

# STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

A successful strategic plan includes a clear assessment of an organization's current situation, the identification of future goals, and the methods by which to achieve them. Successful plans engage all the organization's stakeholders in intentional, interactive brainstorming and planning, making the process of creating a plan as important as the final product. Once complete, strategic plans become a roadmap for organizational success. They are meant to be used – vital tools for tracking progress and communicating impact and results.

The creation of a strategic plan can take several weeks to several months, depending on the overall scope of work, the maturity of the organization and your intended use of the final product. The following outlines the four major elements of a planning process. While the estimated timing of each stage is estimated below, only a specific scope of work relevant to your organization will determine the exact timeline for the project.

Critical to the success of any planning process is the engagement ad hoc team of leaders who can support the work of the facilitator, and oversee and guide the overall process to ensure the resulting plan is most relevant to your organization. This framework is intended as a guide to help your organization get started – your specific planning process will ultimately be shaped by your organization's schedule, budget, and goals.

## DISCOVERY

Before a strategic plan can be crafted, an assessment of your organization's current operations, industry, constituents must be conducted. This data-gathering involves a thorough review of internal and external elements to provide a snapshot of the current situational analysis for your organization. Given the maturity/life cycle of the organization, the depth of your program, and the age/quality your previous planning work, and the scope of your desired external review, the assessment phase can last anywhere from two to eight weeks.

## DREAMING

Once the data is collected and reviewed, the work of the planning process can begin in earnest. In this stage the board reviews and affirms its mission, vision, values. With these guideposts firmly in place, the organization reviews the information collected in the Discovery phase in order to begin prioritizing its strategic direction and articulating clear goals. This phase of the work represents the meat of your strategic plan. It is most often handled in a facilitated board retreat of one full or several days of meetings, which vary given the size and reach of your organization.

## DESIGNING

If the stage is set in the Dreaming phase, then your plan comes to life in the Designing phase. During this process, your organization articulates the details of how to turn goals into reality through the formation of specific objectives, strategies, tactics and evaluation measures. As with the Dreaming phase, this work is most often accomplished in a facilitated meeting of the board over one or several days. Organizations may involve key staff at this stage.

## DELIVERY

At this stage, all of the elements are pulled together in a way that makes sure all the pieces are in alignment with one another, which involves a final check of the planning team before a formal plan is written and distributed. The details of evaluation and implementation are articulated in the final plan. Supporting the successful rollout of a new plan are clear and intentional communication strategies to the key stakeholders involved in and/or affected by its contents.

### **STRATEGIC PLANNING +/-**

Successful strategic plans provide the opportunity for Food Policy Councils to:

- + engage in a principled approach to planning and goal setting – no matter if conducting a formal strategic plan, a grant application, or loose agenda for working together.
- + articulate a group's a shared purpose, which can bring energy and momentum to the work of individual projects and actors.
- + encourage new ideas and solutions and create a shared perspective by engaging diverse stakeholders
- + create useful boundaries and also identify the readiness of certain activities. These parameters can be helpful in focusing the often limited resources of FPCs - especially when so many issues and projects are potential relevant to Food Councils.
- + set priorities and give focus to the work
- + provide momentum by reminding group about the power and potential of collaboration

Strategic planning processes can run the risk of:

- placating or self-validating individuals or leaders when the work is not inclusive of many stakeholders
- feeling redundant or slow for the “do-ers”

Other notes:

- A neutral, third party facilitator can help bring new/ fresh perspective to planning processes. They can help keep the momentum going, keep conversation on task, encourage all voices to be heard, encourage follow-up.
- The timing and frequency of planning process should be appropriate to the organization. A newer organization looking to establish its position in the community may spend more time conducting best-practice research and engaging wide variety of stakeholders. A more established Council might review and refresh the previous plan.

### **IMPLEMENTATION +/-**

Plans don't exist for planning's sake - successful strategic plans are designed to be used and not just “sit on a shelf.” At the implementation phase, it's important for FPC's to consider:

- + there is an opportunity for community groups and projects to see themselves as part of the whole Council's plan to effect change the food system in their city or county
- + that the planning goals are clear to all participants up front – what the purpose of the plan and planning process is and who and how it will be implemented

Implementation of plans can be tricky when:

- a Food Council doesn't have full control of how all the local food work is implemented in a community
- there are barriers to resources (human, financial, organization) to fully implement the goals/ actions in a plan
- there is a design flaw: not all the right actors participated in the planning process or you forgot to discuss how evaluation would occur until the project is underway
- measuring progress on social/ systems change is not always linear

### **COMMUNICATION +/-**

When communicating about your FPC's work, it is important to consider that:

- + distilling complete plans into succinct one pagers or one slide can help FPCs communicate to community leaders their vision/purpose as well as intended goals, actions, impact
- + once planning ends, don't miss the opportunity to continue to include new voices in your FPC's work
- + refreshing your Council members' buy-in throughout the implementation phase in the plan's goals/objectives is important to keep momentum alive
- + principled engagement strategies help FPC's communicate with all your internal and external stakeholders
- + successfully communicating your FPC's plan requires capacity
- it is always tricky – and yet always important - to strike a balance between orienting new members and repeating stale information. Never fall into the trap of thinking that your Council members are all starting on the same page. Council's are made richer and the work's has greater impact by effectively harnessing diverse perspectives.
- Food systems by their nature are diverse – in people, places, programs.