ASP NONPROFIT CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE

FIRST MONDAYS DISCUSSION

TOPIC: Nonprofit Centre for Excellence: Want an Effective Strategic Plan? Pay Attention to the Planning Process

DATE: MONDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2017
First Mondays February 6, 2017
Topic: Want an Effective Strategic Plan? Pay Attention to the Planning Process

Please click here to access the recorded discussion.

Discussion Background:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that an organization in want of an effective strategic plan is in need of a thoughtful, comprehensive planning process. The question is, what should that process look like? This month, the First Mondays conversation will focus on the mechanics of organizing and guiding the strategic planning process for mission driven organizations. What makes a planning process effective, and, what undermines it?

First Mondays discussions are open forums in which all participants are invited to share their experiences and ideas. In February we’ll consider the planning process by considering the following questions:

- What was the best planning process you ever participated in, as a facilitator or participant? What made it work?
- The flip side of the coin, what was the worst planning process you’ve participated in? What went wrong and why?
- What are the most effective ways to engage board members and staff in the planning process? What tools/techniques have you used to do this?
- What decision-making tools/processes/practices have you used to guide a planning process? Why do you use them?
- What pitfalls are most likely to undermine a planning process? How do you avoid or overcome them?
- How do you assess the effectiveness of a planning process? How do you correct the course if things are going in the wrong direction?

Notes

What was the best planning process you ever participated in, as a facilitator or participant? What made it work?

- High level of engagement through organization—internal (staff & board) and external stakeholders. Inclusive approach gets energy going and encourages engagement; makes it possible to have the more difficult conversations when you have feedback/information from multiple stakeholders.
- Example Planning process involving a school: Planning Committee has everyone from 15 yr. old student to an 80-year-old philanthropist, plus staff teachers. Wide diversity of stakeholders with different perspectives, experience, knowledge, levels of power. The challenge is creating an environment that allows all of those perspectives to feel free to speak openly. Plan Steering committee had never been together so at 1st meeting a key goal was to establish a framework for the planning culture/environment grounded in giving everyone a voice. To that end, structured the meeting to ensure everyone had an opportunity to have meaningful input on a topic/subject/idea they were knowledgeable/expert in. To sustain this culture of engagement they are using an online system for connecting between meetings; also build explicit discussion/expectations about the value/importance of giving everyone a voice in communications, at meetings, etc.
• How to get input from stakeholders:
  o Different vehicles: Focus groups, one on one interviews;
  o One way to gather feedback: Nominal group process: Identify questions you need individual and group feedback on. Participants get sticky notes; ask them to respond to questions, one idea per sticky. Responses are grouped by similarity to allow people to see where alignment is, where there are outlier issues/opinions.
  o It is important to employ multiple ways to gather feedback from planning participants throughout the process. Not everyone is comfortable speaking up in a group; some people need time to analyze/think before responding.

Question posed by participant: Is it helpful for leadership to come to the planning table with an idea of “what comes next” for their organization?

• Leaders reach out to people before planning can help set expectations about the organizations goals and the planning process in general. These conversations can help identify areas of alignment/conflict before planning begins and identify areas for discussion when conflict in strategic view occurs. Suggested that this effort can help ensure people feel comfortable when they walk in the door because they have an idea of what the direction and process will be.

• A different view: Some groups prefer to walk in to planning “fresh”—with no defined ideas about direction. As a planning facilitator, how do you meet the “client” organization where they are to determine what approach is best? It is important to understand what their level of flexibility/skill set for planning is before the process begins. This will have significant implications on strategy development as well as on the nuts and bolts of the planning process itself. Example questions to advance that insight could include: what worked in previous planning? What didn’t work? Who are they inviting to the planning table and at what level? Who aren’t they inviting and why? Bringing in “real” data more than opinion—environmental scan/market info is.

• Question: Is there a happy medium here—a way for leadership to set expectations and direction without “dictating”? How much framing of the process is helpful, how much strategy direction-setting should be left open-ended to be defined during plan discussions? No clear answer, but consensus was it depends on the organization.

The flip side of the coin, what was the worst planning process you’ve participated in? What went wrong and why?

• When Board or 1-2 staff leaders create the plan independently without feedback and “tell” everyone else what the plan is.
• Not taking enough time to build alignment about purpose, process, language.
• When planning is considered something you’re expected to do/have to do, not something the organization wants or is committed to doing.
• Planning that does not have the full endorsement of an organization’s leadership.

What are the most effective ways to engage board members and staff in the planning process? What tools/techniques have you used to do this? What decision-making tools/processes/practices have you used to guide a planning process? Why do you use them?

• Conducting a stakeholder survey get to voice their opinion early on in the process very helpful to informing strategic thinking/direction-setting.
• Data is essential to decision-making (ROI, constituent impact/satisfaction, sectors trends)
The Matrix Map/MacMillan Matrix-portfolio assessment-examines mission impact and financial sustainability; objective way to review existing programs; framework for program expansion discussion as well. Matrix Map from book Nonprofit Sustainability by Steve Zimmerman, Jan Masaoka, Jean Bell. MacMillan Matrix is in the public domain.

Portfolio analysis is essentially a method of business analysis and essential to both NPOs and for profit businesses.

What pitfalls are most likely to undermine a planning process? How do you avoid or overcome them?

How to maintain urgency/forward momentum? How do you assess the effectiveness of a planning process? How do you correct the course if things are going in the wrong direction?

- Suggested Effective Process: After high level strategies/goals have been established and when the planning process includes work to determine operational tactics to guide implementation. Been successful dividing the plan out by section and engaging smaller groups of staff/board to work on developing the plan content in those areas for which they have implementation or oversight responsibilities. Divides the plan development process into smaller “bites” so it doesn’t feel so overwhelming, allows people to dig into the section most pertinent to them so the planning work is shared across an organization; builds buy-in by giving those responsible for making the plan happen a voice.

- Suggested Effective Process: Engage board in high level strategy development, have high level administration to define goals and performance measures, then turn the planning process over to strategy development teams who are charged with determining the tactics to achieve goals and outcomes.

- Define metrics/stages for tracking the progress of planning process itself (e.g. Red, Yellow, Green) This could be especially helpful for organizations where individual departments/groups are charged with driving development of Initiatives or operational sections of plan. It allows everyone to see how well planning timelines are being met.

- Example Planning Process Evaluation: Following a planning meeting (monthly) send a 5 question survey to all who participated. Some questions are the same e.g. Did we accomplish what we set out to do?; Was the meeting worth your time? Other questions change depending on meeting content. Getting a sustained 90% response rate to the survey. Feedback from survey is acknowledged at the following meeting; changes have been made to process because of this feedback, e.g. Participants asked for time to think about/process information related to a planning session rather than receiving it at the meeting. Now getting in advance.

- Example Planning Process Evaluation: Surveys sent at key milestones in the planning process (2-3 times) asking for both feedback on the process and for input on what perspective is important to capture/consider at this point in the planning process?

Question: How to differentiate between feedback quality of process, quality of strategies? What to do if Intellectual rigor of the strategy development is flawed? One possible answer: Go back to the data; where is the alignment, where are the disconnects? Look to objective information to help the organization objectively evaluate the strategy.

This led to follow up questions: What is role of facilitator here? What happens when the people in the organization or leading the process don’t have clear understanding about quality of process or quality of strategy?
We ran out of time but these questions were suggested as possible topics for future 1st Mondays discussions.

NOTE: If you are interested in facilitating these or other topics as part of 1st Mondays please reach out to Denise McNerney (dmcnerney@ibosswell.com) or Lynne Brown (lbrown@ibosswell.com). Having additional voices engaged in the facilitation of these discussions is a 2017 goal for the Nonprofit Center for Excellence.