

Values-Based Strategic Planning

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Overview

We live in challenging economic times. Churches, schools, businesses and organizations that have been in operation for years have closed, while others have significantly cut back on their services and programs due to decreased funding. Can strategic planning prevent such cutbacks and closures? Of course not. But having a well thought-out and detailed business plan, and monitoring its implementation on an ongoing basis, can better prepare organizations to identify and address problems sooner, as well as take advantage of opportunities for growth. This article describes one non-profit organization's approach to developing a values-based strategic plan.

Introduction

I know what you're thinking. Strategic plan? Business plan? Who has the time to bother with such things when you're in crisis mode almost every day? It does, in fact, take time to put together a strategic plan for your program or your organization. But it doesn't have to be lengthy or complicated.

Why bother? Because a bit of work upfront can provide just the structure your program needs to continue and to grow, as well as to address problems as they develop. Because competition is fierce for limited funds these days, and funding agencies look favorably upon organizations with a solid history that have realistic plans for continuation and expansion.

What is a strategic plan?

Simply put, a strategic plan is a document that describes where an organization is, where it would like to go, what it needs and how it intends to get there. A web search of "strategic plans" or "business plans" reveals countless models and approaches for non-profit as well as for-profit organizations and businesses.

As a volunteer manager, the term "strategic plan" probably generates as much interest and enthusiasm as "performance measures." But in reality, a strategic plan can enable small volunteer programs as well as large organizations to better focus and use their limited financial as well as human resources.

What is a values-based strategic plan?

A values-based strategic plan is a document that identifies and uses an organization's vision, mission and values as the basis for the development, maintenance and growth of its programs and services.

Why values-based planning?

An agency's mission means nothing if its administrators and staff don't know, embrace and live it. Organizations can get off track in activities and expenditures, developing services based on available funding or the latest crisis, rather than on mission.

As volunteer managers, we can also get off track, our days busily filled with those "other activities as required" in our job descriptions – activities that often take time away from our primary responsibilities.

Values-based strategic planning provides focus for organizations, programs and individuals, as well as the means to demonstrate accountability to Boards of Directors; funding sources; and to licensing, certification and accreditation agencies.

Defining values

It is difficult to live the values and achieve the mission if you haven't clearly defined them. The primary purposes and values of any organization can usually be found in its key organizational documents, including incorporation papers, by-laws, mission and vision statements. The values of faith-based organizations are also based on their particular faith traditions.

Catholic Services of Macomb (CSM) is a family and children's services agency that has provided behavioral health services; pregnancy, parenting and adoption services; and senior services to the residents of Macomb County in southeastern Michigan and surrounding areas since 1957. Since the mid 1990s, CSM has developed a series of two-year strategic business plans. The agency's plan for fiscal years 2005-07 is its first truly values-based plan.

As a Catholic service agency, CSM's services are based on "Catholic social teachings." Clearly defining those values specific to CSM began with a review of the agency's by-laws, treatment philosophy, vision and mission statements, and asking the following questions in view of our key documents:

- Why should we be and are we doing what we do?
- What should we be doing? What services should we provide? What do we need to do administratively to maintain or expand our services?

- How should we do what we need to do? How do we get the resources we need?
- Who will be responsible for doing what, and
- By when?

As a result of this process, five core values were defined, with specific subspecialty values/goals assigned to each core value.

Evaluate current services and activities for compliance with values

Before an organization can determine where it wants to go, it has to determine where it is. Once core values are defined, agency services and activities should be evaluated to determine whether they do or do not fit in with these values. If they don't, then decisions need to be made. Should the services/activities be eliminated? Or should do the core values be amended or expanded?

Looking for an interesting exercise as a volunteer manager? Monitor your activities for a week. At the end of each workday, record how you spent your day. No need to use a punch clock or a stopwatch. Just realistically estimate how many hours you spent attending meetings, doing paperwork, checking e-mail, handling inquiries, marketing, volunteer supervision, etc. At the end of the week, take out your job description, and compare what you actually did with what you have been hired to do. If too much of your time is spent on "other activities as required," it may be time to re-think your priorities – or to revise your job description for a better fit with your program's values and mission.

Evaluate your current resources

The values have been determined. Current services have been evaluated for their compliance with mission and values. Another step in developing a strategic plan is to conduct a realistic inventory of the agency's resources, including human (staff and volunteers) as well as financial resources.

Does your organization or program have sufficient financial, staff and volunteer resources to maintain or expand its current services? For most of us, the answer to that question is probably – no!

These are trying economic times. But the bottom line is that even "charitable" organizations with limited staff need money for something at sometime. "Free" services to clients aren't provided without cost to an organization. And, as volunteer managers, we of all people know that volunteers are not "free," but require a substantial investment of staff time in order to make the most use of each person's unique gifts and talents.

What are your current funding sources? What are potential funding sources? Grants can be a great source for start-up funds or special projects, but they aren't a quick fix, and grants for ongoing operational expenses are hard to find. Can you depend on client fees? Do you need to do a series of fundraising activities or conduct an annual appeal to enable you to continue providing or expand current services? Strategic plans should detail what you have, what you need, and where you propose to get it.

Components of a strategic plan

There are a multitude of formats available for developing strategic and/or business plans. Some are extremely long and involved, while others can be relatively brief. Catholic Services of Macomb develops its business plans for a two-year period. Other organizations develop plans for three or five years. The choice is yours.

Components also vary. Values-based strategic or business plans may include:

- Agency organizational documents:
 - Corporation By-laws
 - Mission and Vision Statements
 - Treatment Philosophy Statement
- Agency values defined:
 - Core Values
 - Target Populations
 - Services/Programs
- Values-Based Action Plans
 - Agency/Administrative
 - Program/Service Specific
 - Evaluation
- Agency Organizational Chart(s)

Importance of Action Plans

Action plans are a key component of strategic and business plans. Using Catholic Services of Macomb's current plan as an example, specific goals and objectives (action plans) were developed for the organization by department – including Finance and Administration and the agency's Board of Directors – using a standard format with activities assigned based on where they fit under the agency's five Core Values.

Monthly program and fiscal reports will document progress in achieving the objectives defined in each action plan, using a standard reporting format based on the work plans. The Senior Services Department has also adapted the format as a standard agenda for our staff meetings, to continually remind us of our values and goals, and to better focus our activities.

Program Evaluation

If you can't document it, it didn't happen. This is particularly true where agencies that fund, license, certify or accredit your organization or program are concerned. All strategic and business plans must include plans to evaluate your success in achieving your defined goals and objectives, as well as the impact of services provided.

Monthly program and fiscal reports are an excellent means of monitoring progress, and addressing problems as they arise rather than after they spin out of control. Volunteer or client satisfaction surveys are a means of documenting the impact of the services you provide. Keeping

a file of all of those great “stories” we discover every day as we go about our business also document impact in an extremely effective way. People may not remember your statistics. But they will remember your stories.

Impact of values-based strategic planning

Why bother with values-based strategic planning? Because it provides *focus*, *fit*, and *accountability*.

Focus: Values-based plans enable programs and organizations to focus their limited resources (financial as well as human) on services, programs and activities that fit clearly defined values, and facilitate the achievement of mission.

Fit: Values-based strategic plans include specific goals and objectives based on an organization’s unique values to ensure that its activities and services do, indeed, fit its defined values and mission. Know your focus. Then assess current or proposed activities for how well they do or to not fit in with your organization’s mission and values.

Accountability: Saying that you provide values-based services and have achieved your mission means nothing without the documentation to prove it. Values based strategic or business plans provide the framework to both evaluate and document success – for those who are the primary reason why we do what we do, as well as for those who support our values, programs and services.

Summary

Contrary to popular belief, non-profit does not mean non-funded, or non-business. All non-profit organizations need money for something at sometime. Having a well-thought-out and detailed values-based strategic plan provides an organization with focus. Monitoring the implementation of the plan on an ongoing basis can better prepare organizations to identify and address problems, as well as take advantage of opportunities for growth. Bottom line? Having a values based plan is just good business.