMENT:** What is the will of the membership when this scenario is posed? How do we know?
- ✓ **REVENUE:** What are the implications of this scenario to the revenue opportunities and expense demands on our station? How do we know?
- ✓ **CAPACITY:** What are the organizational capacity demands/changes that must be made to successfully implement this scenario? How do we know?

As you conclude Phase 3, you should have in place a strong set of strategic issues that need to be front and center in your plan. To provide you with a few concrete examples, these may be issues such as

- We must find a path to reaching a new, younger demographic
- We must find a path to becoming more engaged in our business community
- We must find make sure we have a plan that focuses on us building on our current excellent reputation and continues to deliver value.
- We must keep it simple. Place a few intelligent bets, but not introduce new complexities beyond our capacity to manage.

Phase 4: Develop your strategic framework. What's your blueprint?

A strategic framework is your blueprint, the guide to organizing all priorities. It should be both an aspirational and inspirational document; it sustains momentum towards the organization's vision. Consider developing it as a tool that serve both the function of an internal document regularly reviewed by board and staff, as well as a tool that can be shared externally with key constituencies and potential investors. Many organizations post their Strategic Framework on the wall as a blueprint for all to see. In your toolkit you will find a template as one suggestion for the development of your framework. There are of course many ways to articulate your plan. But they all begin with a refreshed articulation of vision, based on what you've learned in Phases 2 & 3 of this process. They all, as well as include the anchors of your mission and values. They all help you arrive at clear strategic imperatives to focus on in the coming 2-3 years.

The Upper Peninsula Arts and Culture Alliance is offered because of its concise listing of four strategic imperatives, concise goals within each, and a statement of key performance indicators for monitoring progress and learning along the way.



Phase 5: Execute and manage an action plan. How will we get there?

Engage all key stakeholders in the development of annual work plans. Overcome resistance. Ensure benchmarks, key performance indicators, touchstones are built in. There is a template for creating an annual action plan in the toolkit. Here's an example deepen your understanding:

Long Term Objective: Facilitate social connections				
Goal or Outcome [SMARTIE]: If we are successful, in five years we will have built a relational organization that has strong external relationships and is a key player in building a resilient community built around equity and inclusion.				
Overall Performance Measure of Success: We will be able to document broader (more) and deeper (stronger) relationships with key partners and stakeholders in adjacent industries important to our work.				
Initiative, project or more specific SMARTIE goal	Tactics	Responsible person	Time frame	Key Perform. Indicator
By 12/31/2022 we will have documented new relationships with 3 rural economic development or community development agencies, with a focus on strengthening equity and inclusion in our marketplace.				

Conclusion

I hope that you will try out the process of shaping a concise strategic framework in your next strategic planning process. I believe you will find it to be a way to inspire your team, guide your actions, and bring clarity in your message to your community about those important questions Why, What, and How you do your work. I believe your community will more deeply find themselves in your work, understand why you matter to them, and see your responsiveness to a changing world. Best wishes in your planning efforts!

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Recommended Reading

- Read "Scenario Planning: Rapid Planning in a Time of Rapid Change"
<https://blog.boardsource.org/blog/scenario-planning-rapid-planning-in-a-time-of-rapid-change>
- Read "Our Theory of Change and How It Can Change Us"
<http://jesikahmariaross.com/2015/11/our-theory-of-change-how-it-can-change-us/>
- Read "How to do Strategic Planning like a Futurist"
<https://hbr.org/2019/07/how-to-do-strategic-planning-like-a-futurist>
- Read "Managing when the Future is Unclear."
<https://hbr.org/2019/01/managing-when-the-future-is-unclear>

ⁱ Lisa Lai, Harvard Business Review, January 9, 2019