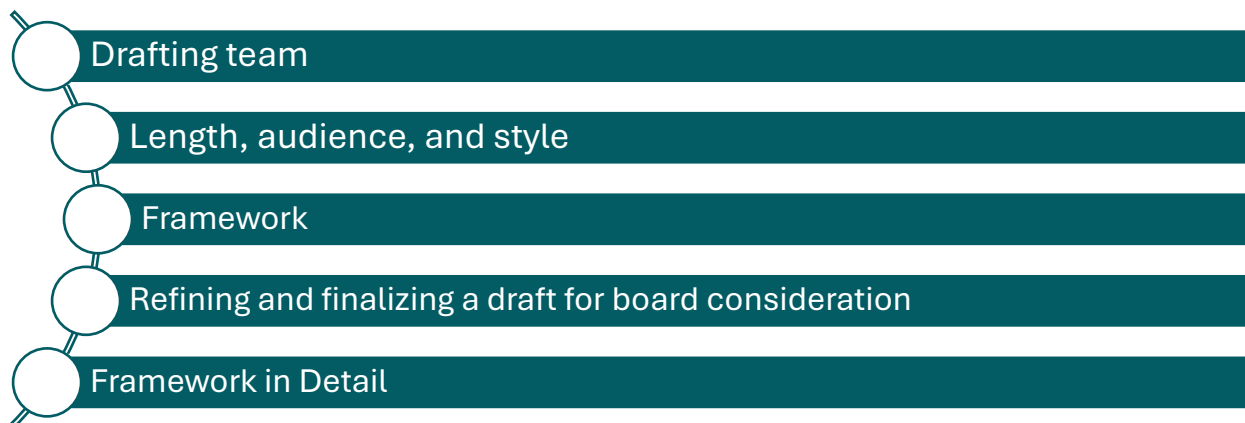


The Basics of Drafting Your Strategic Plan



While the memory of the retreat is fresh, begin drafting those portions of the plan that you can. Those who will be involved in drafting the plan should clear their schedule so that they can focus on the task.

Drafting team

There are several options for organizing the task of developing the first draft of the plan. The simplest is to have the executive director take the lead on the entirety of it. If the organization has no staff, the board chair may do so.

This approach – having a single person take the lead – has the virtue of simplicity. Also, it can allow for a quick start, which is vital. It results in writing in a single, consistent voice, possibly reducing rounds of editing later. Finally, it puts the accountability of drafting the plan in the hands of someone with a big-picture view of the organization and responsibility for its overall direction and performance.

However, the single-point-person model may put too much responsibility in one person's hands. We all have biases and preferences, so relying exclusively on one person to develop the first draft can be problematic. Also, executive directors and board chairs have many responsibilities; they may have trouble carving out the time – or they may have writer's block when they do. If so, precious momentum can be lost at a pivotal point in the process after a retreat.

If a single person is to take the lead, make sure to arrange for frequent check-ins with one or two others, or with the full planning committee. Having a schedule of check-in times provides motivation, accountability, and deadlines.

An alternative is to divide the writing among a group, perhaps the members of the planning committee, or the executive director and other lead staff. This division of labor may allow creative ideas about the plan's form and substance to emerge. It may also create a sense

of shared ownership in the work and the product and reduce the feeling of burden a single person may feel. However, it can also bog down if one person falls behind, or generate a draft in many voices that will require much editing or even a fresh start.

If you select the group approach, make expectations crystal clear up front, give clear instructions about length and form, consider creating a style guide, establish a firm set of deadlines, and assign someone in advance to prepare the second draft as soon as possible.

However, you organize your drafting team, create a first draft quickly after a retreat. It seems the memories from the retreat have a half-life of a week or so. A quick first draft will make the most of your planning meeting and generate momentum for the remainder of your planning process.

Length, audience, and style

A strategic plan should be a clear, compelling, concise, high-level document. A reader who knows nothing about the organization should understand after a first read why the organization exists, the long-term results it wants to see, the primary ways it goes about its work, and its specific goals, strategies, and priorities for the next few years.

There are no strict rules for length and style. Most good plans range from 4 to 20 pages. Erring on the lower end of that range is good, keeping it concise forces the essential ideas to rise to the top. It also increases chances that readers will read the full plan, absorb it, and remember it.

It often helps to capture specific products of your planning process in companion documents. These may be attachments that any reader can see, or that are made available only to select readers.

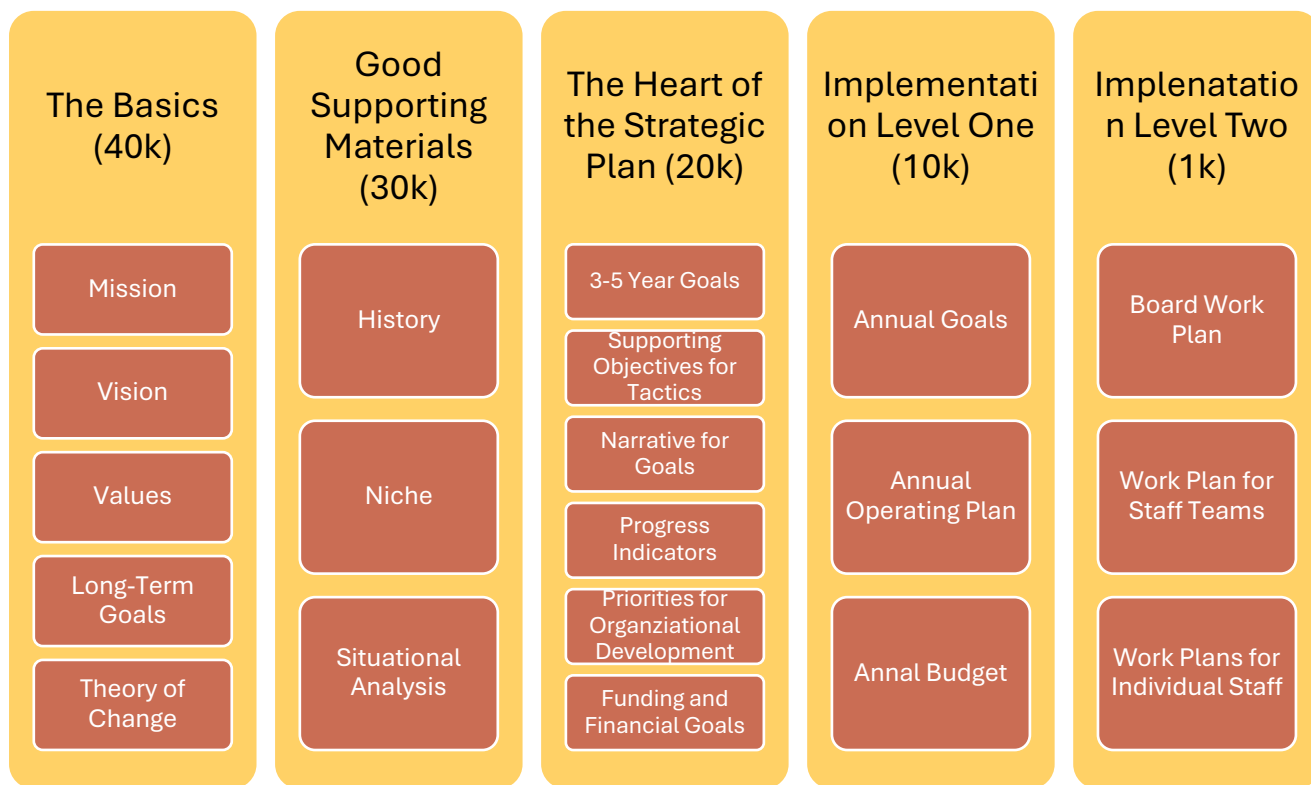
Many organizations limit distribution of the full strategic plan to current and future board and staff members. They may prepare a shorter version for public distribution, or use with specific audiences such as generous supporters. These summary versions may be as short as one or two pages. They may be limited to the highest-level elements, such as mission, vision, and top-priority goals for the next three years.

Other organizations write their plans so that they can be shared with key supporters, or even with the general public. Decide early in the drafting process which path you will take. This will shorten editing time. It will also increase the impact of the document for the target audiences.

Keep the style direct and to the point. If there are multiple writers, provide an example or two of the length and style you prefer. For example, you might want each segment of the goals section to:

- Be one page or less
- Begin with a statement of the goal itself
- Include a short narrative that provides necessary context and makes a case for the goal
- List 3-5 specific action steps needed to achieve the goal.

Framework



Strategic plans should begin with the highest-level elements: Mission and Vision. They should also include long-term goals (often at the 10 to 25-year horizon, sometimes even longer), and medium-term goals (usually at the 3 to 5-year horizon, sometimes as much as 10). While there are numerous ways these elements can be expressed and organized, they are essential for any strategic plan.

Beyond that, there are many options. The table at the end summarizes planning elements and products at five levels. The first three (The Basics, Good Supporting Materials, and The Heart of the Plan) are appropriate for the strategic plan that the board formally adopts. The fourth and the fifth are not; they should be developed later based on the strategic plan, to turn its ideas into action (Implementation Level One and Implementation Level Two).

The first three levels contain elements that a group should think through and develop over time. However, it is not necessary to create them all at once. Trying to do so could easily be overwhelming. It could also be overkill. Good planning is iterative. Mission, Vision, and Goals are the essentials. View the rest of the items in the table below as a menu of options to consider developing or refining over time. Select the few in each planning cycle that you believe will do your organization the most good to develop at that time. Once developed, some may change little from plan to plan. Others will evolve steadily with your organization.

Refining and finalizing a draft plan for board consideration

The first draft should be reviewed and discussed by the planning team, which should still be meeting regularly. Questions to ask include:

- Does it reflect the best thinking that has emerged from our process to date?
- Is it at an appropriately high level?
- Is it substantively coherent and compelling?
- Is it written clearly and in a consistent voice?
- Is it developing in a way that is right for its intended audiences? Is it free of jargon that some might not understand?
- Who will do what next to prepare a draft for circulation to full staff and board?
- Do we want to ask for board and staff feedback on a next-to-last draft? If so, when do we need to get that to them, and when do they need to provide input, leaving ample time to prepare the final draft?

The committee should also review subsequent drafts until the plan is ready for circulation to full board and staff. At that point, a cover note should be prepared which summarizes the process that led to the review draft, the type of feedback (if any) requested at this point, and a clear deadline for providing it.

Momentum is still a key consideration. If the next board meeting is the one where you expect to call for a vote to approve the plan, getting early feedback from staff and board on the review draft is a good idea. If substantial changes are in order, another draft can then be prepared and circulated just before the meeting. In any case, when you request feedback, allow enough time to consider it carefully.

You need not – indeed, probably should not – make a change in response to every comment received. However, consider all the major themes of the feedback. In addition to making specific changes to the draft, the planning team might prepare a brief memo responding to the themes of the comments received. The note can explain the thinking behind any significant changes that were and were not made in the final draft.

Framework in detail

I. THE BASICS (40,000-foot level)		
MISSION	<i>A clear, concise description of the reason the organization exists.</i>	Essential. Worth considerable time and effort if not already clear and shared.
VISION	<i>A vivid description of the better conditions the organization hopes to help create in the long term.</i>	Highly recommended. Supports the mission statement and brings it to life. Can be as short as a sentence. If lengthier, should also have a summary – perhaps a topic sentence at the beginning, in bold – which could stand alone, with the mission statement, when necessary.
VALUES	<i>A statement of core shared beliefs about what the organization cares about and how it should operate.</i>	Optional, but recommended. Sometimes called “Guiding Principles” or something similar. May or may not be included in the public version of the plan. If stand-alone should be reviewed and refreshed as needed at least once per planning cycle. Should be part of the basic recruitment and orientation materials for new staff and board.
LONG-TERM GOALS	<i>Clear, compelling long-term (often 25-year or longer) goals that are as specific possible.</i>	Crucial. Help flesh out the vision and make the link to shorter-term goals. Should be expressed as <i>outcomes</i> , not <i>activities</i> . Should be ambitious and inspiring – but not flunk the laugh test!
THEORY OF CHANGE	<i>A convincing case for the fundamental long-term strategies the group expects to use to pursue its long-term goals and the reasons its leaders believe those strategies will work.</i>	Highly recommended, whether or not required by any outside entity or included in the plan itself. Developing TOC challenges assumptions (often heretofore unspoken) and forces rigor. Often <i>not</i> part of the published strategic plan, but developed as a complementary piece to it. (In that case, can be summarized in simple language in a plan under a heading such as “How we work.”) Should be reviewed, discussed, and, as necessary, updated in each strategic planning cycle.
II. GOOD SUPPORTING MATERIALS (30,000-foot level)		
HISTORY	<i>A reasonably concise history of the group, including its basic strategies and major accomplishments over time.</i>	Important to update in each planning cycle, even if it does not become part of the new strategic plan itself. Provides needed context. Maintains institutional memory. Serves as a useful resource for recruitment and orientation of new supporters, board members, and staff members.
NICHE	<i>An assessment of the group’s place among others currently working toward related goals in the programmatic and/or geographic area(s) of interest.</i>	May change considerably from one planning cycle to the next. Usually needed to help staff and board members understand what others working in the group’s realm are doing.
SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS	<i>A summary of the present and anticipated factors (economic, political, social, etc.) that affect the group’s goals and strategies at this time.</i>	Helpful for clarity now and assessment later. Might not be included in an external version of the plan.

III. THE HEART OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN (20,000-foot level)

3-5 YEAR GOALS	<i>The organization's most important goals for the next few years.</i>	If achieved, will move the organization forward significantly toward the vision and long-term goals. Should be ambitious but achievable (at least in something close to the best-case scenario). Should be clear and concise. Like the long-term goals, should be expressed as <i>outcomes, not activities</i>. Need <i>not</i> encompass every organizational activity. Instead, it should be an expression of the organization's <i>top priorities</i>. Should include goals for finance, development, communications, capacity, etc. as well as key program goals.
SUPPORTING OBJECTIVES OR TACTICS	<i>Specific items that support the 3-5- year goals.</i>	If accomplished, the objectives/tactics should be sufficient to achieve the goal they support. Should be as clear as possible and expressed in a way that drives implementation and supports evaluation. If expressed as objectives, should be outcomes, not activities. If expressed as tactics, should be pivotal actions consistent with longer-term strategies.
NARRATIVE FOR EACH GOAL	<i>Some explanation for each goal and its set of objectives.</i>	Should not be long (much more detail for each goal may exist elsewhere). But should be enough to anticipate and address the major questions that board members or others can be reasonably expected to ask: Why these goals? Why these activities? What are the assumptions behind them? Are they sound? Etc.
PROGRESS INDICATORS	<i>A checklist of items that can be used going forward to gauge success.</i>	Not always necessary if the goals and objectives themselves are specific enough and written in a way that makes it easy to determine if real progress is being made. If not, these items should answer the question, "We will be succeeding when..."
PRIORITIES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	<i>A summary of the most important ways the organization needs to grow and change over the next few years to meet its strategic goals.</i>	Should address needs for board, staff, office, information technology, other infrastructure, and any other necessary capacity-related matters.
FUNDING AND FINANCIAL GOALS	<i>A summary of the fund development and financial management targets for the duration of the strategic plan.</i>	Should be sufficient to support the type of organization and level of activities needed to achieve the plan's other 3-5-year goals.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL ONE (10,000-foot level)

ANNUAL GOALS	<i>A list of the organization's top priorities for the coming year.</i>	Should relate directly to the strategic plan's 3-5 year-goals and objectives.
ANNUAL OPERATING PLAN	<i>A summary of the anticipated overall activities of the organization for the coming fiscal year.</i>	Should be developed by staff in conjunction with the annual budget. Should not be very long or detailed (5-10 pages are the right length for many groups), but should explain to the board generally what the budgeted expenses will pay for – and make the connection to the strategic plan.
ANNUAL BUDGET	<i>Projected revenues and expenses for the coming fiscal year.</i>	Should be developed by staff in conjunction with the annual budget and presented to the board early enough to secure review, any modifications, and approval prior to the beginning of the new fiscal year. Should be reviewed and if necessary revised at mid-year.

V. IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL TWO (1,000-foot level)

BOARD WORK PLAN	<i>Goals and key activities for the board for the coming year.</i>	Should be developed for the board as a whole, in collaboration with the chair and executive director. May include specific priorities for individual board members.
STAFF TEAMWORK PLANS	<i>Goals and key activities for each major staff team for the coming year.</i>	Especially important for medium-to-large organizations with "departments" such as program, development, communications, finance, admin, etc. Should <i>not</i> be developed in staff-group silos. Should be drafted by each staff group or team early in the annual planning process. Plans should be reviewed, compared, and discussed by the staff as a whole (or, in very large organizations, by the leaders of staff teams); harmonized with the others; and summarized in the annual operating plan presented to the board with the budget.
INDIVIDUAL STAFF WORK PLANS	<i>Annual goals and key activities for every staff member.</i>	Derived from annual plans for staff teams and individuals' job descriptions. At least some goals should relate directly to the organization's strategic and annual goals.