

Professional development update

The following is a summary of a presentation to participants at the AMM's October professional development session

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Overview

Organizations led by elected councils or boards frequently struggle to provide clear direction to the entity that they were elected to lead. This struggle is best viewed as normal and expected, given that council members were elected based on their individual reputations and priorities.

Once elected, these council members collectively become the legal person with the power and legal responsibility to govern their organization. In this article, I will explore the value of participatory strategic planning as a way of enabling municipal councils to work with their staff and communities to develop a shared vision of the future that is enriched by rather than undermined by the diverse perspectives of the participants.

As defined by the *Municipal Act*, the purpose of a municipality is:

- (a) to provide good government;
- (b) to provide services, facilities or other things that, in the opinion of the council of the municipality, are necessary or desirable for all or a part of the municipality; and
- (c) to develop and maintain safe and viable communities.

(Section 3, The Municipal Act)

Fulfilling this mandate requires that municipal councils take a long-term view of trends affecting their community, identifying their preferred future, and then defining practical approaches to be taken to ensure that their preferred future is realized.

Regrettably, some councils spend most of their time and energy on short term, annual activities, without an awareness of the implications of these decisions for their community's long-term future. The community's future is therefore determined not by a carefully thought-out, long-term plan, but is the result of a series of short-term decisions with long-term consequences.

To fulfill their responsibilities to their electors, municipal councils need a strategic plan. This leads to a key question: *How can a diverse group of elected officials and administrators collaboratively develop a*

plan to create their community's preferred future?

This question can be answered by sponsoring a thoughtful, well-resourced strategic planning process. The plan to be created will outline the municipality's preferred future, and identify the directions to be pursued to realize that vision of the future.

A practical strategic planning model

To be truly strategic, a plan must answer a few key sequential questions. These include:

- *What do we want to see going on through the efforts of our organization in the next three years?*

Answering this question together, we create our 'practical vision.'

- *What obstacles will block us as we move to realize this vision?*

Identifying key obstacles that need to be addressed enables us to choose actions that are truly strategic.

- *What can we do to deal with these obstacles and realize our vision?*

Identifying these strategic directions enables us to define our own long-term agenda, and focus our energies on achieving our vision.

- *Who will do what, by when, at what cost, to ensure progress?*

'Action planning' enables the group to assign responsibility, allocate resources and monitor progress to ensure that the plan is implemented.

Ten benefits of strategic planning:

1. We take the time to look at the 'big picture' together.
2. The Council can create its own long-term agenda.
3. Short-term issues can be put in context.
4. The plan provides a focus for dialogue within council, and with the community.

5. We can agree, or agree to disagree, and still make progress.
6. The time it takes is invested to minimize misdirected energy.
7. Having clear goals inspires and motivates those involved.
8. Community confidence is enhanced by the knowledge that there is a plan.
9. Progress can be measured and monitored.
10. Accomplishments can be celebrated.

Working with a professional facilitator

There are several reasons why groups are reluctant to use a professional facilitator to support their planning processes. Some groups feel, "We can do this ourselves." However, the Councillor or staff member you assign to lead the process is unable to fully participate in the debate that planning involves.

Another concern is over the cost of hiring a consultant. It may not be a case of, "We can't afford to hire someone to help us," so much as a sense that, "We shouldn't need to hire someone."

The cost is really an investment in expertise. Hiring a skilled consultant buys their expertise in leading group planning processes. All council members are then free to participate. Tough or tense issues are better handled by an impartial facilitator.

The facilitator manages time and the process to ensure that the group's outcomes are achieved, rather than any individual or special interest.

Implementing the plan

Taking action to implement the plan promptly is essential to build momentum. Think of the strategic plan as creating the Council's long-term agenda. Once the plan is approved, each meeting agenda should include items that advance the strategic plan. This can be done through committee reports, scheduled updates on progress implementing key strategies, and task force reports.

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Budget development can also be based on the strategic plan. Annual updates and quarterly progress reviews sustain the plan's currency.

Conclusion

Developing the key elements of a strategic plan requires that the council and its key staff members set aside time to work with a facilitator to think deeply about the way in which they will collaborate to create their preferred future. This investment of time and money is one of the best that any group of elected officials can make, as it pays dividends for years to come in ensuring that their commitment to providing their communities with good government is fully realized. ●

David Church of Wildwood Consulting, Inc. is a facilitator and organizational development consultant who designs and leads participatory workshops with board-governed organizations. David's commitment as a consultant is to enhance the capacity of groups to identify and resolve the issues important to them.