Closing the Gap Between Your Strategic and Work Plans

By Bruce Butterfield

When association CEOs are asked what their single biggest challenge is, the most frequent answer is "planning for the future." And when we ask them to describe their biggest problem with planning, the overwhelming response is, "finding time to implement the strategic plan while carrying on the everyday business of the association."

The result of this dilemma is that most strategic plans never really get implemented. After a lot of time and effort by staff and volunteers, the plan is trotted out with much fanfare, only to languish unused on the shelf. There is no direct connection between the strategic plan (goals, objectives and strategies) and the annual workplan and budget. Most CEOs throw up their hands when asked how they will translate the aspirations of their board into member services. Needless to say, this lack of follow-through on promises leads to member cynicism and board dissatisfaction with staff performance.

How can the CEO get around this dilemma? Here's a step-by-step approach that will work if you stick with it.

1. ***View the strategic plan as driver of your workplan and budget***. Many associations start their annual planning by estimating the amount of revenue they will have available and then either cutting or adding to departments accordingly. Cutting everyone 10% or giving everyone 10% more is a no-brainer that will have serious consequences. First figure out what the most important member needs are and use that to determine how you allocate your resources. That is what strategic planning is all about.

2. ***Establish specific priorities and deadlines as part of your strategic planning process.*** You can't do everything, and strategic plans have a way of becoming unrealistic wish lists unless some discipline is applied. Planners must make the hard choices and decide which member benefits are more important than others, and concentrate resources in the most critical areas. It is better to do a few things superbly that provide a wide range of mediocre services.

3. ***Tell yourself the truth about current programs and services.*** Require a fully-loaded analysis of the true costs of all your programs, products and services. You are kidding yourself and your leadership if your budget isn't fully loaded, including the value of staff time. If you decide that something is worth subsidizing, that's fine. But make that a reasoned decision instead of kidding yourself and the board that the program is a money-maker when it is a resource-eater.

4. ***Identify winners and losers among your programs and services.*** If a program or service fits the strategic plan, meets a strong member need and pays for itself (or provides extra income) with non-dues revenue, you have a **star**. This is a program to implement aggressively. If a program is a good source of non-dues revenue but does not provide a high priority member service, you will want to keep it anyway as a **cash cow** to fund other, more important initiatives. Those programs that offer few member benefits and aren't good sources of non-dues income are **dogs** (no offense meant to pet lovers). Finally, there are those programs that are of high benefit to members but can't support themselves and must be **subsidized**, either by killing the dogs, diverting earnings from cash cows, or raising dues. There is a strong temptation to keep from making the hard decisions by putting all your questionable programs into this category. Resist it.

After working your way through these four steps, you will be left with a smaller number of strong programs that are directly targeted on meeting member needs and can be funded. You will also know which programs and services are less deserving of support and can be dropped. It is true that there will be political jockeying and infighting as people with a personal interest in the losing programs try to preserve them. But you will be able to demonstrate that you are providing the greatest good for the greatest number of your members, and you will prevail in the end.

Courtesy of Bruce Butterfield at The Forbes Group (www.forbesgroup.com).