

## From Strategic Plans to Operational Plans

Christine Soto, Principal, Christine Soto Consulting: Smart Solutions for Nonprofits and Foundations, Business Member since 2009



Christine Soto

During difficult financial times our tendency as humans is to “hunker down,” a necessary survival instinct. We discard the extraneous and the frivolous, we prepare to sacrifice, and we embrace our core values. In this process of getting back to basics we often rediscover strengths within ourselves and within our relationships that we may have lost sight of.

Nonprofit organizations also hunker down. Just as an individual may rediscover strengths in difficult times, so may an organization.

Does the current economic climate mean that a nonprofit organization cannot move forward with change, with improvements and with growth? Does it mean that the organization needs to scrap that strategic plan it painstakingly developed last year, because it needs to focus on staying alive?

Buying into this belief is to surrender to the idea that the organization is controlled solely by outside forces, things beyond its control. But even in the toughest times – sometimes as a result of being in the tough times – every organization has the ability to successfully stretch itself and move towards its goals.

### Why Strategic Plans are Important Now

An organization that has a strategic plan in place – or that undertakes this effort now – will weather the storm and, most likely, come out stronger. **Adhering to the intent of the strategic plan demonstrates that the organization has clarity about its direction and a determination to get there. This is a compelling message in fundraising efforts.** It says “Yes, these are tough times, but we haven’t lost our focus on the great future ahead of us.”

There are two actions that can increase the success of your agency’s strategic plan:

- Developing the plan with participation from all levels of the organization. Combining the board members’ valuable external perspectives and big-picture thinking with the staff members’ intimate, inside organizational knowledge is critical to discussions and decisions about the future direction of the agency.
- Getting input from other stakeholders – such as clients, donors, funders, and partner agencies – as part of the early information gathering that precedes the writing of the plan.

When strategic planning is done in this way, staff members will have more invested in turning the strategic plan, with its larger view, into an operational plan, which is the on-the-ground perspective.

### Strategic and Operational Plans Complement Each Other

#### Strategic Plan

- Is long-term (usually for three years)
- Addresses critical, overarching issues
- Is forward-looking and inspirational
- Has stretch goals (achievable but much work is necessary to get there)
- Provides a basis for more detailed planning
- Stimulates change and becomes a building block for the next strategic plan

#### Operational plan (also referred to as a work plan)

- Is short-term (usually for a fiscal year)
- Describes how-to, specific steps done by specific people at specific times
- Is fueled by the work of staff, board and volunteers
- Achieves the goals and objectives in the strategic plan
- Is where the rubber meets the road

While strategic planning may be a daunting task, it is important to realize that organizations plan all the time and they use strategies – actions to achieve a specific goal – to make those plans successful. When you plan a new program you get specific about what the necessary actions to make the program happen: who will be served, in what way, by whom, for what purpose or outcome. You determine a budget and where the money will come from to support that budget. You develop strategies that will bring this program to fruition. Strategies are the “how” part of the “what.”

Take that scenario and apply it to the organization as a whole. You don’t just say, “In three years we will provide 50 percent more children with high-quality pre-school education,” and leave it at that. A goal without a way to achieve it is a goal that is unlikely to be achieved. You determine the “how” – the strategies you’ll use – to make it happen.

That’s what strategic planning is about. What are the big issues the organization needs to address over the next three years? What are the goals we need to achieve to get us there? What strategies will be taken to achieve those goals?

**The operational plan turns the strategic plan into reality. It is what the staff and board will do. It requires staff and board to use the strategic plan as a guide to their day-to-day work.**

#### Operational Plans: Implementing and Monitoring

**Organize the work of the organization in the context of the strategic plan.** For instance, include goals and objectives in individual and program evaluations or have program directors refer to the plan to provide guidance in decision making. The board should use the

strategic plan to decide how the board and its committees will focus their work for the year. This is a critical step for keeping the plan alive and in the forefront of the organization's ongoing work.

**Design a system for controlling the process.** Ensure that there are mechanisms (e.g., evaluation meetings, monthly reports against the plan) to inform management on progress of the strategic plan.

**Drill down on responsibility.** Link the achievement of operational plans to individual performance evaluation. This way everyone has a responsibility and a stake in its success.

**Share the plan.** Sharing the strategic plan with stakeholders, funders and others will increase the accountability of the organization to making sure the plan is followed.

**Capitalize on the plan in fundraising.** Now is the time to step up the efforts to make your organization attractive to potential funders. Communicate vigorously about your continued commitment to achieving the strategic plan.

#### **Adjustments to the Operational Plan**

**Board and staff should jointly review the goals of the strategic plan and the timeline for implementation.** Perhaps goals with a greater financial impact can be revised or delayed.

**Use all the people-power at your disposal to brainstorm and get creative about how to keep**

**the operational plan focused on the strategic imperatives.** Determine how staff will work together to ensure the operational plan is achieved. Consider opportunities to use highly-skilled volunteers in a more impactful role.

**During tough economic times, operational plans need to consider contingency plans.** It is important to think outside your current structure. For example, consider a cooperative agreement or collaboration with another nonprofit to achieve a goal in your strategic plan that will provide benefit to both organizations.

**Prioritize communication.** Communicate with all levels of the organization about how the strategic plan is continuing to guide the organization. Share operational plans between departments so that the work avoids becoming "siloeed." It is essential for all employees and the board to know how what they are doing complements and supports the overall direction of the agency and is leading to the achievement of the future.

*Christine Soto*

**Christine Soto**  
assists nonprofits and  
foundations in developing

smart solutions to the challenges they face while making a difference in the world. She brings 35 plus years of expertise, energy and dedication to building your organizational capacity. Services include executive leadership transitions, strategic planning, organizational and board assessments.

[www.christinesoto.com](http://www.christinesoto.com)

**"Adhering to the intent of the strategic plan demonstrates that the organization has clarity about its direction and a determination to get there."**