



Planning Today to be Poised for Tomorrow **By: Trish Gannon, Gannon Consulting for Nonprofits**

In these unprecedented times, the stresses on our organizations feel overwhelming. The nonprofit community is dealing with funding losses and employment challenges, while also facing increased demand from clients in need. Some of the best guidance for us personally, may suit us professionally as well...take a moment, breathe, hold tight to what's most important. For organizations, that means staying true to yourselves and what you value: your mission, those whom you serve, and the impact of your work.

In order to do that, you can utilize the foundations of an effective strategic planning process – one identifying a common set of goals and priorities that will deliver your desired impact. Hopefully, you have an active strategic plan that's guiding decision making during these times; but even if you don't, the essential elements of planning can help position your nonprofit now for sustainability well into the future.

Time and again you've heard how vital it is that a strategic plan be a dynamic document. Once it is adopted it needs to be a living, breathing part of your organization – not sitting on a shelf never to be referenced again. What that means in practice is that the long-term goals you've set – and in today's environment, perhaps more importantly, the short-term initiatives you'll take to reach those goals – are consistent parts of your dialogue, your management, and your budgeting.

Whether you have an active plan that is guiding you, or you need to pull an old plan off the shelf to revisit what you *said* was critical during that last planning process, or if you're just trying to figure out how to get through this crisis, here are some considerations to ensure you are poised for tomorrow:

1. Mission

Every strategic planning process seems to start with affirming the mission statement – if only that dedication to mission carried through to every element! As you review your plans, priorities, and programs, remember this: *everything* comes back to mission. Nonprofits are uniquely mission-driven and with that dedication comes an obligation to ensuring that the work you're doing is fulfilling your stated purpose. This is not the time to redraft the mission statement – it's the time to be squarely centered on it. Use it as your guidepost as you evaluate everything you do.

2. Environment

So much has changed in the last several weeks, and we will continue to operate in a fluid environment with lasting effects that are still unknown. In a large-scale planning process, you might have time and resources to undertake a full "environmental scan" with external demographic data, for example. That's a luxury you don't have right now. There is, however, some valid and important data coming out because of the crisis. Use external data – and be sure to gather and review your own performance metrics, both programmatic and financial. But also listen to narratives and anecdotes – they may assist in supporting your priorities and direction. Again, in a full strategic planning process, you would undertake a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis. But in this environment, you'll want a more focused effort. What are the specific challenges and vulnerabilities you're dealing with that are impacting some of the prior initiatives you had identified? Are there new opportunities you can capitalize on internally or externally?

3. Program and Impact

This is where the rubber hits the road, and you'll need to be judicious in how you approach your review. If you have an existing strategic plan, most likely the bulk of it deals with programmatic initiatives. Your work now is about prioritizing and streamlining. Is your existing plan too wordy, cumbersome or ambitious? (Common complaints!) You may need to assess which strategies take precedence and best support your core programs. This is a chance to press the reset button – but do so thoughtfully, and tying back to both data and mission can help. While this may not be the time for a big brainstorming retreat, it *is* the time to ask the hard questions. What should you *stop* doing? Can you collaborate to extend your programs? Remember, focus on what's critical to advancing the mission and making an impact.

4. Resources

It's incredibly important right now to be on top of the day-to-day financial picture – that means managing cash flow judiciously and accurately projecting revenues and expenses. What assumptions and financial commitments were

built into original plans and do they need to be revisited? And what can you do to offset some of the new, sober realities? Push your creativity to the limits. Maximize the human resources available to you right now through your key leaders on staff and on the board – you likely have access to more than you know. And that data you're compiling...it's going to help tell your story and substantiate the needs of your clients with your donors. Accelerating fundraising and expanding messaging could be significant.

5. Stakeholders and Communication

As you assess revenue sources to get to year-end and to develop next year's budget, reconnect with relationships that will help you build the strength you'll need. Communicate with your donors. Communicate with your staff. You'll need all hands on deck to get through the immediate crisis but also to embrace the common goals for the future – collectively. This is a chance for engagement with the stakeholders closest to you, but also to build relationships and expand networks for the future. Engaging the business community, educating local officials, and collaborating with other nonprofits will reinforce your impact, enabling you to serve your clients and achieve your mission.

About the Author:

Trish Gannon, of Gannon Consulting for Nonprofits (www.gannonfor nonprofits.com), provides guidance to nonprofit organizations on strategy, planning, and governance, and teaches graduate-level courses in nonprofit management. Over an extensive career serving nonprofits, she previously held senior leadership positions at Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston, Merrimack College, and MassDevelopment.

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