

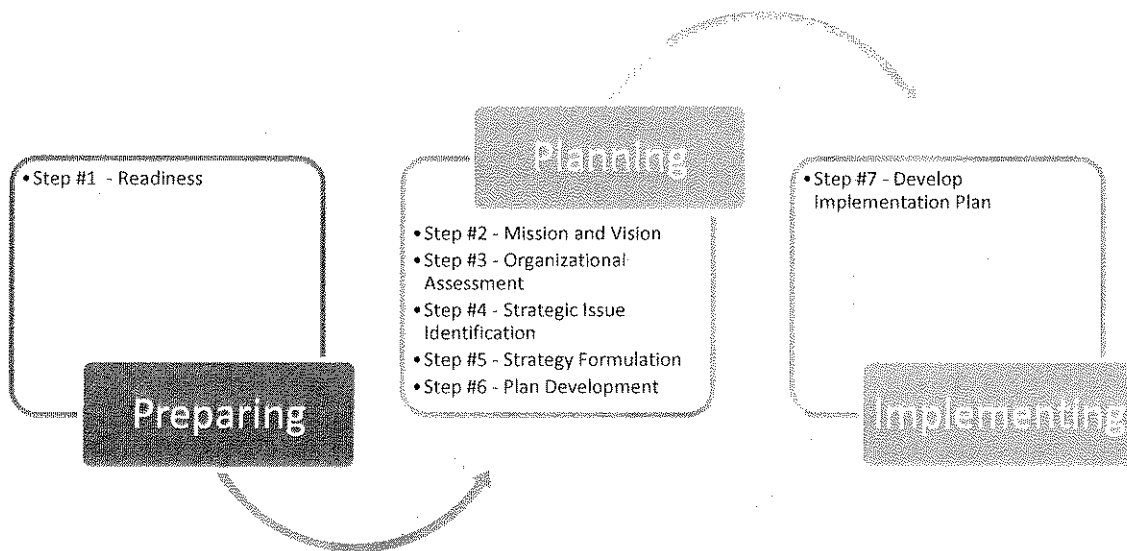


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Description: Strategic Planning Facilitation

Introduction

The strategic planning process is broken into three phases with seven steps. The three phases are **Preparing**, **Planning**, and **Implementing**. The phases are of variable length and can be expanded and deepened depending on the specific needs of the organization. The **Preparing** phase refers to the period where the primary strategic planning contact (or small committee) works directly with the facilitator to get ready for the process. The **Planning** phase is when the participants analyze the needs of the organization, determine what issues need to be addressed, and develop a plan. The **Implementing** phase is the longest phase during which the organization acts on the strategic priorities outlined in the plan.



Preparing

This initial phase includes one step: *Step #1 - Readiness*. The following should be achieved during this step:

- Create a timeline including dates for important events and deliverables.

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- Determination of what reports are required and when (e.g. retreat summary report, survey summary, mid-project, final project)
- Determine who primary contacts will be
- Determine membership for strategic planning steering committee and broader strategic planning team
- A basic idea of how stakeholders will be engaged (e.g. focus groups, community forums, surveys, interviews)
- A plan for how the web will be used to communicate and store information
- A basic communication plan
- A data inventory

Planning

The *Planning* phase includes five steps and the bulk of the work. The steps are: *Step #2 - Mission and Vision*, *Step #3 - Organizational Assessment*, *Step #4 - Strategic Issue Identification*, *Step #5 - Strategy Formulation*, and *Step #6 - Plan Development*.

Step #2 - Mission and Vision

"You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there."
(Yogi Berra)

During *Mission and Vision* step of the strategic planning process the organization clarifies its mission¹. The organization also clarifies its vision, which is a description of future success. During this phase it makes sense to identify mandates placed on the organization. Mandates bring some clarity to what the organization must do, regardless of what the individuals want to do.

Step #3 - Organizational Assessment

During step #3 the strategic planning committee comes together and does an assessment of the organization. This assessment must be based on data. The data (identified during step #1) may include student achievement data, demographic data (e.g. changes in student population, changes in SES or ELL population, changes in special education), financial, discipline, attendance, survey, organizational (e.g. organizational charts, staff turnover, application rates, etc...). The strategic planning committee must look at these data in-depth to provide information about what issues are most important (or strategic)(step #4). The organizational assessment can take place during a retreat with speakers (e.g. director of finance, superintendent, principals, demographer, etc...) or across multiple meetings during which participants analyze data and make in-depth observations.

¹ Mission statement is the declaration of the organization's overall purpose. The mission statement should be able to answer the question who the organization is and why it exists.



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Step #4: Strategic Issue Identification

During step #4 the strategic planning committee identifies strategic issues. A strategic issue can be broadly thought of as fundamental policy choices or critical challenges that must be addressed in order for the organization to achieve its vision. Consider change choices that impact the district's mission, approach to delivering education, services, stakeholders, costs, system structures, or management. Strategic issues may also be identified by considering forces, internal or external, that would prevent the district from taking advantage of its strengths to reach its goals or vision. This is really the key to high-quality strategic planning. The organization must identify its strategic issues with clarity in order to plan to address them.

Strategic issues have several characteristics that separate them from operational issues or just critical issues:

1. They are issues that must be addressed by the highest levels of the organization. Strategic issues are not delegated to staff or middle-level managers. Strategic issues are addressed by the board and the administration.
2. Strategic issues usually come with some tension that must be resolved through planning. Any time there is a discussion that contrasts current or past practice with future changes there is likely to be some tension. What's more, strategic issues usually create discussion about how best to deliver services, which is a tense conversation. Strategic issues surface conversations that will require trade-offs (choosing to do one thing and not another). In short, discussion of strategic issues is likely to surface a feeling that there are going to be winners and losers.
3. Strategic issues have no obvious solution. If there is an obvious solution and immediate solution to an issue, then it is probably not strategic. Frequently the obvious answer may in fact be the wrong answer. Strategic issues are phrased as questions to encourage participants to consider numerous potential solutions.
4. Strategic issues must be something that the district can address. The issue identified might be strategic, but perhaps not at the district-level.

Strategic issues tend to be longer term, tend to be "hot button" (or beyond just a touchy issue), have financial implications, require high level decision makers, and the consequences of ignoring the strategic issue could impact the quality of the product. One other distinction to keep in mind is between critical issues and strategic issues. Critical issues are important. **Strategic issues are important and forward-thinking and seize on current opportunities.** The idea is to encourage proactivity and to position the organization for the future. Strategic issues usually center around a tension or conflict to be resolved. Such tensions or conflicts may be related to differences between: past ways of doing things and future demands, current capacities and capacities necessary for delivering the essential services. Strategic issues have no obvious best solution. If there is an obvious immediate solution to an issue, then question why it has not been implemented before. A



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strategic issue must be something the district can address. If an issue cannot be addressed, it may be strategic, but not at the district level.

The outcomes that we are aiming for when we create a strategic issue agenda are as follows:

- Focus on what is truly important.
- Focus on issues, not answers. Too often we end up with answers searching for a solution. It is difficult to remain focused on the issues when we frequently think there is an obvious answer, but if the answer is so obvious usually the issue is not that strategic in nature.
- Some tension might be raised by the issues identified. This is how change occurs. In one of the experiences I previously mentioned we raised the issue of how we teach ELL. The tensions ended up being intellectual and emotional. While not every byproduct of that tension was pretty, it signaled to us that we had identified something deeply important to the future success of the organization.
- Finally, the identification of an issue agenda can make the work "real" to participants. When you start to think about the future success of the organization and discuss the consequences of not addressing issues facing the organization the work can become urgent and feel like it has gone beyond "theory".

One important way to think about strategic issue identification is that the organization must identify its problems before it jumps to solutions. Too often schools and districts have a solution in search of a problem. For example, a school board in New Hampshire going through this strategic planning process identified the following strategic issues:

- How do we connect or partner with other schools, civic organizations, businesses and colleges to broaden our understanding and expand our opportunities?
- How do we attract, develop, and retain our teachers to achieve excellence in teaching?
- How do we enhance our facilities to support and promote academics, athletics, the arts, and wellness?

Step #5 - Strategy Formulation

Strategy is defined as a pattern of purposes, policies, programs, actions, decisions, or resource allocations that defines what an organization is, what it does and why it does it (Bryson 2011). In short, strategies are the bridges from the organization's current reality to its imagined future (vision). The strategic issues, identified in step #4, identify the places where strategies are required to reach this future. In the end, strategies that are adopted by the organization must be arranged to achieve the mission and vision, meet the mandates, and create public value.

In the planning process the organization can identify strategies to address the strategic issues through a number of approaches including, creating subcommittees focused on each strategic issue (usually five or



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fewer issues are identified) that spend considerable time studying the issue and potential strategies to address the issue, a retreat with speakers that "open the eyes and minds" of the strategic planning members by exposing them to new ideas, or by having the strategic planning committee address the issues one at a time. Regardless of how the strategic issues are tackled, one important element to keep in mind is that the strategic planning participants must be exposed to new ideas throughout the process. Exposing participants to new ideas can be achieved through readings, videos, speakers, or field trips. The earlier this step occurs the more effective it will be.

Step #6 - Plan Development

During this phase the plan is put in written format. The plan is organized around strategic issues and the strategies proposed to address these issues. The plan must be vetted through the decision-making body (e.g. school board). The decision-making body must have an opportunity to discuss, debate, and come to consensus about the decisions proposed in the plan.

Implementing

The Implementing phase includes *Step #7 - Develop Implementation Plan*. During this final step the staff of the organization (e.g. superintendent, assistant superintendent, etc...) outline the steps required to achieve the strategic plan. It is vital that this plan include:

- Timelines
- Expected outcomes
- Methods for reporting progress on implementation
- Specific action steps
- Personnel responsible
- Cost



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Example Timeline

Month	Key Activities
July – August Pre-Work	Data inventory and organization. Development of a data profile for the district ² .
September	Launch strategic planning steering committee. Train facilitators for later work (if subcommittee facilitators will be used) Develop timeline. Promote the process to all stakeholders (solicit volunteers). Collect additional data if needed (stakeholder surveys, focus groups, etc...)
October	<p>What Is? (organizational assessment and strategic challenges)</p> <p>During October the primary focus will be an event bringing together volunteers and stakeholders to complete an organizational assessment and identify the strategic challenges facing the organization.</p> <p>The goals of the meeting:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Complete an organizational assessment (what is the status of the organization)? 2. What are the strategic issues that the organization will face over the next 5-10 years? <p>**Prior to this meeting data could be shared with participants. Participants could be asked to bring (or send) a picture of something that inspires them about education (**this question would need to be modified) and these could then be displayed around the room when participants come into the room and this could be used as sort of inspiration wall. (**this could also be displayed in a rotating PPT)</p>
November	Summary report and planning meetings with steering committee
December	Planning and preparation for stakeholder meeting Training subcommittee facilitators
January	Strategy identification retreat

² A key requirement of effective strategic planning is completing a comprehensive organizational assessment. The assessment itself will be completed by the strategic planning participants, but for this assessment to reflect reality it is important to collect and share data in advance.



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Month	Key Activities
	Subcommittee work
February – March	Subcommittee work and report outs
April	Development of DRAFT Strategic Plan
May	Rollout of DRAFT Strategic Plan Collection of feedback from stakeholders
June	Finalize Strategic Plan