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**WHAT IS A STRATEGIC PLAN?**

It is well-known in the association world that good strategic planning is a cornerstone of a successful organization. But many organizations who pay lip service to this idea don’t reap the benefits, because they don’t understand what a strategic plan is supposed to be.

A strategic plan serves as a long-term roadmap for the organization. It defines a set of big-picture goals that will serve the mission and vision of the Board of Directors, and it lays out a path for achieving those goals, with objectives, task and timelines. The strategic plan can determine the direction of the organization for years to come. When done well, the strat plan will align the focus of the organization from top to bottom, set a direction that ensures the association is working in service of its stated mission, and allocate resources in a way that prioritizes the most important goals and outcomes. A strategic plan is fluid and should be reviewed and updated annually, with status checks at board meetings.

This is, of course, much easier said than done. The process of creating a strategic plan demands significant time and effort, often from board members and executives whose plates are overfilled as it is. And when done poorly, a strategic plan can paralyze an association for years, locking it into an inflexible plan that drains resources and distracts administrators from other important tasks. With all these potential pitfalls, many associations end up neglecting the strategic planning process completely. That is a huge mistake--without a strategic plan in place, an association can end up drifting listlessly for years, never stopping to consider if their resources are being used efficiently or if their actions and programs are still in service of their intended mission.

It is far too easy to get bogged down in the day-to-day operations of your association and forget about the big picture. For that reason, it is imperative to have a strategic plan in place that keeps your organization moving in the right direction.