

The Death of Planning?

Shelly Kessler 03 May 2010

Revenues are declining. Endowments are shrinking. Funders are reconsidering their commitments.

Wherever you look, there are more demands and fewer resources. And then someone tells you that what you need is a *new* plan for today's economy. But what's innovative about strategic planning? In fact, the word is that strategic planning is on its last legs. Some gurus say that planning should be confined to a one-day exercise; others posit that the environment is changing so fast that planning becomes obsolete almost immediately, and that focusing on issues such as fundraising and market development is more likely to produce results.

There is validity in all of these arguments. Certainly, it has been a while since ten-year strategic forecasting was in vogue or even made sense – five years is a stretch these days, and three years is a hopeful guesstimate. However, planning is far from obsolete. A strong argument can be made for nonprofits committing to real strategic assessment of their opportunities based on the best available evidence, and making decisions accordingly. These organizations are much more likely to keep going during difficult times and, moreover, have the tools to take their efforts to scale.

While most nonprofits are passionate about their missions, they are equally averse to sticking to long-range plans, partly because they lack the critical data to set appropriate goals, and partly because past planning efforts were not aligned with the changing reality of the organization.

But let's focus on creating a plan: Not the novel-length door stopper that satisfies everyone for a moment but never infiltrates the organization, but planning that really gets into the organizational DNA, that changes the way we think and the way we do things, and that focuses on strategy. Good planning helps organizations understand what is core to their mission and how they define success, and allows them to recognize the conditions for which they will hold themselves accountable.

Planning in its most dynamic form is one part of a fluid system that constantly takes in new information, assesses success, analyzes the environment and applies new learning to the next round of planning. Organizations that demonstrate discernable impact on the population they are trying to serve and that have the internal capacity to convey the full measure of that change to critical audiences are more likely than their peers to be financially sustainable. The best way to attain sustainability is to use the planning process to lay out critical pathways to change and continuously measure and refine strategies.

The best planning processes for today's environment are

those that meet an organization where they are, create a framework for dealing with change, and build a structure through which decision-makers are able to access the information to measure impact and to respond to evolving realities. Planning shouldn't have defined beginning and end dates. An open-ended process that is constantly referenced and that can be amended as circumstances dictate is much more useful and likely to permeate an organization's culture than a stand-alone activity. When organizations combine this type of planning with passionate and decisive leadership, they create a successful model that will empower effective organizational development practices for mission and vision achievement.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of planning have been greatly exaggerated.

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