

Field Guide to Nonprofit Strategic Planning and Facilitation

By Carter McNamara, MBA, PhD

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Introduction

Focus of Guidebook

When members of nonprofit organizations struggle with their strategic planning process or their plans end up not being useful at all, it is rarely because their planning process did not include state-of-the-art techniques in facilitation or the latest models in strategic planning. Rather, it is because their process did not effectively address the most critical, “core” aspects of the strategic planning process. Guidelines in this guidebook are focused on those critical aspects.

Guidelines in this guidebook are focused on helping you accomplish organization-wide and/or program-specific, strategic planning processes for your nonprofit organization. Guidelines will show you how to conduct a simplified (not simplistic!) strategic planning process that is very realistic, flexible and suited to the nature of your typical nonprofit organization – thus, producing a strategic plan that is also very relevant to the future of your nonprofit organization.

One of the most effective approaches to ensuring a highly relevant strategic planning process and plan is to ensure a highly effective approach to facilitating the planning process itself. Therefore, this guidebook also provides complete guidelines to facilitating nonprofit strategic planning – one of the few strategic planning books to include that information for facilitators.

(Note that it is beyond the scope of this guidebook to provide comprehensive, step-by-step guidelines to organize and develop a strategic plan for a collaboration of nonprofit organizations. Although the process used to develop such a plan is generally similar to the process to develop a strategic plan for a nonprofit organization or program, there still are enough differences such that guidelines about strategic planning for collaboration should not be gleaned only from this guidebook.)

Audiences

This guidebook is designed to apply to a variety of situations, whether:

- Yours is a new or established nonprofit.
- You are conducting strategic planning for the first time or have done planning before.
- Your organization is facing several major, current issues or you are using planning just to “fine tune” things in your organization.
- You are facilitating the strategic planning process yourself or having someone facilitate the process for your nonprofit.

This guidebook will be extremely useful to you, especially if you are a:

- Founder or Chief Executive (Executive Director) of a nonprofit
- Member of a nonprofit Board of Directors
- Nonprofit leader, manager or supervisor
- Nonprofit management consultant
- Human resource and development professional working with nonprofits

Content of Guidebook

PART I includes guidelines to help you gain a clear understanding of how the strategic planning process guides the direction, structure and operations of all facets of nonprofit organizations. You will gain perspective on the overall strategic planning framework and the traits that are common to any strategic planning process. You'll read about when to regularly schedule strategic planning, but that strategic planning is never really "done".

PART II includes step-by-step guidelines to customize and implement a strategic plan that is relevant, realistic and flexible. The planning process is divided into six overall phases, including:

1. Preparing a "plan for a plan."
2. Conducting situational analyses, external and internal to the organization.
3. Establishing strategic direction for the organization, including mission (and vision and/or values, if preferred), goals and strategies.
4. Action planning, including identifying who will be doing what by when and what resources will be needed.
5. Developing and communicating the strategic plan document.
6. Implementing, monitoring and adjusting the plan.

PART III is written for the facilitator of the nonprofit strategic planning process, whether the facilitator is internal or external to the organization. The first set of guidelines in PART III is designed to ensure a highly collaborative, working relationship between the facilitator and planners from the nonprofit organization. The next set of guidelines is about the most common set of techniques used in facilitating the nonprofit strategic planning process. PART III ends with guidelines to address the most common challenges that arise during facilitation.

How To Use Guidebook

Don't Be Intimidated By Size of Guidebook – Do One Step at a Time

Imagine that you wrote down every step that it took to do your grocery shopping. The list of steps would seem so long to you that you would promptly feel overwhelmed and would never go shopping again! Yet, it is obvious that you can manage a shopping trip on your own. The first time that you went, you might have been rather careful, for example, you asked someone for directions, you checked a map, and you carefully watched where you were going. The next time that you went, you gave little attention to where you were going. You just did it.

The same is true for strategic planning. The first time, you might have no clear idea of what it means to successfully develop a strategic plan, yet you carry out the process one step at a time in order to develop and implement your plan. The next time that you do planning, it is not half as challenging as the first time. The second or third time around, you just do it.

This guidebook is carefully designed so that you can develop and implement your strategic plan – one step at a time, whether this is the first time that you have done strategic planning or you are experienced in the process. Don't be intimidated by the size of the guidebook.

Common Terms in Guidebook

Nonprofit

This guidebook makes frequent reference to the phrase “nonprofit organization” and the term “nonprofit”. Those references are in regard to the organization for which strategic planning is being conducted.

Facilitator

The guidebook also refers to a strategic planning “facilitator”. The facilitator is the person responsible to help planners design a strategic planning process and/or conduct that process for the nonprofit organization. The facilitator can be internal (a member of the nonprofit) or external to the nonprofit organization. Guidelines for getting a facilitator are referenced in the section, “Phase 1: Design Plan for Plan,” in PART II.

Planners

This guidebook also makes frequent reference to the term “planners”. A planner is anyone who is involved in the development of the strategic plan for the nonprofit organization, especially those people who regularly take part in planning meetings. The facilitator is usually not considered a planner.

Clients

Clients are the people who benefit from the services of a nonprofit. Some experts distinguish between primary clients and secondary, or supporting, clients.

Primary clients are the people who we intend to directly benefit from the services of the nonprofit. They might include, for example:

- Attendees to an art show
- Members of an association
- Citizens attending a civic event
- Grantees of a foundation
- Patients in a hospital
- Members of a congregation
- Students in a school
- Participants in social service programs
- Patrons to a library

Secondary clients are the people who indirectly benefit from the services of the nonprofit. They might include, for example:

- Organizations that collaborate with the nonprofit
- Special interest groups that support the purpose of the nonprofit
- Suppliers of materials to the nonprofit

Both types of clients could be considered as “stakeholders” to the nonprofit.

Other Key Terms

This guidebook also includes a Glossary in Appendix A that provides definitions of these and other key terms in nonprofit strategic planning.

Conventions Used in Guidebook

Various formats are used to indicate the organization and relationship of the information included in this guidebook. It’s important to be clear about the formats that are used because the guidebook sometimes refers readers to specific areas (sections, subsections, topics, etc.) in the guidebook, depending on the approach that the planners have customized to implement their strategic planning process.

- **PARTS:** The guidebook is divided into three major parts, including PART I, PART II and PART III, followed by Appendices with supplemental material.

- **Sections:** Each PART is divided into sections, such as the section, “Strategic Planning” in PART I. Titles of sections are centered at the top of the page.
- **Subsections:** The sections are divided into subsections. For example, the subsection “Strategic Planning Framework” is in the section, “Conducting Strategic Planning,” in PART I.
- **Topics:** Sometimes topics are included in some sections and/or subsections. For example, the topics “Factors That Influence Approach to Strategic Planning” and “Variations from Strategic Planning Framework” are in the subsection, “Strategic Planning Framework,” within the section, “Conducting Strategic Planning.”
- **Subtopics:** Subtopics provide information about very specific items within an overall topic. For example, “Identifying Timelines in Action Plans” is included in the topic “Guidelines To Develop Action Plans” in the subsection “Develop Action Plans” in the overall section “Phase 4: Develop Action and Financial Plans.”

“Crossroads” Topics to Help Planners Customize Their Planning

This guidebook is carefully designed to help planners customize their own strategic planning process, especially to ensure that their plans are relevant, realistic and flexible.

Consequently, the guidebook directs planners to specific areas of the guidebook at various times, depending on the nature of the plan that planners customized for themselves. Some of the sections in this guidebook begin with a topic entitled, “Crossroads ...” Points in that topic are meant to help you decide if the guidelines in that section should be followed now or later, depending on the planner’s preferences for their planning process.

Reading Guidebook to Learn Strategic Planning?

If you are just interested in learning about strategic planning and do not intend to actually facilitate or develop a strategic plan now, then:

1. Start by reading PART I in order to understand the strategic planning process.
2. Read PART II to learn how to develop and implement a strategic plan.
3. Read PART III to learn about the role of strategic planning facilitator.

Ideally, you will arrange to take part in, or even facilitate, a strategic planning process. You might volunteer to work with an experienced facilitator so that you can get a feel for the strategic planning process. Learning about strategic planning is very much like learning how to ride a bike. You can read all you want to, but until you actually ride the bike, you really won’t learn how.

Reading Guidebook to Develop Strategic Plan Now?

If you are planning to start strategic planning for your nonprofit organization soon (you are the “initiator” of the process), then:

1. Read PART I to understand the overall strategic planning process. Even if you have worked in nonprofits for years, you still should read about the typical nonprofit organization, if only to gain a concise overview of the typical challenges when doing strategic planning with nonprofits. You might read PART I in half an hour or so.
2. Carefully consider whether your organization is ready for strategic planning. Guidelines for addressing that consideration are included in the subsection, “Ready for Strategic Planning?”, in the section, “Phase 1: Design Plan for Plan,” in PART II. Follow those guidelines now to discern if your nonprofit really is ready for strategic planning. You might choose to discuss the guidelines with others in your organization in order to make a careful decision about whether to go forward with strategic planning. The decision might take anywhere from a few minutes to a week to make.
3. If you conclude that your organization is ready for planning, then follow the rest of the guidelines in “Phase 1: Design Plan for Plan.” The guidelines will help you to consider:
 - Whether to form a Planning Committee to oversee development of the strategic plan
 - What will be the focus of the strategic plan
 - How long of a time period that the plan will address
 - How to customize the best strategic planning process for your organization
 - Who will be involved in the planning process
 - How to obtain a strategic planning facilitator, whether the facilitator is internal or external to your nonprofit organization
 - What resources you will need
 - The best schedule for your planning activities
 - How to announce the strategic planning activities to entire organization

Note that a Planning Committee, if used, is responsible to oversee development of the plan, not necessarily to do all the activities required to actually develop the plan. Depending on the size of the organization, people other than the Committee members will likely be involved in the planning. Those people, along with Committee members, will comprise the planners for the nonprofit organization. The amount of time needed to follow all of the guidelines in the section, “Phase 1:

Design Plan for Plan,” might be anywhere from an hour to a week, depending on how long it takes to organize a Planning Committee, if used, and discuss the guidelines.

4. Identify someone to be the strategic planning facilitator, as considered in the previous step when designing a plan for a plan. Suggestions for finding and hiring a facilitator are included in Appendix E. It could take anywhere from a day to a couple of weeks to find an external facilitator; otherwise, use of an internal facilitator might take less time.
5. The planners and the Planning Committee, if used, should work with the strategic planning facilitator to follow the guidelines in Phases 2-5 in PART II in order to develop a strategic plan document. The Committee should decide whether to 1) work as a partner with the facilitator in an overall team effort to lead development activities or 2) have the facilitator lead the activities, including by conferring with the Committee. The length of time to develop a strategic plan can take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. This guidebook recommends that planners proceed with planning at a fairly rapid pace; otherwise, momentum decreases and the process bogs down. A small- to medium-sized nonprofit might finish a strategic plan in as few as 15-20 hours of meetings over a month-long period.

Reading Guidebook To Facilitate Strategic Planning?

1. Even if you are experienced at nonprofit strategic planning, you still might read PART I, especially if any of your planners will be reading that information to learn the strategic planning process. That way, you will know what they know about planning.
2. To be successful at facilitating nonprofit strategic planning, you must understand nonprofits. If you are not familiar with nonprofit organizations, then you should read Appendix F: “Nature of Typical Nonprofit Organizations.”
3. You might read PART III to ensure you know, or to remind yourself, how to accomplish a highly collaborative, working relationship with the planners from the nonprofit organization. You will also read about using some common techniques in facilitation.
4. Carefully read the guidelines in PART II to prepare for guiding your planners to develop their strategic plan. Phase 1 is about preparing a “plan for a plan” and includes a significant amount of considerations about the internal workings of the nonprofit. The nonprofit organization might choose not to involve you in that phase.
5. Meet with members of the Planning Committee to begin designing and developing the strategic plan by following guidelines in Phases 2-5 of PART II. You might need occasional reference to guidelines and techniques in PART III.

Who Should Have Guidebook

Ideally, at least the facilitator and every member of the Planning Committee should have a copy of this guidebook. If that is not practical, then the guidebook might be shared among the facilitator and members of the Committee. Ideally, they can 1) read the information in PART I to understand the strategic planning process and 2) work with each other to complete the plan for a plan by following the guidelines in the section, “Phase 1: Design Plan for Plan,” in PART II.

Planners can share copies of the worksheets from this guidebook. See the topic included immediately below.

Worksheets To Copy or Download

This guide includes numerous worksheets that planners can use to collect and organize the results from their strategic planning activities. If the formats of the worksheets seem useful, the owner of the guidebook can make copies of the worksheets for use within their organization.

Or, guidebook owners can download a copy of all of the worksheets and use their computer’s word processor to modify the worksheets for use within their organization.

To download a copy of the worksheets:

1. Point your Web browser to the Web address:
[//www.authenticityconsulting.com/pubs/SP_gdes/worksheets.doc](http://www.authenticityconsulting.com/pubs/SP_gdes/worksheets.doc)
2. Save the document to your computer’s disk, for example, use the “Save As” command in your browser and name the file “worksheets”.

Adapt Guidelines To Suit Structure of Board of Directors

Members of a nonprofit, governing Board of Directors can choose to organize themselves into a variety of structures. Probably the most common structure is the “policy Board” in which Board members establish certain roles in the Board and organization, including Board officers, Board committees and a Chief Executive Officer. Not all Boards utilize these roles. “Working Boards,” collective Boards or Policy Governance® Boards are different from policy Boards in this regard.

This guide provides guidelines and techniques primarily for the perspective of a nonprofit that utilizes a policy Board, probably the most common type of Board structure. However, you should adapt the guidelines in this guide to the particular structure and nature of your organization and Board.

(This guide provides more information about various Board structures in Appendix F: “Nature of Typical Nonprofit Organizations.”)

“Jump Start” Some Strategic Planning Preparation Now?

Before planners start customizing and implementing their strategic planning process, they might start collecting some of the types of information that will be useful during subsequent planning activities, especially during the external analysis. Sources for that type of information are listed in Appendix B.

For example, you might:

- Sign up for any of the free, on-line newsletters and on-line discussion groups.
- Find out if there are trade journals about the types of services offered by your nonprofit. If so, subscribe to some of them. Try gain access to any on-line archives of articles from the journals.
- Schedule appointments with representatives from at least two potential funders. Explain that your nonprofit will be starting strategic planning and that you would like to talk to the representative as part of the external analysis phase of planning. Mention that you want to gain better understanding of the various community needs that are of interest to the funder and how those needs might be met.
- Schedule appointments with any experts about the services that your nonprofit provides, for example, with any researchers, educators, members from nonprofits that work with similar clients, etc.
- Contact the planning office for your city, county or state/province, and ask if they have any resources that might help you to better understand the groups of clients that your nonprofit aims to serve.
- In the USA, contact the local chapter of the National Council of Nonprofit Associations (at [//www.ncna.org/](http://www.ncna.org/) or 202-962-0322). Ask how the Council might benefit your nonprofit organization.
- Contact the United Ways of America or Canada ([//national.unitedway.org/index.cfm](http://national.unitedway.org/index.cfm) for the United Way America or to <http://www.unitedway.ca/english/> for the United Way Canada). Ask how their organization might benefit your nonprofit organization.
- Also, if your nonprofit does not regularly collect information about possible new clients and what their needs might be, then start using some of the ideas in the section, “Basic Methods To Assess Client Needs,” in Appendix D. That information will come in handy later on during the internal analysis portion of the overall situational analysis.

About the Author

Carter McNamara, MBA, PhD, is a partner in Authenticity Consulting, LLC. He is founder and developer of the Authenticity CirclesSM and Leaders CirclesSM peer coaching group models, and the on-line Free Management LibrarySM, Free Micro-eMBASM and Nonprofit Micro-eMBASM. Dr. McNamara has over 20 years of strategic planning experience and trainings, including in small nonprofits and for-profits, large for-profits and large university systems. Dr. McNamara holds a BA in Social and Behavioral Sciences, a BS in Computer Science, an MBA from the University of St. Thomas, and a PhD in Human and Organization Development from The Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio.

About Authenticity Consulting, LLC

Authenticity Consulting, LLC, publisher of this guidebook, is a Minneapolis-based consulting firm specializing in development of nonprofit organizations, management and programs. Authenticity co-founders, Carter McNamara and Andrew Horsnell, bring over 35 years of consultation experience, including services in facilitation, training, publications and presentations.

While many firms specialize in one or a few specific services to nonprofits, Authenticity brings a comprehensive and integrated approach to development with focus on building the capacity of the entire organization, including its governance, management and staffing, programs, marketing, finances, fundraising and evaluation. The firm also provides services in social entrepreneurship, including nonprofit business planning and development.

To deepen and enrich its capacity building projects, Authenticity also provides powerful, practical peer coaching group programs for networking, training, problem solving and support – either free-standing or to enrich other programs – through Authenticity Circles peer coaching group models. This unique, Action Learning-based, group coaching process ensures ongoing support and accountability among participants during the organizational planning and change process – few change models recognize and build in processes to ensure these two critical elements of any change process.

Authenticity Consulting, LLC, can be reached at 800-971-2250 for the United States office or 877-501-7020 for the Canada office. For more information, see [//www.authenticityconsulting.com/](http://www.authenticityconsulting.com/) on the Web.

Useful Nonprofit Publications

Field Guide to Developing and Operating Your Nonprofit Board of Directors

By Carter McNamara, MBA, PhD. Published by Authenticity Consulting, LLC.

This guide is very useful to start a nonprofit and a Board, or to fix a struggling Board. In our experience over the years, Boards rarely struggle because they don't understand advanced concepts. Rather, Boards struggle because they haven't established all of the most critical, foundational processes to develop and operate a Board. This guide will help your Board establish those processes. You no longer need to buy a large number of small guides in order to fully equip your Board members. Comprehensive guidelines and materials are written in an easy-to-implement style, resulting in a highly practical resource that can be referenced at any time during the life of a Board and organization.

Field Guide to Leadership and Supervision for Nonprofit Staff

By Carter McNamara, MBA, PhD. Published by Authenticity Consulting, LLC.

There has been an explosion of books about leadership and management. Far too many books dwell on popular trends and completely forget the critical, foundational structures that must be in place for any form of leadership and management to be effective. This highly practical guide provides the “nuts and bolts” for carrying out good leadership and supervision, particularly in organizations with limited resources. This is one of few guides to emphasize that nonprofit organizations must have strong leadership, management and supervision in order to do the nonprofit-specific tasks so often written about: fundraising, volunteer management, program evaluation, etc. This guide is extremely useful to top-level executives, middle managers and entry-level supervisors in nonprofit organizations.

Field Guide to Nonprofit Program Design, Marketing and Evaluation

By Carter McNamara, MBA, PhD. Published by Authenticity Consulting, LLC.

Nonprofits have longed needed a clear, concise – and completely practical – guidebook about designing and evaluating nonprofit programs. This guide can be used for a wide range of applications: evolve strategic goals into well-designed programs that are guaranteed to meet needs of clients, develop very credible nonprofit business plans and fundraising proposals, ensure focused and effective marketing, evaluate the effectiveness and efficiencies of current programs in delivery of services to clients, evaluate program performance against goals and outcomes, and understand how a program really works in order to improve or duplicate the program. The guide focuses on utility, relevance and practicality as much as accuracy, reliability and validity.

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