

Firelight Newsflash! 17 March 2008 - Focus on Strategic Planning

Dear partners,

As you all know, developing a strategic plan is an important part of any organization's life. Our day-to-day work with children and families is often determined by what we have set out to do in our strategic plan and action plans. In some ways, a strategic plan can be an act of bravery: it will help your organization be clear about where it is going.

A strategic plan is a written document which describes where your organization wants to be in the future (usually three to five years), and the broad areas of activity that it will undertake to achieve this vision. In many ways, it's like a roadmap for the organization which outlines the long-term goals and strategies of the organization.

A strategic plan is different from an operational plan (or workplan or action plan), which is short-term and intended to guide your day-to-day activities. These two types of plan are closely connected, however, as the operational plans should be moving the organisation towards the vision defined in the strategic plan.

Below is some information to get you thinking about strategic planning, whether your organization has one in place already or whether you've never had one before. Two additional documents on strategic planning, which you might find helpful, are also attached. And please do feel free to share with us your organization's strategic planning processes and documents.

Our very best,
The Firelight Team

Why is Strategic Planning Important?

- To set goals and provide direction
- To see the progress of the organization
- To assess and reassess goals of the organization
- it helps clarify priorities
- Helps keep the organization focused
- Helps to make determinations about what falls under the organizational mission and what doesn't
- it will impress donors
- the planning process can build commitment to the organisation.

Benefits of Strategic Planning

- Strategic planning brings all components of the organization together to see the big picture.

- Strategic planning entails team building within the organization
- Strategic planning brings many people within the community to the table to accomplish a goal.

Basic Steps in Strategic Planning

1. Identify your purpose (mission statement) - This is the statement(s) that describes why your organization exists, i.e., its basic purpose. The statement should describe what client needs are intended to be met and with what services, the type of communities are sometimes mentioned. The top-level management should develop and agree on the mission statement. The statements will change somewhat over the years.

2. Select the goals your organization must reach if it is to accomplish your mission - Goals are general statements about what you need to accomplish to meet your purpose, or mission, and address major issues facing the organization.

3. Identify specific approaches or strategies that must be implemented to reach each goal - The strategies are often what change the most as the organization eventually conducts more robust strategic planning, particularly by more closely examining the external and internal environments of the organization.

4. Identify specific action plans to implement each strategy - These are the specific activities that each major function (for example, department, etc.) must undertake to ensure it's effectively implementing each strategy. Objectives should be clearly worded to the extent that people can assess if the objectives have been met or not. Ideally, the top management develops specific committees that each have a work plan, or set of objectives.

5. Monitor and update the plan - Planners regularly reflect on the extent to which the goals are being met and whether action plans are being implemented. Perhaps the most important indicator of success of the organization is positive feedback from the organization's customers.

Common Questions about Strategic Planning

1. What is the role of the staff in strategic planning? Ultimately, the board of directors is responsible for the strategic plan; however, input from the staff is vital. The staff members will be the ones who implement the strategies and assess the goals of the plan. The staff can help the board operationalize their goals and also help set realistic goals and objectives based on experience.

2. **Who decides on the agency's mission, vision and purpose?** The board approves the mission, vision and purpose of the organization.
3. **Can the mission change as the organization grows?** The true mission and vision of the organization typically stays the same. However, how the mission is addressed, and in what ways the organization functions to address the mission may change as the organization grows and times change.
4. **Do all organizations need a strategic plan?** Absolutely, your organization is never too small to have a strategic plan. The strategic plan helps to guide the organization and keep the organization on track.
5. **How do you get stakeholders committed to the strategic planning process?** This can often be a difficult task. The first important way to get the board committed is to educate board members about the strategic planning process. Let them know that it is a constant and ongoing process and that it is vital to the continuation of the organization. Outside stakeholders must also have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibility in this process.

Some Important Words of Wisdom on Strategic Planning

1. The real benefit of the strategic planning process is the process, not the document.
2. There is no "perfect" plan. Rather, do your best at strategic thinking and implementation, and learning from what you're doing to enhance what you're doing the next time around.
3. The strategic planning process is usually not an "aha!" experience. It's like the management process itself -- it's a series of small moves that together keep the organization doing things right as it heads in the right direction.
4. In planning, things usually aren't as bad as you fear, nor as good as you'd like.
5. Start simple, but start!