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Virtual Strategic Planning Process

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Virtual strategic planning should be as effective and comfortable as an in-person retreat. As associations consider their position and value to members, communicating a strong plan is critical. Members want to know a strategy for recovering and rebound exists.

The plan has multiple purposes:

- Guide for successive boards for 3 to 5 years.
- Empowerment of staff to advance the vision set by the board.
- Careful alignment of the committees and task forces with goals and projects.
- Communicate value to members.
- Distinguish the organization for similar entities, for example the chamber of commerce is not the economic development council, or the beef and cattle association is not the beef check-off board.

60 to 90 Day Process

Working virtually, the steps are a little different than an in-person meeting. Ideally, through research, input, and analysis, up to 70 percent of the work will be done before the on-line retreat. (It is possible for a hybrid retreat with some directors attending in-person and others preferring to join on-line.)

Success comes from breaking the process into steps. With webinar-fatigue, it is not likely that the board wants to sit in on lengthy Zoom calls.

Reverse Engineering

If the board sets a deadline for when the strategic planning process should be completed, it is possible to reverse engineer the process.

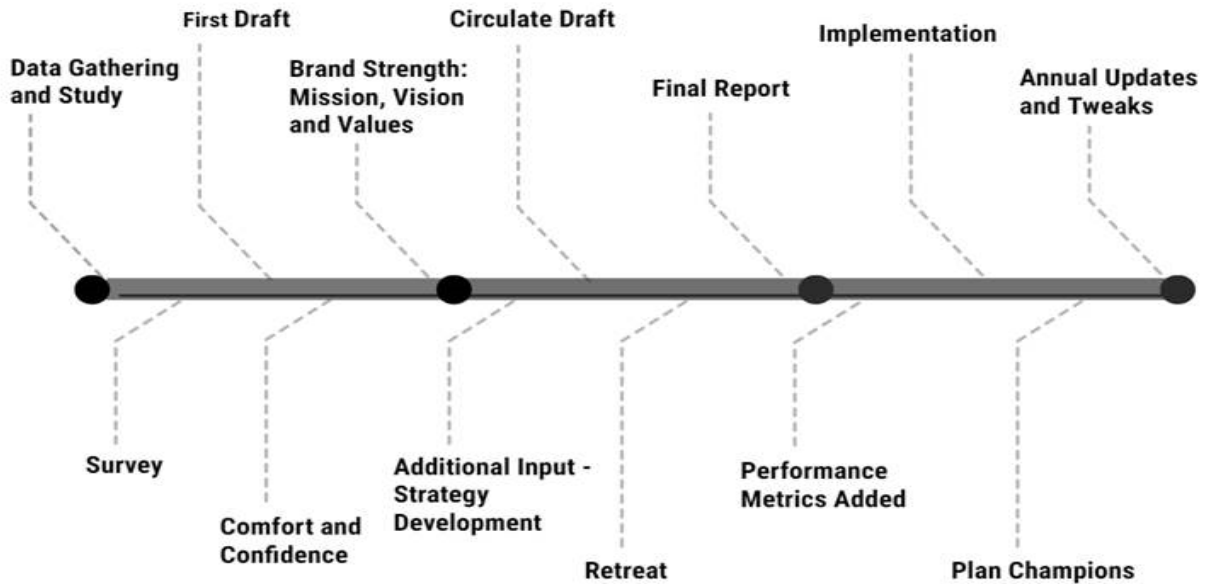
Reverse engineering sounds like a term from NASA sending a manned spacecraft to the moon. The concept is to set a desired outcome and work backwards. Thus, the need for a strategic plan to present to the membership on a date specific, would walk backwards to schedule all the necessary steps.

The aim is to instill confidence in the process.

Data Gathering and Study

It has been said if you can read a budget you can identify the priorities. That's a

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start but there are more clues in the bylaws, committee roster, org-charts, meeting minutes disclosing recent board discussions, IRS Form 990, and the prior strategic plan. Gather the documents, often in the format of the board’s Leadership Manual, and analyze organizational strengths and structure.

- **Survey**
Member surveys should be a regular practice to gauge satisfaction and needs. The more targeted survey is of the board of directors. Ask them 3 questions about priorities, goals, and if anything should be dropped from the program of work. The input of the board, and invitation to the senior staff, will help populate the first draft of the plan.
- **First Draft**
The study of documents and input of the board is vital information for creating a framework for a new strategic plan. Create an outline or template to be shared by officers and senior staff of should be included in the plan based on initial findings.
- **Comfort and Confidence**
Circulate the draft outline or plan template to ensure officers and senior staff are comfortable with the process. Ask if they have additional input. Facilitate opportunities for further collaborate as recommended.
- **Brand Strength: Mission, Vision and Values**
Every exempt organization has a purpose or mission statement. Vision and value statements are at the preference of the board. Acquire feedback about the mission

to affirm or offer alternative drafts. Most mission statements are easy to understand and articulate in a single sentence.

□ **Additional Input – Strategy Development**

Keep the board and staff fully engaged in the process. Circulate updates and drafts. Encourage more input on the direction and findings thus far. The board may want to conduct focus groups, hold caucuses, or survey stakeholders for maximum input.

□ **Circulate Draft**

As the date for the virtual retreat draws near, share information with the board. Familiarize them with the agenda, desired outcomes, terminology of planning, process to date and the outline or template based on all the study and input. In advance of the retreat, introduce the full board to the draft mission, goals, and recommended strategies.

□ **Retreat**

Plan a retreat that is effective with detail to audio and camera needs. There is little use to a retreat if people cannot hear each other or see the subject matter on screen. Allocate about 3 hours to review details of the draft outline or template, asking for input, omissions and understanding. The board is affirming the mission, goals, and priorities. They are not making a to-do list for staff or delving into committee work.

□ **Final Report**

Within a week following the retreat, a comprehensive report of process and board input should be shared. The directors have a final opportunity for input before it will be on the agenda at an upcoming board meeting for a motion to approve.

□ **Performance Metrics Added**

The plan has little traction if metrics are not set. While the board may suggest KPIs at the retreat, where metrics were not offered, the senior staff can suggest performance, accountability, and timelines. The annual budget may need adjustment based on strategic plan opportunities for revenue generation or spending.

□ **Implementation**

Members and stakeholders should be informed of the new strategic plan or “Vision 2025.” Committees will work to advance elements of the new plan. Staff may create their program of work based on board plans. The plan should always be on the board table to guide board discussions and decisions.

□ **Plan Champions**

To track progress on the plan, appoint a “Strategic Plan Champion” or assign

directors to be responsible for tracking program as “Goal Monitors.”

□ **Annual Updates and Tweaks**

At least annually, review progress on the plan, and external influences and achievements to make adjustments. Most plans are updated every 3 years.

The steps will differ for every organization, some wanting to hold focus groups while others want an in-depth survey of members. Use these steps to stay on track and maintain confidence in the process.

A free two-page **Guide to Strategic Planning** is available at

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/p2d7tf2dbis3tyn/Strategic%20Planning%20Guide%202%20pg%202020.pdf?dl=0>

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.