

Developing a Strategic Agenda

Daniel Wolf | June 11, 2009

The important work of nonprofit organizations is ever-changing, and the realities they face require a better approach to strategy management and governance.

New challenges in everything from compliance to service innovation demand a more thoughtful strategic agenda for growth, performance and change.

Nonprofit strategy concerns

Conventional approaches to nonprofit strategy derive from founding principles and values. Nonprofit plans address the enterprise's goals and stakeholders' needs.

What nonprofit strategy often lacks, however, are some key elements:

- Strong balance of near-term and long-term focus
- Thorough insights on strategic conditions, frontiers
- Specific accountability for outcomes and resources
- Broad engagement of stakeholders in the strategy
- Sense of "nonprofit entrepreneurship" that fuels evolution
- Match of executive and mid-level talent to strategy

No matter how well-intentioned, nonprofit boards and management tend to frame strategic plans that are often static and process-stale. And, the satisfaction of stakeholders often suffers in the wake of conventional old-school planning.

Strategic agenda - not planning

The world needs mission-driven, results-oriented nonprofit organizations that are prepared and resolved to make decisions, solve problems, forge judgment and plan forward.

A strategic agenda is a contemporary framework that supports the engagement of people in the direction, integration and execution of nonprofit strategy. A strategic agenda sets the tone for growth, performance and change, and it provides a platform for strategic thought and behavior at every level.

Nonprofit boards are concerned about enterprise relevance and evolution. Their strategic agenda serves to bring together the everyday thinking and discourse of the organization on these subjects:

1. Perspectives on the nonprofit environment...

How they view the conditions, trends and dynamics of the categories served by the nonprofit is critical. The volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity - the "VUCA" realities - require more foresight, awareness and understanding than ever.

2. The Organic Components of Strategy and Organization...

How they bring together the thought and behavior of:

- Strategy direction - focus and choices
- Strategy integration - resources and capabilities
- Strategy execution - action and impact

Conventional strategic planning typically fails to connect these elements.

3. Leadership and Management Engagement...

How they engage people in the strategic agenda is essential to growth, performance and change. Human capital is developed in the context of strategy. Decision making, judgment and resource planning are hatched in young leaders and managers through their work on strategy.

Contemporary strategy is a journey, not a series of planning episodes and book templates. A strategic agenda represents a new school framework that helps nonprofit organizations deal with near-term and long-term success.

Daniel Wolf is managing director of Dewar Sloan, a consulting firm specializing in growth, performance and change issues for corporate and nonprofit organizations.

©2009 Philanthropy Journal. A publication of the A.J. Fletcher Foundation

For more information about Dewar Sloan and the Strategic Agenda, please visit the Dewar Sloan website at www.dewarsloan.com, or call 231-929-4545.