

STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR NEW NONPROFITS

STRATEGIC PLANNING 101

Your rare disease organization is incorporated and now recognized as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Now what? Are you looking for a cure? Do you want to find researchers or are you starting a natural history study? Do you want to bring patients together? There is so much to do, and your organization needs to prioritize its work. It's time to create a plan for what you want to accomplish now and in the coming years.

WHY CREATE A STRATEGIC PLAN?

Strategic planning helps your organization define its major goals and create a plan to accomplish them. According to the Milken Institute, it can take up to 15 years of research and development to get a drug approved, but your organization may be able to accelerate this process with careful planning and prioritization. A strategic plan is vital to assessing your priorities, assets and timelines.

The process will require a review of your organization, what it should do and why, with a focus on the future—whether that be three months ahead, one year or even longer. Strategic planning also produces a framework to coordinate your efforts as you set out to realize your goals. This ensures that everyone from board members to volunteers are working together toward meeting the same objective.

There are many benefits to creating a strategic plan:

- Facilitates agreement on the mission, shared vision and goals of your organization
- Creates a systematic approach and a clear focus to prepare for the future and adapt to change
- Supports synergy, communication and teamwork among board members
- Encourages brainstorming, innovation and creative out-of-the-box thinking
- Determines and clarifies priorities which, in turn, strengthens decision making
- Promotes accountability and enables an evaluation process to measure effectiveness
- Assists in garnering support from funders who often require a strategic plan to be in place

WHAT EXACTLY IS A STRATEGIC PLAN?

A strategic plan defines what your organization stands for, the initiatives and goals you will pursue, and how you intend to allocate your limited resources to meet those goals. It will serve as your master plan that will focus your team and create a process for managing risk.

A standard strategic plan generally includes the following sections:

- Your mission and vision statements
- An outline of your goals, objectives and activities
- An assessment of your current resources
- A strategic analysis of the competitive landscape

A strategic plan takes into consideration that you are operating in an ever-changing landscape. As such, part of the plan includes revisiting your strategy periodically to monitor your environment and adjust as needed. If you are looking to create a plan for a specific program or venture in the future, you can develop a business plan, which incorporates elements of strategic plan but from the lens of a single, focused program. Many of NORD's rare disease member organizations called emergency meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic

to revisit their strategic plans due to the ever-changing environment of venue shutdowns, group meeting restrictions and the rise of virtual engagement tools and platforms.

A strategic plan is your assessment of where you find yourself as an organization now and where you hope to be in the future, along with a roadmap with actionable steps to get there.

CREATING YOUR FIRST STRATEGIC PLAN

Planning to Plan

As you start preparing to create your strategic plan, it is essential to confirm you have commitment from your board. Board members will need to dedicate time to the process, assist with executing the strategy and monitor the progress of the plan's development. To help alleviate concerns or fears, you should clearly articulate the process for your board and reiterate the short- and long-term benefits. Set the timeframe for creating the plan, likely two to three months at most, and identify who will participate in the planning process.

Define Your Mission, Vision & Core Values

Your mission statement clarifies your purpose. It is the starting point for your strategic plan, with your vision statement as your ultimate destination. Start your strategic planning meeting by reviewing your mission statement and recalling why your organization came to exist to set the right tone for the rest of the planning process. This allows you to confirm that there is consistency within the group on how the mission statement evolved to where it is today and is currently interpreted.

If you do not yet have a mission statement, see the section "Creating Your Mission Statement" at the end of this guide.

To provide additional strategic direction, articulate your vision. A vision statement briefly and concisely paints a picture of the future your organization is working toward. It serves as a future-focused extension of your mission statement.

For example, here are the mission and vision statements for the American Diabetes Association:

- Mission Statement: To prevent and cure diabetes and to improve the lives of all people affected by diabetes.
- Vision Statement: Life free of diabetes and all its burdens.

The mission and vision statements should lend clarity to your organization's core values or the guiding principles for those closely associated with your organization. Your core values are how you enact your mission and vision—the thought, speech and actions of your board should reflect your values. Defining values might be difficult for a new organization while you develop your culture, so expect that they may evolve along with your organization.

For example, the mission of the American Red Cross is to prevent and alleviate human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors. Complementing their mission, a few of their core values include impartiality, neutrality, independence, unity and universality.

Determine Your Goals

Identify a set of specific goals that will help you achieve your mission. Be sure to frame your goals in the context of your mission to ensure that your organization's work is always aligned with your purpose. Your plan should include large, organization-wide goals (related to building and leading the nonprofit) as well as those that are centered around the products and services you provide your community.

Create goals that are SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound. SMART goals will help you avoid the tendency to think too small—be innovative and ambitious—but also confirm your goal is achievable. Each goal should have accompanying objectives, which act like benchmarks to reach your goal. You can take your objectives a step further by outlining specific activities or programs that your organization can engage in over the next few months and years, all tying back to the overarching goal. Lastly, assign someone to be responsible and accountable for the progress toward each objective.

To help you visualize this process, consider where you currently are as point A and the place you want to be as point B. Point B is your goal, and your objectives and activities are the action steps you need to take to get from point A to point B. Setting metrics for your objectives and activities will provide a guide as to whether you have successfully made it, or are on your way, to point B.

Note that the strategic planning process will likely include a combination of brainstorming as a team and individual reflection and evaluation. You can identify times within the planning process, such as while determining goals, to set aside time for individual reflection before coming back together as a group.

S	M	A	R	T
SPECIFIC	MEASURABLE	ACTIONABLE	REALISITIC	TIMEBOUND
Goals should be specific and narrow for more effective planning.	Define what evidence will prove you're making progress and reevaluate when necessary.	Make sure you can reasonably accomplish your goal within a certain timeframe.	Your goals should align with your values and long-term objectives.	Set a realistic, ambitious end-date for task prioritization and motivation.

Assess Your Resources

Make time to inventory your existing assets so you know what is available to help you reach your goals. Your assets include not only money, but also people, expertise, skills and other intangibles. For example, do you have a group of committed volunteers or a strong relationship with a medical expert? Those can be extremely valuable in delivering on your mission.

Strategic Analysis

It is important to evaluate your marketplace so you can identify the pathways open to you and the pitfalls you may encounter. Now that you have your goals and know your resources, it is time to complete a strategic analysis so you can make the best use of your resources to achieve your goals.

A common method used for evaluating your marketplace or surrounding landscape is through a SWOT analysis—Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Your board members can discuss each of these areas as well as responses to them.

The point of this analysis is to think of ways to maximize the positive aspects and minimize the negative elements. You can plot your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats on a two-by-two matrix to help visualize where you should invest your time and resources and what you should avoid.

SWOT ANALYSIS	OPPORTUNITIES <i>are positive elements outside your organization, e.g., a high demand for patient education webinars or availability of a grant within your disease area.</i>	THREATS <i>are negative elements outside your organization, e.g., lack of researchers or the collapse of a major funder.</i>
STRENGTHS <i>are positive elements within your organization, e.g., a board member with event planning experience, a group of willing volunteers or the use of a donor management platform.</i>	Leverage your strengths to maximize your opportunities. Invest in these areas.	Leverage your strengths to minimize threats. Defend your organization and find strategic alliances in these areas.
WEAKNESSES <i>are negative elements within your organization, e.g., a shortage of volunteer support or lack of funding.</i>	This is an area open to options: you can invest, avoid, or collaborate. Counter weaknesses through exploiting opportunities.	Avoid or perform damage control where your weaknesses overlap with your threats.

Finalize & Monitor

Now that you have set goals, defined action steps and created a strategy to best use your time and resources, you are on your way to achieving your mission. Take a few days to review your plan and incorporate final edits and adjustments as needed. Your strategic plan does not need to be complex or extensive; a concise plan might be best to keep you focused on your defined goals. Your final plan may incorporate these elements:

- A brief introduction to support and introduce the plan
- The context for planning, if relevant
- Your mission, vision and core values
- Your strategic goals and the outcomes you would like to achieve
- Your objectives and the end-results that will support your goals
- Your strategies to reach your goals including the actions you will take and how you will spend your time and resources
- How you will measure performance

Once your plan is finalized, be aware that you may want to create a professional document to share with funders. The plan is an internal working document, and a strategic organization will regularly refer to it and measure progress against it. Touchpoints throughout the year will keep you and your team accountable. Are you making headway toward your anticipated outcomes? Things can change. Know that you can always adjust your plan as needed.

REFERENCES:

Shaping the Future of Your Organization: A Strategic Planning Guide for Nonprofit Leaders (BoardSource)
bit.ly/shaping-future-organization

Measuring and Improving Impact: A Toolkit for Nonprofit Funders of Medical Research (Milken Institute)
fastercures.org/reports/view/16

Create a Strategic Plan for Your Nonprofit (NOLO)
bit.ly/strategic-plan-NOLO

5 Key Components of a Powerful Strategic Plan (Medium)
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How To Craft A Vision Statement That Will Guide Your Nonprofit (BoardBuild)
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bit.ly/strategic-planning-foundations

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bit.ly/strategic-plan-template

SWOT analysis template examples (Smart Insights)
bit.ly/SMART-Insights

About Us (American Diabetes Association)
diabetes.org/about-us

Mission & Values (The American Red Cross)
bit.ly/mission-ARC

The Link Between Mission, Vision and Strategy (AchieveIt)
bit.ly/AchieveIt-mission

SMART Goals: Definition and Examples
bit.ly/SMART-goals-defined