

# Plan Your Work and Work Your Plan: Lessons Learned from Marin County Health and Human Services' Strategic Planning Process

SWATI DESHPANDE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strategic planning can be described as a process by which organizations define their mission, their vision for the future, and identify their goals and objectives. As the San Mateo County Human Services Agency embarks on developing a new strategic plan, it can be useful to look at other agencies who have been successful in developing their own strategic plans. The Marin County Health and Human Services recently went through their own strategic planning. Marin County used the strategic process

not only to further the county's mission and vision, but to create a culture of change built around the idea of equity. They recognized that the key to successful strategic planning is a relentless focus on goals, stakeholder involvement, data-driven decision making, and constant communication. Observing and learning from Marin County's process can provide San Mateo with some valuable insights and lessons learned.

---

**Swati Deshpande**, Quality Assurance and Reporting  
Manager, San Mateo County Human Services Agency



# Plan Your Work and Work Your Plan: Lessons Learned from Marin County Health and Human Services' Strategic Planning Process

SWATI DESHPANDE

*"In life, as in football, you won't go far unless you know where the goalposts are."*

—Arnold H. Glasgow, Author

## What is Strategic Planning?

Organizations go through the strategic planning process to determine the direction of the organization (Vision), what the organization is going to do and for whom (Mission), and how to get there and measure success (Goals). Simply put, strategic planning determines exactly where your organization is going over the next few years and how it's going to get there. A strategic plan is a coordinated and systematic way to develop a course and direction for an organization. Strategic planning helps organizations to:

- Define the mission and vision of the organization
- Analyze the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis)
- Formulate strategies and tactics that should be adopted as a result of the above factors
- Measure success by tracking progress and motivating employees to keep up their efforts
- Increase productivity by ensuring that employees know where they're going and that they optimize their use of resources
- Plan for unforeseen circumstances

Sustainable and flexible execution of the strategy promotes the likelihood that a government organization will deliver on its promises and improve the

day-to-day conditions of its citizens, thereby promoting their confidence and trust.

## San Mateo County's Current Strategic Plan

The San Mateo County Human Services Agency is currently operating under a five-year strategic plan which will sunset in 2020. This plan was created to align with Shared Vision 2025, which is San Mateo County's Strategic Plan. As the agency embarks on a new strategic planning process, it is imperative to find out if the current strategic plan is meeting its goals and objectives. Nicole Pollack, Director of the Human Services Agency who spearheaded the current strategic plan, is critical of the current plan as well as the strategic planning process. She said that the objective of this plan was primarily to get the agency used to operating within the framework of a strategic plan. However, the current plan did not have enough stakeholder and staff input, did not have buy in from mid-level management, and was too top-heavy and removed from the staff. While the plan was easy to read, simple, and aesthetically pleasing, it never had any real impact on staff. For the upcoming five-year plan, the agency director would like to first start with a thorough assessment of the agency and ensure that the plan is more community- and staff-focused and aligned with the budget.

The Marin County Health and Human Services Agency recently released a five-year strategic plan. Their plan has garnered a lot of attention due to its comprehensiveness and collaborative planning process. As the San Mateo County HSA prepares

**FIGURE 1**  
**Focus Area: Employee Performance, Health and Well-Being**

STRATEGIES	ACTIONS	OUTCOMES	METRICS
Create healthy workplace policies that support a thriving workforce	Policies and Practice that support employee health and well-being	Increased employee health and well-being	% of employees who would recommend HHS as a good place to work

Source: Department of Health and Human Services, County of Marin, Internal Strategic Plan, 2018

to launch the next strategic planning effort, lessons learned from Marin County's experience can help San Mateo make more informed decisions.

### The Marin County Experience

Until recently, the Marin County Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) did not operate under a single, comprehensive strategic plan. Different divisions within the agency had their own individual action plans but there was no overarching universal vision, mission, or strategy. In 2015, under the leadership of the agency director Dr. Grant Colfax, HHS embarked on developing a five-year strategic plan. Core to Marin County's approach in developing this plan was self-reflection and an acknowledgement that there was limited community and employee engagement in the past. Over time there was further realization that the organization need to look inward to tackle issues related to employee morale, retention and satisfaction. This led to the strategic plan being split into two: the operational plan (internal facing) and the equity plan (external facing). Both these plans were designed to align with the Marin County Five-Year Business Plan. The county used two consultants to drive the initial phases of the planning process. The consultants worked closely with the leadership and staff and helped develop the strategies, outcomes and metrics.

### Developing the Plan

#### *The Operational Plan*

At the heart of Marin County's operational plan is a culture change, defined as "HHS employees

embracing a set of key values, which, once firmly rooted in the organization will lead to shifts in norms, beliefs and finally, behaviors" (Department of Health and Human Services, Internal Strategic Plan 2017). The core message of this plan is that employees will drive cultural change by focusing on four values (support, unity, trust, and excellence) and this in turn will help achieve the department's mission, which is the wellbeing, self-sufficiency, and safety of all Marin residents.

Three teams were developed and comprised of staff from all levels of the organization.

The *Strategic Planning team* consisted of 22 members and was tasked with all stages of planning and oversight of the plan. The *Data team* reviewed over 48 sources of data and provided all the necessary inputs necessary for decision making. The *Community Facilitation team* conducted 18 focus groups consisting of 190 employees. In addition, they facilitated leadership meetings consisting of 90-110 managers. The engagement phase of this plan included five department wide forums comprising 120 employees.

All the information collected during the planning and assessment phase led to the creation of four focus areas. Each focus area comprised of specific strategies, goals, outcomes, and metrics. *Figure 1* provides an example.

#### *The Equity Plan*

Even though Marin is one of the healthiest and most affluent counties in California, a deeper look at the data reveals that it is also the most inequitable. In 2017, Marin had the highest level of racial and ethnic

**FIGURE 2**  
**Focus Area: Conditions**

STRATEGY	INDICATOR OF SUCCESS	ACTION	METRIC
Catalyze Partnerships to improve conditions that affect health and wellness	Improved Ability to meet basic needs	Use collaborative approach to align resources and create change	Ending chronic homelessness by 2020

Source: Department of Health and Human Services Strategic Plan to Achieve Health and Wellness Equity 2018

disparities compared to all other California counties (Department of Health and Human Services Strategic Plan to Achieve Health and Wellness Equity 2018). As part of the County's partnership with the Government Alliance on Racial Equity (GARE) and its priority on increasing equity, the external plan is designed to focus on improving racial equity in the areas of health and wellness.

The planning phase of this plan included a comprehensive data review of more than 300 data sources including census data and the Marin County Health Assessment, and covered a broad range of issues including mental health, food insecurity, and alcohol and substance abuse. Facilitators collected data from clients and community members using focus groups and surveys. Stakeholder engagement involved meeting with representatives of more than 50 community partners, service providers, government agencies, and resident groups.

The result of this intensive data collection and stakeholder engagement was to develop four focus areas. Each focus area had a specific strategy, action, and outcome as well as an indicator of success and a metric that can be used to determine progress. *Figure 2* provides an example.

### Communicating the Plan

Consistent messaging is the key to the successful implementation of any plan. The Marin County HHS created a clear communication plan to disseminate the strategic plan to all its stakeholders. The strategic planning team has employed several

strategies to ensure that the plan has been communicated often.

- Department leaders invited staff to attend several town hall-style sessions where they discussed the strategic plan at length. In addition to discussing the “why” and “how” aspects of the plan, they also gave concrete examples of the strategic plan that have already been put into action. Such examples help drive the message even further and can lay the foundation for creating a mission-driven organization.
- Throughout the process, staff have been receiving a biweekly email to keep abreast of all strategic plan-related updates and activities.
- All updates are posted on the agency's internal website.
- Monthly manager meetings are held to discuss strategic plan updates.
- Community outreach included language interpreters, food, and childcare.

### Evaluating the Plan

Strategic planning is a constant work in progress and for a strategic plan to be actionable, it needs have built in performance metrics that can be measured, monitored, and modified if necessary. The Marin County HHS has created systems to measure progress and track continuous improvement. They created a staff position whose assignment is to measure, track, and evaluate the performance metrics that are part of the strategic plan. Managers were provided training on writing action plans and building smart goals. They then went to their respective units and

worked with their teams on creating action plans and smart goals that fit with the departments' overall strategic plan. All the action plans are tracked and monitored via dashboards and managers are supposed to meet on a quarterly basis to make sure they are on track. In addition, the strategic planning team is also working on creating sustained engagement with the community by developing a feedback loop and accountability mechanism.

### **Recommendations for San Mateo County**

San Mateo County should institute a strategic-planning process that identifies the right priorities and drives decision making that supports those priorities. Marin County's strategic planning process can serve as a blueprint for San Mateo as it embarks on developing its next strategic plan.

#### *Develop data-driven plans that focus on internal and external strategy*

Ideally, HSA may want to emulate Marin County's strategy of developing an internal plan that focuses on employee well-being and an external plan that focuses on the community. Issues related to employee retention, morale, and engagement that were identified during Marin County's strategic planning process also exist in San Mateo County. Each year, the county administers an employee engagement survey. Data from this survey can be used in developing an internal plan that aligns the employee's personal goals and interests with the vision and mission of the agency.

The external plan should be designed to focus on community needs and external stakeholders. Both these plans need to be data-driven and have performance metrics and smart goals embedded within them.

#### *Engage mid-level management into the strategic planning process from the beginning*

The strategic plan for HSA should be driven by the vision and mission of the agency. It should be grounded in data and developed by the agency director, the leadership team, stakeholders, and staff. It

should have a set of targets and timelines, key performance indicators, and measures of accountability. Once the strategic plan has been established, each division should develop their own operational plans. These plans must be linked to the strategic plan. They should be inward-looking, measured, reported on a regular basis, and reviewed regularly. Managers should link the day-to-day work of frontline staff to the strategy by highlighting ways that their roles and responsibilities—and the strategic plan itself—can help eliminate the obstacles to achieving important objectives and directly contribute to solving citizens' real-world problems. These steps can help build buy-in among staff for the strategic plan, making successful execution more likely. Additionally, it will help develop strategic thinking in staff who are likely to be the next generation of leaders.

#### *Create and staff specific positions to oversee the development and implementation of the Strategic and Operational plans*

Plans are easy to develop; however, implementation and managing them requires constant monitoring, adjustment, and evaluation. In San Mateo, the current strategic plan did not succeed partly due to changes in leadership, leadership turnover, and vacancies. In order for the strategic plan to be a dynamic and living document, it is necessary to have executive sponsorship as well as dedicated staff who are tasked with implementing the strategic plan. Marin County created specific positions to oversee the implementation of the strategic plan. The Chief Strategy Officer is tasked with managing the strategic plan, identifying resources, and ensuring that staff remain engaged in the process. To ensure that the strategic plan is data-driven, the agency created a "Measurement, Learning, and Evaluation Lead" who, as the name implies, is tasked with working with the various teams to create smart goals, measure success, and evaluate progress. Additionally, the County also plans to hire a Chief Equity Officer to oversee the Equity Plan. San Mateo County should also consider creating such positions that can exclusively focus on the management of the Strategic

Plan. This will ensure that the strategic plan becomes embedded within the culture of the organization and remains a living document.

### *Communicate early and communicate often*

The success of a strategic plan depends on every stakeholder knowing and working towards the same objectives and metrics. Communication creates engagement and awareness and encourages participation in the process. Marin County put great emphasis on communication by constantly engaging with employees on a frequent basis. They used several modes of communication including videos, biweekly emails, surveys and town hall style meetings. San Mateo County should also develop a clear and robust communication plan and create a dedicated communication team. Some suggestions include:

- Distribute the plan to everyone in the organization.
- Use the TV screens in each office to post the mission and vision and values statements.
- Publish portions of the plan in newsletters and advertising and marketing materials (brochures, ads, etc.).
- Introduce the plan to all new employees during employee orientations. Include portions of the plan in policies and procedures, including the employee manual.
- Distribute copies of the plan to major stakeholders, for example, community-based organizations, unions, trade associations, potential collaborators, vendors/suppliers, etc.

### *Monitor and review frequently and modify if necessary*

What gets measured gets done. Without accountability even the best strategic plan will likely never succeed. Management should build reports that track the progress of operational plans and hold biweekly meetings at which staff report progress on strategic priorities. While going through the review process, it is important to reflect if the current goals and objectives can still be met, and if they can't, to shift them. Identifying the right metrics for tracking

progress against the objectives and instituting a credible and timely review process is critical in monitoring and evaluating strategies. Ultimately, the goal should be to make HSA more data-informed and data-driven.

## **Conclusion**

*"Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction"*

—John F. Kennedy

The ultimate goal of every organization is to ensure that their employees' and community's needs and expectations are met in ways that are not only efficient but also equitable. The Marin County HHS approached the strategic planning process with careful deliberation, flexibility, and participatory leadership. They had strong executive sponsorship and a visionary leader who made strategic planning a priority. San Mateo County is currently operating under a strategic plan, and while it is not perfect, it can serve as a foundation and can be improved by using the lessons learned from Marin County's strategic planning process.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my host agency, Marin County, for providing me the opportunity to visit and learn about their strategic planning process. Thank you to Angela Nicholson, Jenny Chacon, Kari Beurerman, Alison Sexauer, and Nisha Anand for being so open and generous with their knowledge and time. I would like to thank Paula Glowdoski for being my point of contact, for arranging all the meetings, and for being readily available to answer all my questions and address any concerns. I would like to thank the San Mateo County leadership for providing me the opportunity to participate in BASSC. Thank you to Nicole Pollack for sharing her time and vision for the agency and finally to Clarisa Simon for her guidance throughout the process.

## References

1. Department of Health and Human Services, County of Marin Strategic Plan to Achieve Health and Wellness Equity, 2018
2. Department of Health and Human Services, County of Marin Internal Strategic Plan, 2017
3. Department of Health and Human Services, County of Marin Strategic Plan to Advance Health and Wellness Equity Town Halls
4. County of Marin 5-year Business Plan 2015-2020
5. San Mateo County Human Services Agency 2015-2020 Strategic Plan