

Gaining Perspective for Your Strategic Planning



Retrospectives: Programs, Money, and People

Situational analysis

Engaging people inside and outside the organization

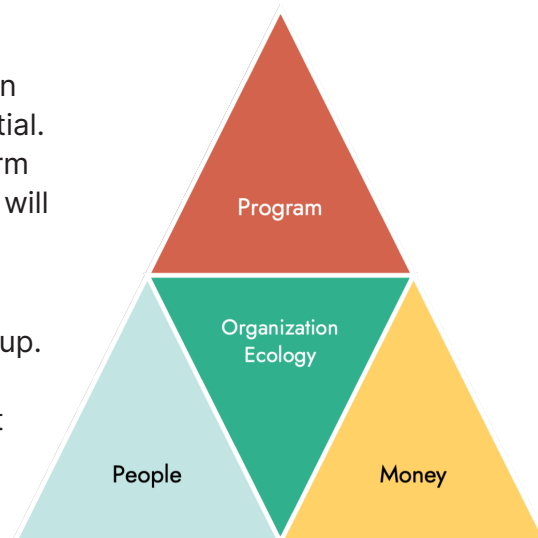
Now that you formed your planning committee, engaged your full board and staff, and framed your key strategic questions, it's a good time to step back and gain perspective. Now is one of the most valuable parts of a strategic planning process. Yet it is one that is often shortchanged. Allowing enough time to gain perspective is an important consideration when you build the timeline for this process.

Retrospectives: Program, Money, and People

Program

A big-picture review of your organization's progress in pursuing its mission over the past few years is essential. Your long-term goals and especially your medium-term (3-5 year) goals established in the last strategic plan will be useful benchmarks.

The best ways to conduct a program retrospective depend on the size, nature, and structure of your group. However, you do it, capture highlights of your observations and conclusions in a brief summary that you will share with full staff and board.



Money: Fundraising

A fundraising retrospective can provide a crucial early reality check in your planning process. It does not need to be highly detailed. It should give a very big-picture view of fundraising results and trends over at least the last three years. This information will ground an in-depth discussion of several questions about fundraising, such as:

- What have been our major sources of revenue? Which sources have been growing? Why? Which ones have not been growing? Why?
- Which sources are restricted? Which are not? What do we think about the balance of them?



- What has been the approximate level of effort required to maintain and build each of our major revenue streams? What does that tell us about which ones are yielding the best returns on our investments of staff time, board effort, and money?

These fundraising questions should be explored by the planning committee, with input and involvement of fundraising staff and board committees. Share a summary of observations and conclusions with the staff and board.

Money: Finances

A similar big-picture retrospective of finances is equally important.

- How has our annual budget changed? Why?
- Have we consistently met our budget targets for revenue? Why or why not? Have we consistently kept our expenses within budget? Why or why not?
- Have our unrestricted reserves been adequate? Have they been growing or shrinking? Have all our programs been adequately funded? If not, why not?
- Are some effectively being subsidized by general funds? If so, is this a deliberate use of general funds, or an unintended one?
- What decisions need to be made about inadequately funded programs?

These and other financial questions should also be explored by the planning committee, with input and involvement of finance staff and the board's finance committee.

People

A review of the development and current status of your organization's people will round out your retrospective.

- How has our staff changed? Why?
- Do we have the right skills and capacity to match our commitments and ambitions at this point?
- How has our board changed? Why? Has it become the kind of board we need today, and going forward?
- How have our teams of volunteers, advisors, and other supporters changed? What are the strengths of these teams today? What gaps do we need to fill soon?
- Have we identified the best ways volunteers can contribute to our success? Have we been supporting them adequately?

It's good to develop brief summaries of each of these four retrospectives. Consider sharing them with full staff and board as soon as they are complete, and then making them available again in a package of materials you prepare later for your planning retreat. They will be useful records later as well, at the end of the current strategic planning process and the beginning of the next one a few years later.

Situational analysis

This is also a good time look outside your organization to consider how your operating environment has changed. Consider factors and trends in the political, economic, social, cultural, demographic, and similar realms that affect your organization's ability to succeed.

As you develop your situational analysis, you will want to create your own list of questions to consider, tailored to your unique organization. Here are some examples:

- How has the political environment changed in ways that affect us? What is the outlook for the next few years? What major political contingencies should we consider?
- How are the communities we work in and serve changing? What are the implications for our programs, partnerships, communications, fundraising, etc.?
- What economic trends affect us? What opportunities or challenges do they present? What is our best niche today relative to other organizations? How has it changed? Why?
- How does the general public perceive us? By our most ardent supporters? By our partners? By our critics and opponents?

The situational analysis provides an excellent opportunity to engage key people inside *and* outside your organization in a meaningful way. Ideas for doing so follow in the next section.

Engaging people inside and outside the organization

Insiders

If you have frequent in-person meetings with your full staff and board strategic planning team, consider devoting a portion of them to a series of conversations about your retrospective and your situational analysis. You might also begin exploring some of your key strategic questions (described in *Getting Started*) with staff and board members at these meetings.

Make sure that these conversations are well facilitated. At this point, it is much more important to discover the full range of views that exist on major questions than to try to reach complete consensus about them. Take note of those questions where opinions seem to converge or diverge. This will help now and later, as you narrow the list of questions that need in-depth exploration.

If a series of in-person meetings of the full staff and board strategic planning team is not possible, there are other good options, including small-group discussions or an internal survey. Take care to design your questions well, to get the type and amount of information that will be most helpful. Summarize the results and share them with the full team.

Other “insiders” to consider engaging at this point are members and individual donors. There are numerous options for doing so. They include online surveys, small-group meetings, conference calls, one-on-one meetings with major supporters, and invitations to provide ideas by email. Tailor the methods for engagement to the nature of the questions you have decided to explore.

Outsiders

It may also be beneficial to engage some people outside your organization at this point. First, it may provide a more robust perspective that will inform your thinking as you

develop your plan. Second, it may help guard against self-reinforcing internal groupthink. Third, it may strengthen relationships with people outside the organization who are important to you. Finally, it may show you who is most interested in your organization and thinking creatively about it – providing clues about who may play a more significant role with your organization if you cultivate relationships with them further.

Think expansively about the types of outsiders to engage. Begin by considering key decision-makers, opinion leaders, funders, and collaborators.

The list of options above for engaging insiders is a good starting point for considering the best ways to engage outsiders. Here again, tailor the methods for engagement to the nature of the questions you have decided to explore.