

Roles in Strategic Planning

In all types of planning, there is someone who has the vision for the desired outcomes, who decides what needs to be done, and who implements the final plan.

This individual may be the same person for all phases. Planning the future of an organization, however, is a major endeavor and involves a great number of people. It cannot happen in a vacuum. The success of the final plan — and the actual planning process — depends on the engagement of the right people at the appropriate phases of the process.

Group effort

Why are so many people needed during the strategic planning process? Planning requires thinkers and doers. A multitude of skill sets and expertise is needed during each stage. The strategic plan as an end product must meet the needs of a wide variety of stakeholders. If they are left out of the process, the final plan tends to serve the needs of a few who may not be fully aware of the actual impact of their decisions. It is counterproductive for the decision-makers to serve the plan on a platter and expect to get the necessary buy-in and enthusiastic reception. When those responsible for the health of the organization, those responsible for doing the daily work, and those who depend on the products and services interact, the final plan is more readily accepted and owned by all participants.

Role of the board

Without the full board's blessing and participation, the success of the planning effort is compromised. Whether the board or the chief executive introduces the need for planning, the board must be behind the decision to move forward, and then ultimately approve the final directives. The board's role is to set direction and, with the chief executive, determine and fine-tune the mission, vision, and the values of the organization. The board is the true liable body of the organization — strategic planning cannot happen without the board's input and ability to make strategic decisions for the organization.

The board works in close partnership with the chief executive but it must own the final results of the strategic plan. It is unreasonable to expect individual board members to organize the details of the process, but each board member should contribute to the strategy development and understanding of the consequences of board decisions.

Periodic planning is only one way boards are involved in strategic planning and direction setting. Strategic thinking is a key attribute of an exceptional board and not required only during actual planning process. It is present in every board meeting. Issues of substantial consequence dominate the agenda. The board proactively reflects on potential business items, whether they need a decision then or later. Strategic thinking keeps the board one step ahead in identifying priorities.

Role of the chief executive

The chief executive is in the driver's seat, taking charge and managing the strategic planning process. She often is the visionary, hoping to articulate the options available for the future and then get the board's blessing. She usually is the instigator of the planning idea and sees that the plan is executed in a concrete manner. The chief executive coordinates the participation of everyone whose collaboration is needed. She may delegate some of the individual tasks to others but she remains the supervisor who ensures that planning proceeds as expected.

Role of the staff

Without the staff's input, perspective, support during planning, and final implementation of the plan it would be impossible to carry out the strategic planning process from conception to successful results. Staff provide relevant context to planning as they are so close to the needs of the organization and means of making things happen. They are the task masters and worker bees who get involved in researching the external and internal factors guiding the direction the organization needs to take. Staff members organize the meetings and retreats that bring all the players together. After the overall plan is defined, the staff should be busy drafting its own operational plans for implementation. The operational plans are the natural next step to the strategic plan. They translate the board-approved guidelines into workable directives and schedules.

Role of a consultant

A consultant or a professional facilitator can add objectivity and autonomy to the process while also alleviating the stress of the additional work load. Small-scale planning does not automatically necessitate the use of a consultant, but if the organization is going through a major shift via planning, a facilitator can ensure that all the steps receive proper attention. A consultant may act as a mere facilitator who directs the process and runs the meetings but does not impose his or her opinions in any way. A consultant may also act as the professional guide who takes the responsibility of defining the key issues through interviews and other methods, and then helps steer the board and staff in the right direction.

Role of various constituents

The larger the participation list in strategic planning, the easier it is to connect 'cause and consequence.' Rich information leads to wiser decisions. However, to keep the process under control, it is useful to justify the involvement of members, clients, customers, donors, funders, competitors, partners, or the general public, or at least to be clear about the extent of their

engagement. Surveys or focus groups can include these stakeholders when external environmental scans are studied or when user feedback is needed on the quality of services. Bringing representatives to planning meetings, however, is not usually necessary. Planning is an internal exercise and deserves due confidentiality.