



## THRESHOLD QUESTIONS

- Are we ready to commit to doing this well?
- Do we need an update or an overhaul?
- What level of planning should we focus on?
- Who should initiate and lead our process? When? Should we get outside help?

### Are we ready to commit to doing this well?

Good strategic planning requires time and effort. Before you begin, make sure you and the others who will lead your process are ready to commit both.

The purpose of strategic planning must not simply be to re-validate your organization's status quo. Even an update of a fairly recent, still-mostly-relevant plan requires time and mental effort. Without them, it's easy to slide back into familiar, too comfortable beliefs and assumptions about an organization's direction and approach.

The amount of time required for strategic planning varies with a group's type and situation. At a minimum, a group's leaders should expect to devote at least several days of focused time to the effort over a period of a month or two. Part of their job will be to set up one or more in-depth discussions involving most or all board and staff members, often at a retreat of some sort. More time and effort are often needed.

Below, we offer considerations that will help you gauge how much time and effort your next strategic planning process will likely take. As you do so, adopt the mindset that planning is not something that is getting in the way of your work. It is your most important work. Help your organization get in the habit of giving strategic planning the time and effort it deserves at least every few years.

### Do we need an update or an overhaul?

If it has been just three or four years since your last planning process, if nothing has changed dramatically internally or externally lately, and if your group is getting the results you want, a simple update may be all you need. It is still important to commit to a good process.

One reason to update your plan is to evaluate progress, then calibrate tactics and resources. Another is to help orient and engage newcomers to the board and staff. They deserve the chance to learn about the thinking that went into the last plan while bringing fresh eyes, questions, and ideas to the update. Also, veteran board and staff members should have the chance to share what they have learned before they depart.

*If you answer yes to any of the questions below, it may be time for your organization to consider an overhaul of your current plan.*

Has it been more than 4 years since last plan?

Since the last Strategic Plan...

- Have there been significant external changes?
- Have there been significant internal changes?
- Has the organization had rapid growth?
- Has the organization significantly downsized?

Is the organization missing out on the results it wants?

Have there been major, political, legal, or economic changes?

- **An overhaul is likely in order if it has been five years or more since your last plan** because internal and external factors have probably changed significantly in that time. Also, there may now be new staff and board members who were not involved in the last process. Having contributed nothing to it, they may not understand the thinking behind it or feel much ownership in it.
- **A group that has experienced rapid staff growth** may well need an in-depth process, to make the most of the new opportunities growth creates, and to orient numerous newcomers and get them involved in strategic thinking going forward.
- **Conversely, groups that have downsized for financial or other reasons** may need to take a big step back and overhaul their plan. Financial problems may have been the result of unrealistic program goals or unfounded assumptions about strategies, personnel, fundraising, or other elements of the last plan. In any event, decreased capacity has many implications for a group's next plan.
- **An overhaul is likely needed if your group is not getting the results you want.** Your goals may be realistic, but your ideas about how to pursue them may not.
- **If significant political, legal, economic, or other external factors have changed,** an overhaul of your last plan is probably urgent. Your former goals and strategies may have become unattainable, at least for the foreseeable future.
- **If you have been highly successful,** an overhaul may be in order. It may be time to set ambitious, inspirational new goals!

While “*Update or overhaul?*” is a threshold question, it’s possible that you will change your mind about it as you dig into your process. Keep an open mind and be prepared to dig deeper if necessary.

## What level of planning should we focus on?

New or rapidly changing organizations usually need to focus first on top-tier planning elements: mission, vision, long-term goals, and major strategies. Discussions about them deserve considerable time, effort, and patience. They should include surfacing and explicitly stating current beliefs and assumptions about the organization's niche, roles, and best ways to pursue their mission over time.

Established, more stable organizations should revisit their mission, vision, long-term goals, and major strategies in each planning round, if only briefly. It is worth revisiting these elements to refresh memories of long-term staff and board and to orient newer members. There is value in a regular reaffirmation of the organization's mission, vision, and goals. However, stable groups don't usually benefit from *dwelling* on these elements in each new planning process. In fact, unproductive re-hashing and large-group wordsmithing of them can bog a process down from the start.

It is often better to revisit the mission and vision statements toward the end of the process. Sometimes groups who think their mission and vision are rock-solid at the beginning find valuable opportunities to clarify or even overhaul them toward the end, based on the fresh thinking they have just done. Account for this possibility by circling back to mission and vision while there is still enough time to give them their due.

Established groups usually will find it better to focus most of their attention on medium-term considerations such as 3 to 4-year objectives and the tactics and resources needed to achieve them. While high-level elements may change little from plan to plan, medium-level elements will change regularly, often significantly, as external factors change and the organization evolves. Medium-level elements should thus be the focus of most strategic planning processes for established, stable organizations.

If the last strategic plan is still serving the group, it may not be necessary to update the entire plan. It may be a better use of time and energy to focus on a few key questions about implementing the existing plan.

Resist the urge to get into short-term objectives, and tactics and activities; a good strategic plan is not a to-do list. ***The board-approved strategic plan should be high-level.*** After finalizing the strategic plan, it is crucial for staff to draft a more detailed annual action plan, along with a supporting budget for the board's consideration. Delving into the details of annual plans and individual work plans is not the best use of the board's time and energy. In a later section of this guide, we will explore ways to use the annual plan and budget to implement the strategic plan.

## Who should initiate and lead our process? When? Should we get outside help?

Commitment of the group's leaders is essential. In an organization with no staff, the board chair and key officers should initiate the process. In an organization with staff, the commitment of the executive director and other lead staff is also essential.

A mid-cycle assessment (discussed toward the end of this guide) is a good time to start thinking about the timing of the next planning process. For a group on a three-year strategic planning cycle, this would be about eighteen months after the last plan was adopted. For a group on a four-year cycle, it would be about two years after. Calendaring the beginning and ending dates of the next strategic planning process at this point is a good idea. Otherwise, timelines slide.



If the mid-cycle assessment suggests that the next plan should probably be an update, consider a timeline about four months long. If it suggests an overhaul, allow at least six months. In either case, if you want to do some work to gain perspective or to engage people outside the organization in a meaningful way (something that you should probably do at least every other cycle), increase these times by at least a month or two.

Outside help can be valuable. Consider engaging someone with experience with similar organizations to advise you as you design your process. Also consider having this person help later in other ways, such as conducting interviews or facilitating some meetings.

However, if you do get outside help, remember that you will still need to devote considerable time to providing them the background information and support that they will need to do their jobs well. Also, remember that the less experience the outside help has with organizations of your type, the more time you will need to spend to orienting them and to supporting them as the process unfolds.

If budget constraints or other considerations make getting outside help difficult or impossible, it's still possible to do a great job. At times, however, your group's leaders will need to be focusing more on group process and getting outside perspective than they would have otherwise. They will probably also have to suppress their own ideas and opinions from time to time. Leaders influence the organization's trajectory nearly every day. The strategic planning process is the moment when others have their best opportunity to contribute, and when fresh ideas are most likely to emerge. Leaders need to provide space for them to do so.