



SEVEN Strategic Planning Myths You Should Shatter

By Lori L. Silverman

Strategic planning is something most associations do. **And yet, strategic planning is something few associations do well.**

If you're wondering how your organization measures up, reflect on its strategic planning efforts during the last five to 10 years. What tangible results have been attained? Are you and others pleased with the outcomes? How satisfied are staff and members with the process that was used to create the plan and execute it? If your plan isn't producing, can your association afford to continue planning the same way it's planned in the past? If not, consider these seven commonly held myths about strategic planning — then shatter them.

MYTH 1:
Because the future is uncertain, planning in increments longer than two to three years is fruitless.

The first predictions of the current economic recession appeared in writing not in 2007 or 2008, but rather much earlier. How much earlier? Harry Dent, Jr., predicted the current downturn in his book, *The Great Boom Ahead*, which was published in 1993. Soon after, some organizations built the recession into their future plans. Did yours?

Most trends do not emerge overnight. In fact, they often take years to develop and mature. Take, for instance, social responsibility. While the association movement embraces it

today, organizations like The Body Shop, Tom's of Maine and Ben & Jerry's lauded its tenets decades ago. How about social networking? According to Wikipedia, social networking Web sites began forming as early as 1985, with several appearing in the mid 1990s.

When did your association first start talking about these topics? If it had seen them on the horizon years ago, think about how it would look today.

MYTH 2:
Effectively engaging in strategic planning requires leaders, staff and members who are strategic thinkers.

According to Dr. David Kiersey, because of the estimated distribution of personality temperaments in the general U.S. population, 80 to 85 percent of people are not predisposed to thinking strategically. The specific steps used to create a long-range strategic plan must therefore be designed to promote strategic thinking — the uncovering of breakthrough strategies that create real long-term value for future members.

Review your association's strategic planning steps. What type of thinking do they encourage? Do the steps rely on the opinions of those involved in strategic planning, for example,

or do they bring in information about the future as the basis for thoughtful dialogue? Opinion data keeps the conversation focused on today's problems and associated tactical resolutions, often ignoring future trends. Plus, it reinforces that which is already known. Instead, it should encourage your organization to explore the unknown, which likely will affect the association's future.

MYTH 3:
Association leaders and senior staff are best equipped to create strategy.

When you think about the key traits possessed by those engaged in strategic planning, you probably think about things like association tenure, industry experience and intimacy with the organization's issues. Viewing the future with fresh eyes may be even more important, however, than viewing it with experienced ones. To this end, some organizations are involving a wide cross-section of members in their planning efforts. They believe that "involvement breeds commitment" and that diverse voices are critical to creating and deploying a successful plan.

To take advantage of diverse viewpoints, consider hiring a facilitator and holding a large group planning session with as many as several hundred stakeholders.

Not ready for a large audience? Start smaller by asking yourself who your association involves in strategic planning and why. Think about who's absent and consider what benefits your organization could reap by broadening participation in both planning and implementation.

MYTH 4:
A vision defines what the "organization" wants for its future.

When you seek membership in an organization, what compels you to join: What it wants to become — the premier organization in XYZ industry, for instance — or what it can do for you as a member?

Members typically don't care what an organization wants for itself. They care about how their membership will benefit them, now and in the future. When these benefits cease to exist or provide value, members disappear.

To keep that from happening, re-cast your association's vision statement so that it answers the question, "In the eyes of our future members, what does our association need to become?" Thinking about strategy and vision from the member perspective can stimulate potential breakthroughs and, more importantly, convince current members to stay and new members to join.

MYTH 5:
Member feedback is the key to strategic planning.

Strategic planning is about mapping out the future and grappling with the myriad issues, trends, wildcards and risks that can stand in the way of that future. Unfortunately, extrapolating from today into the future only affords incremental improvements. Few members probably grasp what the world will truly be like in five to 10 years. If you collected member feedback en masse, you'd probably hear more about current issues and problems than you would future breakthroughs. For that reason, member feedback is not critical to strategic planning.

Member feedback does, however, have its place in planning. First, it can help associations gauge how big the gap is between the future and the present. Second, it can help associations

set mission goals, which are the top two or three problems members want the association to help them rectify. If its vision is what the association wants to become, then its mission is what its members collectively pay the organization to do; integrating both vision and mission — breakthrough strategies and mission goals — into the same long-range plan gives associations a valuable level of focus that helps them prioritize their work, thus allowing for appropriate allocation of resources.

MYTH 6:
We can implement at least five breakthrough strategies during the next five years.

In your personal life, how many self-improvement innovations are you working on? One? Three? Five? Ten? While we personally acknowledge resource constraints, we somehow overlook them at work.

If an organization's breakthrough strategies are truly groundbreaking, they will likely take a lot of time and energy to fully implement and evaluate. So while it is easy to succumb to everyone's wishes and put an infinite number of strategies on paper as strategic goals, it is much more effective — and realistic — to choose just one, two or three strategies that will produce needed results. If your association has more than three strategies, they're probably not all innovative. You're likely to make more progress by focusing on fewer goals.

MYTH 7:
Because so many people must be involved, and so many approvals received, strategic planning takes months to accomplish.

Consider the following scenario: Over a few weeks, your organization documents several key questions about the future, then collects information to answer them. A cross-section of representative leaders, staff and members-at-large then review this material prior to a two-day planning session. That session sparks strategic thinking and produces both breakthrough strategies and mission goals that are then prioritized and integrated into a cohesive five-year plan. Next, action steps are scheduled for the plan's first year and appropriate committees assigned to work on them.

Within just a few weeks, your association could have and begin implementing its strategic plan.

Next Steps

Identifying strategic planning myths is step one for your association. Taking action to shatter them is step two. Now is the time to get started. ■

Lori L. Silverman is a strategist, keynote speaker and author, and owner of Partners for Progress. She may be reached at (800) 253-6398 or lori@partnersforprogress.com.

Join the conversation at www.theforumeffect.org.

