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Basics of Monitoring, Evaluating and Deviating from the Strategic Plan

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Adapted from the [Field Guide to Nonprofit Strategic Planning and Facilitation](#).

(The reader might best be served to first read the information in the topic [Strategic Planning](#). This library topic explains basics of strategic planning, basic elements in the process, how to prepare for planning, conducting planning, writing and communicating the document, evaluating the strategic planning process.)

Great Value from Monitoring and Evaluation

As stated several times throughout this library topics (and in materials linked from it), too many strategic plans end up collecting dust on a shelf. Monitoring and evaluating the planning activities and status of implementation of the plan is -- for many organizations -- as important as identifying strategic issues and goals. One advantage of monitoring and evaluation is to ensure that the organization is following the direction established during strategic planning.

The above advantage is obvious. Adults tend to learn best when they're actually doing something with new information and materials and then they're continuing to reflect on their experiences. You can learn a great deal about your organization and how to manage it by continuing to monitor the implementation of strategic plans.

Note that plans are guidelines. They aren't rules. It's OK to deviate from a plan. But planners should understand the reason for the deviations and update the plan to reflect the new direction.

Responsibilities for Monitoring and Evaluation

The strategic plan document should specify who is responsible for the overall implementation of the plan, and also who is responsible for achieving each goal and objective.

The document should also specify who is responsible to monitor the implementation of the plan and made decisions based on the results. For example, the board might expect the chief executive to regularly report to the full board about the status of implementation, including progress toward each of the overall strategic goals. In turn, the chief executive might expect regular status reports from middle managers regarding the status toward their achieving the goals and objectives assigned to them.

Key Questions While Monitoring and Evaluating Status of Implementation of the Plan

1. Are goals and objectives being achieved or not? If they are, then acknowledge, reward and communicate the progress. If not, then consider the following questions.

2. Will the goals be achieved according to the timelines specified in the plan? If not, then why?
3. Should the deadlines for completion be changed (be careful about making these changes – know why efforts are behind schedule before times are changed)?
4. Do personnel have adequate resources (money, equipment, facilities, training, etc.) to achieve the goals?
5. Are the goals and objectives still realistic?
6. Should priorities be changed to put more focus on achieving the goals?
7. Should the goals be changed (be careful about making these changes -- know why efforts are not achieving the goals before changing the goals)?
8. What can be learned from our monitoring and evaluation in order to improve future planning activities and also to improve future monitoring and evaluation efforts?

Frequency of Monitoring and Evaluation

The frequency of reviews depends on the nature of the organization and the environment in which it's operating. Organizations experiencing rapid change from inside and/or outside the organization may want to monitor implementation of the plan at least on a monthly basis.

Boards of directors should see status of implementation at least on a quarterly basis.

Chief executives should see status at least on a monthly basis.

Reporting Results of Monitoring and Evaluation

Always write down the status reports. In the reports, describe:

1. Answers to the above key questions while monitoring implementation.
2. Trends regarding the progress (or lack thereof) toward goals, including which goals and objectives
3. Recommendations about the status
4. Any actions needed by management

Deviating from Plan

It's OK to deviate from the plan. The plan is only a guideline, not a strict roadmap which must be followed.

Usually the organization ends up changing its direction somewhat as it proceeds through the coming years. Changes in the plan usually result from changes in the organization's external environment and/or client needs result in different organizational goals, changes in the availability of resources to carry out the original plan, etc.

The most important aspect of deviating from the plan is knowing why you're deviating from the plan, i.e., having a solid understanding of what's going on and why.

Changing the Plan

Be sure some mechanism is identified for changing the plan, if necessary. For example, regarding changes, write down:

1. What is causing changes to be made.
2. Why the changes should be made (the "why" is often different than "what is causing" the changes).
3. The changes to made, including to goals, objectives, responsibilities and timelines.

Manage the various versions of the plan (including by putting a new date on each new version of the plan).

Always keep old copies of the plan.

Always discuss and write down what can be learned from recent planning activity to make the next strategic planning activity more efficient.

A Note About Celebration

I've been involved with many strategic planning activities. Rarely, when a plan is completed, do organizations really acknowledge the success they have achieved. Instead, planners are often so focused on "progress" and problem solving, that they're too eager to move on to the next version of the plan.

Celebration is as important as accomplishing objectives -- maybe more. Without a sense of closure, acknowledgement and fulfillment from a job well done, the next planning cycle becomes a grind.

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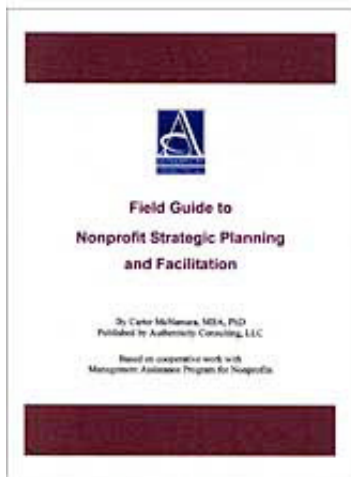
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[Field Guide to Nonprofit Strategic Planning and Facilitation](#)

by Carter McNamara, published by Authenticity Consulting, LLC. Step-by-step guidelines to customize and facilitate planners to implement the best strategic planning process to suit the particular nature and needs of their nonprofit. This is one of the few books, if any, that explains how to actually facilitate planning. Includes many online forms that can be downloaded and used by planners. Many materials in this Library's topic about strategic planning are adapted from this book.

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