



501c Organizations and the Strategic Planning Process

Cecilia Sepp, CAE, CNAP

Principal & Founder

Rogue Tulips LLC

ROGUE TULIPS

501c CONSULTING | ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT
DISTINCTIVE PROJECTS

“Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.” Sun-Tzu, author of “The Art of War”

501c Organizations use the strategic planning process to assess their environment (both internal and external), to evaluate their resources, and to define issues affecting the constituency, profession or industry they represent. Ultimately, long-term goals are established that will support the mission of the organization.

Goals are the results or achievements towards which effort is directed . . . (per dictionary.reference.com). Put another way, goals are what you want to accomplish. This concept is well understood by most 501c Organization management professionals as goals are used throughout the organization in a variety of planning modes. Goals are also understood by most volunteer leaders and members as we all use goals for measuring some aspect of our professional and/or personal lives.

Where most 501c Organizations struggle with the process is not knowing and understanding the difference between strategy and tactics. A frequent mistake is indicating tactics as strategies which confuses the purpose of the plan. This leads to wasted resources (time and money), lack of focus, and frustration among those implementing the plan. To develop a thoughtful strategic plan, and to fully implement it, a clear understanding of strategy and tactics must be developed first.

A goal is what you want to accomplish. A strategy is a long-term plan of action to achieve a particular goal (Wikipedia’s definition). Put another way, strategy is how you will accomplish your goal. All 501c Organization strategies should support the mission of the organization.

For example: The goal is that our 501c Organization will be the leading voice in our industry. A sub-goal is that we will gain an improved reputation, demonstrate increased value to our members, and find new audiences for our products and services, thus developing new revenue streams. The rationale for this goal is that we believe attaining this position will demonstrate our expertise and the superior value of our resources.

A **strategy** to accomplish this goal would be to develop a coalition among our peer organizations to lobby the federal government.

Tactics are the individual actions that, when aggregated, support strategy. According to Merriam-Webster.com, tactics are the art or skill of employing available means to accomplish an end. These are the “what,” of implementing strategy. Tactics represent the individual actions that must be conducted to implement the strategy. Successful strategic plans attach strategies and tactics to metrics and timelines for proper assessment.

For example: to support our long-term goal of becoming the leading voice in the industry, in the first quarter of the year, we will issue two white papers on industry concerns, distribute three press releases about each paper, and have six media placements (television, radio, or print) about these issues.

The strategic planning process flows from the “big picture view” (goals) to the details of implementation (tactics):



The Strategic Planning Process

While the age-old process of creating huge documents outlining five-year plans has fallen by the wayside, strategic planning is alive and well and essential to success. Today, modern strategic planning focuses on the discussion of strategic goals and strategies and less on exhaustive documentation of specific tactics and objectives. The planning documents are designed to improve communication and do not function as end points.

The strategic planning process of today is collaborative, innovative, and includes a broad range of stakeholders. By developing this type of process, 501c Organizations can access the collective knowledge and experience of all segments of their community. The integration of multiple community segments into the process strengthens the organization and better supports the mission.

Leadership of Strategic Planning

There are several options for leading your strategic planning process; all are effective, but you need to choose the one that works best for your 501c Organization.

Never forget the uniqueness of your organization when developing any sort of plan or program; create the appropriate mechanism for your structure and members.

Some common options include:

1. *The Board of Directors acts as lead with input from staff and other stakeholders.* In this scenario, the board acts as the strategic planning committee, creating and implementing the plan with mostly input from the board.

2. *Form a strategic planning committee to advise the Board of Directors.* In this scenario, the committee should have representation from all stakeholders including board members, component leaders, staff, and other active, committee volunteers who may not have an official role (such as former committee members or chapter presidents).
3. *Your 501c Organization may choose to work with a Consultant* to help guide your process, in conjunction with your Strategic Planning Committee and Staff.

Where do Tactics Come in?

After the strategic plan is written, a “work plan” including tactics that support goals and strategies is written. The work plan indicates individual responsibility for each area, metrics for tracking progress, and milestones to keep the plan on track. This document should be used as a daily and annual guide for building a successful 501c Organization based on goal/strategy driven decisions.

In developing this plan, determine specific tactics linked to each strategy; there will be 6 – 10 key tasks that are central to accomplishment. It is important in strategic planning to identify these because it helps ensure that leadership has a common understanding on how a specific strategy will be implemented.

In addition, tactics require resources, so at this point in the process, allocation must be done. Usually this part of the strategic plan implementation is created by staff to prepare staffing and budget requirements. It is then submitted to the 501c Organization leadership for review and approval.

No matter what option you use, the work is not done when you write the plan. Strategic planning and its implementation are part of ongoing management and operations of the 501c Organization; the plan and its milestones should be reviewed frequently throughout the year. Continue the collaborative process with your stakeholders after the plan is put into action; a dynamic approach to strategic planning allows the organization to quickly adapt to changes in the environment or shifting resources.

Creating Context for the Strategic Planning Process

Many 501c Organizations have worked hard to establish strong, member-driven organizations. Using a strategic planning process can continue to bring focus to building the 501c Organization’s understanding of stakeholders and developing systems to more fully link member needs with organizational structure and resource allocation.

In preparation for strategic planning, create context for the discussion by briefing participants on all aspects of the 501c Organization. Briefing can be done via written materials or presentations by staff at an initial meeting.

Additionally, technology and the internet offer many venues for video or “real time” interaction. For example, an 501c Organization can post a series of training or educational videos on YouTube.com, and “real time” meetings can be held using video conferencing services. By creating context for the discussions, the 501c Organization achieves the following steps that support the strategic planning process:

- Improves leadership understanding of the relationship between Mission, stakeholders, goals, strategies, and resources.
- Improves leadership focus on distinct strategic challenges or opportunities.

- Improves the ability of leadership to achieve consensus and make decisions regarding the priorities of the 501c Organization.
- Improves the ability of leadership to communicate expectations to staff regarding strategy and metrics.

Moving on to the Planning Phase

“Prohibit seeking for omens and do away with superstitious doubts. Then, until death comes, no apparently predestined calamity need be feared.” **Sun-Tzu, author of “The Art of War”**

Strategic planning can be as simple or as complex as you would like to make it. Generally speaking, the more complex the 501c Organization’s stakeholder markets and product/service portfolio, the more complex the process will be.

Regardless of complexity, there are some common steps:

1. Discuss and agree on the process: bring together your board of directors, staff, and other stakeholders for a meeting to discuss the goals and steps of the strategic planning process. This ensures that the primary 501c Organization leadership is in agreement regarding how the eventual strategic plan will be created. This can be done via conference call, web session, or in person. In person is recommended for the first meeting because it is an opportunity for all to meet each other, get to know each other, and build a common understanding of what you are trying to accomplish and how. Additionally, by building understanding, stronger relationships are forged. These strong relationships are necessary in order to have an open and inclusive process, which requires trust, honesty, and a safe environment for open discussion.
2. Evaluate past activity: review your past strategic plan if you have one. Discuss what you liked about the plan, what worked, and what outcomes you achieved. Conversely, analyze and discuss what didn’t work and why. For example, too few resources, external factors, lack of commitment to the project or lack of time. Then ask the question: should these “failed” times be revisited and redeployed with a better support system and action plan?
3. Pull out your mission statement: Did your previous plan support the mission? If not, why not? If yes, then note where it did this well and keep in mind when developing the next plan.
4. Discuss and identify goals: to identify a consensus on what you want the 501c Organization to accomplish, discuss the goals for the organization.
5. When goals are agreed to, discuss how each goal applies to each segment of your 501c Organization. For example, how will increased membership recruitment help chapters? How will it support the knowledge base of SIGs? Are committees affected by increased recruitment numbers?

6. Now that goals are agreed to, discuss the strategy that applies to reaching that goal. For example, if a goal is to increase retention, then the strategy would be to increase perceived value of membership to current members.
7. Develop consensus on strategies to achieve goals: strategies are the primary means by which you'll achieve the goals. Strategies are used to communicate the road map for achieving the goals and are used to guide allocation of resources.

“Opportunities multiply as they are seized.” *Sun-Tzu, author of “The Art of War”*

Using your strategic planning process to build stronger relationships with all of your stakeholders is one opportunity that yields many others for your 501c Organization. Aligning all your stakeholder and member segments to support the strategic goals of the 501c Organization creates a stronger membership, a nimbler organization, and a committed leadership that learns to put the needs of the organization over their personal agendas.

These opportunities lead to multiple benefits, and that is a strategy worth pursuing.

Learn more about Cecilia Sepp in her LinkedIn profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ceciliasepp/>

Recommended Resources

“The Art of War,” by Sun-Tzu: this book is considered the definitive text on strategy. While it is focused on military aspects of strategy, his teachings can be applied to other areas.

“A Spy’s Guide to Strategy,” by John Braddock, copyright 2017. Contact the author at www.spysguide.com

“Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement (Bryson on Strategic Planning)” [Hardcover] by John M. Bryson [available on Amazon.com]

“Strategic Planning Made Simple: 10 Easy Steps [Kindle Edition]” by Lori Williams [available on Amazon.com]