

Choosing Our Direction

Workbook 4

Making It Happen



Introduction

This workbook is one of five in the *Choosing Our Direction* series designed to assist your group, organization, or nonprofit agency in developing an effective strategic plan that can help you strengthen and sustain your organization's achievements. These workbooks will also help provide you with the insight you need to accurately and realistically guide your future. Even more importantly, these materials will help you outline an effective course of action that will make your strategic planning efforts pay dividends long into the future.

If you have been utilizing the entire *Choosing Our Direction* series, you have now addressed three questions about your group or organization: "What do we do now?", "What shapes our future?", and "Where are we going?" Working through these questions has allowed you to discover a wide range of information about your group or organization and has provided you with an effective set of goals that will guide your future.

The challenge now is to "make it happen"—to ensure that the information, goals, and consensus you have developed to this point are transformed into a feasible and effective *action plan*. This action plan will provide you with the road map you'll need to stay on course, ensure accountability, and evaluate your successes. Strategic planning without this follow-through to implementation is simply a waste of time.

Creating an Implementation Plan

Lights, camera, action! To this point, your planning group has identified and prioritized a number of goals critical to the future of your group. It is now important to look at specifically what will be done to achieve these priority goals by assigning responsibilities, evaluating resources, and establishing a time frame in which specific outcomes and actions will be accomplished.

Step One

Assuming you now have a number of prioritized and agreed-upon goals that your organization needs to move forward (as outlined in Workbook 3), now is the time to begin to outline some of the specific objectives and projects necessary to realize these goals.

As a reminder: *Goals* should encompass a desired future outcome you would want to see. *Objectives* need to be measurable, have an end date, and be realistic. *Action steps* should describe the specific actions necessary to achieve your objectives, identifying the persons responsible and timelines.

Exercise #1

For each of the goals you have identified, assign an action team to complete the Objective Identification Worksheet. This worksheet is designed to help you identify, define, and evaluate the objectives that will need to be achieved to accomplish the goals your group has discussed. This will assist you in organizing your goals, beginning to put together a strategy to meet them, and determining if they meet the criteria necessary to become part of your plan. The *objectives* you outline for each goal should identify the specific outcomes you want to occur within a given (and identified) time frame. While you are free to choose otherwise, we recommend that you outline these objectives together as a large strategic planning group. The action steps and measures of success that relate each of these will be further developed in smaller teams.

Example

Goal A:

To strengthen our financial resource base.

Objective #1:

Acquire at least three grants from private foundations within one year.

Objective #2:

Host fund-raising event to raise at least \$10,000 by May.

Objective #3:

Complete comprehensive cost-reduction plan by June 15.

Objective Identification Worksheet

Goal:

Objective #1: What will be accomplished, by whom, and by when? (Be specific.)

Objective #2: What will be accomplished, by whom, and by when? (Be specific.)

Objective #3: What will be accomplished, by whom, and by when? (Be specific.)

Goal:

Objective #1: What will be accomplished, by whom, and by when? (Be specific.)

Objective #2: What will be accomplished, by whom, and by when?x (Be specific.)

Objective #3: What will be accomplished, by whom, and by when? (Be specific.)

When your Objective Identification Worksheets are completed for each goal, take time as a group to review the list to determine if the goals need to be completed in any specific order. Record additional objectives on blank worksheets if necessary. Each of these will be compiled into a report and sent to *Choosing Our Direction* participants for their review and comments. The final report detailing the projects and action steps developed by the action teams should be compiled at the conclusion of the planning process.

Strategic Options

Within each goal, you have looked at objectives that will assist you in reaching that goal. Here are some questions to ask as you look at each of these objectives. Answering these will help ensure that you are organized to effectively address these issues.

1. How will completing these goals and objectives affect programs and initiatives already in place? Can the project be coordinated or integrated with current programs and activities or do existing efforts need to be eliminated?
2. Are effective management systems in place to reach these goals and objectives? Are there committees in place to carry out the steps necessary?
3. Are staff and committee members ready to take on these goals and objectives? Will staff need to be hired/trained?
4. Can the physical infrastructure support efforts to achieve these goals and objectives (i.e., are new technology or buildings necessary)? Can you adequately maintain/service the necessary infrastructure?
5. What will key decision makers, stakeholders, and opinion leaders think of these goals and objectives? How will you communicate with these parties?

6. Are these goals and objectives sustainable over time? Will you be able to maintain funding and other resources at necessary levels?
7. Can progress be adequately measured/evaluated? How?
8. What additional information do you need to make an informed decision regarding these goals and objectives?

Creating a Timeline

From this stage of your discussion a set of prioritized goals and strategies has emerged that now need to be placed in action-oriented, time-defined terms. In order to take the steps necessary to realize your strategic plans goals you need to be able to identify not only by whom and when various activities will be accomplished but also have in place clear measures evaluating your successes (and conversely learning from those things that didn't go so well.) Use the Action Step Development Worksheet to help you develop this plan.

Exercise #2

Action Step Development Worksheet

Action teams or committees should use this worksheet to identify, develop, implement, and evaluate action steps that need to be met to accomplish goals and objectives. Complete a separate box for each objective. Feel free to make additional copies as necessary.

Example

Goal A: To strengthen our financial resource base.

Objective #1: Acquire at least three grants from private foundations within one year.

Action step(s)	Who will do it?	By when?
1. Compile and prioritize list of prospective donors.	Fund-Raising Committee	September 15
2. Develop preliminary proposal materials and discuss with at least three prospects.	Fund-Raising Committee	November 30
3. Develop comprehensive fixed-costs recovery schedule to be used with all grant proposals.	Finance Committee	January 31

Goal:

Objective:

Action step(s)	Who will do it?	By when?
1.		
2.		
3.		

Goal:

Objective:

Action step(s)	Who will do it?	By when?
1.		
2.		
3.		

Goal:

Objective:

Action step(s)	Who will do it?	By when?
1.		
2.		
3.		

Goal:

Objective:

Action step(s)	Who will do it?	By when?
1.		
2.		
3.		

Before coming back together as a large group and reporting on your team discussions, it's worth taking a few extra moments to ask some important questions of each of your action steps.

1. Is this action step contributing to accomplishing its related goal and objective?
2. Who else can help? Are there partners in and outside of the organization that can help?
3. List all the specific resources that will be required to accomplish the action step.

Once your team has fully fleshed out each of these details, you are now prepared to present your overall strategy to the large group. Have everyone discuss these plans as they are outlined. Is there overlap between teams or committee efforts? Are there natural places where efforts or resources can be streamlined or combined? Are the appropriate measures in place to be sure they will succeed? Are they consistent with the organization's mission and vision? These are just a few of the questions you'll want to ask to ensure your plan has the greatest chance of success and you are using your resources in the most effective manner possible.

Ensuring Accountability

To ensure that each of your action teams meets the objectives they have established, it is recommended that an "Implementation Timeline" be completed for every action team you have established. This will establish an agreed-upon set of expectations and timelines.

Implementation Timeline

Next meeting date and location:

Three-month follow-up report/evaluation due:

Six-month follow-up report/evaluation due:

Twelve-month follow-up report/evaluation due:

Summary Timeline of Goals and Objectives

	Due Date	Contact Person	Next Meeting
Goal A			
Objective 1			
Objective 2			
Objective 3			
Objective 4			
Objective 5			
Goal B			
Objective 1			
Objective 2			
Objective 3			
Objective 4			
Objective 5			

Pulling It All Together— Writing the Plan

Somewhere along the way in your strategic planning efforts (hopefully earlier than later), your group decided who is going to write your strategic plan. This can be a paid consultant or an internal staff member, volunteer, or a board member who has the skill and experience to do so. Your plan writer will have been taking careful notes throughout the process, including preparing interim reports between planning sessions. This information should be assembled into a coherent document that reflects the key decisions of the planning team and enables the organization to move forward to implementation.

Suggested Method: Your plan writer can start by putting together a basic outline including minutes from each session or meeting of the planning team. In addition, the plan should contain some ideas and clarification for certain parts of the plan. Following is a suggested outline for the final plan.

Suggested Plan Format

- The organization's mission. This section may also include any relevant comments summarizing some of the ways the organization's mission makes it unique or provides it a competitive advantage.
- The organization's mandates and its stakeholders.
- A summary of the SWOT analysis.

- Vision of success. This section may include descriptions of key items the planning team identifies in its "envisioning the future" exercise. You may wish to modify the items on the list somewhat so that it will be clear how the organization will know it is succeeding.
- Strategic issues, goals, objectives, action steps, and teams. This section will be the meat of the plan because it will include a listing of each strategic issue and the goals and objectives associated with it.
- Resource implications (financial and human) of the plan.
- Timeline for reviewing and updating the plan.

Your planning team and plan writer may have considered several drafts of the plan before presenting a final version to your board of directors or members. If this is appropriate for your organization, the plan should be formally presented to the board for its consideration and adoption. Ideally, the board members will have read the plan before the board meeting. It may also be helpful to provide a verbal overview of the plan's contents.

Ensuring Success

Once your governing body has adopted the plan, it should anticipate periodically checking the progress toward accomplishing the plan's goals and objectives. Such checkpoints should occur at regular board meetings, perhaps every three months. *The time for checking may vary with the nature of the projects, but their review should be an important part of your governing body's business on a regular basis.* Use the Implementation Timeline as a general guide for preparing reports. In addition, be sure to note the success of projects and goals as they are realized.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Shelving the plan: The whole idea of the strategic planning process is not simply to finish it and say that you've done it, but to implement it.
- Treating it like the Ten Commandments: These are not directives sent down from above. The plan is a living, breathing document that can be changed as needed.
- Underestimating time needed to implement: Don't get discouraged if the project is taking longer than anticipated to get done. As Winston Churchill said: "Never, never give up." So maybe you have to change or rearrange the steps, just keep at it.
- Failure to coordinate: All parties that need to be involved need to coordinate. This could happen with subcommittee meetings,

staff meetings, listservs, memos, conference calls. Be creative!! Just communicate so everyone knows what the expectations are.

- Lack of skilled personnel: If you have the budget to hire part-time help or consultants in order to carry out the plan, by all means do so. If not, again be creative. Are there board members or volunteers that have special expertise? Look to community partners to help.
- Plan becomes outdated: Again, this is a living, breathing document. Be sure to make changes if goals are no longer relevant.
- Not integrated into daily activities: Make the process a part of your regular activities. Be sure to set deadlines and keep communication open. Celebrate successes!
- Waiting for someone else to take the initiative: No one else cares as much as you do about your organization and its future. Create a team of stakeholders whose interests are at stake both inside and outside the organization.

Evaluation

Are We Headed in the Right Direction?

As you surely are aware by now, the strategic planning process never really ends. Your action plans will change as your organization's needs, resources, and priorities change. Your first version will change over time as you learn from your experiences and improve it. Think of your plan as being in a loose-leaf notebook, not as a hardcover book. Constant evaluation will help you see how well the community is doing, understand the benefits and impacts of certain activities, and make decisions based on better information.

Successful implementation of your action plans will depend on monitoring and continuously learning about the following:

- How will members of the organization be kept involved and informed?
- How will the organization report on annual progress?
- How and when will you review and update the strategic plan?
- How will the organization evaluate its processes for making the action plans happen?
- How will you determine the success of the actions?
- How will you determine if the completed actions move you closer to your vision?

Continuing Involvement

After the initial enthusiasm of developing an organizational vision and action plans, some organizations find it difficult to maintain interest and involvement. This drop off is normal, but over the long term, the potential benefits of strategic planning will be greatly diminished if the action plans are implemented by a small number of people. Your organizations should develop a strategy to market the vision and action plans to encourage people to become and stay involved. Vibrant organizations always have a large pool of motivated people.

Progress Reports

How will successes be publicized? As the strategic plan is being implemented, it is important to have constant communication with the individuals and organizations that have provided resources to your organizations. It is easy to forget to tell everyone what you are doing when you are so busy doing the work. However, the individuals and agencies that support your organization need to know that their time and money are well spent. The strategic plan should describe how and when you will provide progress reports to the public and other partners. This will help maintain good partnerships and ensure continued support from inside and outside the organization.

Strategic Vision and Action Review and Amendment

How and when will the organization review its strategic vision and action plans? This review can look at both "How is the organization doing?" and "How well are the plan's goals

being carried out?” It can consider unexpected circumstances and scan the environment for new problems or opportunities. A review team should include some of the people that developed the plans as well as other members.

Continuing Evaluation

Every once in a while, you should stop and look at what went right or wrong, learn why it happened, and try to prevent similar problems in the future. The strategic plan should describe how and when your organization will evaluate the process, outputs, and outcomes of the strategic plan. If you already know who will do your evaluations, include them in the planning process. They can tell you what kind of data is needed to do a good evaluation. Aspects of good evaluations include, but are not limited to, the following.

Process

Did people complete their tasks on time and within budget? Are partnerships succeeding? A process evaluation helps answer questions such as “What changes are needed in how we are carrying out our plan?” and “How can we do it better?” It may be possible to do a process evaluation at the end of the first year or it may be more effective to do it during the strategic plan’s annual review and update.

Outputs

An output evaluation asks, “How much of what we planned to do did we actually accomplish?” Outputs are usually things that can be counted and that you can see

completed in a short time frame. They result from activities in the strategic plan and work programs (e.g., jobs created, houses built, programs started).

Outcomes

In evaluating the end results of implementing a strategic vision, ask, “How successful were we in tackling the long-term problems we sought to address?” or, “How successful were we in achieving our long-term goals?” Outcomes are usually long term (e.g., fewer people living in poverty) and linked to problems and goals. They are hard to evaluate because many factors that influence a community’s well-being are out of any one organization’s control (e.g., weather, the world trade). The outcome evaluation should be made after your strategic plan has been in effect for a long period of time, perhaps measured in terms of 3 to 10 years.

Many organizations overlook the importance of monitoring and evaluating the capacity-building process. When there are pressing deadlines and limited resources, it may seem that evaluation is a luxury you cannot afford. In reality, however, it is critical that you check in with members of your organization to make sure your efforts are heading in the right direction. Building in an evaluation process from the very start will help you get feedback later. The most successful organizations maintain momentum, learn from their experiences, and improve as time goes on.

Monitoring

As your strategic plan and work programs are being implemented, your board should track where you are with respect to all your goals and objectives. How and when will you review these objectives? This can be done at the same time that the strategic plan is reviewed (usually once a year) and should include a review team of your board: advisory board members, staff, and organizational members. This annual review should be done with an eye toward identifying those things that need to be changed in your annual work program or plans.

Summary

If you have been following the *Choosing Our Direction* series throughout your strategic planning efforts, you’re now keenly aware that while the formal process may now be completed, it is never really finished. Implementation, evaluation, thoughtful assessments of your mission and goals—as well as continually monitoring all those things changing in the environment around you—are all important everyday activities of any successful organization. The guidebooks in this series can be an important reference for you as you continue this process.

About the *Choosing Our Direction* Materials

Effective groups and organizations have clear goals and objectives and are focused on working toward accomplishing these. *Choosing Our Direction* is a strategic planning tool for groups or organizations to become more effective by developing or redeveloping such goals and objectives for their future. It helps groups identify who they are, what they currently do, what they want to do in the future, and develop a usable plan for getting there. The workbooks in the *Choosing Our Direction* program were designed to be used sequentially and are intended to provide a framework for strategic planning. However, depending upon the needs of the group or organization, the workbooks can be used independently to focus on specific concerns or issues.

The workbooks in the *Choosing Our Direction* program include:

- **Setting the Stage: A Primer on Strategic Planning and Visioning** (Initial assessment: Is strategic planning for your organization? What does it involve? What is the group's commitment?)
- **#1 What Do We Do Now?** (Introduction to strategic planning, assessing organizational structure)
- **#2 What Shapes Our Future?** (Forces affecting the organization; stakeholder perceptions; strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats)
- **#3 What Are We Going to Do?** (Goals, objectives, mission and vision exercise)
- **#4 Making It Happen** (Implementation plan; action steps; timeline; evaluation)

No two strategic planning efforts are ever the same. Differing organizational needs and circumstances often require different strategic planning approaches. It is also important to remember that good strategic planning is never really finished—and provides for a continual process of reevaluation and refocus. The *Choosing Our Direction* workbooks are a complete strategic planning program with exercises to guide your group through this process. Depending upon the needs of your group, these workbooks can also be supplemented by additional tools and exercises. Many of these can be found at www.visioning.aers.psu.edu.

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