



How Nonprofits and NGOs Can Get Real Value from Strategic Planning

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Introduction

Strategy is all about getting critical resource decisions right. The strategic planning process is a rare chance for a nonprofit's leaders to step back and look at their organization and its activities as a whole—to understand what success looks like and to allocate time, talent, and dollars to the activities that can help achieve it.

When strategic planning is done well, it not only clarifies the path forward for teams and stakeholders, but also informs resourcing decisions and sets in motion key organizational changes. To be sure, it doesn't always go well; we expect some readers may have had negative experiences with strategic planning. The practical advice we offer in this article will help leaders avoid the pitfalls and get real value from the process.

The best way to start strategic planning is by asking why you are doing it and what you want to get out of it.

Consider [Generation Hope](#). Founded in 2010, the nonprofit, headquartered in Washington, DC, helps teen parents succeed in college and experience economic mobility while driving systemic change for student parents nationwide. One in five undergraduates today is a parent, and yet they are much less likely to graduate than students without children. Through its direct-service work, Generation Hope supports teen student parents—primarily women of color—with services like mentoring, tuition assistance, and a peer community; provides early childhood programming to their children; and focuses on eliminating racial disparities for the students and families it works with.

After a decade of this direct-service work in the DC area, Generation Hope knew it was making a real difference. Now it was asking some big questions about its future. “Our work in DC was a proof point for what this could look like across the country,” says Nicole Lynn Lewis, founder and CEO of the organization and a former teen mother who put herself through the College of William & Mary with her infant daughter in tow. “We couldn't serve every teen student parent in the US—but we knew we could help drive larger changes to benefit them.”

As Generation Hope began its strategic planning process, one thought-provoking question reverberated through the leadership team: given that we've demonstrated success locally, how might we improve the lives of more teen parents—and parents of any age—entering college? Motivated by this animating question to think bigger about its potential, Generation Hope began to develop a new [strategic plan](#).

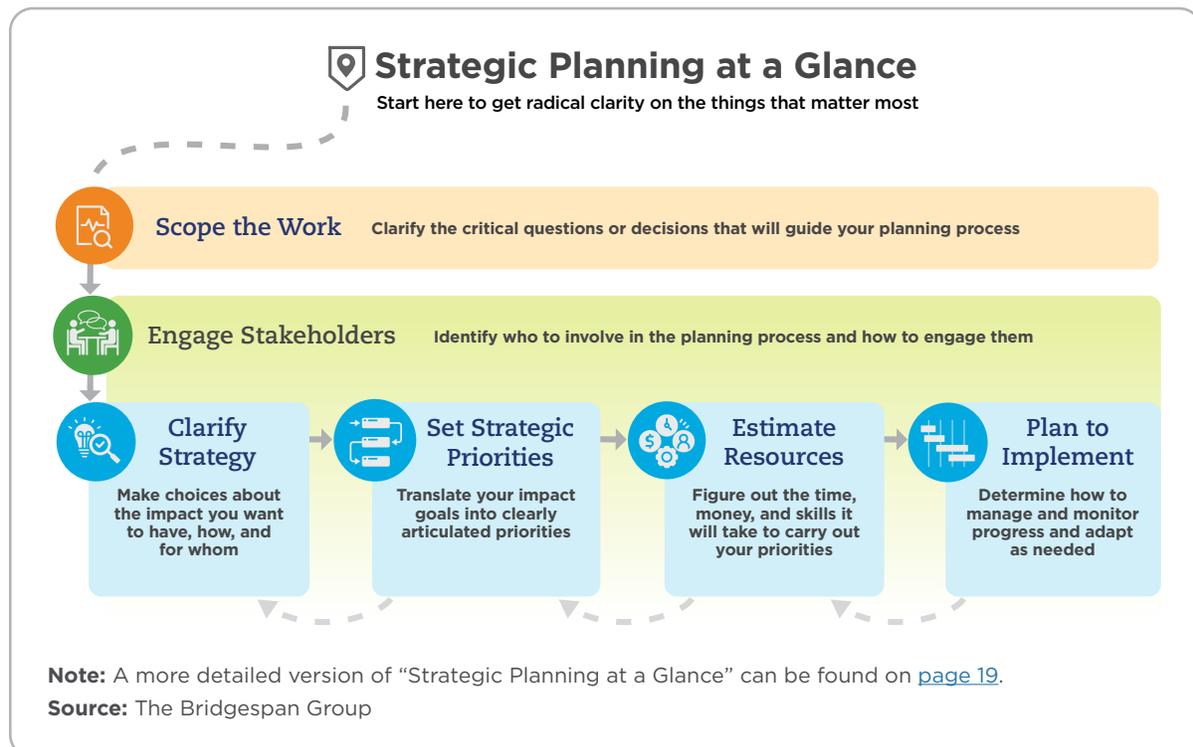
The Bridgespan Group worked with Generation Hope as well as with Living Goods, another organization described in this article, to support elements of their strategic planning process. Indeed, Bridgespan has had the opportunity to work with many

hundreds of nonprofits and NGOs, large and small, as they developed strategic plans. In this article and our accompanying conversation starter, “[Practical Questions Your Board and Team Might Ask About Strategic Planning](#),” we explore what we’ve learned through those experiences over the years.

There are many approaches to strategic planning—and no one-size-fits-all template for the process.¹ There are also many tools and techniques that can be helpful along the way (a number of which we provide throughout this article, along with links to further information). But making key decisions and getting real value out of the process comes down to just four vital elements:

- **Clarify strategy.** Make choices about the impact you want to have, how, and for whom.
- **Set strategic priorities.** Translate your impact goals into several clearly articulated actions and activities.
- **Estimate resources.** Figure out the time, money, and skills it will take to carry out your strategic priorities successfully.
- **Plan to implement.** Determine how to manage and monitor the organizational changes required to execute your strategy.

Let’s look at each in turn—recognizing that these elements are as much iterative as they are sequential.



1 Examples of approaches to strategic planning include Roger Martin’s [Playing to Win](#) framework, a [lean approach](#), and the [emergent strategy](#) championed by [adrienne marie brown](#).



Clarify Strategy

Make choices about the impact you want to have, how, and for whom

Developing a clear, effective strategic plan often takes at least several months and may require difficult tradeoffs. To answer the key questions that typically drive the planning process will require revisiting your organization’s most important goals—your [intended impact](#)—and thinking about how you will achieve that impact, known as your [theory of change](#).²

Impact goals are more tangible and measurable than an organization’s longer-term mission and vision. Ideally, they focus on the next three to five years—long enough to allow for meaningful change, but not so long that the path to achieving that change is vague and undefined. Getting clearer as an organization on your three- to five-year impact goals and a plausible path to achieving those goals can help answer a broader set of questions critical to developing a sound strategy.

As Generation Hope began to develop its three-year strategic plan, it gathered information on its strengths and weaknesses and on how changes in the external environment might affect it. Based on what it learned, Generation Hope felt ready to go from primarily delivering direct services in the Washington, DC, area to combining direct service with technical assistance to higher-education institutions and advocacy for policy change nationwide—a new approach it articulated in its plan:

Generation Hope will drive systemic change to address historical racism and remove barriers for teen/student parents and their families by implementing a federal and local policy and advocacy agenda, transforming the higher-education landscape through ... institutional capacity building ... and providing resources and tools for the broader higher-education and workforce community.

Notice what this description of its approach does and doesn’t communicate. You couldn’t simply hand it to staff and say, “Go do this.” It doesn’t say how much, when, or with what resources. But you can’t get to those questions without making the kinds of decisions reflected in this approach. It sets out how they intend to achieve impact, with specifics still to be determined.

Indeed, Lewis explains that this description, in turn, raised big questions about what to do next. Her team asked, she says: “How were we going to put those different pieces together

² See Bridgespan’s [“What Are Intended Impact and Theory of Change and How Can Nonprofits Use Them?”](#) (December 14, 2020) for more information.

and ensure that our leadership team and board had a common vision of that strategy and [were] able to execute on it?” We look at how Generation Hope answered these questions in the following sections.

Another organization whose strategic planning process led to changes in how it achieves impact is [Living Goods](#), an NGO headquartered in Kenya. Living Goods trains and supports community health workers to deliver quality health care to their neighbors’ doorsteps. Over a decade and a half, Living Goods has trained over 12,000 health workers who have reached over nine million people. And it has learned how to deliver community health care at an annual per capita cost of \$3 to \$4, ensuring a high return on investment for Living Goods, governments, and other partners.

Still, “we were grappling with a couple of big questions,” explains Emilie Chambert, the organization’s chief program officer. “For example, we increasingly understand that if government owns the community health worker model rather than us, it will make the work much more sustainable in a country. We’ll make the initial investment, but government funding will need to play a larger role—so that, in four or five years, the government will fully own and finance the community health worker program. We needed a plan to get to that kind of government ownership.”

In its most recent strategic plan, Living Goods explains that “this strategy represents a material evolution” of its work from providing health services itself to relying on governments to scale and sustain that work. The Living Goods strategic plan is a good example of being clear about what will change compared to the past—a useful signposting of “from-to” that helps communicate strategic changes to external stakeholders and an organization’s own staff.



A Generation Hope Scholar poses with her daughters and mentor at the 2022 Hope Conference. (Photo credit: Generation Hope)

How To Conduct a Focused, Exploratory Strategic Planning Process

It's valuable to define key strategic questions at the start of the process. But in a good strategic planning process, leaders also need to be willing to discover and act on information that goes against their initial assumptions.

By engaging those who know your organization best from different vantage points—staff, board, clients, funders, community members, partner organizations, and others—you can learn a lot at every stage of the planning process. Thoughtfully engaging with key stakeholders is also important from a change-management perspective, because decisions and actions that result from your strategic planning process will affect everyone connected to your organization as well as the broader community.

For example, Generation Hope understood how critical its board would be to developing and supporting its new strategic plan. It convened a planning task force of five board members and three of the organization's top leaders, as well as coordinated a two-day retreat with the full board near the beginning of the process—and has continued to involve its board at every step.

It also engaged other vital stakeholders. “We talked to higher-education professionals, and we talked to student parents,” says Nicole Lynn Lewis, founder and CEO of Generation Hope. “We held four listening sessions with folks across the country. We did a lot of listening.” It also conducted stakeholder interviews, engaged program alums and current and potential funders, used an internal assessment tool, conducted a [landscape analysis](#), and incorporated guidance from [Equity in the Center](#) to explore the levers that drive organizational change and transformation in the context of racial equity. “We wanted to ensure our racial equity work was resourced effectively and woven into our own racial equity blueprint,” says Lewis.

It can be worth using a variety of methods to gather ideas and input. “We were pretty clear on where we were as an organization and didn't end up learning much from the internal assessment [we conducted],” recalls Emilie Chambert, Living Goods' chief program officer. “But the external analysis and external stakeholder engagement were really helpful.” For example, a [benchmarking analysis](#) of peer organizations working in Africa (involving interviews with five organizations and desk research on two others) helped Living Goods better understand key elements in successfully partnering with government.

Engagement and information gathering can help ensure that your strategy is a good fit with your unique assets and relevant external trends, and that it considers feedback from board, staff, community members, and other constituents. All are key not only to the design of the plan but its later implementation.



Set Strategic Priorities

Translate your impact goals into clearly articulated priorities

Once an organization has set out what it wants to achieve, it must decide how to accomplish its goals. Typically, strategic priorities consist of several—typically, no more than five to seven—multiyear initiatives that will advance the overall goals of the plan and contain enough detail to create a good idea of how the work will unfold. Strategic priorities don't need to cover all of an organization's work; instead, they often focus more on high-stakes changes to how the organization will work than on business as usual. (Don't get hung up on distinguishing between a strategic "priority" or "initiative," or an "activity" or "objective." If you look at the plans from Generation Hope and Living Goods, you will notice that they use different ways of organizing the material, but convey a similar level of detail and clarity regarding what they're planning to do.)

Recall one of Generation Hope's key strategic goals—driving systems change through technical assistance and advocacy. Like many of its most important decisions, this meant that things would not be business as usual. The organization, long focused almost entirely on direct service, would have to find new ways of working. As a result, the organization's plan sets out several specific priorities under this goal—each just a sentence long. For example:

Join and support an ecosystem of higher-education and public and private partners centered on student parents' experiences, resulting in 10 new collaborations by the end of FY24.

Another priority Generation Hope articulated:

Develop, test, and build upon a technical assistance program that partners with anti-racism experts to build capacity in student parent success and intersectional issues, resulting in at least 20,000 student parents impacted by 2024.

Both of those priorities, short as they are, represent important decisions about what Generation Hope will do, when it will do it, how much it will do, and how it will know if it's successful. It is worth spending a good deal of time to arrive at these kinds of decisions and to pressure-test them with staff, board, partners, and other stakeholders.

The points also illustrate how strategic planning is an iterative process across its four key elements. Without some serious information gathering and conversations about needed resources and infrastructure, it would be impossible to know if "10 collaboratives" or "20,000 student parents" are conservative, ambitious, or unrealistic targets. "We proposed different scenarios for growth. We discussed things together," explains Lewis. "We had task force members name things that didn't feel tangible or felt too ambitious, and we made changes."

Both priorities are in the form of “do more”—with the objective about collaboratives reflecting a significant expansion of Generation Hope’s previous partnership work and the technical assistance objective being essentially a whole new program. But equally important to an organization’s strategy can be decisions about doing less, or in some cases stopping something altogether. For organizations with multiple programs, mapping its programs to its goals can be powerful for visualizing and understanding the performance of its programs in the context of the strategy—and for making decisions about where to invest more resources and where to invest fewer.

The Living Goods plan has a section entitled “What We Will Not Do.” For example, underlining its commitment to scaling its community health worker model through government funding, the plan states that it

[will not] engage in scaling Living Goods-led community health delivery. Going forward, the only Living Goods-led delivery we will invest in will be those that operate as learning laboratories.

Decisions to *stop* doing something can be among the most difficult strategic decisions an organization can make—involving staff, funders, and other constituencies who are deeply involved in the activities that will be shrunk or ended. These decisions can also be critical in changing an organization’s path forward. In our strategic planning work with nonprofits and NGOs, we have seen organizations give up programs, withdraw from geographies, forgo once-significant funding sources, or curtail whole categories of work—not because



In Kayunga, Uganda, Community Health Worker John Bosco reads results off a thermometer. (Photo courtesy of Living Goods)

they needed to retrench, but because they came to understand that achieving greater impact required a different focus.

The choice of priorities can also make big aspirations much more concrete and actionable. Living Goods, for example, wanted to sharpen its priorities around diversity and equity. Like many NGOs founded in the Global North but working in the Global South, it has been seeking to move its center of gravity to the places where it works. As a result, it recently appointed a Kenya-based CEO, and 95 percent of its staff is based in East Africa and native to the countries in which they work. But it has also committed to doing more, including the following priority:

Ensuring local teams are in place and in leadership roles across our countries, deepening engagement with our in-country advisory boards, and continuing to diversify our global board to ensure that at least 50 percent of members are of African descent.



Estimate Resources

Figure out the time, money, and skills it will take to carry out your priorities

Even the boldest and most ambitious strategic plan must also be feasible. You want to have a good sense of how much time and money it will take, who will put in that time, and where the money will come from.

To be sure, sometimes the resourcing needed for what is envisioned may end up being out of reach. This is a place where iteration in a planning process is crucial. It's completely normal for teams to adjust their goals and the scope of their priorities as they estimate the time, money, and skills those goals require.

With a lot of “do more” in Generation Hope’s plan, the organization used its strategic planning process to think hard about the resources and infrastructure that would be required—and how to fund them. “This was an ambitious plan,” says Lewis, the CEO. “It called for growth across all departments, and we had to create two new departments to carry out parts of the plan.”

For example, seeing the board as critical to achieving its impact goals, Generation Hope sought to increase board capacity, including developing

training and accountability systems for committee chairs, resulting in 90 percent of board members feeling engaged in committee work by 2024.

It also resolved to recruit

board members with a national network to assist in scaling and fundraising efforts while maintaining our diversity goals, resulting in at least one new member with this background annually.

As you consider what additional capacity you will need to make your plan a possibility, you may also find that your organizational design is no longer a good fit with the new strategic priorities and that you need to redesign the reporting structure or make changes to how you deploy people and resources. These are all elements of your organization’s [operating model](#). Strategic planning can be the right time to ensure your organization has the right systems and processes in place to achieve impact more effectively and sustainably.

Living Goods likewise used its planning process to understand the capabilities required to carry out its strategic priorities. The organization has long incorporated a focus on digital tools, data, and innovation as drivers of impact—for example, ensuring that community health workers can provide accurate care and prompt follow-ups with a smartphone app that details every patient contact, enables near-real-time performance management of health workers in outlying villages, and detects early disease outbreaks. In its plan, it makes concrete the activities and investment required:

We will introduce disruptive innovation, which may include incorporating existing approaches not widely used in community health today, and investing selectively in cutting-edge, new approaches where it will be important to partner with others ... with an estimated spend of five to 10 percent of our organizational budget.

Note that the organization is proposing to strengthen its technology efforts in part by partnering with others, rather than building this capacity entirely on its own. For some organizations, partnerships can be a critical element of the strategic plan.

Organizations will likely also need to think about whether their current [funding model](#) is well suited to a new strategic direction. This may be particularly relevant if the organization is taking on new activities that are likely to attract a different type of funder or payer. During the planning process, Generation Hope worked to gauge interest among funders about the new systems-change work it was taking on.

For Living Goods, the biggest shift in its strategy was toward government co-financing for the work, the financial implications of which are spelled out in the plan:

Over the next five years, we will aim to unlock around \$70 million in co-financing across implementation support sites. ... This will halve Living Goods' costs per community health worker and reduce cost per capita from \$4 to \$2.

For organizations whose strategic plans envision significant growth, as with Generation Hope and Living Goods, there can be a lot of uncertainty about what level of growth it can afford and how much it can raise. "Our finance team developed a model that helped us build different scenarios—low, middle, and high," says Living Goods' Chambert. "We're so glad we had these different scenarios, because the context has changed a lot since the plan was developed. When we started, there was no recession on the horizon, no war in Ukraine. Now we are using our middle scenario, and we've had to adjust the number of countries we'll be working in."



Plan to Implement

Determine how to manage and monitor progress and adapt as needed

Implementation mainly happens after an organization has finished its strategic plan. But the odds of successfully implementing the planned changes—shifting parts of the organization in a new direction, setting up new initiatives, curtailing old ones—can depend a lot on what you do during the planning process or shortly thereafter. As one leader we interviewed advises: “There’s a culture piece that needs to be considered at the same time as the rest of the plan. Change management needs to be built in from the beginning.”

Generation Hope, for example, had gained a lot of value from engaging staff and the board around strategy during the planning process, so it continued some of that engagement even after the plan was done. “Because we were launching an ambitious plan at the onset of a global pandemic, we knew we were navigating a lot of uncertainty,” explains Lewis. “So we baked in more check-ins with our board than we’d usually do. Here’s what we’ve accomplished, here’s what’s been hard, here’s what we want to do differently.”

The organization does the same with its staff. “I don’t think our staff has ever been more informed about the organization’s direction,” Lewis adds. “We just did a pulse check survey: Do you understand the goals of our strategic plan? About 95 percent said ‘Yes.’”

There are a range of tools organizations can use to help stay on track. For example, implementation plans lay out the steps, sequence, owner, and metrics for each key activity, while performance dashboards track and communicate progress using a few vital metrics that the leadership team and board need to monitor in order to understand and manage performance.

When Strategic Planning Goes Wrong

Just as there are patterns to successful planning, there are several common ways strategic planning processes can go wrong:

- **Everything but the kitchen sink.** A logical list of things that would help the organization, but ... it lacks overarching impact goals, choices, and prioritization of activities.
- **The impossible dream.** An inspirational plan, but ... it does not account for the time, money, and skills required to get action items accomplished.
- **The work plan.** Clear activities and milestones, but ... they do not consider risk or build in the flexibility to adapt to a changing environment.
- **The manifesto.** A bold plan, but ... few support it other than the creator of the plan, and there is little connection to implementation.
- **The spinning yarn.** Tells a compelling story, but ... there is little data supporting the new direction.

Remember, too, that every strategic plan and its strategic priorities have risks. The planning team can brainstorm key risks, considering questions such as:

- What could happen that would make the implementation of this plan difficult?
- Do you anticipate shifts in the external landscape due to funding, politics, or otherwise?
- Are there uncertainties with implementing a new program?
- Are there possibilities of internal capacity gaps?

A [learning agenda](#) can be important in helping to mitigate and manage some of these risks and uncertainties. For example, in thinking about its core model, the Living Goods plan notes that the organization wants to learn more about current inefficiencies in its model, service delivery, digital aspects, the use of supervisor time, and several other areas so that it can address the most significant inefficiencies and improve its results.

For some organizations, a learning agenda may include full-scale research. But there are also faster learning strategies. In her book [Lean Impact: How to Innovate for Radically Greater Social Good](#), Ann Mei Chang, CEO of Candid and a former Bridgespan fellow, argues that organizations looking for answers to critical questions about how to deliver on their strategy can “run fast experiments to accelerate the pace of learning, save time and money, and minimize risk.”

Even the best strategic plan is unlikely to nail down all the answers or make all key decisions that will need to be made. For example, during its strategic planning process, Living Goods didn’t decide which new countries it would expand into in the future. But it did set up decision criteria for expansion—stating that it won’t enter a country if it knows from the start that the country is unlikely to become core to its work or has not indicated sufficient willingness to increase government ownership and investment in community health.



Strategic planning can help improve how an organization makes decisions. The questions posed during the planning process are not the sort you answer only once. Rather, leaders will likely find themselves applying the same approach to opportunities and questions down the road. That is one reason why many nonprofits and NGOs find strategic planning to be so transformational.

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Useful Tools for Strategic Planning

Benchmarking

Benchmarking is a tool nonprofits use to determine how well their organizations are performing relative to external peers. It can also be used across sites in a network. The goal is to identify best practices and opportunities and to adapt for improvement. External benchmarking involves identifying a relevant pool of peers and creating a detailed analysis comparing the costs and benefits of one nonprofit's program or capability with another's. Internal benchmarking identifies the most effective practices of each program or site in order to replicate them. Benchmarking can be applied to many different aspects of a nonprofit organization, including elements of strategy (e.g., program design and partnerships), organizational structure (e.g., job descriptions and use of volunteers), and performance measurement (e.g., outcomes).

For more on this topic, see "[Benchmarking](#)."

Funding model

A funding model is a methodical and institutionalized approach to building a reliable revenue base that will support an organization's core programs and services. While it is common practice among most nonprofits to seek funding from multiple sources, research has shown that 90 percent of the largest nonprofits have embraced funding models built around a single dominant type of revenue source (such as government funding, corporate giving, or individual donors).

Developing a funding model can help nonprofits and NGOs achieve financial stability and sustainability. Organizations that have clear insight into their funding models are able to raise their revenues more efficiently because they can focus their development efforts on the most promising funding sources and build the internal capacity needed to identify and cultivate those funders.

For more on this topic, see "[Funding Models](#)."

Intended impact

Intended impact defines the results your organization will hold itself accountable for achieving within a reasonable time frame (e.g., three or five years). Since your organization will ideally measure its progress against the intended impact statement you develop, it is important to get specific:

- **Who** is your population of focus? This may not be the only population with whom you achieve results, or the only population you work with. Rather, it is the group you will prioritize in your work. Be as specific as possible here in terms of demographics, including naming race, ethnicity, gender, or economic status as relevant.
- **Where** will your organization do its work? Consider the specific geographies and settings in which your organization will work.



- **What** specific outcomes do you want to achieve? Outcomes refer to the changes or results achieved by or for the population you have prioritized in your work. Outcomes differ from outputs, which measure activities (e.g., 50 trainings delivered).

For more on this topic, see “[What Are Intended Impact and Theory of Change and How Can Nonprofits Use Them?](#)”

Landscape analysis

A landscape analysis, also known as ecosystem mapping, involves identifying the key players in a field, sector, or geography and classifying them by relevant characteristics (e.g., type of organization, target beneficiary). This helps nonprofits understand the broader political, economic, environmental, and societal context in which they are operating and design their strategies to achieve their impact.

Landscape analysis can help nonprofits chart their broader strategy and make critical decisions. It can be used to learn about a new field or geography, to discover important trends shaping a sector, or to identify peers and collaborators. It allows organizations to identify topics, approaches, or constituents that are well served by existing organizations, as well as any spaces where no organizations are currently active.

For more on this topic, see “[Market Mapping and Landscape Analysis.](#)”

Learning agenda

A learning agenda is a codification of the most important questions (or knowledge gaps) that an organization doesn't currently have answers to but must address in order to achieve its goals for impact. It includes a set of associated activities (or experiments) to help the organization develop answers to those questions over time.

A learning agenda can help align key stakeholders (including board, funders, and staff) on what the organization hopes to learn, as well as lay out a common set of metrics that can be used to assess progress and move the organization forward. It is especially useful for organizations operating amid significant uncertainty in their external environment and that need to quickly test, learn, and adapt accordingly.

Operating model

A nonprofit's operating model is the blueprint for how to organize and deploy people and resources. It serves as a bridge between strategy and execution.

Every nonprofit has an operating model, even if it is not named as such, that describes where and how critical work gets done to achieve an organization's goals. It includes four interrelated elements:

1. Structuring the organization and distributing accountabilities, which clarifies where key work is done and who does it.



2. Managing priorities and allocating resources, including the executive forums, managerial processes, and metrics that support high-quality decision making.
3. Aligning leaders, talent, and culture. Organizational culture is shaped by how leaders guide their teams and how colleagues behave and interact with one another.
4. Building your critical capabilities, which optimizes performance across the other priority elements of the operating model. Critical capabilities include recruiting and talent development, data and technology, expertise in critical areas, learning and innovation, and supports to ensure partnerships with other organizations are successful.

For more on this topic, see “[Operating Models: How Nonprofits Get from Strategy to Results.](#)”

Performance dashboard

A performance dashboard tracks the vital few metrics your organization needs to measure and monitor to understand and manage performance. While program and functional staff often track dozens of indicators to understand whether their work is on track, the best dashboards for senior leadership and boards typically focus on the vital metrics across those units that are critical to the entire organization’s success.

Performance dashboards enable an organization to continuously learn and improve, consequently helping it achieve better results. The metrics (data points) should be derived from an organization’s intended impact and theory of change—what the organization is holding itself accountable for achieving and how to get there. By measuring performance, nonprofits can:

- Track progress toward and be held accountable for their impact goals
- Identify opportunities for improvement and celebrate areas of strength
- Understand their impact among different populations by disaggregating data (e.g., by race, ethnicity, gender, etc.) and identifying opportunities to address disparities
- Communicate progress and successes internally and externally to staff, beneficiaries, funders, peer organizations, and the broader community
- Gain insights over time about program effectiveness and what works, and, if appropriate, prepare for rigorous program evaluations

For more on this topic, see “[Performance Measurement and Improvement.](#)”

Program strategy map

A program strategy map (also known as a matrix map) is a visualization of each program’s financial sustainability and its fit with the impact the organization is pursuing, generally with specific populations of focus in mind.



Using a program strategy map, an organization can visualize how each of its programs contributes to both financial sustainability and impact. The map illuminates tradeoffs such as, “If we did less of Program A, could we better allocate our unrestricted funds to Program B, having greater impact?” A leadership team can use a program strategy map to assess its programs in comparison to one another. This assessment also considers who else is doing similar work and how the organization’s own programs fit into the larger landscape of services and needs for the people and communities it serves.

For more on this topic, see [“How Nonprofits Can Map Their Programs to Their Strategies.”](#)

Theory of change

A theory of change explains how your organization will achieve its impact—the approaches you will undertake and the other actors you will work with or alongside. Hallmarks of a strong theory of change include:

- It should be a target, not a mirror—articulating what your organization will do to achieve its intended impact, not merely listing your current programs and activities. Of course, much of what your organization does today is likely to be important, but you might need to add, remove, or change some elements to achieve your impact.
- It should capture the approaches and capabilities that make your organization distinctly good at what it does. These may exist at the organizational level (e.g., our practices are informed by a deep understanding of the communities we serve) or at the program level (e.g., our programs are grounded in a rigorous base of evidence).
- It should be specific enough to help the organization understand which elements are driving or impeding progress toward its goals. For example, if progress is slow, is it because your theory of change is not producing the desired results, or because you are not fully implementing your theory of change?

For more on this topic, see [“What Are Intended Impact and Theory of Change and How Can Nonprofits Use Them?”](#)

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Strategic Planning at a Glance

Start here to get radical clarity on the things that matter most



Scope the Work

Clarify the critical questions or decisions that will guide your planning process

- Why are we embarking on a strategic planning process, and what do we want to get out of it?
- What are the most important decisions facing our organization? Where should we focus our time and energy in the planning process?



Engage Stakeholders

Identify who to involve in the planning process and how to engage them

- Who will we need to help develop and implement our strategic plan? How and when will we engage them?
- Do these individuals or groups reflect the perspectives of those most proximate to the work?



Clarify Strategy

Make choices about the impact you want to have, how, and for whom



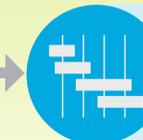
Set Strategic Priorities

Translate your impact goals into clearly articulated priorities



Estimate Resources

Figure out the time, money, and skills it will take to carry out your priorities



Plan to Implement

Determine how to manage and monitor progress and adapt as needed

What is the problem we seek to address in the world?

- Are some populations disproportionately impacted?

What impact goals will we hold ourselves accountable to over the next 3-5 years?

- Who is our population of focus?
- Where will we do our work?

How does our portfolio of work lead to the impact we aspire to achieve?

- What external trends could affect our work?

How well are we performing against our impact goals today?

- Across our portfolio of work, among different populations, and compared to other actors?

What will we need to do differently to accomplish our impact goals in the future?

- What programs may we need to grow, evolve, or sunset?
- What new programs may we need to pursue?
- How do we—or how could we—advance equity in our portfolio of work and program design?

What resources—financial, human, organizational—will we need to pursue our strategic priorities?

- Where will we need to add, reduce, or diversify talent?
- What new systems or capabilities will we need to build or buy?
- What level and what type of funding will be required?

Do we have the right organizational design in place to pursue our strategic priorities?

What metrics and milestones will we track to ensure progress and accountability?

- How might we disaggregate data to assess the equity implications of our work?

What are the biggest risks or outstanding open questions?

- How will we proactively mitigate these risks?
- How will we experiment, learn, and adapt over time?

How will we use our strategic plan to continually inform decision making?