



Number 16

*Join Us in Our  
Continuing Discussions*

How recently were you involved in a strategic planning process? How well did it go? Has the organization benefited from the process and the plan itself? What are the characteristics of an effectively designed planning process and how can we avoid the proverbial “plan on the shelf” problem? In this issue, we explore some keys to developing plans that get used.

We’re interested in hearing from you on this topic. Send an e-mail to [info@wolfkeens.com](mailto:info@wolfkeens.com) or fax a response to 617.679.9700. We’ll post your comments in the Publications section of our web site, located at [www.wolfkeens.com](http://www.wolfkeens.com).

# Working Paper

## Ready?

## Assess, Plan, Evaluate

Dr. Thomas Wolf  
*Chairman & CEO*  
*Wolf, Keens & Company*

Many organizations struggle with strategic planning. Some claim they are too busy for extra tasks and don’t have enough time. Others wonder why they should plan when there are inadequate resources to undertake anything new. Still others get stymied trying to wordsmith a perfectly adequate mission statement or translating general goals into specific actions.

Wolf, Keens believes two components are crucial to good planning: proper preparation and ongoing follow-up.

Proper preparation includes a fresh organizational self-assessment that offers perspective on the past, present, and future.

*continued on page 2*

*continued from page 1*

The old-fashioned SWOT analysis (assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) is still a useful tool; but any analysis must focus on particular areas. For example, a checklist might include:

- **MISSION, VALUES, IMAGE, AND CASE FOR SUPPORT:** Is the mission statement still relevant and up-to-date? Does it speak to the needs of a broad constituency? What are the organization's values and do they help establish priorities? How is the organization regarded and how well is it known? How compelling is its case for support?
- **ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS:** Are programs effective, relevant, and needed by the constituents? What new programs and services should be added? Which should be dropped? Can the organization compete effectively in the marketplace?
- **MANPOWER ISSUES (Board, staff, and volunteers):** How strong is the Board? Do trustees "give and get," and do they carry out their fiduciary responsibilities? How qualified is the staff and how good is its morale? Are there enough volunteers and are they well managed and productive?
- **FINANCES:** Is there prudent financial management, appropriate oversight, and sufficient controls? How good are the budgeting systems? Is there a history of surplus or deficit? Are earned income and contributed income both diversified and adequate?
- **PLANNING AND EVALUATION:** Has consensus been reached on the goals, objectives, and action steps for the next several years? Are programs, staff, and the Board regularly evaluated?

This kind of organizational self-assessment will generally lead to reaffirming or re-articulating the mission, vision, values, and goals. In other words, it will lead to a successful tackling of the planning process itself.

**ONGOING FOLLOW-UP:** Once an organization's purpose, direction, capability, and goals are clear, it's time for another crucial planning step—providing ways to monitor and amend the plan over time.

Very specific objectives should be established for each goal, followed by priority actions that will bring the organization closer to achieving them. To complete the process, the plan requires:

- An implementation timeline (detailed for specific actions)
- Assignments of lead responsibility (who will do it)
- Indicators of success (or completion criteria)
- Income and expense projections, with stated assumptions.

The plan must become a living document, one that serves as both a reference and resource, is referred to often, and evolves through implementation. By periodically reviewing action steps scheduled for completion, it is relatively easy to assess accomplishment and to amend the plan as needed. Accountability for implementing a plan is as important as doing it in the first place.

---

**Ginnie Cooper**

*Executive Director, Brooklyn Public Library*

A good friend of mine gave me a sign that I keep in my office: Life is what happens to you while you are making other plans. That is true! I've never made a multi-year plan that has been carried out exactly as designed. More common, my plans—and perhaps yours, too—are honored by not being followed rather than by being followed! Still, in my nearly 30 years as a library director, planning has been essential.

Thus far in my library career, the most successful plans have been those made in collaboration with others who affect what I am able to do. These collaborators include library boards, donors, local decision-makers, friends and supporters, and perhaps most important, library staff. Each of these groups has a valuable perspective on community needs, available resources, and other factors that will determine success or failure. Even more important, these groups help determine the relevance of the plan!

The most important part of planning is often given the least advance thought: providing the ways

to review and change the plan over time. I've seen—and, I'm sorry to say, participated in making—too many plans that sit forever unexamined. These plans are a monument to good process with no follow through.

Life does happen to you while you are making other plans. However, with accountability and review, we can at least modify the plan while life happens!

---

### Miles J. Gibbons, Jr.

*Executive Director, The Helen F. Whitaker Fund*

While many, if not most, nonprofit organizations engage in strategic planning, I sometimes wonder how many actually develop a workable strategic plan. Some plans never get completed; others simply sit on a shelf.

The steps outlined by Tom Wolf are critical if the strategic planning process is to create a “useful tool” for the operation of the organization over the ensuing five- or ten-year period. The questions asked under “preparation” (the organizational assessment component of planning) are particularly relevant and the emphasis on “specific objectives” and “priority actions needed,” together with “ongoing follow-up” are critical.

I might suggest that greater emphasis be placed on determining the organization's capabilities and that this should be an essential component of the early stages of planning. Both the mission and the goals of an organization must reflect its financial and administrative capacity. Unless the strategic plan is realistic in light of this capacity, the programs eventually adopted will be insufficiently funded and meaningful goals will be unachievable. It is one thing to dream up new ideas, quite another to be able to implement them.

As a funder, I believe that part of the discipline of planning in nonprofit organizations revolves around being realistic about which goals are achievable and how many programs are affordable. This may lead to a strategic plan that focuses on fewer issues, but it will permit the organization to implement programs that have a more significant impact on those issues.

### Cynthia Guyer

*Executive Director, Portland (Oregon) Schools Foundation*

Integrating the elements of strategic planning into the rhythm of an organization's decision-making processes and culture brings a powerful focus and energy to “the work.” Here are a few lessons I have learned from planning both for a large urban school district and for my own organization:

- **Starting with the End in Mind:** An effective planning process is only possible when an organization is crystal clear about the desired results of its work. For those of us engaged in the improvement of public education, for example, our “North Star” is increasingly about designing “systems of schools” where the majority of students learn and achieve at high, rigorous levels. That provides the focus for our planning.
- **Developing Shared Accountability and Responsibility:** A well-designed strategic planning process should help organizations develop what the Annenberg Institute for School Reform has called “reciprocal accountability.” It replaces the notion—all too familiar in my field of education reform—of finger-pointing and blame. Rather, we must develop new frameworks for the responsibilities of teachers to students, principals to teachers, school boards and superintendents and their central offices to the local schools, schools to parents and the community, voters and elected officials to the schools and ultimately—the children and their education.
- **Developing a New Set of Measures and Indicators of Progress:** Leaders of major improvement and change initiatives know that “what gets measured gets done.” A strong, effective strategic planning process must include the framework for assessing progress over time, providing valuable information necessary for mid-course corrections.
- **People, Leadership & Engagement:** In any organization, it is people at every level of the organization that make the difference. A powerful strategic planning effort will engage the right constituencies—internally and externally—and unleash people's energy, experience, and talents.

## HAVE YOU SEEN OUR “STORIES OF THE WEEK?”

Every Friday, we send a brief e-mail message with six or seven news items that you may have missed. They are interesting, important, sometimes amusing. And they relate to aspects of nonprofit management, governance, planning, funding—all those matters that occupy us every day.

CHECK OUT A SAMPLE COPY ON OUR WEB SITE.

Follow this link <http://www.wolfkeens.com/BIGPICTURE/pages/pubs.html>. If you want to subscribe, just send a message to [info@wolfkeens.com](mailto:info@wolfkeens.com) with the word “subscribe” in the subject.

## NEED HELP?

Need help in fund raising, strategic and business planning, market and financial analysis, facilitation, or any other areas? Chances are the “Portfolio” section of the Wolf, Keens website ([www.wolfkeens.com](http://www.wolfkeens.com)) can direct you to other organizations that have successfully completed such a process. You can find detailed descriptions of how projects were structured and completed. And if you want more information, please e-mail us at [info@wolfkeens.com](mailto:info@wolfkeens.com) or call 617-494-9300.