

Strategic Thinking

I'm not a big fan of doing a strategic planning process if it's seen as just a means to an end. What I am a big fan of, however, is using the process to develop strategic thinking skills. Too often, strategic planning plays out as a process of canned exercises aimed at developing a wide range of hopeful but unrealistically ambitious goals. The output usually gets cleaned up and memorialized in a 64 page document which then goes on a shelf, never to be looked at again. No wonder powerful women shudder and strong men weep when they hear their executive director say "it's time for strategic planning."

Strategic thinking, on the other hand, is something leaders of nonprofits should be doing all the time. Big picture goals may not change rapidly, but strategies should be constantly re-examined to determine if they're working or if they continue to be appropriate, based on changes in the external environment. Imagine that you created a strategic plan in June of 2008, just before the worst of the Great Recession hit. If you were still making decisions for your organization in December of 2008 based on those strategies, you might well be out of business today.

To be sure, elements of traditional strategic planning theory are indispensable: articulating a clear and compelling vision and mission along with well-defined statements of core values, provides an essential framework and filters for decision making. But fostering a culture of on-going strategic thinking will leverage that foundational work much more effectively than an annual strategic planning day

Picture strategic thinking as the Venn diagram below, with three sets of considerations:

- What you do as an organization – your purpose, focus, skills
- The needs of the community you serve
- The resources you have available

All of these areas are in constant flux – our capabilities, understanding, and skills evolve; community needs grow and ebb; and certainly the resources you have available (time, money, support) can change overnight. Strategic thinking means continuously questioning priorities to stay focused on the confluence of these three areas, so that your organization can have the greatest mission impact.

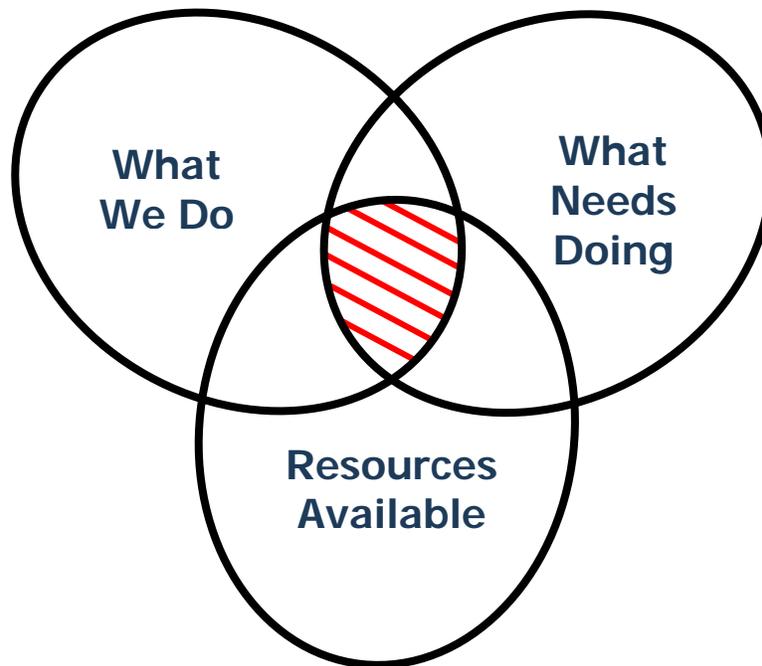
That's not something that can wait twelve months for your next planning session. It requires nonprofit leaders who can:

- Hold a vision for the ideal future
- Continuously scan the environment for opportunities and threats
- See patterns and relationships in events and circumstances
- Recognize interconnections and interdependencies before making decisions and taking action
- Make decisions and take actions for the long term that are shaped by the vision, core values, and awareness of interdependencies and the environment

Building the Strategic Thinking Habit

In spite of the challenges and pressures of leading and managing a nonprofit organization in difficult economic environments, every board meeting should include a 20-30 minute strategic level discussion. After all, that's one of the main purposes of a board of directors – to provide guidance and insights for the organization's direction and success.

Keeping a Strategic Focus



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