

Center for Results-Focused Leadership

Strategies to strengthen results in public-sector and nonprofit organizations



Quick Summary

Strategic planning is a fundamental tool of good government and nonprofit management, helping clarify organizations' goals and strategies. In practice, though, strategic plans be less impactful than hoped. Achieving more useful strategic planning takes broad stakeholder input as well as a stronger focus on learning and evidence.

Strategy Details

Q1. Why are strategic plans important?

Almost all public agencies, and many nonprofits, have strategic plans that they update periodically. The theory behind them is compelling: To achieve important results as an organization, you have to be clear about where you're aiming and what specifically you're trying to accomplish. Those details help leaders, staff and external stakeholders all understand in which direction the boat is rowing. That's why most strategic plans include:

- A **mission and vision statement**;
- A set of organizational **goals, strategies** designed to achieve those goals, and **initiatives** to advance those strategies;
- Associated performance **metrics** related to those goals, strategies and initiatives that allow the organization to track progress and adjust as needed.

Q2. Why are strategic plans often less impactful than hoped?

In practice, strategic plans by government agencies and jurisdictions often end up on the shelf as expensive paperweights. One reason is that, too often, they're developed by a narrow group—usually a strategic planning team working with leadership. Those plans don't achieve broader buy-in from staff and other stakeholders, nor do they reflect the input of staff with implementation expertise.

A second, less obvious reason that strategic plans often fall flat is the theory underlying them: that if we pick the right set of goals, strategies and initiatives and then implement them well,

we will achieve the results we want. It's a prescriptive approach that assumes we have all the answers, including knowledge about the complex causal relationships involved.

The reality, of course, is that we are often guessing about what affects what. That's not because of a lack of expertise or competence, but rather because the work that government does is complicated. From fighting poverty to addressing the opioid crisis to tackling climate change, if the answers were easy we'd have solved these challenges already. A similar point was made 30 years ago by Bob Behn, now at the Harvard Kennedy School, in his seminal article, "[Management by Groping Along](#)." Public managers, Behn noted, "need to have a clear sense of mission for their agency. But they will never know precisely how to realize these purposes." Rather than aiming to create the perfect plan, Behn argued, public managers "must experiment with various initiatives, trying to determine what works and what does not."

Q3. Strategy and evidence: A missing link

Behn's emphasis on experimentation and determining what works overlaps strongly with the evidence-based policy movement. Yet strategic planning and evidence efforts rarely intersect. Experts on these topics generally sit in separate offices within agencies and view their work as largely unrelated. Not surprisingly, three decades after Behn's article, most agencies and jurisdictions are still trying to create the perfect strategic plan rather than aiming to get better at learning what works.

Q4. A next generation approach to strategic planning

A new approach to strategic planning -- one that builds solidly on the traditional version but adds some new elements -- would integrate evidence-based decision-making practices into strategic planning. The focus would be on strengthening an organizational culture of learning and continuous improvement. The goal should be a culture that *builds* evidence about what's working and what's not, and then *uses* that evidence, with built-in feedback loops, to refine initiatives and strategies over time. To do that, organizations would need to:

1. **Clearly define what success looks like for each goal**, using qualitative or quantitative measures—or both if possible. If you want to build a culture of continuous improvement, you need to be clear about what kind of improvement you're aiming for.
2. **Create learning agendas for each main goal or strategy.** [Learning agendas](#) identify key research and operational questions that need to be answered in order to improve results. A question could be about which version of a program works best, or it could be about whether a program or policy works as well for rural as for urban areas. Learning agendas help focus evidence efforts—including program evaluation, data analytics and rapid experimentation—on priority questions.
3. **Develop clear logic models for each initiative.** [Logic models](#) tie inputs and activities to outputs and outcomes. They don't need to be complicated. The goal is to clarify

assumptions about what affects what and to specify the expected results. They're useful for implementation planning as well as to inform how results will be evaluated.

4. **Implement evaluation strategies for each initiative**, formalizing the feedback loop. Without this step, it is difficult to credibly know whether those initiatives are working as intended or how they can be improved over time. Evaluation strategies do not need to be overly complicated or expensive, but they need to produce credible information about what works.
5. **Establish a process of regular evidence reviews**, providing leadership with an opportunity to access evaluation results and act on that information. That includes refining initiatives and strategies over time and, with robust evidence, making investment and divestment decisions.

These steps can be woven into a more traditional strategic planning process, rather than creating something completely different. That can include developing workshops with senior leaders to clarify goals, as well as conducting outreach sessions with staff and stakeholders to conduct "SWOT" analyses and flesh out the plan, for leadership review.

Q5. What are examples of this approach in action?

Some public agencies are already making progress toward significantly improving their strategic planning. At the federal level, for example, a legislative branch agency held workshops with staff on each of its four goals and related strategies. The workshops included quick training sessions on logic models and time for staff to develop logic models for proposed initiatives.

Another example is the Small Business Administration. It develops a multi-year learning agenda, updated annually with new evidence, related to its strategic goals, such as supporting small business revenue and job growth.

Moreover, the White House Office of Management and Budget made Evidence Act requirements around agency learning agendas a part of agencies' strategic planning processes. These examples represent a shift from a focus on accountability for activities (merely implementing a plan) to one that focuses on accountability for learning, improvement and results.



Additional Resources

- **Article:** "[What Government's Broken Strategic Planning Needs: Evidence](#)" in Government Executive by Andrew Feldman.
- **Report:** [Meeting the Moment: Tips for Building Bold Strategic Plans and Turning Them Into Results](#) by the Partnership for Public Service and Grant Thornton.



Customized Assistance

Please [contact us](#) if your organization needs help with strategic planning, including approaches that integrate an evidence-based decision making emphasis into traditional strategic planning.