

Changing Your Non-profit's Lifestyle

Realize Your Full Potential by Embracing "Strategic Living"

Non-profit leaders often say they understand the importance of strategic planning to support and advance their organizations' missions.

Do they really, though? Knowing they should be engaging in strategic planning is a good start, but let's be honest. The concept is very misunderstood. "Planning" suggests a clear beginning and end. For many non-profits, the process effectively ends with some form of static plan that doesn't facilitate coordinated action and, as a result, doesn't deliver the desired outcomes. These organizations aren't undertaking an on-going, dynamic process that produces the results their communities need, and progressively builds toward their visions for the future. They're putting great ideas on paper, but they're not "living the dream." If they want to be at their sustainable best, however, non-profits need to go beyond strategic planning and adopt a "strategic lifestyle."

Realities of Non-profit Strategic Planning



When we hold discussions on non-profit strategic planning, we'll often ask participants if they have plans. Usually, about half of the crowd raise their hands. When we inquire about plan execution, though, virtually all those hands go down.

Over and over, we're hearing non-profit leaders say they just can't implement what they put down on paper.

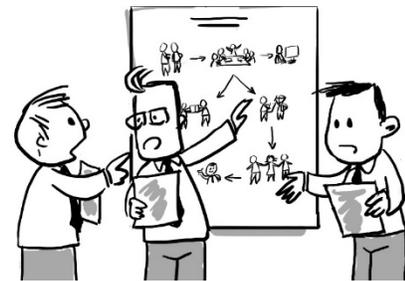
Studies show that typical business executives spend about five percent of their time tending to organizational strategy. There is substantial—albeit anecdotal—evidence suggesting non-profit leaders allocate even less time to shaping their organizations' futures. They indicate this is due in large part to lack of time, from a constant need to respond to immediate requirements with limited resources. By necessity, non-profit leaders tend to focus on short-term operational issues, and long-term, strategic activities are a "luxury" they don't feel they can afford.

This isn't to say that non-profit leaders don't "dream big." Boards, executives, and staff have creative ideas that form the basis for many strategic plans. Without results-driven action, though, these plans are virtually useless, and can even damage organizations' credibility and staff morale. All too frequently, non-profits don't actually "live their dreams," as strategy execution and management are overcome by day-to-day concerns. Their plans become the "ends," not the "means" to get the results they need to fully, effectively serve their purposes.

Shifting Perspective: The "Strategic Life"

Translating strategic plans into actions and results requires a change in perspective from the very beginning of the planning process. To be sustainable and continuously meet their communities' demands—and

do more—non-profits have to, at the very least, place execution and management of well-constructed long-term strategies on equal footing with core service delivery. Most, however, still view mission-advancing outcomes as secondary to daily lives. That's an approach that needs to change, for the long-term good of these organizations.



Strategic planning isn't enough for sustainable success. Getting the right results requires "strategic living."

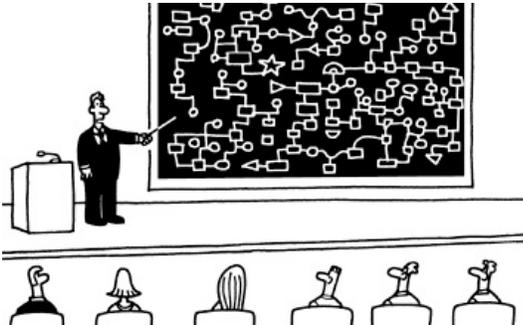
Non-profits instead need to "live" strategy. This is a new mindset, one in which strategies drive key activities and guide decision-making aimed at achieving a sustainable, market- and mission-oriented, future. This requires more than just creating a strategic plan. It's a continuous cycle of planning, action, and adjustment to build sustainable organizations that deliver services better, and are responsive to anticipated community needs. In other words, it's a lifestyle. Strategic outcomes aren't just "nice-to-haves," if there is time. They're the lifeblood of every non-profit.

Nine "virtues" of non-profit strategic living

- Creativity**
- Responsiveness**
- Creativity**
- Patience**
- Practicality**
- Coordination**
- Communication**
- Attentiveness**
- Flexibility**



If non-profits don't take the initiative to live strategically and own their futures, they won't make sound decisions or cost-effectively deliver on community needs. They also run the risk of irrelevance, or worse, insolvency. Current needs are urgent, but there will always be better ways to meet them, opportunities to do more, and new challenges to confront. Non-profits that are behind the curve can't realize their full potential, and are less likely to be sustainable. Their futures require forward-thinking strategy to secure and advance their missions.



If non-profits don't build beyond the present day, they won't do better, and may not even be there tomorrow.

Key Virtues for Strategic Living

Successfully living the strategic life requires the development and incorporation of nine key "virtues" directly into non-profit DNA:

- 1. Curiosity** - Non-profits should be exploring market demographic trends, market survey data, legislative impacts, and other information sources to find out about evolving community needs and priorities, and put them in mission context.
- 2. Responsiveness** - Non-profits need to determine what they plan to do to meet their "market's" needs, and how they'll know they've been successful. Goals, objectives, metrics, and strategies all need to align in a coherent way, responsive to demands.
- 3. Creativity** - We'll call this "brainstorming," looking for the best ideas for how to increase scope, expand coverage, reduce costs, raise funds, etc. Non-profits can and should take "thought risks" in response to community requirements and opportunities.
- 4. Patience** - Even if they all sound great, very few non-profits can act on every idea right away. It's critical to prioritize needs and set realistic timelines for expected results, patiently and purposefully building for the future rather than taking on too much, too soon.
- 5. Practicality** - Someone has to do the work of strategy execution. Non-profits need to know who they need, who they have, and how to fill "gaps." If the right people aren't accessible, it's probably time to rethink the viability of the strategic approach.

- 6. Coordination** - Sound strategic planning yields a dynamic program with multiple, often inter-related projects. A strong Program Manager who can schedule, facilitate, and track on-going work, supported by the right tools, is essential.
- 7. Communication** - Strategic living is for everyone, including non-profit staff and volunteers. People can't live it, though, if they don't know where their organizations are headed, and how their work fits in. Everyone needs to be informed to be involved.
- 8. Attentiveness** - Non-profit boards and executives need to be focused on the strategic life. Strategy should always be "front and center," with actions, results, and conditions discussed regularly at the highest levels and used as a guide for decision-making.
- 9. Flexibility** - Remember, the strategic life isn't static. It's responsive to progress issues, outcomes, and changing conditions, and non-profit leaders need to be willing to adapt plans to ensure they get executed and remain relevant in a dynamic environment.



Transitioning to the Strategic Lifestyle

All of this may seem impossible given non-profits' myriad competing and often urgent day-to-day priorities. However, transitioning to a strategic lifestyle is entirely achievable. It only requires a mindset that addresses the future with the same urgency as the present, with realistic expectations, smart resourcing, and attentive management. Non-profits that fully embrace strategic living will continue to help their communities now, and empower themselves to ensure they're around and equipped to meet the demands of the future.

Non-profits can't wait to find "spare time." Strategic living is essential for significant, sustainable impacts.

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