



ADOPTING YOUR PLAN



Formally adopting a strategic plan is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of a board of directors. We offer here process ideas for helping your board do so.

Preparation and discussion

The planning team should make the case to the board for consideration and adoption of the draft strategic plan. It might begin to do so in a memo, from the full planning committee to the entire board, that accompanies the draft plan. The plan and the memo should be circulated to all board and staff along with the board meeting agenda at least a few days before the meeting.

The committee should be prepared to make its case verbally at the opening of the meeting. Someone – likely the executive director, board chair, or planning committee chair – should take the lead with prepared remarks about the key elements of the plan. They might begin with a quick recap of the process to date, then answer higher-level questions such as:

- What’s the same as the last plan, and still important?
- What’s new or different? Why?
- How are our answers to the key strategic questions identified early in the process reflected in the plan?

After the opening remarks, the full planning committee (board and staff members alike) should help field questions from the floor.

Because these remarks and discussions are leading to a formal decision of the board, the process should be more formal than the free-flowing full-group discussions that are typical at a board/staff retreat. Explicit seating arrangements and expectations about how and when to participate in the discussion can contribute to a more formal tenor. For example, staff members other than those on the planning committee may sit outside the main circle and speak only if called on.

While adopting the plan formally is up to the board, a strong board will want to know that it has the general support of its staff. After all, staff will be principally responsible for implementing the plan. If staff has been



meaningfully involved from the start, engaged actively at the retreat, and given the opportunity to discuss and comment on the prior drafts of the written plan, board members can be confident of general staff support at this point. Still, the board chair may want to test this assumption by inviting some final comments from lead staff before calling for a vote.

The Vote

If it has not already done so, the board should now enter a formal business session so that the chair can entertain a motion for approval of the strategic plan.

In the ensuing discussion, board members should take the vote seriously – but not *too* seriously. The strategic plan is simply a snapshot of the organization’s best thinking at a particular point in time. It should set the organization’s general direction and focus its activities going forward.

But it’s not set in stone. Later, after appropriate deliberation, the board may approve activities outside the plan’s sideboards. It may also adopt amendments or other changes to the plan. In any event, the board should expect to update or overhaul the plan within a few years.

Timely adequacy is better than delayed perfection. If a good process over the last several months has led the group to this point, it is almost always better to adopt the plan and move on than it is to lose momentum. It is not worth bogging down at this point in wordsmithing, lengthy debate over minor points, or wrestling over abstract questions with no meaningful answers.

If some substantive questions or concerns arise in this final discussion, there are options other than delaying the call for a vote. The chair might entertain a motion to adopt the plan in principle, with the caveat that a specific section of it is flagged for further discussion and development, and brought back to the table for approval soon.

If there are concerns about minor matters, including wordsmithing, the chair might entertain a motion to adopt the plan in principle with the understanding that the planning committee will address specific small issues soon after the meeting, without having to bring the full strategic plan back to the entire board for another discussion and vote.

With these ideas in mind, the chair should feel comfortable moving the discussion along and calling for a vote by the time scheduled on the agenda.

Celebration, and a look ahead

Leave time for celebration! Your new plan is a tremendous accomplishment for staff and board alike. Relish the moment and look forward to what you will accomplish together in the next few years.

If you haven’t already discussed next steps, make sure to do so now. Who will do what to prepare the plan and summarize it for external audiences? How will you roll the plan out to partners, funders, and other supporters? How will you use the plan to orient new board members and staff members? How will you use your plan to focus your work, monitor it, and evaluate it? How will you make yours a *living* plan that you use regularly? These and other subjects are discussed in the next section of this guide.