

## The Board Role in Strategic Thinking and Planning

Why do boards need to think and plan strategically? Simply put, because it is at the very core of effective board governance. Board directors need to think and plan strategically because they are leading nonprofit organizations through one of the most turbulent periods of change in our history. This leadership imperative reinforces the need for the board of directors to focus on critical issues and policy challenges vs. administrative details and programmatic implementation.

In this article, we will focus on two areas:

- A basic orientation to the strategic planning process, and
- The need to think strategically on an ongoing basis outside of the formal strategic planning process.

Let's start with a brief discussion of strategic planning. The purpose of strategic planning is to develop a three to five year blueprint for the organization's future. Strategic planning is a way to help an organization be more productive by helping guide the allocation of resources in order to achieve goals.

More and more nonprofits are doing strategic planning because they understand that it is a must in today's fast changing environment. And they are seeing a number of important benefits including:

- Determination of a clear sense of future direction and focus.
- Improvements in program and service delivery.
- Enhanced marketing efforts.
- Increased volunteering and membership involvement; and,
- More effective fundraising.

According to Brian W. Barry, author of *Strategic Planning Workbook for Nonprofit Organizations*, strategic planning usually involves fundamental choices about:

- The mission, goals, or vision your organization will pursue.
- Whom you will serve.
- The organization's role in the community.
- The kinds of programming, services or products you will offer.
- The resources needed to succeed -- people, money, expertise, relationships, facilities, and so forth.
- How you can best combine these resources, programming and relationships to accomplish your organization's mission.

Sometimes "Strategic planning" is confused with "long-range planning" and operational planning". They are different. There are two things in particular that distinguish strategic planning from planning which is merely long-range in nature and from operational planning typically done on an annual basis:

- The first is the attention paid to changes in the external environment, for example, fundraising trends or political and regulatory changes; also changes in the needs and service expectations of our customers, funders and other stakeholders.
- The second difference is the focus in strategic planning on developing a shared vision of the future, and the way this shared vision of future success drives the rest of the planning process.

Now, let's talk more about the role of the board in strategic planning.

As we have said, the purpose of strategic planning is to develop a three to five year blueprint for the

nonprofit's future. The board has a critical role to play. Because the board of directors assumes a large share of the responsibility for the success of the nonprofit, it must provide the critical link between the nonprofit and the outside environment in which the organization functions. It must also ensure that the nonprofit reaches the community it intends to serve, and effectively serves the needs of its constituents. To fulfill this function, the board should help the executive director to establish a strategic planning process, should participate in the process, and should approve the final strategic plan.

Richard Ingram, author of Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards, states that the board's first responsibility is to determine the nonprofit's mission and purpose. Clarifying the mission of the nonprofit is a critical part of strategic planning. The board must work with the executive director to formulate, and periodically update, the nonprofit's mission and decide whether particular programs and services fall within its expressed mission. The mission statement should define why the nonprofit exists. It should clearly articulate the nonprofit's main purpose and values, and identify the beneficiaries of its programs and services.

A good mission statement articulates the overall goal of the nonprofit to everyone inside and outside the organization. It is used to guide strategic, long-term planning and helps to keep the school focused during both smooth and turbulent times. The absence of a mission statement, or having one that is unclear, may cause confusion inside the nonprofit as it faces various challenges, or it may result in inappropriate decisions. For a mission statement to be useful, it should be reviewed periodically to ensure that it reflects the current environment in which the nonprofit operates and the changing needs of the people it serves. This is particularly important for nonprofits because of the uncertain political and economic environments in which they operate.

The board and executive director should work together in developing the strategic planning process and provide guidance and input to the plan. The board can be particularly effective in providing and analyzing information about the external environment, current trends in social policy, or new financial opportunities. Because strategic planning takes time and effort, several sessions will need to be scheduled to complete all the strategic planning steps, including gathering information, discussing current and proposed programs and services, projecting the financial resources that would be needed to implement various programs, prioritizing programs, and finalizing the plan. The board must formally approve the final plan, be committed to it, and support its implementation.

## **Steps of the Strategic Planning Process**

Now, let look more closely at the steps of the Strategic Planning Process. A strategic plan includes five levels:

- Mission
- Vision
- Goals
- Strategies
- Objectives (Annual plans of action).

Now let's talk about the main steps of the strategic planning process in more detail.

### **Step 1 - Gathering and Analyzing Information**

The first step is Gathering and Analyzing Information. This step consists of three components: an external assessment, a market or constituent assessment and an internal assessment.

## External Assessment

The purpose of the external assessment is to identify and assess changes and trends in the world around the nonprofit likely to have a significant impact on it over the next 5-10 years. We look at political, economic, technological, social, lifestyle, demographic, competitive, regulatory and broad philanthropic trends. We then determine which changes are opportunities for us (for example, opportunities to grow) and which could be threats to us in some way (trends that can keep us from being successful). Finally we identify implications for selected changes and trends -- ways the nonprofit might respond to the opportunities and threats we identify. At this early stage of the planning process, saying that something is an implication does not require the nonprofit to adopt that course of action. The external assessment is sometimes referred to as the "environmental scan."

Here is an example of external assessment findings for a nonprofit involved in education reform:

One trend was increased interest in supporting school reform and change efforts by foundations serving needs of low-income children and families. The implication: Tap this new source of funding for the nonprofit. Another trend was increased poverty impedes educational achievement. The implication: promote family support programs at schools to address needs of low-income families. A third trend was the proliferation of web-based learning resources. The implication: Increase Internet access for educators, students and parents.

## Market Assessment

The next component of the information gathering and analysis step is the constituent or market assessment. The purpose of the constituent assessment is to identify and assess changes in the needs and perceptions of the nonprofit's markets and constituencies. For most nonprofits, these include customers, volunteers, funders, donors, volunteers, paid staff, board directors, collaborators, and competitors.

The market assessment attempts to answer the following questions:

Who are the nonprofit's key markets and constituents?

What are the current needs, perceptions, and service expectations of each market?

What are the emerging market trends?

What are the implications for the nonprofit -- how should the nonprofit respond to these changes and trends among its constituents and markets?

Examples of market assessment findings from our education reform organization included:

62% of parents of children enrolled in local schools desire before and after school care for their children.

Two-thirds of the volunteers say they would be willing to get involved in fund-raising for the nonprofit but would require training.

## Internal Assessment

The other component of the information gathering and analysis step is the internal assessment. The purpose of the internal assessment is to assess internal structure, process and operations of the nonprofit

and based on this assessment, to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses. Areas examined include nonprofit personnel, both paid and volunteer, fund-raising, physical facilities, equipment, use of technology, location, financial condition, management practices, board governance, programs, products and services, market position, and other factors.

From an affordable housing development organization, the following internal strengths were highlighted:

- Excellent staff -- competent and experienced.
- Availability of unrestricted working funds.
- Effective in delivering technical assistance to nonprofits.
- Track record -- we are known with a good reputation.

The following internal weaknesses were identified:

- Current financing programs represent an internal strain on the organization.
- Lack of strategic focus.
- Current sources of revenue limit what we can consider

## **Step 2 - Identification Of Critical Strategic Issues, Choices And Challenges**

The second step in the planning process is identification of critical strategic issues, choices and challenges facing the nonprofit. Critical issues are fundamental policy or program concerns that define the most important situations and choices a nonprofit faces now and in the future. Critical issues can reflect long-standing problems in the nonprofit, the community served or recent events that are anticipated to have a significant impact on the nonprofit and/or community served. Critical issues can also reflect major shifts in thinking that challenge "business as usual." The selection of issues is important because it determines range of decisions the nonprofit will consider in the future.

In some instances, the nonprofit is already aware of the critical issues that the strategic planning process must help it address. In most situations, the planning process participants discern critical strategic issues as they work on the external, market and internal assessments.

In developing the actual wording of the critical issue statements, it's helpful to reflect on the following information drawn from the earlier external, market and internal assessments:

The external changes and trends having the greatest positive and/or negative impact on the nonprofit . . . Major changes and trends in the needs, perceptions and service expectations of our markets and constituencies . . . Internal strengths and weaknesses of the nonprofit that will seem to have an impact on the nonprofit's future success.

Here are some examples of critical issues from an affordable housing development organization:

What should the balance be between the Affordable Housing Alliance's role as an independent developer versus a provider of technical assistance on housing development?

How should the Affordable Housing Alliance diversify its revenue base?

Should the Affordable Housing Alliance expand its advocacy and education roles in support of affordable housing?

How can we forge strategic alliances with the private sector to advance the Affordable Housing

Alliance's mission?

### **Step 3 - Development Of A Strategic Vision Statement**

The third step in the planning process is development of a strategic vision statement. The vision statement describes what we want the nonprofit to look like in ideal terms in the future - the results we will be achieving and characteristics the nonprofit will need to possess in order to achieve those results. The strategic vision statement provides direction and inspiration for goal setting.

Through the vision statement, the nonprofit describes how it intends to respond to the major challenges expressed in the form of critical strategic issues.

(PLEASE NOTE: Although the words "mission" and "vision" are used interchangeably, they are distinct in an important way: Mission describes "fundamental purpose"; Vision conveys a sense of "future direction."

Here is an example of a vision statement from the Affordable Housing Alliance:

The Alliance is a recognized statewide and national leader in the development of affordable housing opportunities. We are a bridge linking public, private and nonprofit resources. Success in achieving our agenda is built on financial strength and strong coalitions.

### **Step 4 - Development Of A Mission Statement**

The fourth step in the planning process is development of a mission statement. The mission statement is a broad description of what we do, with/for whom we do it, our distinctive competence, and WHY we do it (our ultimate end).

If a mission statement already exists, the focus of this step is on reviewing it in light of the emerging vision statement and if necessary revising the language. Here are some questions that can aid in the review of an already-existing mission statement:

#### **Questions for a Critical Review of an Existing Mission**

1. Is the mission statement clear and on target in today's operating environment?
2. Do you have any specific questions or concerns with respect to the mission statement?
3. Does the mission statement duplicate the mission of any other school? If so, what should we do about it?
4. Considering the answers to these questions, how, if at all, should the mission statement be changed?

Here is an example of a mission statement from the Affordable Housing Alliance:

We provide leadership to expand access to housing opportunities through partnerships among the public, nonprofit and private sectors to create and sustain strong neighborhoods and communities.

### **Step 5 - Development Of Strategic Goal Statements**

The fifth step in the planning process is development of strategic goal statements consistent with the vision statement. Strategic goals are broad statements of what the nonprofit hopes to achieve in the next 3 years. Goals focus on outcomes or results and are qualitative in nature. Often goal statements flow

from some of the critical issue statements developed earlier in the planning process.

Here are some examples of goals for the Affordable Housing Alliance:

Achieve a balance between the Alliance's role as an independent developer and its role as provider of technical assistance on housing development.  
Expand and diversify our revenue base in order to support anticipated growth.  
Forge strategic alliances with the private sector to advance the Alliance's mission.

## Step 6 - Development Of Strategies For Each Goal

The sixth step in the planning process is development of strategies for each goal. Strategies are statements of major approach or method for attaining goals and resolving specific issues. Ideas for strategy emerge from the earlier internal, external and market assessments, -- especially the strengths and weaknesses identified in the internal assessment as well as the implications statements developed as part of the market and external assessments. A strategy is judged potentially effective if it does one or more of the following:

Takes advantage of environmental opportunities  
Defends against environmental threats  
Leverages organizational competencies  
Corrects organizational shortcomings  
Offers some basis for future competitive advantage  
Counteracts forces eroding current competitive position

Here are examples of strategies for our sample goal: Expand and diversify our revenue base in order to support anticipated growth.

The first strategy: Generate revenue from special events.  
The second strategy: Increase funding from public sources.  
The third strategy: Expand individual giving from major donors.

## Step 7 - Development Of Annual Objectives

The seventh step is development of annual objectives. The purpose of this step is to formulate objectives consistent with the goals and strategies of the strategic plan. Objectives are specific, concrete, measurable statements of what will be done to achieve a goal generally within a one-year time frame. Objectives include answers to the following questions: Who, will accomplish what, by when, and how will we measure the outcomes or results of the activity. Put another way, objectives should be "SMART" -- **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**mbitious but **A**ttainable, **R**elevant (contributing to the nonprofit's vision), and **T**ime-based (we'll do X over the next Y years).

Strictly speaking, annual objectives are not part of the Strategic Plan of an organization. Objectives are the core of the nonprofit's Annual Operational Plan that is based on the strategic plan itself. The planning process will also address the costs associated with implementing objectives. This information will be utilized in the development of budgets.

Here are some examples of objectives for our sample goal and strategy:

Again, the sample goal is: Expand and diversify the revenue base in order to support anticipated growth.  
The sample strategy: Generate revenue from special events.  
A sample objective: The Board will establish a Fund Development Committee consisting of at

least 8 board and non-board directors and provide training in special events fund raising by July of year 1 of the strategic plan.

And other sample objective: The Fund Development Committee will generate at least \$150,000 from no more than 3 special events by July of year 2 of the strategic plan.

It's helpful to think of strategic planning as a journey. Imagine your organization as a sailboat at sea. . . at the mercy of ever-changing conditions - ocean currents and winds. Now think of planning as a journey through sometimes-rough waters to a destination we have determined. Strategic Planning is how we determine the destination and how we get there.

If planning is a journey, the first two steps of the process - information gathering and analysis and identifying strategic issues tell us where we are. The next step - Developing a Vision - helps us determine the destination. And Mission - reminds us why we're on the journey in the first place. We get to the vision through the accomplishment of goals. We accomplish our goals by means of the strategies we devise for each goal. Finally, we translate goals and strategies into concrete action through development of objectives.

If you would like additional information about the steps of the strategic planning process, contact us at [frank@createthefuture.com](mailto:frank@createthefuture.com).

## Effective Strategic Planning Practice

Strategic planning in nonprofits is most effective when the following elements are present:

**First, establishment of a strategic planning committee.** If the nonprofit board is serious about strategic planning (and it needs to be!), it will establish a strategic planning committee. Here is a sample description for a board strategic planning committee job description. ([hyperlink](#))

**Second, there needs to be a thorough and shared understanding of strategic planning.** The term "strategic planning" is sometimes used to describe a range of planning activities. It is important that the process is looked upon in the same way by board, staff and other participants in the nonprofit strategic planning process.

**There also needs to be agreement on outcomes.** While it is true that the expected outcome of most strategic planning processes is a strategic plan document, it is also important to discuss and eventually agree upon other expected outcomes. For example there may be a specific critical issue that the board wants to focus on by means of strategic planning. Typically, planning outcomes will include some or all of the following:

1. Board leadership and management staff will have a thorough understanding of the critical issues and choices facing the organization over the next 5 years.
2. A strategic plan document including a mission statement, strategic vision statement, goals and strategies will be produced. The plan will give special attention to organizational structures that will best support the overall strategic plan.
3. The strategic plan will have a day-to-day relevance on management and governance; and
4. There will be enthusiasm and support for the strategic plan at all levels of the organization.

**There needs to be real commitment to the process on the part of leadership.** While there is no one right way to do strategic planning, whatever approach the board chooses will involve time, energy and careful thinking. People will not commit these personal and organizational resources if they are not convinced that the planning process is worth the effort. Sometimes the start of strategic planning process may need to be postponed until leadership within the board and staff have become convinced of the importance of the process.

**There also needs to be involvement of many.** In order to be effective, strategic planning must

involve individuals representing all constituencies of the nonprofit: staff, constituents, funders and donors, as well as other key community supporters.

**Finally, the strategic plan needs to be translated into concrete detailed plans of action.**

Involvement in an isolated strategic planning exercise or a one shot planning retreat is not sufficient. Strategic planning needs to lead to specific objectives which include clear evaluation measures, set on an annual basis by staff, the board of directors and the board's own committees. This commitment to implementation will also help to ensure that the majority of the board's time and energy is in alignment with the mission, vision, and goals and strategies contained in the strategic plan.

These foregoing practices will help to assure that the strategic plan does not end up on a shelf. To avoid this, look for other ways to keep your strategic plan visible. Once the strategic plan has been developed, nonprofit leaders need to take steps ensure that the plan becomes a guiding force for the nonprofit – a living strategic plan. United Way of America offers the following techniques for publicizing your strategic plan and maintaining enthusiastic support for it among key internal and external constituents of the nonprofit.

1. Develop a recognizable theme that signifies the plan's essential thrust. This may be graphically represented by a logo or some other visually attractive means. One nonprofit working with at-risk youth adopted the theme "No Excuses!"
2. Publicize brief summaries of the plan and how your nonprofit will use it.
3. Look for opportunities to refer to the strategic plan in meetings, newsletters, websites, or news releases.
4. Create a slide or video show summarizing the plan and its proposed implementation.
5. Seek major media coverage when important milestones in the plan are reached. A press conference with graphics and charts summarizing the plan can be effective.
6. Use the strategic plan as a living document at nonprofit board meetings. Keep it visible and refer to it regularly.
7. Use retreats and mini-conferences to continue to build buy-in among other agencies and community groups. Make sure that this is an interactive process, one that **listens** as well as talks.
8. Create a speaker's bureau to take the strategic plan to specific target groups: the county board, the city council, parent groups, the chamber of commerce, community and business leaders, and nonprofit agencies, for example.
9. Create poster-size versions of your mission and strategic vision statement and display them throughout the facilities – in meeting rooms, at the front door, etc.

## **Strategic Thinking – Not Just During The Strategic Planning Process**

In addition to the board's commitment to engage in the formal strategic planning process on a periodic basis, it is vital that the leadership of the board think strategically on an ongoing basis. Let's talk now about what can be done to make this happen.

### ***Thinking and Acting Strategically: Encouraging Visionary Board Leadership***

The rapid pace of change in America, in local communities and in the nonprofit sector requires that boards look and act differently from traditional boards. Some forward thinking nonprofit boards are already adopting a new approach. They provide a new profile of nonprofit boards, from which we can all learn useful lessons

The new nonprofit board leaders have the following eight qualities:

1. They are **visionary and future focused**, spending most of their decision-making time looking



forward.

2. They **possess an entrepreneurial spirit**, understanding that their organizations operate in a fast changing marketplace seeking products and services to meet emerging customer needs.
3. The new board leaders are **risk takers**, balancing the need to take chances with the traditional stewardship responsibilities of board service.
4. They **are good communicators**, understanding the importance of effective communication at all levels and they organize the board and its committees accordingly.
5. They are **systems thinkers** seeking to understand the root causes and forces that shape the issues and challenges they will face in the boardroom. They look for courses of action that will exert the highest possible leverage as they respond to those issues.
6. In the new board, leaders also look for creative ways to connect their organizations to the world around them, exploring and **imagining new forms of partnership and alliances** that will support their mission and advance in their strategic plan.
7. The new board's leaders also have a **deep appreciation of the strength of diversity**, understanding that diversity helps to assure a higher level of responsiveness to customers and also promotes creativity, innovation and organizational learning.
8. They are committed to **building a learning organization**, realizing that board effectiveness and overall nonprofit effectiveness will be greatly enhanced if there are systems, practices and structures in place that make it easier rather than harder to learn on an individual and organizational basis.

These attributes position nonprofit board leaders to exercise a visionary leadership style. Barriers, however, may get in the way. There are a number of factors that prevent boards from exercising the kind of visionary leadership described above. Taken together, these factors provide a checklist for assessing your board and identifying areas to target for improvement. Examining these barriers to visionary board leadership can be the first step in revitalizing an existing board or building a powerful nonprofit board from scratch. Let's look at some of them now:

**First, a shortage of time.** In order to play a visionary leadership role, board directors need the time to attend meetings, read materials and maintain contact with each other in between meetings. This puts pressure on the board to do everything it can to organize for maximum effectiveness and avoid wasting time on trivial matters.

**Second, avoidance of risk-taking.** In order to be innovative and creative in its decision-making, nonprofit boards must be willing to take chances, to try new approaches, to take risks. In fact innovation and risk-taking are fundamental premises of the nonprofit movement. Risk-taking, however, flies in the face of the traditional wisdom about board director stewardship responsibilities. Success in new educational and other programmatic ventures is never guaranteed. Boards need to acknowledge this tension point and discuss it with the charter authorizing body, parents, funders, donors and other key supporters. Board leaders must strike a balance between taking chances and maintaining their traditional stewardship role.

**A third barrier would be lack of board involvement in strategic planning.** More than any other activity, strategic planning offers boards an opportunity to think about changes and trends that will have significant impact on the nonprofit and devise strategies to effectively respond to challenges. This opportunity to reflect together on the big questions facing the nonprofit provides new vision and a sense of future direction as well as the energy to move forward. Some boards are not involved in strategic planning at all. Some are involved but only superficially. When this happens, the board loses an important opportunity to develop and exercise its visionary leadership skills.

**Another barrier is lack of knowledge in an increasingly complex world.** The world is much more complex today for most organizations, especially nonprofits. Busy board directors frequently lack a deep understanding of critical changes, trends and developments that challenge fundamental assumptions about how a nonprofit defines its work and what success looks like. We see this shift most dramatically in the areas of health, education and welfare. Often, this lack of knowledge results in a lack of confidence on the part of the board to act decisively and authoritatively.

**The tendency to micro-management is another obstacle to visionary board leadership.**

Recently the city council of a major American city spent almost an entire meeting deciding what color to paint the new stadium seats. Practically all of us have hair-raising stories about boards that spent untold hours discussing trivial subjects while neglecting major agenda items deserving their more careful deliberation. It is critical that the board focuses its attention on items of critical importance to the nonprofit. In order to do this, the board must avoid the temptation to micro-manage or meddle in lesser matters or in areas that are more appropriately handled by the staff or committees of the board. As we pointed out in first program of the audioarticle series, the average board, meeting monthly for two hours, has approximately 24 hours of meeting time per year to make all of the major decisions as well as address new critical issues that emerge from time to time. It is simply impossible to do an effective job with in those 24 hours of meeting time, even if only a few hours are wasted on trivia. In addition, a habit of board micro-management can adversely affect the morale of staff and the board's own committees as well.

**Another barrier is the habit of holding on to the old ways.** In their book, [The Accelerating Organization](#), authors Maira and Scott-Morgan state that one principle of scientists have observed in natural systems is the continuous shedding of operating rules that cease to be relevant because of changing environmental conditions. Organizations, they surmise, "can hold only a small number of rules and operations at anytime so they must have the ability to shed old rules to make room for the new. Shedding becomes more complicated in systems involving human beings, because their sense of self worth is often attached to many old rules." This all-too-human tendency to hold on to what we know can prevent boards from considering and pursuing new opportunities that conflict with some of the old rules that persist, even in a nonprofit.

**Yet another barrier is lack of clarity regarding board-staff roles and relationships.**

Sometimes boards assume that it's the job of the executive director to do the visionary thinking. While boards rightly expect the executive director to be visionary and decisive, this doesn't mean that the board sits and waits for direction and inspiration. This lack of clarity can result in boards that don't exercise visionary leadership because they don't think it's their job.

**Finally, leaders didn't have to be visionary in a less-competitive past.** Time was when constituents and consumers would just walk in the front door on their own -- or so it seemed. Viewing things in this way, nonprofit boards didn't consider marketplace pressures, or for that matter the existence of a competitive marketplace. Today, especially in the fields of health and education, all that has changed. And certainly, nonprofits, which have to work hard to recruit and retain customers, volunteers and donors, are well aware of these competitive pressures. Adopting the approaches of traditional boards won't work for today's nonprofits.

Some of these barriers will be familiar. All can be overcome. Let's look at five strategies that can help your board adopt a visionary leadership style.

The first strategy is to focus on the ultimate ends of the organization. Once again, taking our inspiration from John Carver, author of [Boards That Make a Difference](#), the board must concentrate on the nonprofit's ultimate ends rather than the day-to-day means used to get things done. Board directors should focus on the mission, vision, goals and strategies contained in the strategic plan. They should leave daily management of the organization to the staff and executive director. This approach will help the board avoid micro-management and structure board meeting time to address more pressing governance matters.

The second strategy for nurturing visionary board leadership is to create a long-range plan for the development of future board leadership. In contrast to the typical short-term recruitment process that focuses narrowly on filling anticipated nonprofit board vacancies for the current year only, boards need a long-range plan for developing future leadership. We addressed this in the [second article](#) of this series.

Such a long-term leadership development plan centers on the following questions: Who will be serving on and leading the board over the next three years? What is our plan to scout board leadership talent for the future? How will we go about fostering and developing future board leadership? Key elements of this

approach include:

Replace the nominations committee with a board development committee. This committee will use the key questions listed above to devise an ongoing process that includes prospecting, recruiting, selecting, orienting and training, and performance assessment of board directors. Link board development to your strategic plan. Identify the new skills, knowledge, personal contacts, and other attributes future board directors will need to possess in order for the board to do its part in advancing the strategic plan. Based on this analysis, develop targeted board recruiting priorities.

Develop a written board director job description that reflects the future needs and expectations of the board.

Direct the executive committee to design board meeting agendas that focus attention on the ultimate ends and avoid micro-management.

Conduct an annual evaluation of the board that focuses, in part, on how well the board is maintaining a focus on the "ultimate ends" questions.

Develop a just-in-time board orientation program to speed up the learning curve for new board directors so that they can hit the ground running in their first meeting. Again, it is important to link this advance program of orientation and training to the strategic plan.

The third strategy is to develop a shared vision of the organization's future. The key question for boards is the following: "If we could create the nonprofit of our dreams that will have the impact we most desire, what would that look like five years from today?" The board's answer to this question captures the organization's vision. As mentioned earlier, it is critical that the board be involved in the development of a shared vision, the centerpiece of the strategic plan. Once the board has developed a vision statement, look for ways to live the vision in your organization. For example:

Use the vision as a framework for board decision-making in every meeting -- not just during the annual planning retreat.

Share your vision with the wider community. Once you go public, it's hard not to live up to the vision.

Ask board directors what they think is most exciting and inspiring to them about the wording of the organization's vision statement.

Use the vision as the basis for regular dialogue on emerging issues and challenges.

Seek major media coverage when strategic plan milestones are reached and use this as an opportunity to promote your vision both inside and outside of the nonprofit.

The fourth strategy for nurturing visionary leadership is to help the board keep up with the rapid pace of change. Provide information that helps the board think about these key questions: What external changes and trends will have the greatest impact over the next three to five years on the nonprofit and the people it serves? How can the nonprofit effectively respond to these changes and trends? How are other schools and youth serving organizations responding to these changes and trends?

Let's remember, however, that busy people will have difficulty finding time to read a lot of material so if you intend to share information with the board, especially in printed form, make sure that it is timely, relevant and well-summarized. Here are some suggestions for helping board directors stay current:

Schedule time during the regular board meetings for discussion about the impact of key external changes and trends and emerging critical issues.

Encourage individual board directors to read, listen and look for information about emerging trends and bring this information to the attention of the board.

Periodically send board directors short readable articles and information about Web sites summarizing relevant future trends.

Involve the board in ongoing strategic planning as a way to expose them to external trend data.

The fifth strategy is to stay in touch with the changing needs of your "customers"

The fifth strategy for transforming the leadership style of the board is to provide members with information to enable them stay in touch with the changing needs of the people served by the nonprofit – now and in the future. Key questions include: What do our constituents think of the organization (i.e., What is their perception or image of the nonprofit?) What are the most important future needs and service expectations of the nonprofit on the part of our constituents? For new needs and service expectations of the nonprofit likely to emerge among constituents, what other organizations are positioned to meet these constituent needs? Consider the following activities:

Create opportunities for board directors to "meet the customer." For example, the board can schedule an ongoing series of community forums to provide board directors with face-to-face opportunities to listen to constituents talk about their emerging needs. This will be particularly important for board directors from the larger community who don't have direct personal experience of being served by the nonprofit.

Tap staff experience and knowledge of people served by the nonprofit to deepen the board's understanding of emerging constituent needs.

Establish a "marketing and planning information system" to supply the board with data to support its planning and decision-making roles.

In summary, I want to stress that the five strategies just described here all reinforce each other. Here's how to use them to transform your nonprofit board:

1. **Characteristics.** Review the seven attributes of visionary leaders. Use these factors as a checklist to assess your board. Identify areas that need improvement. Consider use of the [Visionary Board Leadership Assessment](#) which can be found on our website.
2. **Barriers.** Scrutinize the seven barriers to visionary board leadership. Some will be familiar. All can be overcome. Begin work now to remove these barriers.
3. **Strategies.** Remember, an effective, visionary board is built on five key strategies that lay the groundwork for board and overall nonprofit effectiveness in this time of rapid, profound change.



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"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow." *Albert Einstein* [View Past Quotes](#)

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