

Participatory Strategic Planning for Community Enterprises

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1. Background

This short paper outlines the process of developing a *Strategic Plan*. It is based on a participatory approach to planning in which members of an organisation work together through mediation and consensus building to create a plan for the future of their community enterprise. The process normally includes all voluntary Directors as well as key employees.

Creating a *Strategic Plan* through participatory methods can often benefit from the assistance of an outside facilitator. This person's role is to:

- *articulate the framework, lead the exercise, facilitate discussions, mediate and summarise debate, help reach consensus, add objectivity, act as a neutral broker, and support the writing-up of the plan for circulation to all participants.*

2. Framework

The following section outlines the process of participatory strategic planning. The framework is comprised of 9-steps:

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| 1 | Review: | <i>How did we get here?</i> |
| 2 | Vision Statement: | <i>Where do we want to go? Is the vision realistic?</i> |
| 3 | Assessment: | <i>What are our strengths and weaknesses?</i> |
| 4 | Objectives | |
| 5 | Indicators for monitoring: | <i>What are our goals?</i> |
| 6 | Marketing: | <i>What and where are the best opportunities?</i> |
| 7 | Budgeting: | <i>What resources are needed to convert these opportunities?</i> |
| 8 | Implementation Plan: | <i>How will this be implemented?</i> |
| 9 | Reviewing and Revising | |

Not all community enterprises will need to undertake each of these steps; in some cases additional steps relating to the enterprise's particular activities may also need to be added.

Review: *How did we get here?*

Each participant should record the points he or she feels accounts for the success of the organisation to-date. All points should be discussed and agreement reached on which are the most important.

It is also necessary to determine what your members, clients and partners opinions are about the service or product you provide. This can be done through a simple sample survey or interviews. It is best that this be done as part of the Strategic Planning process, and need not be expensive and time consuming. Organisations should be encouraged to use local non-members to undertake such a task.

Vision Statement: *Where do we want to go?*

Each should write two visions:

- *the one that got the organisation to this point, and*
- *the one needed in the future.*

Each vision should be limited to not more than two sentences. From these statements a consensus vision should be formulated and agreed for the future. The facilitator should help the group reach consensus by listing all suggestions, and then helping them to choose or develop the most appropriate.

Reality Check: *Is the vision realistic?*

Are there any conflicts between personal ambitions and the vision? Are there any differences still remaining about the future direction? Is the vision compatible with the kind of organisation and people you are? Does the vision build on the kind of things you do well? These issues need to be answered before the vision can be presented to the organisation's membership for adoption.

Assessment: *What are our strengths and weaknesses?*

Each participant should list the strengths and weaknesses in order of importance, including ones for each major service or product. No more than a dozen should be listed. After discussion, the top six strengths and weaknesses should be accepted.

It is important to ask: Do the strengths support the vision? Will weaknesses prevent realisation of the vision? Is the vision realistic given these?

Objectives

Each participant in open discussion should suggest the specific objectives needed to realise the vision. Each should be discussed and a list agreed. Objectives should be limited to not more than eight items. These objectives should be achievable in light of the strengths and weaknesses outlined above. Remember, objectives should be *achievable targets* and not vague generalisations.

Indicators for monitoring: *What are our goals?*

Each participant, in open discussion should suggest goals to be achieved. These are essentially *indicators of success*. They must be capable of being measured. How do these compare to other organisations offering a similar service or product? Should there also be goals for quality, customer care, innovations, number of disadvantaged clients reached, or others? Goals should be agreed for the most important indicators.

Marketing: *What and where are the best opportunities?*

It may be necessary to break the session and collect market data on other similar services or products. What does the market currently offer? To whom and at what

price? The answers should be summarised in a brief position paper circulated before the next session. Participants should then discuss the findings thoroughly, in terms of opportunities.

Budgeting: *What resources are needed to convert these opportunities?*

Each participant should agree through open discussion, what is needed in terms of funds, accommodation, employees and technology. From this, a budget should be developed which clearly indicates local and external funding to be sought.

Implementation Plan: *How will this be implemented?*

An implementation plan which outlines *who does what, how* and *when* should be drawn-up for the first year, and general parameters set for subsequent years.

Reviewing and Revising

Annual reviews should involve all participants and be done once a year, as a minimum. The first review may benefit from the assistance of an outside facilitator. Reviews should, if possible, be held outside the organisation workplace and at a time when participants are least likely to be interrupted. It should involve going through the original plan and altering it in light of experience. Key questions from the facilitator may help to guide the process.

3 Final Note

As a final note, the time required to do a Strategic Plan must remain flexible. The review process can often be done prior to the strategic planning days and by local persons with minimal guidance from that facilitator. *A two day workshop is often required, plus additional time if market studies need to be undertaken.*

In conclusion, strategic planning should be a regular and recurrent part of any community enterprise's annual business development calendar. It is a cyclical process, always beginning with a review of the past and then building a vision for the future.

Footnote:

This paper was prepared for a 1994 ACE-HI training course for Community Enterprise Agents in the Highlands of Scotland. The course was funded by the European Social Fund.