



Basic Guidelines for a Successful Planning Process

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One of the most common sets of activities in management is planning. Very simply put, planning is setting the direction for something—some system—and then guiding the system to follow the direction. There are many kinds of planning in organizations. Common to these many kinds of planning are various phases of planning and guidelines for carrying them out as effectively as possible. Information in this document can be referenced as a basis from which to carry out various kinds of planning, ranging from highly complex to simple and basic. To help make the following information applicable to as many situations as possible, the scope of the following planning information is to the "system", which is fully explained below. The following process should be customized by planners to meet the needs and nature of the planners and their organizations.

Quick Look at Some Basic Terms

Planning typically includes use of the following basic terms.

NOTE: It's not critical to grasp completely accurate definitions of each of the following terms. It's more important for planners to have a basic sense of the difference between goals/objectives (results) and strategies/tasks (methods to achieve the results).



Goals

Goals are specific accomplishments that must be accomplished in total, or in some combination, in order to achieve some larger, overall result preferred from the system, for example, the mission of an organization.



Strategies or Activities

These are the methods or processes required in total, or in some combination, to achieve the goals.



Objectives

Objectives are specific accomplishments that must be accomplished in total, or in some combination, to achieve the goals in the plan. Objectives are usually "milestones" along the way when implementing the strategies.



Tasks

Particularly in small organizations, people are assigned various tasks required to implement the plan. If the scope of the plan is very small, tasks and activities are often essentially the same.



Resources (and Budgets)

Resources include the people, materials, technologies, money, etc., required to implement the strategies or processes. The costs of these resources are often depicted in the form of a budget.

Basic Overview of Typical Phases in Planning

Whether the system is an organization, department, business, project, etc., the basic planning process typically includes similar nature of activities carried out in similar sequence. The phases are carried out carefully or—in some cases—intuitively, for example, when planning a very small, straightforward effort.

NOTE: Different groups of planners might have different names for the following activities and group them differently. However, the nature of the activities and their general sequence remains the same.

NOTE: The following are typical phases in planning. They do *not* comprise the complete, ideal planning process.



Reference Overall Singular Purpose ("Mission") or Desired Result from System

During planning, planners have in mind (consciously or unconsciously) some overall purpose or result that the plan is to achieve. For example, during strategic planning, it's critical to reference the mission, or overall purpose, of the organization.



Take Stock Outside and Inside the System

This "taking stock" is always done to some extent, whether consciously or unconsciously. For example, during strategic planning, it's important to conduct an environmental scan. This scan usually involves considering various driving forces, or major influences, that might effect the organization.



Analyze the Situation

For example, during strategic planning, planners often conduct a "SWOT analysis". (SWOT is an acronym for considering the organization's strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats faced by the organization.) During this analysis, planners also can use a variety of assessments, or methods, to "measure" the health of systems.



Establish Goals

Based on the analysis and alignment to the overall mission of the system, planners establish a set of goals that build on strengths to take advantage of opportunities, while building up weaknesses and warding off threats.



Establish Strategies to Reach Goals

The particular strategies (or methods to reach the goals) chosen depend on matters of affordability, practicality, and efficiency.



Establish Objectives Along the Way to Achieving Goals

Objectives are selected to be timely and indicative of progress toward goals.



Associate Responsibilities and Time Lines With Each Objective

Responsibilities are assigned, including for implementation of the plan, and for achieving various goals and objectives. Ideally, deadlines are set for meeting each responsibility.



Write and Communicate a Plan Document

The above information is organized and written in a document, which is distributed around the system.



Acknowledge Completion and Celebrate Success

This critical step is often ignored—which can eventually undermine the success of many of your future planning efforts. The purpose of a plan is to address a current problem or pursue a development goal. It seems simplistic to assert that you should acknowledge if the problem was solved or the goal met. However, this step in the planning process is often ignored in lieu of moving on the next problem to solve or goal to pursue. Skipping this step can cultivate apathy and skepticism—even cynicism—in your organization. Don't skip this step.

Guidelines to Ensure Successful Planning and Implementation

A common failure in many kinds of planning is that the plan is never really implemented. Instead, all focus is on writing a plan document. Too often, the plan sits collecting dust on a shelf. Therefore, most of the following guidelines help to ensure that the planning process is carried out completely and is implemented completely—or, deviations from the intended plan are recognized and managed accordingly.



Involve the Right People in the Planning Process

Going back to the reference to systems, it's critical that all parts of the system continue to exchange feedback in order to function effectively. This is true no matter what type of system. When planning, get input from everyone who will be responsible for carrying out parts of the plan, along with representative from groups who will be affected by the plan. Of course, people also should be involved if they will be responsible for reviewing and authorizing the plan.



Write Down the Planning Information and Communicate it Widely

New managers, in particular, often forget that others don't know what they know. Even if managers do communicate their intentions and plans verbally, chances are great that others won't completely hear or understand what the manager wants done. Also, as plans change, it's extremely difficult to remember who is supposed to be doing what and according to which version of the plan. Key stakeholders (employees,

management, board members, funders, investors, customers, clients, etc.) may request copies of various types of plans. Therefore, it's critical to write plans down and communicate them widely.

Goals and Objectives Should Be SMARTER

SMARTER is an acronym. In this case, a SMARTER goal or objective is:



Specific

For example, it's difficult to know what someone should be doing if they are to pursue the goal to "work harder." It's easier to recognize, "Write a paper."



Measurable

It's difficult to know what the scope of "writing a paper" really is. It's easier to appreciate that effort if the goal is, "Write a 30-page paper."



Acceptable

If I'm to take responsibility for pursuit of a goal, the goal should be acceptable to me. For example, I'm not likely to follow the directions of someone telling me to write a 30-page paper when I also have five other papers to write. However, if you involve me in setting the goal so I can change my other commitments or modify the goal, I'm much more likely to accept pursuit of the goal as well.



Realistic

Even if I do accept responsibility to pursue a goal that is specific and measurable, the goal won't be useful to me or others if, for example, the goal is to "write a 30-page paper in the next ten seconds."



Time frame

It may mean more to others if I commit to a realistic goal of writing a 30-page paper in one month. However, it'll mean more to others (particularly if they are planning to help me or guide me to reach the goal) if I specify that I will write one page a

day for 30 days, rather than including the possibility that I will write all 30 pages in last day of the 30-day period.



Extending

The goal should stretch the performer's capabilities. For example, I might be more interested in writing a 30-page paper if the topic of the paper or the way that I write it will extend my capabilities.



Rewarding

I'm more inclined to write the paper if the paper will contribute to an effort in such a way that I might be rewarded for my effort.

Build in Accountability (Regularly Review Who's Doing What and By When?)

Plans should specify who is responsible for achieving each result, including goals and objectives. Dates should be set for completion of each result, as well. Responsible parties should regularly review status of the plan. Be sure to have someone of authority "sign off" on the plan, including putting their signature on the plan to indicate they agree with and support its contents. Include responsibilities in policies, procedures, job descriptions, performance review processes, etc.

Note Deviations from the Plan and Re-plan Accordingly

It's OK to deviate from the plan. The plan is not a set of rules. It's an overall guideline. As important as following the plan is noticing deviations and adjusting the plan accordingly.

Evaluate Planning Process and the Plan

During the planning process, regularly collect feedback from the participants. Do they agree with the planning process? If not, what don't they like and how could it be done better? In large, ongoing planning processes (such as strategic planning, business planning, project planning, etc.), it's critical to collect this kind of feedback regularly.

During regular reviews of implementation of the plan, assess if goals are being achieved or not. If not, were goals realistic? Do responsible parties have the resources necessary to achieve the goals and objectives? Should

goals be changed? Should more priority be placed on achieving the goals? What needs to be done?

Finally, take ten minutes to write down how the planning process could have been done better. File it away and read it the next time you conduct the planning process.

Recurring Planning Process is at Least as Important as Plan Document

Far too often, primary emphasis is placed on the plan document. This is extremely unfortunate because the real treasure of planning is the planning process itself. During planning, planners learn a great deal from ongoing analysis, reflection, discussion, debates, and dialogue around issues and goals in the system. Perhaps there is no better example of misplaced priorities in planning than in business ethics. Far too often, people put emphasis on written codes of ethics and codes of conduct. While these documents certainly are important, at least as important is conducting ongoing communications around these documents. The ongoing communications are what sensitize people to understanding and following the values and behaviors suggested in the codes.

Critical -- But Frequently Missing Step -- Acknowledgement and Celebration of Results

It's easy for planners to become tired and even cynical about the planning process. One of the reasons for this problem is very likely that far too often, emphasis is placed on achieving the results. Once the desired results are achieved, new ones are quickly established. The process can seem like having to solve one problem after another, with no real end in sight. Yet when one really thinks about it, it's a major accomplishment to carefully analyze a situation, involve others in a plan to do something about it, work together to carry out the plan, and actually see some results. So, acknowledge this—celebrate your accomplishment!